



Marlborough Town Council

Protocol for Virtual Meetings

1. Introduction

Town and Parish Councils have been given provision under 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 2020 Regulations”) to hold legal virtual meetings in order that council business can be maintained.

Remote attendance at Council meetings is permitted as long as certain conditions are met. These include that Councillors are able to:

- Hear and be heard by other Councillors in attendance
- Hear and be heard by members of the public entitled to attend the meeting
- A visual solution is preferred, but audio is sufficient. This also relates to members of the public attending the meeting

The regulations are clear that a meeting is not limited to those present in the same place, but includes electronic, digital or virtual locations (internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers).

Marlborough Town Council has chosen to use the Zoom platform for its scheduled meetings enabling remote access for the public.

2. Advertising meeting

The Town Clerk will host scheduled, formal meetings using the Town Council account. These meetings will be open to the press and public and held using the published agenda. Invitations will be sent to all Town Councillors with a code and link to the virtual meeting. Access to the meeting will be available to the press and public as set out on the published agenda and displayed on noticeboards and posted on the Town Council website.

3. Joining the meeting

Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly at least ten minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disruption. Attendees will collect in the Zoom ‘waiting room’ prior to the meeting.

4. Meeting protocol

Meetings will be governed by the usual Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and associated policies. All attendees will be set to ‘mute’ on entry to the meeting and only the Chair will remain unmuted. All other participants, if they wish to speak, will be invited to unmute. As the ‘host’, the Town Clerk will have the ability to mute or remove anyone deemed a nuisance at the Chair’s request. Meeting participants may wish to protect their personal environment by choosing a virtual background in the Zoom Settings ‘Virtual

Background' or alternatively should consider what can be seen behind them while on camera.

All Councillor attendees will display their name in order for the public to be able to identify them, just as they would at an in-person meeting.

5. Meeting Etiquette

- Mute your microphone when you are not speaking
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair
- If you are not using video, then please state your name
- The only person to keep on their microphone throughout the meeting is the Chair
- To protect participants from malware and not to breach Standing Orders, the 'chat', function will be disabled during the meeting. If necessary, the Town Clerk or Administrator will display any documents required using the 'share screen' function

6. Public Participation

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the Town Council's Standing Orders. This can include speaking, asking questions and/or making representations. As with meetings in the Council Chamber, members of the public will be given the opportunity to ask a question during Public Question Time at the start of the meeting, but can only speak at other times if invited to do so by the Chair with the agreement of other Councillors. (This is a requirement and known as a Suspension of Standing Orders).

Anyone wanting to speak should raise their hand using 'raise hand' in the options within the participant tool bar or by physically raising a hand if using a camera so that the Chair can see. Members of the public must introduce themselves if they wish to speak.

The Chairman can request that the Town Clerk (the 'host') mutes a participant and also removes a disruptive member of public if necessary and this should be made clear at the beginning of the meeting.

7. Declarations of Interest

If a Councillor has declared an interest in an item on the agenda, they will be placed in the waiting room for the duration of that agenda item. Once the item has been concluded, they will be re-admitted.

8. The Meeting and Debate

For Councillors who wish to speak in the debate, they should either click on the raise hand facility on the participant tool bar or raise their hand on the video screen and wait to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chair. If a Councillor is using a telephone without a screen to access the meeting, they should make the Chair aware that they wish to speak. Once Councillors have spoken, they must mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise.

9. Voting on Motions

Within the Zoom facility, there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting. When the Chair asks the Council or Committee to vote, those in favour of the proposal should use the "thumbs up" icon, those against should use the "thumbs down" icon. No response will represent an abstention. Alternatively, a vote may be made via a show of hands or the Chair may choose to ask each Councillor to vote in turn. If this is the case,

Councillors should express their vote verbally and the Town Clerk or Administrator will record the outcome of the vote and announce it to the meeting.

10. Disturbance from Members of the Public

In line with Standing Orders, if any member of the public interrupts a meeting the Chair will warn them accordingly. If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Chair will ask the Town Clerk to mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

11. Confidential Items

There are times when Council meetings are not open to the public, when confidential, or “exempt” issues – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 – are under consideration.

It is important to ensure that there are no members of the public at remote locations able to hear or see the proceedings during such meetings. Any Councillor in remote attendance could be in breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct if they fail to disclose that there are other persons present who may be able to see and/or hear the meeting if they are not entitled to do that. If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the Chair will ask the Town Clerk to remove those participants from the meeting at the appropriate time. Before this happens, the members of public and press must be made aware why they are being removed.

12. After the Meeting

Participants should leave the meeting by clicking on the red “end meeting” button. The Town Clerk can also end the meeting for all participants. No audio recording will be made by the Town Council of formal meetings. Meeting minutes will be published on the Council’s website in the usual way.

13. Technical Issues

If any meeting participant identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chair should declare a recess while the fault is addressed. If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting becomes inquorate through this fault, the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate, then it should continue.

Those attending remotely should be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and a vote would be taken without their attendance. If the meeting was due to determine an urgent matter or one which is time-limited and it has not been possible to continue because of technical difficulties, the Chair and Town Clerk shall explore other agreed means of taking the decision under the Scheme of Delegation.

The protocol should be reviewed on or before 7 May 2021

5 August 2020