



Agenda Item 1

SCHOOLS FORUM

01 July 2020

PROTOCOL FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS HELD REMOTELY BY ELECTRONIC MEANS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Legislation

Until recently the law governing Council and Committee meetings required Councillors to be present together in a physical location. Meetings were largely governed by the Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangement)(Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. Such legislation did not, of course, anticipate a global pandemic and the current impact of Covid-19 and social distancing guidance which has made it impractical to run Council and Committee meetings in the usual way.

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4th April 2020. The Regulations provide the Councils with the power to hold their Council and Committee meetings remotely, by electronic means, between 4th April 2020 and 6th May 2021. Consequently, during this period of time, to enable Councillors, Officers and the public to social distance themselves, Council and Committee meetings can lawfully be held on remote platforms by access via electronic devices, rather than being held in a physical location, such as County Hall, Morpeth or any of the other physical locations which are used in respect of Local Area Council meetings.

The new Regulations can be found here

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/392/contents/made>

1.2 Council Procedure Rules

The legislation provides a significant amount of flexibility as to how such meetings may be run. It provides Councils with the power to introduce their own arrangements by way of Standing Orders or Rules of Procedure governing for example, the electronic platform to be used, the way in which voting takes place, the way in which members of the public attend meetings and public speaking rights.

The Councils have amended their Council Rules of Procedure, effective from May 2020, to implement the new regulations and enable remote meetings to be held.

1.3 Protocol

This Protocol, which is intended to give practical guidance on the implementation of, and arrangements for the holding of remote meetings, should be read in conjunction with the revised Council Rules of Procedure.

2.0 REMOTE PLATFORMS

2.1 Participation in Meetings

The regulations enable the Councils to hold their Council and Committee meetings with persons attending the meeting by way of remote access. This means by enabling members to participate in the meeting by electronic means, including by telephone conference, video conference, live webcasts and live interactive streaming.

The Council have chosen to use ‘Google Meet’ or ‘Hangouts’ as their platform for remote meetings. The software will enable members in remote attendance to hear and be heard, see and be seen, by other members in attendance and also by any member of the public who chooses to join the meeting by way of a YouTube livestream. The Council are not at this stage permitting members of the public to speak at any of its remote meetings but will provide an alternative written process to replace public speaking for the time being. Those members participating in Council and Committee meetings by virtue of being a member of that meeting will be provided with a calendar invitation from Democratic Services to the meeting with a link to enable them to access the Google Hangout meeting.

2.2 Observation of Meetings

The regulations provide that a meeting must be open to the public (unless they have been excluded due to exempt or confidential material being discussed). However, being open to the public now means simply that the public must be able to hear, and where practicable see, the members of the meeting. Therefore, the meeting will also be livestreamed via YouTube and members of the public will be able to ‘attend’ by observing the live streaming via an electronic device.

3.0 PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE REMOTE MEETING

3.1 Joining the meeting by remote access

For members who are participants of a Council or Committee meeting will be provided with a Google calendar invitation to the meeting by Democratic Services Officers. The invitation contains a link to the Google Hangout meeting and the accompanying Council or Committee documentation

Members will have already received appropriate hardware, software and Google training from IT Officers but any queries should be directed by email to wearedigital@northumberland.gov.uk in advance of the meeting

The summons to the meeting will advise of the start time of the meeting. All participants should have remotely accessed the meeting at least 10 minutes before the start time. The remote meeting will be accessible 20 minutes before the start time of the meeting and officers will be available from that time wherever possible.

Any member, not a member of a Committee meeting, but attending under a provision in the Council Rules of Procedure enabling them to do so, would need to contact Democratic Services officers on democratic.services@northumberland.gov.uk by noon on the day prior to the meeting to obtain joining instructions.

3.2 Security

Anyone provided with access details to the Google Hangout meeting should ensure they are kept confidential and not shared with any other person.

Should a member wish to invite another person to the Google Hangout meeting, they should discuss this with Democratic Services Officers, who will, if that person has a right to participate in the meeting, issue them with their own individual joining instructions.

3.3 The remote environment

The Google Hangout meeting will be live streamed and viewed by the public (unless it is in private session). A member attending will be using the camera and microphone on their electronic device e.g. laptop, iPad etc.

When attending a remote meeting a member should ensure they are sitting comfortably, in front of their electronic device so that they can be seen and heard clearly. The member should consider the background also captured by the camera and ensure it is appropriate to the meeting. They should also check the volume control on their device to ensure that they can be heard when they speak. The member should take steps to ensure they will not be disturbed during the meeting as far as is possible.

3.4 Officer support to a remote meeting

A remote meeting will be attended by various officers, but they will generally include a legal officer to provide the meeting with legal and constitutional advice and take a recorded vote, a Democratic Services officer to record and minute the meeting, and a Meeting Host (usually the Democratic Services officer) who will be able to provide and deny access to participants and if necessary mute and unmute participants microphones and raise and lower participants' hands where that functionality is available (see paragraph 3.9 below)

3.5 Attendance and apologies at a remote meeting

At the commencement of every remote meeting the Chairman or an officer will take a roll call of attendees and apologies for absence. When a member's name is called out they are required to unmute their microphone, respond "Present" and then mute their microphone again.

This is firstly to ensure at the outset of the meeting, that it is quorate, and secondly to provide transparency to the public as to which members are in attendance.

3.6 Non-Attendance during a remote meeting

It may become necessary during a meeting for a member to cease attending for a short temporary time, for any reason, but including a temporary loss of remote connectivity. If a member intends to voluntarily leave the meeting at any point they should unmute their microphone, identify themselves, and advise the Chairman of their intention to leave the meeting.

Non-attendance means either where a member cannot hear the participants of the remote meeting or cannot be heard by them; a loss of visual connectivity would not lead to non-attendance.

The Meeting Host will ensure that a quorum is maintained and advise the Chairman if it is not, when an adjournment will be required in accordance with Council Rules of Procedure.

A member who is not in attendance for the duration of any particular agenda item is prohibited from voting on that agenda item. If they are in attendance at the time the vote is taken, but have not been in attendance throughout the item, they are required to abstain from the vote.

3.7 Chat Function

The Google Hangout platform has a 'chat' function where messages can be typed to all or some selected participants of the remote meeting during the meeting.

All members, save for the Chairman are asked not to use the chat functionality. The electronic chat is to be reserved only for communication between officers and the Chairman of the remote meeting, to enable them to effectively manage the remote meeting.

It should be noted that any chat comments that are made can be viewed by members of the public who are observing the meeting through the means of the YouTube livestream

3.8 Public Questions

Members of the public may ask questions at a remote meeting in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23 as amended.

Should a member of the public wish to ask a question at a remote Council meeting, of a Cabinet Member (at Council), they must submit their question by email, together with their name, address and contact details to the Head of Democratic Services at democratic.services@northumberland.gov.uk by noon five working days prior to the day of the meeting.

No questions will be permitted at the remote meeting unless such advance notice has been given.

If the question is accepted by the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services, the member of the public will be notified of the acceptance of their question which will be read out at the meeting by the Chairman or an officer. The question will be answered by the Cabinet Member.

No supplementary question arising out of the answer to the substantive question will be permitted.

3.9 Speaking at a Remote Meeting

When a member joins a Google Hangout meeting, with the exception of the Chairman, they should have their microphone set to mute.

When a member wishes to speak they should indicate by raising their hand physically in front of the camera or by using the 'Raise Hand' function in Google Hangout where available. The Chairman can see all those indicating and will come to each person; the Chairman has absolute discretion as to the order in which he takes speakers.

When a member is invited to speak by the Chairman, they should unmute their microphone to enable them to speak and if the Chairman has not already done so they should identify themselves first before making their substantive speaking contribution.

When the member has finished speaking, they must remember to switch their microphone to mute once again and to use the ‘Lower Hand’ function on the Google Hangout platform where the “Raise Hand” function has been used.

3.10 Rules of Debate

The usual rules of debate apply to remote meetings, and reference should be made to Council Procedure Rule 12 as amended.

The Chairman should announce and identify each member when inviting them to speak, to aid transparency and assist those attending by watching the live stream. If the Chairman overlooks this requirement the member who wishes to speak should introduce themselves

3.11 Point of Order and Personal Explanation

If a member has a Point of Order or Personal Explanation to raise during a meeting, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 12 as amended, they must unmute their microphone and interrupt the meeting saying ‘Personal Explanation’ or ‘Point of Order’. The Chairman will then invite that member to speak. Having spoken, the member must remember to mute their microphone again.

3.12 Voting at a remote meeting

For all meetings where members are attending by way of remote access, a recorded vote will be taken on each agenda item where a vote is required.

When the Chairman indicates that a vote is to be taken, each member’s name will be read out in alphabetical order by the Democratic Services Officer or legal officer. Each member will need to unmute their microphone and say either ‘For’, ‘Against’ or ‘Abstain’ from the motion or amendment that has been put. Abstention may be due to non-attendance throughout the entire agenda item, or for any other reason. After indicating, each member must remember to mute their microphone again.

Where a member, thought to be in attendance, does not respond to a recorded vote, the Democratic Services Officer or legal officer will confirm that they are recording no vote for that member. If the member had in fact cast a vote this will alert them to the fact that they could not be heard (perhaps by having their microphone on mute or having lost connectivity). If they are still connected, they should unmute their microphone and interrupt the meeting to be heard and cast their vote.

3.13 Adjournments

In accordance with Council Rules of Procedure, the Chairman has the power to adjourn a meeting for a short temporary period. If the Chairman advises of a short temporary adjournment to a remote meeting, all members must remain in attendance with their microphones on mute, until the Chairman instructs otherwise.

It is possible that the Chairman may leave the meeting for a few minutes, for example to take advice from professional officers, via the chat function or a separate electronic platform.

It should be recognised that it may prove necessary to adjourn a remote meeting to another date most likely in the event that there are significant issues with the technology used to facilitate a meeting

3.14 Documents

All agenda documents will be made available to members participating in a remote meeting, in advance. It is likely that presentations on agenda items at remote meetings may be more concise and succinct and it is assumed that members will have familiarised themselves with all relevant agenda documents in advance of the remote meeting.

3.15 Exempt Session

If a resolution is passed for the meeting to go into private session, to consider exempt or confidential material, the YouTube livestream by which any press and public are observing the meeting will be ended. The Meeting Host of the meeting will ensure that the live streaming of the meeting has stopped to ensure that no member of the press or public are in attendance.

It is the responsibility of the members participating in a private session of a meeting, to ensure that the meeting cannot be seen or heard by any other person at their remote location.

3.16 Disturbance

If there is a disturbance amongst members the Chairman continues to have the ability to deal with it in accordance with Council Rule of Procedure Rule 19 as amended. Rather than a Chairman standing, in a remote meeting the Chairman has the ability to mute all microphones, and if a direction is given for a member to leave a remote meeting, the Meeting Host can effect this.

3.17 Members standing

Any requirement in Council Rules of Procedure to a member needing to stand to address a meeting, does not apply to a remote meeting.

3.18 Documents open to public inspection

Any reference in Council Rules of Procedure to a document being available for public inspection at the Council's offices will now be satisfied by being published on the Council's website.

4.0 Following a remote meeting

The video / audio recording of the remote meeting will be live streamed and may be made available to view on the Council's website in which case it will be available for 12 months from the date of the meeting after which period it shall be deleted.

Minutes of a meeting will be dealt with in the usual way and draft minutes will be published on the Council's website as soon as practicable after a remote meeting.

May 2020