CHAIRMANSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF REMOTE MEETINGS

Some Practical Tips

Many members and clerks are daunted at the thought of holding meetings over the internet. The first few meetings will be different but local councils experimenting with the technology are reporting that remote meetings have some positive benefits. Meetings are much shorter and more focussed and there is a shared sense of priorities and meeting expectations.

NALC has published a guide to holding virtual meetings which is available from the CALC website. We have started to compile a set of tips and observations below and hope that you will share your experiences with us so that we can continue to build the guide over the coming weeks.

Sarah Mason
County Officer
Cornwall ALC

Managing the IT

Whilst the Chairman and clerk are working hard to deliver the meeting, it is worth to identify someone to manage the IT function. It is helpful to have some assistance to make sure that the participation of councillors and members of the public is managed properly and to spot any connection problems.
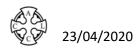
This person will be responsible for

- controlling the video, telephone and IT for the remote access and attendance
- ensuring that protocols for the meeting including the order for speaking, voting and exclusion of councillors and/or press and public are followed
- ensuring that everyone present at a remote meeting is able to hear (and ideally be seen) and in turn be heard (and ideally seen).

Top Tips 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 that your council tries out the technology and learns 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:

i) to confirm that all those present are able to hear the proceedings.
ii) To take a roll call of members present at the meeting
iii) 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.

way in which the meeting 'works' Outline the way in which the meeting will be run including the protocols for speaking at meetings and taking votes before starting to work through the agenda.

During the meeting

All of the normal rules of debate apply 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. This box can be used to ask to speak, but members should not use it to have private conversation during the meeting as it is available for all to see. The 'chat' can be saved and will remain in the public domain so it is much better to use the box simply to record voting, indicate that you wish to speak or move a point of order.

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, having a separate 'driver' for the IT will help to warn the Chairman of the problem so that they can stop the meeting temporarily. The Chair can then establish

- If the failure prevents the meeting from being open to the public
- if the meeting is still quorate or the failure reduces the number of members present and eligible to vote
- 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.

b) 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.

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