

6.3.1. To consider the adoption of a policy for council meetings held remotely by electronic means.

Background:

Due to the unprecedented times we find ourselves in, the Parish Council now has the power to hold remote meetings by electronic means under the provisions made on the 4 April 2020, when the government brought in The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 to allow local authorities to conduct meetings remotely. This legislation is available until the 21st May 2021.

Warbleton Parish Council, has decided to use Zoom as the platform to hold and host meetings. Moving forwards the Clerk may be required to amend and adapt the policy as the technology and opportunities develop and asks for delegated authority to be given to amend the policy if required. Any changes will be reported to Members by email prior to any meeting of the Council/Committee with a full report being presented to a scheduled Council meeting, if required.

POLICY FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS HELD REMOTELY BY ELECTRONIC MEANS

PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

The Council has chosen to use 'Zoom' as its platform for remote meetings. The software enables 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 attending the meeting with a right to speak. The zoom invitation will be displayed on the front of the agenda and on the website.

Any Member with a prejudicial interest in any item who would in accordance with Council Rules and Protocols, absent themselves from a physical meeting for the duration of the item, will be transferred from the virtual meeting to the virtual waiting room for that item, where they will not see or hear the proceedings and are unable vote. They will be returned to the virtual meeting once the item is completed.

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.

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR REMOTE MEETINGS

All participants should have remotely accessed the meeting at least 5 minutes before the start time. The remote meeting will be accessible 10 minutes before the start time of the meeting and the Clerk will be available. Any Member, not a Member of a Committee meeting may also attend the meeting in line with the Council Standing Orders.

THE REMOTE ENVIRONMENT

All attendees should dress appropriately for a meeting of the Council. 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. The Member should arrange appropriate lighting, absence of background noise and take steps to ensure that they will not be disturbed during the meeting.

OFFICER SUPPORT TO A REMOTE MEETING

A remote meeting will be attended by the Clerk, to record and minute the meeting, to control the live streaming, provide and deny access to participants, mute and unmute participants microphones.

ATTENDANCE AND APOLOGIES AT A REMOTE MEETING

At the commencement of every remote meeting the Chairman will take a roll call of attendees and apologies for absence. 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.

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. 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 would be required in accordance with Council Standing Orders. 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.

SPEAKING AT A REMOTE MEETING

When a Member joins a Zoom 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 using the 'Raise Hand' function in Zoom. 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. Both the Chairman and the Clerk will have the ability to mute and unmute participants' microphones.

RULES OF DEBATE

The usual rules of debate apply to remote meetings in line with the Council Standing Orders. The Chairman should announce each Member when inviting them to speak, to aid transparency.

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 Standing Orders, 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.

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 by the Chairman. 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. Where a Member, thought to be in attendance, does not respond to a recorded vote, the Chairman 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.

ADJOURNMENTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COUNCIL STANDING ORDERS

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 likely that the Chairman may leave the meeting for a few minutes, for example to take advice from the Clerk, via the chat function, the Zoom waiting room, or a separate electronic platform.

DOCUMENTS

All Agenda documents will be made available by email in advance to Members participating in a remote meeting. 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.

EXEMPT SESSION

If a resolution is passed for the meeting to go into private session, to consider exempt or confidential material, any press and public participating in the Zoom meeting will be asked to leave the remote meeting by disconnecting. The Host of the meeting will ensure they have disconnected and may remove their access if they have not done so. It is likely that any exempt session would continue on a different virtual meeting platform for which access would be supplied to Members. It is the responsibility of the Member 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.

DISTURBANCES

If there is a disturbance amongst members of the public at a remote meeting, the Chairman has powers to deal with it in accordance with Council Standing Orders. Having warned the member of the public over their conduct the Chairman can, if the conduct continues, mute the microphone of that member of the public, or ultimately can order their removal from

the remote meeting. If such a direction is given, the Clerk would cease the access of that member of the public. If there is a disturbance amongst Members the Chairman continues to have the ability to deal with it in accordance with the Council Standing Orders. 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 affect this. Any participant who appears to embark upon comment that is deemed libellous, defamatory or profane will be muted without notice and the meeting paused, so that the Clerk may offer professional advice to the Chairman.

MEMBERS STANDING

Any requirement in Councils Standing Orders to a Member needing to stand to address a meeting, does not apply to a remote meeting.

DOCUMENTS OPEN TO PUBLIC INSPECTION

reference in the Councils Standing Orders to a document being available for public inspection will now be satisfied by being published on the Council's website.

FOLLOWING A REMOTE MEETING

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