
Dedham Parish Council

Remote Meetings Protocol

1. Introduction:

The following guidance is intended to provide Councillors with useful information to assist with navigating new ways of working, and in particular preparing for and attending remote meetings. Information considered to be of specific use to meeting Chairs is highlighted separately to form a useful quick reference guide.

2. Meeting location and paperwork:

The time of meetings, together with agenda documents, will be published on the Council's website. Instructions on how to access the meeting remotely will also be provided.

Councillors will be notified of a remote meeting by email, with the meeting link and password. All relevant papers will be sent ahead of the meeting itself, to enable Councillors to join as participants as opposed to observers.

3. Preparing for the meeting, practical arrangements

These steps are particularly important for participants in meetings viewable by the public, but also apply to any others.

- Please note that due to logistical difficulties, it will not be possible to make printed agendas available for any meetings. If printed copies of paperwork are required then you will need to make the necessary arrangements to provide these yourself.
- Try to ensure that you are joining the meeting from an area in the home where you are less likely to be disturbed, and pay particular attention to anyone else in the area who may be able to overhear parts of the meetings – in particular any confidential or exempt from publication items that may form part of the meeting;
- Turn off noise sources such as television and radio and ensure that any smart speakers are turned off (Amazon Echo, Google Home etc) as they could turn on or inadvertently record the meeting.
- Try to ensure that the broadband connection is sufficiently stable to join the meeting. If your connection has low bandwidth, you may find it helpful to reduce the number of users or other devices that are using your broadband connection, turning them off for the duration of the meeting. You might find it easier to join using your mobile phone's data allowance, or if absolutely necessary by making a voice-only call.

- Try to ensure that your background is as neutral as possible (a blank wall is best), and that it contains no political slogans or posters.
- Your name will be shown onscreen if you are appearing in video; all Councillors are asked to ensure that their name is in the same format.
- Before joining the meeting, double check to make sure that your camera is positioned to provide a clear, front-on view of your face. This may involve thinking about lighting in the room you're in (for example, sitting in front of a window may plunge your face into shadow). It may also involve putting your webcam, laptop or tablet on top of a couple of books so that you can look into the camera face on. Carry out a test or preview of your display before joining the meeting;
- Try to take an opportunity to practice with the functions of the software you are using to access the remote meeting. If you have any concerns or worries, please contact the Clerk before the meeting. Of key importance during a meeting will be the ability to mute and un-mute your microphone, and to indicate to the Chair that you wish to speak.
- Where possible, arrange to use a headset during the meeting rather than the speaker and microphone built in to your device. Not only will the quality of your audio be dramatically improved, but audio quality for all participants will be also. This is of particular importance should anyone participating have a hearing issue.
- Please give some extra thought into any input that you wish to have into the meeting, having read the meeting papers through carefully. If you wish to speak or ask a question, you may wish to contact either the Chair or Clerk before the meeting so that your intention to speak can be noted and will be addressed in the meeting. You may wish to liaise with individual Councillors/Clerk prior to the meeting to seek clarification on any points in reports you feel necessary, and which may assist with concise delivery of the relevant report. You will also have the option of indicating your desire to speak during the meeting itself by utilising the 'raise hand' function of the Zoom software.
- Having considered the agenda document, Councillors should also give careful thought as to any pecuniary or non-pecuniary interests that they may have to declare in relation to any agenda items. Any such interest should be communicated to the Clerk as soon as possible, so that any arrangements necessary can be made to ensure that the meeting runs as smoothly as possible. This may include excluding you from the vote on any particular item or arranging for you to be removed from the meeting altogether (in the case of a disclosable pecuniary interest) and invited to re-join once the relevant agenda item had been dealt with.

- Try to make sure that you are as physically prepared for the meeting as possible, so that you will be comfortable throughout the meeting. This is particularly important as it may be some time before the meeting finishes or there is a break in the agenda.

Because of the nature of remote meetings, they tend to run much longer than meetings that are carried out in person, and so additional preparation before the meeting is key to ensure that business is conducted in as focussed and efficient manner as possible, but still with full consideration of the pertinent issues.

Chair information:

- Ensure that, where appropriate, you have the means to be contacted outside the meeting in the event of any failure in the broadcast or technical issues meaning that the meeting is no longer quorate.
- Be familiar with the functions offered by the software being used to broadcast the meeting – particularly the muting capacity of the software.

4. During the meeting:

The Chair, at the beginning of the meeting, will explain the protocol for member and public participation and the rules of debate, and Councillors will be asked to introduce themselves. The Chair's ruling during the debate will be final.

Councillors are asked to adhere to the following etiquette during remote attendance at a meeting:

- ✓ Councillors should be careful to not allow exempt or confidential papers to be seen in the video-feed.
- ✓ Councillors should have their microphones muted when not talking.
- ✓ Only speak when invited to by the Chair.
- ✓ Only one person should speak at any one time.
- ✓ Turn on the microphone and also the video-feed (if available or unless speaking to a diagram, presentation slide or drawing), then state your name before you make a comment.
- ✓ When referring to a specific report, page, or slide, mention the report, page, or slide so that all Councillors have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times.
- ✓ Ensure that your mobile phone is set to silent mode.

- ✓ Don't make comments about other Councillors or Officers during the meeting, even if you believe that your microphone is muted.
- ✓ Refrain from smoking during the meeting – this is prohibited by the Council's Constitution.
- ✓ You should also try to avoid eating or drinking during the meeting unless this is necessary and can be done discretely. Although being held remotely, meetings are still formal and should be treated as though they were being held in person, with the same expectations of appearance and behaviour. Although it is easy to forget, given the nature of the meeting, Councillors will still be on public display throughout, potentially to a wider audience than would normally be in attendance at a physical meeting.
- ✓ Councillors and Officers should introduce themselves before they speak, particularly if only attending the meeting via an audio link.
- ✓ As remote meetings are new to both Officers and Councillors, please be patient during the meeting as some processes may take a little longer than usual – you will still get your chance to speak.

Chair information:

- At the start of the meeting, read out the introductory statement, and advise all Councillors that their microphones will now be muted.
- Ensure that Councillors are introduced to the meeting, and Officers introduced with their job titles when speaking.
- Remain vigilant throughout the meeting to those indicating their wish to speak on an item by physical gesture or by using the 'raise hand' function.
- When inviting a Councillor to speak, remind them to unmute their microphone (if necessary).
- Ensure that everyone who wishes to speak has done so at the end of each agenda item and before moving to the vote. It is good practice for the Chair to pause at this point to give any Councillor who wishes to comment further a chance to do so – they may have to unmute their microphone etc.
- Ensure that any vote taken during the meeting is done so clearly, by making a roll call of Councillors present and asking them to confirm their vote, and ask the Democratic Services Officer to confirm the voting.
- The Chair will be in control of the meeting, and will invite input where necessary in accordance with indications received either in advance of, or during the meeting.

- The rules around breaks apply to remote meetings too, and breaks should be utilised to promote greater concentration, particularly during longer meetings.
- Where it becomes apparent that a Councillor has lost connectivity, the Chair will pause the meeting for a brief time to enable reconnection to take place. Where this is not possible, consideration will need to be given to adjourning the meeting for a longer period of time – this will be essential if the meeting is no longer quorate.

5. Review

This Protocol will be kept under review by the Clerk and will be revised in the light of experience in consultation with the Council.