



PROTOCOL FOR HOLDING VIRTUAL MEETINGS

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1. Introduction

1.1 Until April 2020, Wokingham Borough Council held a wide range of public decision-making meetings, mainly at the Council Offices in Wokingham. The national “lockdown” and social distancing measures arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that alternative arrangements had to be made for the introduction of “virtual” meetings.

1.2 The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (“the Regulations”) have enacted provisions which provide flexibility to the Council in the manner in which they may hold such meetings.

1.3 The Regulations, which took effect as of 4 April 2020 and apply until 7 May 2021 (or earlier if agreed by Government), enable Councils to hold meetings which Members may attend remotely.

1.4 The following protocol has been set up in order to provide assistance to the public, Members and Officers in the organisation in the conduct of virtual committee meetings at Wokingham Borough Council all of which will be held via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). The principal aim of this document is to facilitate as many of the constitutional rules and procedures as possible, whilst recognising the limitations and challenges that virtual meetings present.

2. Technical Overview

2.1 Meetings will be held via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) and it is the intention that all public meetings (with the exception of when exempt/confidential items are discussed) will be live streamed on the Council’s YouTube Channel.

2.2 Members should ensure that they have MS Teams installed on their laptop/device and familiarise themselves with the system. In advance of their first meeting Members should read the MS Teams Quick Guide (which has been provided to all Members and is available on request from Democratic Services) and if required set up a test call with Democratic Services/IT to run through the software’s functionality.

3. Prior to Meeting

3.1 Publication of Agendas

Meeting agendas will be published 5 clear working days prior to each meeting and all agenda papers (except for exempt/confidential items) will be available electronically on the Council’s website.

A note will be added to the agenda front sheet for each meeting advising the public that the meeting will be held virtually and providing a link to the YouTube site where the meeting can be viewed.

Members of a particular committee will be emailed the direct link to the online agenda and will be sent a copy of the agenda pack with their meeting invitation. No physical paper copies of the agenda will be printed. The only exception to this will be Planning Committee agendas which will only be sent to members of that committee.

3.2 Submission of Public and Member Questions

For those meetings where Public and Member questions form part of the agenda these may be submitted in accordance with the deadlines set out on the Council's website and in the Council's Constitution.

3.3 Invitations to Meetings

A calendar invite, containing a link to join the MS Teams meeting as well as, in case of difficulties joining the meeting, instructions on how to access the audio link by dialling-in to the meeting will be sent to Members of the relevant committee, those Members who have submitted a question or been invited to speak at the committee, and Officers supporting that committee.

Members of the public who have submitted a question to a committee will also receive a calendar invite containing a link to join that meeting as well as, in case of difficulties joining the meeting, instructions on how to access the audio link by dialling-in to the meeting.

Ensure that you can access the calendar invite on whatever device (including any back-ups) you are intending to use to join the meeting. It is advisable to copy and paste the MS Teams link and dial-in details set out in the calendar invite into a word document or e-mail them to yourself so that the meeting can still be accessed if any technical issues occur on the day.

4. Members Attending Virtual Meetings

4.1 Virtual meetings are joined by accessing the Calendar on your device, opening the meeting invite and clicking the "join meeting" link – this will automatically re-direct you to the MS Teams application.

4.2. Members must endeavour to join virtual meetings promptly at least 10 minutes before the scheduled start. Any external participants will be placed in a virtual lobby and will be admitted to the meeting by the Clerk when the meeting is ready to start. Please note that if a Member uses their personal account to access the meeting they will also be placed in the virtual lobby and their e-mail address will be visible by other participants. In addition to ensure that the "hands up" facility is available for voting purposes Members should always use their workingham.gov.uk e-mail address to access any virtual meeting.

4.3. Members must ensure their microphones are muted when not speaking in order to reduce feedback and background noise. If Members ignore this request they

may be muted by the clerk. Participants should ensure that any background noise is turned off and that any pets are moved into another room.

4.4 Unless they are speaking Members, other than the Chairman, should keep their cameras switched off.

4.5 Members are advised to sit in a quiet room, preferably with a plain background. If this is not possible, they should set a virtual background by clicking on “more options” (the three dots in the middle of the screen) and selecting “show background effects” from the list. If using a MS Teams background do try not to move around a lot as you will no longer be visible onscreen should you move outside of the background’s parameters.

4.6 Members should ensure that the room has adequate lighting. If it is too dark viewers will not be able to see you clearly. Minimise distracting glare by pulling shades down on windows and doors.

4.7 If it is not possible to attend a meeting using the videoconferencing facilities, Members must attend by audio link (dial-in details will be included in the calendar invite). If using this option, Members must inform the Clerk in advance of the meeting of the number they will be calling from so they can be identified at the meeting.

4.8 Members must ensure they have the relevant meeting papers open and ready to use before the start of the meeting. The relevant agenda pack will be attached to the meeting invite or alternatively the agenda can be accessed via the Modern.gov app or the Council website. Where possible/practical, the use of a second or split screen is also recommended.

4.9 Members must conduct themselves in a professional manner throughout the meeting, as they would do at a face to face meeting. Since meetings will be live streamed and viewed by the public Members should also dress appropriately as they would if they were attending a meeting in the Council Offices.

4.10 Members are reminded that the chat function is public and also if they are in a public place (including at home with open windows) they may be overheard.

5. Members of the Public Attending Virtual Meetings

5.1. Members of the public and the press will be able to watch any public meeting (except for those where exempt or confidential information is to be discussed) by accessing the live stream on the Council’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/WokinghamBC/featured?disable_polymer=1 . Details on how to access a specific live stream will be included within the public notice of the meeting and a link to the relevant area on YouTube can be found on the meeting agenda page on the Council’s website.

5.2 Members of the public and Councillors can submit questions to most committees including Council, Executive, Audit, Overview and Scrutiny and Wokingham Wellbeing Board provided they are submitted in accordance with the

rules set out in the Council's Constitution and on the website. Any member of the public who has submitted a question to a committee will be sent an MS Teams invite to participate in the remote meeting for the duration of the item in question. They can also join the meeting via an audio link details of which can be found in the meeting invite.

5.3 On the day of the meeting, the member of the public must click on the link /enter the dial-in details at least 5 minutes before the meeting where they will be placed in a "lobby" until the meeting is due to start. Their camera should be turned off and their microphone muted until it is their turn to speak.

5.4 Public questions will be taken in the order they are received which will be set out in the agenda and all relevant time limits as set out in the Council's Constitution i.e. question time and responses will be adhered to. Questions will be responded to at the meeting. One supplementary question may also be asked. Once your questions have been asked and responses provided you should switch off your camera, your microphone will be muted and you will not be able to participate any further in the meeting. If for any reason you are unable to attend the meeting you will receive a written response to your question.

6. Specific Rules Relating to Member and Public Participation at Planning Committee Meetings

6.1 Only members of the Planning Committee and relevant Officers will be invited to attend Planning Committee meetings. The proceedings of the committee may however be viewed via the live stream on the Council's YouTube channel.

6.2 Although Ward Members, Town and Parish Councillors and members of the public will not be able to attend the meetings they will, in addition to any comments previously submitted, be able to provide a further statement to the committee. This can be done by following the instructions below.

- You must register your intention to submit a statement, which should not cover comments made previously, with Democratic Services by 10am on the 3rd working day prior to the committee meeting;
- Comments will be split into the following categories: Town and Parish Councils, Objectors, Supporters (including applicants and agents) and Ward Members. If you submit a statement within your category then it should be no more than 390 words. However, if more than one statement is received in any of the above categories you will be contacted by Democratic Services and asked to reduce your word limit accordingly. Statements must be received by 10am on the 2nd working day prior to the committee meeting;
- The committee will be provided with copies of any statements received and these will be taken account of when considering the relevant planning application.

7. Conduct of a Virtual Meeting

7.1 Quorum

The number of Members required to be present for a quorum for a meeting is set out in the Council's Constitution. The quorum must remain during the entirety of a meeting.

If at any point in the meeting it becomes inquorate the meeting will either, in the case of a Member dropping out of the meeting, be adjourned until such time as the Member re-joins the meeting or if it is not possible to re-join the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened.

7.2 Opening the Meeting

At the scheduled time, the Mayor/Chairman will open the meeting, welcome everyone present and make introductory comments.

The Mayor/Chairman will advise the meeting if the meeting is being live streamed before any discussion takes place.

In the case of technical issues with the live stream the committee may decide to utilise the "record a meeting" option. If agreed to do so, the Clerk will select the appropriate option and start the recording. This option will be used only with the explicit agreement of all participants before any discussion takes place. The recording will be made publicly available after the meeting.

7.3 Introductions and Apologies for Absence

The Mayor/Chairman will either introduce those Members and Officers in attendance or ask the Members and Officers to introduce themselves.

7.4 Declarations of Interest

The Mayor/Chairman must follow the usual procedures and ask if any Members wish to declare any interests.

Any Member declaring a personal interest will be able to remain in the virtual meeting and will be able to take part in the discussion and vote on the particular matter.

Any Member who declares a prejudicial interest, which would normally require them to leave the room, must leave the virtual meeting for the duration of the discussion of that item and will not be able to participate in the meeting. The Mayor/Chairman will state when the Member has left the meeting. Depending on the order in which items are heard, the Member will be re-admitted to the meeting by the Clerk.

7.5 Minutes of the Meeting

The Mayor/Chairman will follow one of the following methods:

- ask each Member to state whether or not they agree with the accuracy of the minutes;
- state that it is assumed that the minutes are agreed unless anyone advises that they disagree.

The Mayor/Chairman will decide which of the above methods is to be used. The Mayor/Chairman will advise that the minutes will be physically signed at a later date.

7.6 Discussion of Agenda Items/Reports

The Mayor/Chairman will invite Members/Officers to present reports in the usual way.

If referring to a specific section of an agenda/report Members and Officers must clearly state the page and/or paragraph number and pause for a few seconds to allow everyone to find the relevant section. On some occasions it may be appropriate to show the relevant section on the screen.

Supplementary documents will not be tabled at virtual meetings. Therefore any supplementary documents must be submitted to the Clerk as early as possible on the day of the meeting in order that they can be circulated to all participants and added to the relevant agenda page on the website.

Visual content such as presentations, maps or images (particularly relevant for Planning and Licensing meetings) must be shared with other participants using the “Share Screen” function on the bar in the middle of the screen (the function is only available when using a laptop/PC and depending on the internet connection may slow the user’s device). Alternatively, a copy can be shared with the Clerk who will be asked to display the slides when directed.

Once the report has been introduced, the Mayor/Chairman will open the discussion by using one of the following methods:

- asking if anyone wishes to speak/raise any questions;
- asking each Member of the committee if they have any comments/questions;
- going through the list of speakers which has been provided by the relevant Groups in advance of the meeting.

The Mayor/Chairman will decide which of the above methods is to be used. Members may indicate their wish to speak by using the MS Teams “hands up” function, sending a message using the meeting “chat” function and waiting until invited by the Mayor/Chairman to speak, or by speaking up. Please note that the meeting “chat” must only be used for committee-related questions/comments as any messages posted will be visible to all participants present and will appear on the live stream.

Members should aim to keep their questions clear and concise, avoiding unnecessary repetition. The Mayor/Chairman will ask Members of the committee if they have any further points to raise before completing the discussion on the item and moving to the next item.

7.7 Voting

Unless a recorded vote is called for voting will be carried out using one of the following methods:

- the Mayor/Chairman will call out the name of each committee Member present asking them to state whether they are “for”, “against” or wish to “abstain”;
- if the Mayor/Chairman feels from the discussions that there is a consensus in how Members wish to vote he/she will state that they believe the committee wishes to vote in a particular way unless a Member advises them otherwise;
- use the “hands up” feature on MS Teams. This method will only be used if the majority of Members attending the meeting have access to and the ability to use this feature. Prior to any vote taking place the Mayor/Chairman will state that this method of voting will be used and ask those Members in attendance, who are entitled to vote, to advise him/her if they are unable to use the “hands up” feature. The vote will be carried out as follows:
 - The Mayor/Chairman will ask Members to use the “hands up” feature to show whether they are “for”, “against” or wish to “abstain”;
 - Between each of these votes Members must ensure that they put their “hands down” and that they don’t vote twice;
 - Those Members who do not have the “hands up” feature will then be asked individually whether they are “for”, “against” or wish to “abstain”;
- use other electronic voting systems if available.

In addition for Council meetings the following method may also be used:

- the Mayor will ask each Group Leader in turn to state how many of their Members wish to vote in a particular way i.e. “for” or “against” the recommendation(s). If the vote is not unanimous then the Group Leader will state how many of their Members wish to vote in a particular way (this will usually be the view of the majority of those Members) and then name those Members who are of a different view and how they wish to vote e.g. “for”, “against” or “abstain”. The Mayor will then ask the Members of that Group if anyone disagrees with the information their Group Leader has provided;

The Mayor/Chairman will decide which of the above methods are to be used for a particular agenda item.

7.8 Exclusion of the Press and Public

If the agenda of a meeting includes any private or exempt items, then a separate private virtual meeting must be set up by the Clerk and invitations sent only to the required participants.

Before any discussion takes place, each participant at the private session must ensure that there are no persons at their location who would be able to hear or see the proceedings during such meetings or part of meetings.

Any Member attending a virtual meeting who fails to disclose that there are persons present in their location who would be able to hear or see the proceedings, who are not so entitled will be in breach of the Council's Members' Code of Conduct.

7.9 Closing the Meeting

The Mayor/Chairman will close the meeting in the usual way.

The Clerk will record the end time of the meeting and stop the live stream.

8. Dealing with Technical Difficulties

If the Mayor/Chairman loses connection then the Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairman will take over the chairing of the meeting. If they both lose connection then provided the meeting is still quorate another member of the Committee will be elected Chair for the remainder of the meeting and take over chairing the meeting.

If a Member experiences a technical problem and disconnects from the virtual meeting, but the meeting remains quorate, then the meeting will continue and any necessary vote taken. If the Member cannot re-establish their connection then they should use the audio link details of which can be found in their meeting invitation.

In the event that the Mayor/Chairman or Democratic Services Officer identifies a failure of the remote participation facility the Mayor/Chairman will declare an adjournment while the fault is addressed.

If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting is inquorate the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate and provided, it is accessible to members of the public, the meeting will continue. Those attending remotely will accept that the meeting will continue and a vote may be taken in their absence.

If there is a fault which means the meeting is no longer being live webcast then the Clerk will, with the permission of the Mayor/Chairman and all attendees, record the meeting and publish the recording on the website at a later date.

9. Disruptions

The Mayor/Chairman/Clerk can mute participants, including voting Members, should they consider their behaviour to be inappropriate or disruptive.

Should either a Member or a participant become disruptive, the Mayor/Chairman will warn them and should that warning not result in a change of behaviour they will be authorised to terminate that person's participation in the meeting.

In the case of disruptive behaviour, the Mayor/Chairman will be entitled to ask the Clerk or another support officer to mute or remove a participant from the meeting.

10. Comment and Feedback

The Council recognises that the move to virtual meetings, although necessary, has been challenging for Members, Officers and the public. We will be reviewing the Protocol on a regular basis to ensure that lessons learnt from holding virtual meetings are taken into account and the document updated accordingly. We would therefore welcome any feedback on the Protocol and the process to date and any suggestions for future improvements.

If you would like to submit any comments please contact Democratic Services using the following e-mail address: Democratic.services@wokingham.gov.uk