Broughton Parish Council

Guidance & Notes for Virtual Meetings

The legal framework for local council meetings requires that all council meetings are open to the public and that unless confidential, that the public can watch the debate and see the decisions made for their area.

To manage the impact of social distancing, councils were unable to meet physically i.e. all members and the public in one physical place. Wherever possible councils moved to adopt a scheme of delegation to the Clerk to allow decisions to be taken during the emergency. The purpose of the delegation was to protect the council whilst the law did not allow decisions to be taken outside of properly convened physical meetings.

The legislation has now been changed and local councils are now expected to meet regularly using technology rather than relying on the delegation in lieu of holding meetings during the Covid19 pandemic.

The High Consequence Infectious Disease Policy and delegated powers are still active, but the following points should be considered:

1. Many councillors have found themselves in the protected categories and even if there is a swift return to physical meetings are unlikely to be able attend. Remote meetings will allow these councillors to continue play an active part in the work of the council.
2. The law still allows 2 councillors to demand a council meeting and this request would have to be fulfilled now that a remote meeting is possible.
3. The legislation permitting remote attendance by members and members of the public remains in place until May 2021. The council will be required to offer remote access to meetings even when it decides to return to physical meetings as its first choice.
4. The council can choose to reduce the number of meetings whilst there is little or no business to transact and rely on a scheme of delegation between meetings.
5. If the council decides to rely solely on a scheme of delegation instead of meeting it may be challenged or criticised as there is now a statutory mechanism for holding remote meetings.

Attendance at meetings and the six month rule

Attending remote meetings, getting to grips with the technology or debate on the phone will be challenging. The council will have to start meeting in this new format at some point as there are still some statutory functions which have to done ‘in public’. The government does not believe that councils should avoid meeting to accommodate a reluctance to use the new technology and the following points may be helpful:

1. Every councillor is part of the decision-making process which takes place at meetings. The council should consider how to ‘ease’ into remote meetings and support members and clerks who are struggling with the concept.
2. A member of the council is deemed to present at any meeting of the council where they can be heard and ideally seen i.e. phone or video link with/without a camera.
3. Councillors have signed a declaration of office to attend meetings of the council as and when required. Councillors unwilling to attend meetings in the new format will be counted as absent from the meeting and will lose their seat after six calendar months unless the council grants an extension to their apologies for a significant reason. We are being advised that choosing not to attend because of the remote format is not a suitable reason.

Guidance for Meetings

Being Prepared

Your normal council meeting follows a long established order of debate, where councillors and members of the public are very familiar with the format. Whilst the outline remains the same, virtual meetings held over the internet create some different issues and it will take time for everyone to cope with the new style.

It is important to try out the technology and learn how to work with virtual participation, the varying internet connection and the mixed media of webcams and phones. Just because everyone can access a meeting does not mean that they will be able to participate in the same way as before and like many things practice will help build confidence.

Much of the council’s normal activity will have changed or stopped completely this gives you the chance to have shorter more effective meetings. A clear purpose for the meeting with a sound agenda will help build confidence in the new technology.

At the beginning of the meeting

Whilst the format of the agenda may be familiar, a virtual meeting requires the Chairman to carry out some extra checks at the start of the meeting. These include:

1. To confirm that all those present are able to hear the proceedings.
2. To take a roll call of members present at the meeting
3. To confirm the quorum for the meeting based on those members attending remotely.

The Chairman can then outline how he will run the meeting including the protocols for wishing to speak, voting, and viewing documents before starting to work through the agenda.

During the meeting

All of the normal rules of debate apply as laid out in the Standing Orders including the number of times a member can speak, the length of any contribution, declarations of interest, the rules for voting and controlling disruptive behaviour.

It is important that the Chairman and Clerk have established how they will communicate during the meeting as it is no longer possible to communicate quietly!

Most IT has a method for adding comments during discussions, however, this chat facility will be disabled for the duration of the meeting.

The software will have a mute button which can be used to limit public comment outside of the public session. Participants should be reminded to mute themselves to avoid background noise from their home environments but will need to be reminded to unmute in order to speak.

IT issues

Unlike a physical meeting, a remote meeting requires the public to be able to see and/or hear the whole of the meeting. In the event of an apparent failure of the video or telephone conferencing connection, the meeting may need to be temporarily stopped. The Chair can then establish:

1. If the failure prevents the meeting from being open to the public
2. if the meeting is still quorate or the failure reduces the number of members present and eligible to vote
3. the meeting should be adjourned for up to 5 minutes to determine whether the connection can be quickly re-established or a suitable alternative can be used.

In the event of a connection failure the remote member(s) will be deemed to have left the meeting at the point of failure. If the connection is re- established the remote member(s) will be deemed to have returned to the meeting at the point of re-connection.

Rules of A Virtual Meeting for all attendees to the meeting.

*(To be displayed within the invitation, waiting room (if available) and agenda)*

It is important that members and parishioners are made aware of the following at the beginning of each virtual meeting, by joining the meeting you are agreeing to the below quidelines:

1. The meeting may be recorded for the purpose of minute taking and will be disposed of within 24 hours.
2. To have their microphones on mute.
3. To adhere to the Councils Code of Conduct, General Standing Orders and virtual standing orders (to be agreed as the first item of business at the first virtual meeting)
4. Only unmute when you have been invited in to speak.
5. Speak clearly and look into the camera.
6. Turn phones to silent.
7. Be aware of time lags and allow time for participants to respond.
8. Introduce themselves when raising a point.
9. Respond to the Chair when their name is called.
10. Be aware of your background (what others can see behind you when you are on screen i.e valuables, photos, sounds)

Template Covering Page for Agenda’s under the Virtual Meeting Protocol

Dear Councillor

You are summoned to attend the meeting of Broughton Parish Council to be held on XXXX Date 2020 at 7.00pm in the below virtual meeting room to transact the business contained in the attached agenda.

**Meeting Room Location and Joining Details:**

**Virtual Meeting Room:**

Link to Virtual Meeting Room

Details of Telephone Access to Virtual Meeting Room.

Please ensure with any personal IT used, that your anti-virus software and computer has been updated fully as no liability will be accepted by the Council for any malicious acts/viruses etc. when using this third-party system.

Telephone charges are dependent on your telephone contract (i.e. if you have inclusive minutes within your contract). Please note that Broughton Parish Council accept no responsibility or liability for any charges incurred by any attendee joining this call.

Kind Regards

**Becx Carter-Broughton Parish Clerk**