

Report To:	STANDARDS AND PERSONNEL APPEALS COMMITTEE	Date:	29 JULY 2020
Heading:	VIRTUAL MEETINGS GUIDANCE		
Portfolio Holder:			
Ward/s:	ALL		
Key Decision:	NONE		
Subject to Call-In:	NO		

Purpose of Report

This report provides details of the changes to running and participating in public meetings as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent regulation changes to ensure constituted public meetings continue to take place.

Following the introduction of the time limited Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, all local authorities have moved to undertaking virtual meetings as a way to enable continued public access to constituted meetings.

To ensure these meetings operate in a controlled and professional manner a Virtual Meeting Protocol was circulated to all Members. This is attached as Appendix A.

Recommendation(s)

Members are requested to:

- Note the protocol attached as Appendix A.
- Provide feedback and comments regarding the use of virtual meetings.
- Suggest any further practical arrangements to improve the process.

Reasons for Recommendation(s)

Constituted meetings of the Council will continue to be held virtually to ensure the health and safety of all involved, to guarantee the continued openness and transparency of public meetings and to reinforce the Council's commitment to continue to deliver services during the pandemic.

Alternative Options Considered

As detailed in the report.

Detailed Information

Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 make provision for remote attendance at, and remote access to Council meetings held on or before 7 May 2021. The Regulations override any existing procedure rules or standing orders or other rules that local authorities have relating to the governance of meetings.

The main implications of the regulations are as follows:

Regulation 4 (1) empowers local authorities to alter the frequency of meetings and move or cancel meetings without notice. It should be noted however that there is no change to the requirement to publish notice of a meeting 5 working days prior to a meeting.

Regulation 5 provides that local authority meetings may take place through digital means. A meeting summons does not need to specify a physical location and a meeting may take place entirely online or by conference call, subject to certain conditions set out below.

- Councillors may participate in meetings remotely. There is no requirement for a quorum of councillors to be present in the meeting room because the regulations make it clear that a Councillor “attends” the meeting if they are able to participate remotely. The following conditions must be met for a councillor to be defined as participating remotely:
 - The councillor must be able to hear and where possible, see other councillors attending the meeting. The councillor must also be heard and where possible, seen by those other councillors;
 - The councillor must be able to hear and where possible, see members of the public who are attending the meeting to exercise their right to speak.
 - The councillor must also be heard and where possible seen by those members of the public; and
 - The councillor must be heard and where possible seen by other members of the public who are attending the meeting (remotely).

Regulation 5 also empowers local authorities to make standing order or rules governing remote attendance, which may include provision for:

- voting;
- member and public access to documents; and
- remote access of public and press to a local authority meeting to enable them to attend or participate in that meeting by electronic means, including by telephone conference, videoconference, live webcasts, and live interactive streaming.

This means that councils can hold meetings regardless of any existing restrictions and to match facilities to suit their circumstances.

Regulation 6 allows a notice of a meeting to be published on the Council’s website as though it were published at the offices. The publication, posting or making available of agendas, reports and supporting information may be via the Council’s website instead of at the offices or via post.

Current Activity

Ashfield District Council held its Annual Meeting of the Council virtually on the 23 April. This meeting and all subsequent public meetings have been held through Zoom. All Members were trained in using Zoom and it was agreed that in order to ensure the virtual meetings were managed in a coordinated and controlled manner for live streaming, they would be managed and controlled by Democratic Services and IT.

This includes;

- a waiting room for meeting participants
- muting all Members on entry
- centrally controlling the mute and unmute button
- not allowing open access to screen sharing
- the ability to remotely invite participants into the meeting.

All Members were also sent the Virtual Meetings Protocol. This protocol sets out the “do’s and don’ts” when participating in a virtual meeting. This is attached as appendix A. The Protocol sets out the basic principles to be followed to ensure that meetings are undertaken in a professional and efficient manner. This includes guidance on dress code, voting, speaking and visibility.

Implications

Corporate Plan:

The Council exists to serve the communities and residents of Ashfield.

Legal:

The changes to meeting procedures are compliant with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

Finance:

Additional costs associated with printing and posting agendas and a rolling monthly fee for the use of Zoom are currently being monitored.

Budget Area	Implication
General Fund – Revenue Budget	TBC
General Fund – Capital Programme	None
Housing Revenue Account – Revenue Budget	None
Housing Revenue Account – Capital Programme	None

Risk:

Risk	Mitigation
Meetings not managed in a professional and co-ordinated manner, being live streamed to the public, pose both a reputational and organisational risk.	Extensive testing on the appropriate app to use for virtual meetings was undertaken to ensure it provided the most effective tools to manage a meeting. Agreeing a local set of protocols for Members is also an efficient way to ensure everyone attending is aware of and in agreement with the meeting protocols.

Human Resources:

Democratic Services and IT have supported the management of virtual meetings throughout the pandemic.

Environmental/Sustainability

None

Equalities:

All meetings have continued to remain accessible through virtual means to ensure equality of access for all. Members of the community and public speakers who have wanted to participate in a meeting have also been supported by both Democratic Services and IT.

Other Implications:

None

Reason(s) for Urgency

None

Reason(s) for Exemption

None

Background Papers

Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020

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Appendix A - Virtual Meeting Protocol

In the last few months Members will have become familiar with using virtual tools to access meetings. In order to ensure meetings are carried out appropriately and remain professional for viewing by the public, please follow some basic principles set out below.

- Please access the Meeting at least 15 minutes prior to the start time to ensure the meeting starts promptly on time.
- Please remember that these are formal meetings of the Council, therefore exercise the same respectful behaviour that you would do in a physical meeting. This includes;
 - Remain on topic
 - Respect the authority of the Chairman
 - Be respectful to both Members and Officers
 - Do not make any personal comments
- All Members will be remotely muted. If you wish to speak please raise your hand in front of your face (this ensures that your hand is picked up on your camera and noted by the Chairman). The Chairman will bring Members in to speak individually. Your Audio will only be unmuted when the Chairman introduces you to speak.
- For voting on recommendations the Chairman will read out the recommendations and then Members will be asked to raise their hand if they are voting yes. The Chairman will then repeat the question for those voting no, followed by those abstaining. The Chairman will then confirm the outcome of each individual vote.
- Do not sit in front of a window – the glare from this means others cannot see you.
- Sit back – to ensure you are fully visible to other participants and the public.
- Remove other devices away from you as much as possible – this reduces the amount of feedback/interference.
- Dress smartly - as you would if attending a physical meeting in the Chamber
- Try not to touch your face whilst streaming – government advice is that you shouldn't be touching your face etc. in public, it would set a good precedent if we avoided doing this over live stream as well.

- Be aware of what is on the walls behind you – it will be seen by other participants and the public, so please avoid any inappropriate pictures etc.
- Do not eat or drink alcohol during the zoom meeting.

If you have any problems with accessing Virtual Meetings, please contact the Scrutiny and Democratic Services Team on 01623 457317