Formal Council Meetings by Skype

A Guide to the Procedures and Protocols for participation in remote Council meetings for Councillors and the Public

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1   Introduction

1.1   This guide is intended for participants joining a formal council meeting using Microsoft Skype.

1.2   It commences with General Guidance and Good Practice for ALL participants.

1.3   The remainder of the guide is then structured to provide support and a quick guide for each of the roles. The specific roles identified are:-
- Chairman
- Committee Members (Voting councillors who are members of that Committee)
- Other Participants
  - Non-voting councillors who are not members of that committee
  - Representatives from external bodies
  - Public participants (formally making statements at regulatory meetings)
- Other Public Viewers

1.3   The principle aims of this guide are to facilitate as many of the constitutional rules and procedures as possible, whilst recognising the limitations that virtual meetings present.

1.5   The key principle requirements are to:-
- Enable contributions from people using a wide variety of devices, not all of whom will be on the council network. We aim to put in place arrangements to allow users to join a meeting via the following channels and features:-
  - Skype for Business Application (Two-way Audio, Video, Presentation)
  - Skype Web App (Two-way Audio and Video)
  - Telephone (Two-way Audio)
  - Web Streaming (One-way Audio only)

- Be accessible to participants in a meeting who wish to speak and be heard, and to those who just wish to observe.

- Recognise and give special controls to a meeting Chairman.

1.6   The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 4 April 2020. This Guide reflects the requirements of these Regulations.

2 General Guidance and Good Practice for ALL Participants

2.1 Conducting large meetings by video conference can be daunting, however, such meetings can work well if managed and all participants play their part and support those managing the meeting.

2.2 A fundamental rule to help make online meetings run smoothly is absolute respect and patience for the Chairman and those speaking.

2.3 Key Tips

Below is a list of some of the key tips for all participants:-

- Ensure you are **using the most up-to-date version of Skype**. Updates are pretty regular and often deal with possibly security issues, so it is imperative to make sure you have the latest version.

- Reliable Skype meetings depend on good sound quality, so always **use a good microphone, preferably in a headset**, if you have one. The latest laptops and tablets give acceptable sound quality from their internal mics and speakers, but only if you are in a room by yourself without any background noise and especially nobody else on the same call as you.

- **Don't group together and share a microphone** or laptop, this can make it difficult to hear and participants lose the advantage of seeing who is speaking. One person per account works best.

- Adjust the microphone position to **ensure best audio quality**. Too far away and no one will hear you, too close and everyone will hear you breathing. Testing your connection before a scheduled meeting is always recommended.

- **Mute your microphone when not speaking** unless you are responding repeatedly to questions or making regular contributions (e.g., the Chairman). Background noises, keyboard tapping, barking dogs, or telephones ringing will promote you as the main speaker within the system and may interfere with the meeting. If possible mute or switch other phones to silent as you would in normal meetings.

- **Maximise your bandwidth** and if possible, connect to your network via cable rather than wi-fi. Minimise the use of the internet at home by others during the call, particularly those with high bandwidth demands such as online gaming and video streaming. Switching off your camera whilst not speaking can improve your audio connection quality.

- **Avoid any distractions** to yourself or others watching, by locating yourself where you will not be disturbed by pets, children or other family members moving in the background.

- **Sit in a well-lit area** to improve visibility of your on-screen presence.

- **Be aware of your surroundings**. Check what is on display behind you.

- **Remove items containing personal information** including photographs of family or friends from camera view if you can.

- Aim to start Skype and **join the call at least 10 minutes before** the meeting commences. You can check everything is working as it should and mute your microphone.

- **Be prepared well in advance** of the meeting. Ensure you have access to the documents you need and have read the papers before the meeting commences. If you cannot access your papers, contact Committee Services (01784 446240) as early as possible before the meeting. It will not be practical for officers to assist you just before or during the meeting.

- When you first come online, say hello and if it is a big call, give your name, so the organiser and Chairman know you are connected.

- **Avoid informal chat** before a meeting starts formally. Such conversations can be heard by all on the call. After an initial sound and connection check, the Chairman or meeting organiser is likely to mute all microphones initially.

- When the call finishes, always remember to check that the organiser has closed the call and if not, disconnect yourself.

- If you have other topics to discuss with someone in the meeting, don't stay on the call, but close the call and start again.

- **Add an appropriate photograph to your profile** if you do not already have one. On large calls, not everyone may know what you look like and the photograph is a big help in improving communication and identifying attendees.

- **Dress appropriately for the meeting**. Ask yourself the simple question, "Would I wear this to a formal meeting at the Council Offices?"

- Finally, remember that although you may not be speaking you may be visible on-screen to others. **Be conscious of what your body language may imply**.

3 Chairman

3.1 The Chairman is responsible for controlling and running the meeting. Whilst in many respects this will be similar to meetings conducted in person, it will be necessary to adopt new approaches to ensure proceedings are fair and transparent and to that everyone wishing to contribute is capable of being heard.

3.2 It is absolutely imperative, however, that the Chairman controls the flow of the meeting. To achieve this the following hints and tips are suggested:-

- **Avoid informal chat** – As people join a remote online meeting, there can be a tendency for participants to 'chat' amongst themselves. Whilst not part of the formal meeting, such conversations can be heard by everyone. This is particularly important before regulatory hearings where such conversations could be seen as familiarity between parties. To assist, the Chairman and Meeting Organisers will have the ability to 'Mute' users manually. This can be overridden but allows an opportunity for the Chairman to remind participants of the expectations.

- Starting the meeting with **opening remarks** and laying down some ground rules.

- Invite Committee members to introduce themselves at the start of the meeting and make clear which other members are attending as observers, as well as officers, for the benefit of any public listening to the meeting.

- Similar to hosting a physical meeting when attendees get stuck in traffic, there will be occasions when an individual encounters **a technical issue that cannot be resolved** in time for the start of the meeting. Within a timely manner before the issue causes a distraction, the Chairman should be clear when the meeting should go ahead without the attendee or be postponed/rescheduled.

- Explain **how speaking will be managed** and the expectations for those online. Invite individuals to speak only – do not allow anyone to speak over someone else or for cross conversations.

- Take charge if you need to and **Mute someone speaking** if you feel the need. This can be carried out from the Participants list. Right-click to see options. You can also stop their videos or even remove them from the meeting if required.

- **Manage a speakers list**. Whilst a traditional speakers list by raising a hand will not be possible, there are two possible ways to proceed depending upon the type of meeting.

  (a) ask anyone wishing to speak to indicate using the Instant Messaging feature. It is suggested that participants requesting to speak (RTS) could simply type

"RTS" in the Instant Message Conversation window. Such requests to speak will appear in the order requested.

(b) alternatively, the Chairman could ask each participant in turn whether they wish to speak.

For those connecting via the web app or by telephone, the Chairman will need to actively ask if they wish to speak. This is critical to ensure no one leaves the meeting feeling short-changed. This could lead to a legal challenge in a regulatory hearing if any party feels they have not had the opportunity to speak, ask questions or respond during a hearing.

- **People speaking need to be identified**. Where possible this should be controlled through the Chairman, naming individuals every time they are invited to speak, not just the first time.

- **Guide attendees** - if referring to specific documents, clearly state the document and page number.

- **Allow for pauses** – users will need a little time to locate documents and page numbers and to switch their microphone on and off.

- **Do not allow repetitive comments**. Seek new points only.

- **Instant Messaging** - Do not allow the Instant Message facility to be used for matters other than requesting to speak. Any comments posted will be shared to everyone in attendance. Anyone wishing to message someone else should do so in a separate conversation thread.

- **Remote attendance and technical failures** - If at any time during a meeting an individual member's remote participation fails, the Chairman may call a short adjournment of up to five minutes or so to determine whether the connection can quickly be re-established. If the connection is not restored within that time, the meeting should continue to deal with the business whilst this happens, providing the meeting remains quorate and the public are able to hear.

- The member who has lost connection will be deemed to have left the meeting at the point of failure and re-joined the meeting when the connection is restored. Where this occurs during a regulatory committee, the member who was disconnected will not be able to vote on the matter under discussion as they would not have heard all the facts.

- In the event of any apparent failure of the video, telephone or conferencing connection, the Chairman should immediately determine if the meeting is still quorate:

- o if it is, then the business of the meeting will continue; or
- o if there is no quorum, then the meeting will adjourn for a period specified by the Chairman, expected to be no more than ten or fifteen minutes, to allow the connection to be re-established.

- **Voting**
  - o Where a vote is required from those in attendance, the Committee Officer will call upon each voting member in turn to ask if they are 'For' or 'Against' the motion or wish to abstain. The Officer will state the result of the vote.

  - o Details of how members voted will not be kept or minuted unless a Recorded Vote is called.

  - o Where, in the opinion of the Chairman, there is consensus for the motion during a debate, the Chairman may seek to secure such agreement whilst providing an opportunity for any dissenting members to be heard.

4 Committee Members

4.1 You should be familiar with the general guidance and good practice principles set out earlier in this document.

4.2 It is imperative that the online meeting can be conducted smoothly, and the Chairman is permitted to manage and invite speakers in a controlled manner.

4.3 Below are listed some key points for particular reference:-

- Join the meeting promptly to avoid unnecessary interruptions.

- Mute your mic when you're not talking.

- If you are having problems hearing or viewing the meeting, try switching off your camera when you're not speaking.

- Only speak when invited to by the Chair. If you'd like to speak, type "RTS" in the Instant Message Conversation panel and click the send (arrow) button.

- If you're referring to a specific page or slide, mention the page or slide number.

- Be mindful of the Access to Information rules and that where it is necessary to go into Part 2 session that you are in a location where other members of your household are not able to overhear the proceedings.

- Don't work on other tasks (like emails, browsing the web or answering other phone calls) during the meeting. If you have a mobile phone, switch it off for the duration of the meeting.

- If at any time you are unable to hear, or be heard, then you will be deemed to have left the meeting and may not be able to participate in a vote on the matter being debated. If this happens to you, you must let the Chairman know immediately you regain connection, so that officers can re-cap the part of the debate you have missed, if appropriate.

- When a vote is taken by roll-call, ensure your microphone and camera are switched on before answering clearly whether you are 'FOR', 'AGAINST' or wish to 'ABSTAIN' from the vote. These are the only three options that are valid.

5 Other Participants

5.1   This section deals with both councillors who are non-committee members and public participants who would normally have a right to speak at Planning and Licensing Committee meetings.

5.2   We are keen to provide appropriate and proportionate opportunities for non-committee members to participate in meetings, however, managing a meeting virtually presents additional challenges.

5.3   Unless there is a recognised right of a councillor who is not a committee member to speak at a meeting (for example a ward councillor at Planning Committee in connection with an application on the agenda in their ward), the ability of other councillors to speak will not ordinarily be permitted.

5.4   All councillors will be sent the Skype meeting invite for all Committee meetings to enable them to 'attend' any meeting whether as a speaker or just an observer.

5.5   Any member of the public who has registered to speak at a Planning Committee or Licensing Sub-Committee hearing, will be sent the Skype meeting invite so that they may hear and, where practicable, see the members of the Committee.

5.6   These regulatory committees and hearings will separately publish appropriate protocols for public representations at virtual meetings.

6 Other Public Viewers

6.1 The Council will make available facilities to hear all meetings which would ordinarily be held in public as a live audio streamed event.

6.2 A link to the relevant meeting broadcast will be available from the meeting page on the Council's web site.

6.3 The following link displays the current month of scheduled meetings. Click on the relevant date to view the agenda and a link to the broadcast for a specific meeting (https://democracy.spelthorne.gov.uk/mgCalendarMonthView.aspx?GL=1&bcr=1)

6.4 The recording of the meeting will remain published until the following meeting has taken place.