
Protocol for Holding Virtual Meetings



Version 1

May 2020

1. Introduction

- 1.1. 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 meetings.
- 1.2. The Regulations, which took effect as of 4 April 2020 and apply until 7 May 2021, enable Councils to hold meetings which Members may attend remotely.
- 1.3. The following protocol has been set up in order to provide assistance to Members and Officers in the organisation and conduct of virtual committee meetings at Harrow Council held via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). The principle aim of this document is to facilitate as many of the constitutional rules and procedures as possible, whilst recognising the limitations that virtual meetings present.

2. Commonly used terms:

- 2.1. **Clerk**– a member of the Democratic Services Team, who will ensure the set-up of the meeting, the sending of invites and technical control of the meeting. The Clerk may be assisted by another support officer or member of IT team if required at the meeting.
- 2.2. **Chair** – an elected member who plays a key role in the conduct of a meeting and steers the discussion.
- 2.3. **Participants** – everyone directly involved in a meeting (eg Clerk, Members and presenting Officers)
- 2.4. **Viewers** – anyone indirectly involved in the discussion, i.e the public or councillors who are not Members of a committee or other observing Officers
- 2.5. **Place of meeting** - where a meeting is held or will be held. This may include an electronic, digital or virtual location such as internet location, web address or conference call number
- 2.6. **Open to the public** - a meeting will be considered “open to the public” if it includes access through remote means including audio, video conferencing, live webcast, live interactive streaming and where a meeting is accessible to the public through such remote means so as to allow them to observe the proceedings.

- 2.7. **Lobby** – a virtual waiting area in which external participants are placed before the start of a meeting.

3. Technical overview

- 3.1. MS Teams is virtual meetings software, allowing two or more participants to interact remotely between themselves or in front of the wider public.
- 3.2. MS Teams requires a laptop, computer, tablet or a smart phone with microphone (built in or headset) and camera as well as a reliable internet connection.
- 3.3. The protocol assumes that participants already have MS Teams installed on their devices. If not, a free version can be downloaded from the MS [Teams Downloads](#) or as a smart phone app. For instructions on getting started, please refer to Appendix 1.
- 3.4. MS Teams works on the following platforms:
 - 3.4.1. For PC/Laptops – Windows 8.1 and later; MacOS 10.10 or later
 - 3.4.2. For mobile devices – Android 4.4 or later; iOS 10 or later
 - 3.4.3. For web browsers – Chrome, Edge RS2 or later; Firefox; IE 11; Safari

4. Notice of meetings and provision of agendas

- 4.1. The Clerk will produce an agenda in the usual manner, in line with the agreed deadlines and notice periods.
- 4.2. All agenda papers (except for exempt/confidential items) will be available electronically on the Modern.gov app and Harrow Council website.
- 4.3. 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 access the meeting.
- 4.4. The Clerk or another Officer acting as an organiser, will be responsible for setting up the virtual meeting and sending out invites via Outlook.
- 4.5. The calendar invites will contain a link to join a meeting as well as dial-in instructions. Members must keep invitation links safe and avoid forwarding to third parties unless necessary.
- 4.6. Members (and Officers) are advised to copy and paste the link and dial-in details set out in the calendar invite to a word document or as an email to themselves so they can be accessed in case of any technical issues on the day.

5. Attendance of virtual meetings by Members of a Committee:

- 5.1. Virtual meetings are joined by going to Outlook Calendar, opening the meeting invite and clicking the “join meeting” link – this will automatically re-direct Members to the Teams application.
- 5.2. Members must endeavour to join virtual meetings promptly at least 10min before the scheduled start. Any external participants (Members of the public or other councillors, not Members of the committee), will be placed in a virtual lobby and will be admitted to the meeting by the Clerk/organiser when the meeting is ready to start.
- 5.3. Members must ensure they maintain a video link for the duration of the meeting.
- 5.4. Members must ensure their microphones are muted when not speaking in order to reduce background noise.
- 5.5. 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. Please note this is only available once the meeting has started. More guidance on how to change background can be found [here](#).
- 5.6. 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.
- 5.7. Members must ensure they have the relevant meeting papers open and ready to use before the start of the meeting. This can be done via the Modern.gov app or via the Council website. Where possible/practical, the use of a second or split screen is also recommended.
- 5.8. Members must conduct themselves in a professional manner throughout the meeting, as they would do at a face to face meeting. Further advice on virtual meeting etiquette is referred to in Appendix 1.

6. Attendance of virtual meetings by Members of the public and the press

- 6.1. The importance of enabling Members of the public to view and participate in virtual meetings would need to be balanced against the logistical and

technical constraints in allowing them to do so. Unless a meeting is dealing with exempt or confidential items, meetings will be open to the public so that they may listen and watch but not participate (except for when they are making a deputation or have requested to speak and this has been agreed in advance).

- 6.2. Members of the public and the press shall be able to attend the meeting by accessing the Council's webcasting or live audio facility. Instructions on how to access these will be given with the public notice of the meeting.
- 6.3. Any member of the public wishing to participate in a meeting (e.g as an objector at a Planning Committee meeting) shall do so by prior arrangement in line with the Council protocol for public speaking by accessing the video conferencing or other facilities provided by the Council. If joining via an audio link, the member of the public must inform the Clerk of the number they will be calling from in advance of the meeting in order to be identified.
- 6.4. If it is not possible for the member of the public to participate in a virtual meeting, then they should be given the option to submit a written copy of their statement to the Clerk in advance of the meeting. The statement would be read out by the committee Clerk or Chair on behalf of that individual at the meeting.
- 6.5. Should deputations/requests to speak be agreed, Members of the public will be invited by the Clerk to join the meeting remotely for the purpose of delivering their statement.
- 6.6. On the day of the meeting, the member of the public must click on the link /enter the dial-in details at least 10 min before the meeting and wait until it is their turn to speak. They will be able to listen to the proceedings but their microphone will be muted until it is their turn to speak.
- 6.7. The usual rules about the permissible duration of speaking will apply. The member of the public will be informed from the outset of the time allowed and the Clerk/Chair will keep track of time, advising the speaker when their time is almost up (usually when 30 seconds or less remaining
- 6.8. Having spoken for the allocated time they will be informed by the Chair that their time has expired and thereafter muted and will be removed as a participant from the meeting.

- 6.9. In case of disruptive behaviour, the Chair would be entitled to ask the Clerk or another support officer to mute or remove a participant from the meeting.

7. Conduct of a virtual meeting:

7.1. Opening the meeting

- 7.1.1. At the scheduled time, the Chair would open the meeting and welcome everyone present.
- 7.1.2. It is suggested that the Chair uses a script, similar to the Chair's notes produced for normal committee meetings, which could include a brief statement on the conduct of the meeting and any privacy implications (e.g. which organisation is hosting the meeting; purpose of meeting; overview of what personal data is permitted to be discussed (in general terms) and/or confidential information; who the information from the meeting can be shared with; awareness of surroundings – e.g. others in household or location).
- 7.1.3. The Chair must clarify if the meeting is streamed live (via Live Events or any other acceptable means) before any discussion takes place.
- 7.1.4. In case of technical issues or for the purposes of any internal meetings or member trainings, the committee can also 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 must be used only with the explicit agreement of all participants before any discussion takes place.

7.2. Introductions and apologies for absence

- 7.2.1. The Chair must ask Members and Presenting Officers to introduce themselves, clearly stating their title, name and ward (for Members) and/or name and job role (for Officers).
- 7.2.2. Sufficient pause must be allowed in between introductions to allow the Clerk to record attendance and any apologies for absence.

7.3. Declarations of interest

- 7.3.1. The Chair must follow the usual procedures and ask each member to declare any interests from the outset of the meeting.

- 7.3.2. Any Member, who declares a pecuniary interest which would normally require them to leave the room, must leave the virtual meeting for the duration of the discussion and would not be able to participate in the meeting. Depending on the order in which items are heard, the Member would be re-admitted to the meeting by the Clerk.

7.4. Minutes of the meeting

- 7.4.1. The Chair will ask each Member to state whether or not they agree with the minutes.

7.5. Discussion of reports/main agenda

- 7.5.1. The Chair will invite Officers to present reports through the usual process.
- 7.5.2. If referring to specific section in a document, 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.
- 7.5.3. Circulation of supplementary documents, not already in the agenda or addendum, is not advisable at virtual meetings. All documents must be submitted to the Clerk before the meeting in order for them to be made available to all participants (particularly in relation to decisions of a regulatory nature such as planning or licensing).
- 7.5.4. 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 at the bottom 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/organiser who will be asked to display the slides when directed by the Chair/officer.
- 7.5.5. Once the report has been introduced, the Chair will open the discussion by asking if anyone wishes to speak/raise any questions.
- 7.5.6. Members must indicate their wish to speak by raising their hand or sending a message using the Meeting chat function and wait until invited by the Chair. The Meeting chat must only be used for committee related questions/comments. Any messages posted on

the Meeting chat will be visible to all participants present at the virtual meetings.

7.5.7. Members must keep their questions clear and concise, avoiding unnecessary repetition.

7.5.8. The Chair must check with each Member if they have any further points to raise before completing the discussion on a given item and moving to the next.

7.6. **Voting**

7.6.1. Unless a recorded vote is called for, the method of voting will be at the discretion of the Chair but will be in one of the following methods:

- by a show of hands
- by the Chair calling out the name of each Member present asking them to state whether they are “for”, “against” or “abstain”.

7.7. **Exclusion of the press and public**

7.7.1. 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.

7.7.2. Before any discussion takes place, each participant at the private session must ensure and verbally declare that there are no other persons present who are not entitled to be hearing/seeing the consideration of any private or confidential items, nor are recording the proceedings.

7.8. **Closing the meeting**

7.8.1. The Chair will close the meeting in the usual way.

7.8.2. The Clerk will record the end time of the meeting and stop the webcasting.

8. **Technical issues and disruptions**

8.1. Several options are available to the Chair should any aspect of the conference call link fail:

8.1.1. If a Member (or an Officer) experiences a technical problem and disconnects from the virtual meeting, the Chair must call for a short adjournment (up to 15min) to determine whether the link

can be re-established. If it is possible to re-establish a connection either through a video or audio link within that period and the meeting is quorate then the meeting will continue from the point at which it was adjourned.

- 8.1.2. If the connection with the disconnected Member (or Officer) cannot be restored within a reasonable time but the meeting is quorate, then the committee can agree to proceed without the Member who was disconnected and they will not be able to vote on the matter under discussion.
- 8.1.3. If it is not possible to continue discussion on the item without the presence of the disconnected Member/Officer, the Chair should consider moving to the next item and reverting back to the former if the officer/member returns.
- 8.1.4. Should all of the above fail, the meeting is inquorate, the technical difficulties continue and/or the meeting is no longer inaccessible to members of the public then the Chair must abandon the meeting and arrange for it to be reconvened at another date and time.

8.2. Disruptions

- 8.2.1. The Chair/Clerk can mute participants, including voting Members, should they consider their behaviour to be inappropriate or disruptive.
- 8.2.2. Should either a Member or a participant become disruptive, the Chair will warn them and should that warning not result in a change of behaviour they will be entitled to terminate that person's participation in the meeting.