

Item 7.1

Hawkhurst Parish Council remote meetings

Proposed protocol April 2020

FOREWORD

On 4 April 2020, the government brought The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 into force to allow local authorities to conduct meetings remotely. NALC produced guidelines for the conducting of meetings remotely and these underpin this protocol.

Where possible the aim is for the Council to conduct the meetings as per existing schedules and 'standing orders'. This less formal document is as an addendum to our standing orders explaining how these will be interpreted and how the meetings will run.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The clerk should make arrangements in advance of the meeting by sending out agendas and papers in the normal way, together with a 'session ID' for the remote meeting platform (ZOOM). This information should also be published on the council website and publicised on social media.

If required, a confidential 'session ID' should also be set up for councillors only.

The council has set up a small working group and will provide 'practice meetings' for councillors before the first live meeting.

Which platform to use

The remote meeting platform ZOOM* has been selected to underpin these remote meetings following trials by the working group. It allows participants to either load the app on their computer or access via the web for those worried about security. Audio conferencing was considered but rejected as it would make verification of voting and speaking difficult with large groups.

What investment might be needed?

It was decided that the Council will pay a monthly subscription for Zoom Pro for unlimited time for meetings – current £14.99 per month.

In the longer term, on top of the cost of the meeting platform itself, the Council is considering investment in hardware (IPADs etc.). For example, if some councillors do not have access to a laptop/desktop the council may consider purchasing this equipment. The Council will also consider individuals with specific needs (e.g. if someone has a hearing impairment then certain headphones may help them hear the meetings better).

As part of our preparations the Council contacted councillors and staff to find out what technology they do have access to and any concerns or needs that they have.

The practice meeting

Practice makes perfect – and this is particularly true when trying something new. Holding a practice meeting with all councillors and staff so that we can work out any technical issues and to see if our approach to voting and discussions does work for everyone. We may

then need to go back to amend our proposed approach and even try a second practice before the 'real' council meeting.

Holding practice meetings might feel like an extra demand on everyone's time, but it will be much easier to work out bugs and issues in advance than to be struggling with them during the council meeting itself. How frustrating would it be to discover that we are not able to hold the council meeting due to technical difficulties we could have resolved in advance?

Once these practical issues have been resolved attention will then need to turn to how we will conduct the meeting itself. This is covered in the following sections.

COUNCIL MEETING

The meeting will be recorded and saved, although the Clerk will publish written minutes.

If you do have members of the public attending, then take some time at the beginning of the meeting to explain to them how the meeting will run and how and when they can speak. This will help manage their expectations

To help manage the meeting the chair will mute all participants and unmute people when they ask to speak (by a show of hand)

The Chair will ask for public speakers – each speaker will be allowed a maximum of 3 minutes and a total of 20 minutes is allowed for public speaking.

The Chair will then start the meeting and ask TWBC / KCC local Councillors to speak.

Council discussions

The chairman of the council/committee should still chair the meeting. They should take the opportunity of any practice meetings to ensure they are confident following the agenda, managing input from councillors and staff, and keeping the meeting to time. Some suggestions to aid this are:

- The Chair will mute everyone when not speaking - this helps keep background noise to a minimum which will improve everyone's ability to hear the discussions.
- Councillors should raise their hands when they wish to speak.
- The chairman may ask everyone to state their name before they start speaking so that it is always clear who is speaking.
- How will you keep track of who is 'present'. It may be the case that some individuals have technical issues that mean that they 'leave' the meeting, for example their internet connection means that they are cut off. The ZOOM platform is very clear on who is present. If you are not sure you would be aware of anyone accidentally dropping out of the meeting you might wish to do a quick 'roll call' before each item to ensure you are able to accurately minute who was present.
- It is important that when an item is introduced each Councillor has the opportunity to speak once on that item.
- Another option might be for the chair to read from a list of councillors names and ask them in turn if there is anything they wish to say or ask. This may take more time but allows for a more controlled approach
- The Councillor who introduced the item then answers any queries and summarizes the item

Voting

There is no 'right way' to conduct voting in a remote meeting. You will have to find an approach that works best for the council. Some things to consider are:

- Councillors will raise hands to vote as in a physical meeting.
- The chairman or clerk to read back the votes of the council so that everyone is sure their vote has been recorded correctly.
- Make sure every vote is clear and unambiguous

Behaviours and conduct

It is worth remembering that the required standards of behaviour and discussion are the same whether in remote or face-to-face meetings. These are difficult times and people may be worried about their health or family members, they may be frustrated being isolated at home, and there may be challenges with using new technology particularly if there are technical difficulties. Everyone in the meeting will need to be respectful and compassionate towards one another, emotions may be higher than usual but that only makes it more important that everyone approaches the meeting with respect and in the spirit of the council's code of conduct.

Declaring Interests

The council will need to consider how it will manage councillors 'leaving' a meeting if they have an interest and do not wish to be part of the meeting, particularly if they consider there will be negative public perception if they remain.

Therefore, the Chairman will mute the audio and blank the picture. The Councillor will be able to hear the discussion but not take part.

At the end of the item the Chairman will invite the Councillor to rejoin the meeting and unmute them and return their picture to the meeting.

CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS

These should be at the end of a meeting – therefore the meeting will close and reconvene with a separate meeting ID which is only available to Councillors.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Council meetings must still be advertised and the public have a right to observe. As we normally allow public questions or input in our meetings then it is worth trying to keep this approach with remote meetings too.

ZOOM allows the audience to speak whenever.

Once the public speaking session is over only Councillors will be able to speak.

It's worth keeping in mind that there is the same risk of disruption to a normal council meeting as there is for a remote meeting. So it may not be necessary to be able to control the public's ability to speak, it is likely they will follow the rules of the meeting as they usually do. The chair or clerk should also take a note who wishes to speak, from the public, to ensure that no one is missed out. This is key in rural areas with poorer broadband capacities, which can cause people to 'leave' meetings accidentally. due to signal strengths.

If there are parts of the agenda that are confidential then you will need to ask the public observers to leave as you normally would. If you fear, there is a risk of people accidentally joining the confidential item the Chairman should consider using a different meeting ID/log in that is not shared with the public for that item. The ZOOM platform also allow meetings to be password protected.

AFTER THE MEETING

Minute taking should be done as usual with the clerk seeking clarity at any point, should it be needed. The minutes should be agreed at the next meeting and can always be retrospectively signed at the next face-to-face meeting.

Once you have held your first remote council meeting it is worth taking a little time to reflect on how it went and what you might wish to change or improve for next time.

*** REMOTE MEETING PLATFORM**

Zoom

<https://zoom.us>

This is a video conferencing platform. This can be used for meetings, collaborations and participants can also use the chat option. It also supports audio conferencing, allowing people to join by telephone as well. Find out more about pricing at <https://zoom.us/pricing>

Advantages:

- Participants can share screens with each other (e.g. share a PowerPoint presentation).
- Meetings can be made securely. This includes having passwords and meeting IDs for participants to join meetings.
- Meeting invitations can be added to Outlook Calendar, Google Calendar or Yahoo Calendar.
- You can save the chat conversations.
- Meetings can also be recorded for future reference.

Disadvantages :

- The level of support you can receive from Zoom is dependent on the Zoom package being used.
- The free Zoom package limits group meetings to 40 minutes.

The monthly subscription will mitigate these.