

ALCESTER TOWN COUNCIL

VIRTUAL PUBLIC MEETINGS PROTOCOL

Introduction

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations permits local authorities to conduct and make lawful decisions at virtual meetings.

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 the other councillors in attendance and by any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting. A visual solution is preferred, but audio is sufficient.

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).

Zoom

Zoom is the virtual meeting application preferred by Alcester Town Council for hosting remote and virtual meetings. It has functionality for screen sharing, HD video and audio, and remote screen control features. Members of the public do not need to be a member of the Council to join a Zoom meeting.

Setting up the Meeting

Zoom meetings will be scheduled by the Town Clerk who will send a Zoom invitation with the agenda. At the start of the meeting, the Chair will be enabled as a Co-Host. This gives them more functionality than other participants, including the ability to mute and exclude disruptive participants from meetings.

Agendas

The Town Clerk will publish the agenda for meetings on the Council's website in the usual manner and will notify Councillors by email in line with usual practice. The website will include an invitation for members of the public to contact the Town Clerk if they wish to join the meeting via Zoom.

External Participants and Members of the Public

Any external participants who contact the Town Clerk will be sent the Zoom invitation which will allow them to access the meeting via Zoom. In the case of a first-time participant, the Town Clerk will send an explanatory leaflet supplied by WALC explaining how to use Zoom and a copy of this Protocol.

Joining the Meeting

Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly at least three minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disrupting the meeting.

Any other attendees are invited to join the meeting via the meeting link or via the Zoom app on smart phone, tablet or computer.

Starting the Meeting

At the start of the meeting, the Town Clerk will check that all required attendees are present by viewing the participant list.

The Chair will remind everyone that the meeting is being recorded for administrative purposes.

The Chair will ask all Councillors, members of the public, media and any other meeting attendants to turn off all microphones unless they are speaking. This prevents background noise, coughing etc which is disruptive during the meeting. Councillors will need to turn their microphones on before speaking and to turn it back off after participating.

Public Participation

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the Council's Standing Orders 3 (e) - (g). This can include speaking, asking questions and/or making representations. When a member of the public is addressing a meeting, the Chair will invite them to speak at the appropriate time.

Both the Chair and the Town Clerk will need to ensure their microphone is enabled so the meeting can hear them.

The member of public must be directed to switch off their microphone again after they have made their statement or asked any question(s). The Chair has the ability to mute if necessary and the ability to remove a disruptive member of public if necessary and this should be made apparent at the beginning of the meeting.

The Meeting and Debate

For Councillors who wish to speak in the debate, they should click on the raise hand facility and await to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chair. Once Councillors have spoken, they must mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise.

Meeting Etiquette Reminder

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking.
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.
- If you are not using video then please state your name.
- The only people to keep on their microphones throughout the meeting are the Chair and Town Clerk.

Voting

Within the Zoom facility, there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting.

When the Chair asks Councillors 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.

If a Chair does not wish to use this mechanism, they 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 will record the outcome of the vote and announce it to the meeting.

Exclusion of the Public

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 who fails 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 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 from the meeting.

It would be good practice to turn off smart speakers such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home or smart music devices. These could inadvertently record phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

Interpretation of Standing Orders

Where the Chair is required to interpret the Council's existing Standing Orders in light of the requirements of remote participation, they shall take advice from the Town Clerk prior to making a ruling. However, the Chair's decision shall be final.

Disorderly Conduct by Councillors

In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders 2 (a) - (c), if a Councillor behaves in a disruptive manner, the Chair may move "That the member named be not further heard" which, if seconded, must be put to the vote without discussion.

If the same behaviour persists and if a motion is approved "that the member named do leave the meeting", then they will be removed as a participant by the Chair.

Disturbance from Members of the Public

In line with the same 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 mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

After the Meeting

Participants should leave the meeting by clicking on the red "Leave" button to hang up. The Chair or Town Clerk can also end the meeting for all participants.

Meeting minutes will be published on the Council's website in the usual manner.

Technical Issues

In the event that 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 would be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and a vote would be taken without their attendance.

Disability

It is important for the Council to ensure that the needs of any disabled members are taken into account when considering the practicality of a remotely attended meeting.

Approved at Full Council 4th August 2020

To be reviewed – as required.