Saughall & Shotwick Park Parish Council
Virtual Meeting Procedures and Protocol

Introduction

Town and Parish Councils have been given provision under 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 2020 Regulations") to hold legal virtual meetings in order that Council business can be maintained.

It is expected that this provision will be extended, hence the need for this long-term procedural document.

Saughall & Shotwick Park Parish Council has currently chosen to use the 'Zoom' platform for its virtual meetings in order that the public may gain easy access but will review this as required in the light of on-going costs, facilities, and performance.

Pre-meeting arrangements

The Clerk will arrange the virtual meeting using the approved Council account.

The meeting will be a formal Council meeting and will be held using the agenda and summons which the Clerk will publish on the Council website or by other approved means. A code and link to the virtual meeting will be published on the agenda and the website in order that the public are able to attend, just as they would be able to attend a normal meeting, but using a desktop computer, laptop, tablet, or phone.

Attendance of Press and Public

The Regulations clarify that a meeting being "open to the public" includes access to the meeting through remote means. Where a meeting is accessible to the public through such remote means the meeting is deemed open to the public whether all members of the public can attend the meeting in person (e.g., if someone does not have access to a computer).

Joining the meeting

Councillors and the public are encouraged to join the meeting at least five minutes before the scheduled start time to ensure a prompt start and to avoid disrupting the meeting. Attendees will assemble in the virtual 'waiting room' prior to the meeting.

Councillors should consider what can be seen behind them while on camera for personal privacy and consider if the position of their camera is set at the correct height (i.e., face-on), with light on their face but without a light source behind them.

All Councillors will display their name for the public to be able to identify them, just as they would at an in-person meeting. The public are encouraged to do so.

Meeting protocol

To allow the Chairman and Clerk to perform their proper functions the meeting will be enabled by a separate Councillor who will be the 'Moderator'.

Meetings will be governed by the usual Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and associated approved policies.

All attendees should set themselves to 'mute' when the meeting starts and only the Chairman of the meeting will remain unmuted.

During the meeting, all other participants if they wish to speak should indicate by either using the 'raise hands' function or raising their hand if on video, and then await to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chairman. Having spoken, they should mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise.

The Moderator will mute or remove anyone to the virtual waiting room who is deemed a nuisance at the Chairman's request. The Council will then decide if they should be re-admitted or excluded from the rest of the meeting.

To protect participants from malware, the 'chat' facility, file sharing and screen sharing functions will normally be disabled during the meeting. Only the Clerk will be able to record meetings (if they so desire) to assist with minute-taking and these will be deleted following approval of the written minutes.

If necessary and essential the Clerk will display any documents required using the 'share screen' function.

Basic Meeting Etiquette

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking. The only person to keep on their microphone throughout the meeting is the Chairman.

- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chairman.

- If you are not using video, then please state your name at the start.

- All participants should ensure that background noise (TV, radio, dogs, children, mobiles) is kept to an absolute minimum and, if any such noise intrudes whilst speaking or inadvertently, they should mute their input immediately.

Public Participation

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the Council's Standing Orders. This can include speaking, asking questions and/or making representations at the start of the meeting.

As with normal face to face meetings, members of the public will be given the opportunity to speak during public participation, but will not be permitted, unless invited to do so by the Chairman, to speak at other times.

Anyone wanting to speak should raise their hand using 'raise hand' in the options within the Participants section or by waving if they are using a camera so that the Chairman can see.

Members of the public must introduce themselves if they wish to speak.

Declarations of Pecuniary Interest

If a Councillor has declared a pecuniary interest in an item on the agenda, they will be placed in the waiting room for the duration of that agenda item.

Once the item has been concluded, they will be re-admitted.

Voting on Motions

Within most virtual meeting platforms there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting. When the Chairman asks the Council or Committee 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 Chairman 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 Clerk will record the outcome of the vote and announce it to the meeting.

Disturbance from Members of the Public

In line with Standing Orders, if any member of the public interrupts a meeting the Chairman will warn them accordingly.

If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Moderator on instruction by the Chairman will mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

Confidential Items

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 if they fail 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 as to 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 other voice-sensitive devices as these could inadvertently record or transmit phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

Post-Meeting

Following closure of the meeting by the Chairman, participants will leave the meeting by tapping the 'leave' icon and, at the Chairman's direction, the Moderator will close the meeting for all.

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

Technical Failure

If any meeting participant identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chairman 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, then the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened.

If the meeting is quorate then it should continue and those unable to attend remotely must be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and any vote would be taken without their attendance.

To be reviewed every 12 months.