

Woodley Town Council Virtual Meetings Protocol

1. Overview

This document summarises the requirement, authorisation and procedure for running “virtual” meetings of the Council, the Council’s Committees and other meetings as required. This includes meetings that are open to the public and those that may be confidential or operational. The requirement for this has been brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to maintain social distancing measures that mean holding meetings in the normal way is not possible. The aim of this protocol is to enable meetings to take place, Council and Committee business to be attended to, and the public to have the opportunity to remotely “attend” meetings that they would otherwise have been able to do in person. **The Coronavirus Act (2020) – section 28, specifically authorises the use of virtual meetings for this purpose.**

The procedure described in this document is subject to change as required to meet the needs of the Council. This is a new approach and process for Council meetings and is likely to require some amendments as we move forward.

2. Approach

The current pandemic precludes physical meetings due to social distancing requirements to minimise the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In addition to these requirements the Council also has a number of staff members and Councillors who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to the virus and are therefore shielding.

There are a number of video conferencing platforms available for carrying out virtual meetings and these have been in use for many years in the commercial environment. The approach is to operate meetings in as similar a manner as possible to the face-to-face meetings normally held, but using the online conferencing tool.

As with face-to-face meetings there will be two types of people involved in the virtual meetings;

- **Panelist** – who are actively participating in the meeting i.e. Members of the Committee (all Councillors for Full Council), Officers and (when permitted) members of the public who have registered to speak.
- **Attendee** – who may watch/listen to the meeting via a Zoom link provided. Attendees can speak when invited to by the Chair.

The public can also view but not participate via live stream on the Council’s Facebook or YouTube channels.

3. Authority

Authority to hold meetings of a public organisation (such as Woodley Town Council) via virtual proprietary software was granted in Statutory Instrument 2020 No. 392 “The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020”, dated 4th April 2020. This has certain provisos about how the meetings need to be managed to remain accessible, while being effective for Councillors.

4. Quoracy

The selected tool is designed to be operated from a home computer using existing data connections. Although the tool is usually easy to install and Councillors will be offered a "practice" meeting to check this, the meeting *should* commence on-time. The Dial-in option is available to Councillors as a last resort and the meeting will be considered quorate if the requisite number of Councillors are connected (either on-screen or via telephone). This will fulfil the requirement under the Council's Standing Orders.

5. Process

5.1 Tool Selection

There are a number of virtual meeting tools available including Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc. Zoom has been selected as the preferred tool on the basis of its flexibility, functionality, ease of use and familiarity among Councillors and Officers who have used the software previously.

The Council has purchased a user licence which provides for meetings of unlimited number and duration along with the means to fully control and manage the meetings, including live streaming onto social media. This includes the facility to run meetings as a webinar, which provides greater flexibility and control to run meetings efficiently and manage public attendance.

5.2 Announcing a Meeting

The announcement of a meeting will be as follows;

- Public announcement of the date, time with a link to the Woodley Town Council Facebook/YouTube page for the live stream and information on how to register and request a Zoom link to 'attend' the meeting.
- Formal calling notice to Councillors with the agenda - by email.

The members of a committee will receive an invitation to be a panellist when the agenda is sent out. Clicking this link will automatically take them into the meeting as a panellist. All Councillors can 'attend' any meeting. If you are not on the Committee but wish to attend please let the Town Clerk know and you will be sent the appropriate link.

5.3 Running the Meeting

Councillors should aim to arrive at least 20 minutes before the scheduled start time of the meeting. All meetings will commence with a 'practice session' where the panellists join but the meeting is not broadcast to attendees (public) or live streamed. This will give us the opportunity to make sure Councillors are present and have a good connection to participate in the meeting.

Once the meeting commences the meeting will be broadcast to whomever is watching – please be conscious that:

- a) This is a council meeting – the usual high standard of behaviour and protocols should be observed
- b) There may be members of the public watching the meeting – this could be more than a usual committee meeting where few people attend
- c) Be conscious of your background and appearance
- d) Seek to minimise distraction/interruption during the meeting

All panellists other than the Chair will be muted at all times unless the Chair invites them to speak. A raised hand will indicate the wish to speak.

Once you have finished speaking, you will be muted again – this helps maintain an orderly meeting as the slightest noises can be picked up by microphones and take focus away from another speaker.

All panellists should be visible so voting will continue to be by show of hands. Should that not prove possible for any reason, voting can be done by roll call.

Any attendee can be invited to join the meeting as a panellist – if we have a meeting where we would usually have an external speaker join for an item this can be used. We can also allow attendees to address the council by audio only. This can also be used for Town Forum at the start of Full Council meetings.

Attendees can request to speak by using the 'hand up' function in Zoom. The Chair can then invite the attendee to speak.

Attendees will be required to register and, if they wish to speak at the meeting, will be asked to advise the Committee Officer in advance of the meeting which agenda item they wish to speak on. The Chair will have this information and will ask the attendee to speak at the appropriate part of the agenda in the normal way.

Resolving to exclude the public and press is more complicated than during a normal meeting and to ensure that discussions remain confidential will require the existing meeting to close and a new meeting start where only the council has access to join – this will ensure that:

- a) Any live broadcast is terminated
- b) No public can join the meeting partway through *in camera* discussions

Agendas will be structured such that any confidential items are together at the end of a meeting in the usual way.

Councillors will be sent a separate email invitation to join a confidential session if there are confidential items on the agenda.

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