Somerset County Council
Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families
Committee – 6 May 2020

Virtual Committee Meetings procedure and guidance

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1.   Summary

1.1.   This report looks at the procedure and guidance for new virtual committee meetings starting in May and for the foreseeable future. It outlines the new regulations that came into force on 4 April 2020 and the various considerations emerging from these and notes there are likely to be further updates and issues during this transition period.

2.   Issues for consideration

2.1.   The Committee is asked to consider the information contained in this report.

3.   Background

3.1.   The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 have given local authorities new powers to hold public meetings virtually by using video or telephone conferencing technology.

Remote attendance is permitted as long as certain conditions are satisfied. These include that the Member is able to hear and be heard by the other Members in attendance. Also, being able to hear and be heard by any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting (in line with the public participation scheme). To ensure reliability an audio conferencing solution is preferred, but video conferencing can be achieved in some circumstances.

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).

A precis of the Regulations is contained in Appendix 1 of this report.

4.   Guidance

4.1.   This guidance is an immediate response to the above regulations and is based on the information available at the time. Therefore, we will update the guidance, if necessary as we receive further information.

4.2. <u>Accessing meetings</u>

Microsoft Teams is the virtual meetings solution recommended for hosting remote / virtual meetings by Somerset County Council. It has functionality for audio, video, and screen sharing and you do not need to be a member of an organisation (or have a Teams account) to join a Teams meeting.

For external users, they can also use the Teams app, by downloading it to their laptop, smartphone or tablet.

External participants can be sent the meeting request vie email and if a participant is included in this way, they can use all the functions of Teams (video / chat) in the meeting. This might be useful for external presenters at Committee meetings, for example NHS / CCG Officers.

Alternatively, someone can be added to a meeting as a voice call. This can be done at the appropriate time in the meeting by the Democratic Services Officer.

There is also provision for a conference call number and ID to be given to external people who are calling in, which is another mechanism for them to join the meeting. Again, this will be coordinated by the Democratic Services Officer as part of the meeting administration.

4.3. <u>Accessing agendas and reports</u>

Democratic Services will continue to publish the agenda and reports for committee meetings ahead of these taking place on the Council's website and will notify councillors by email in line with usual practice.

Because of the Covid19 social distancing requirements, printed copies will no longer be available for inspection at the Council's offices and this requirement was removed by the Regulations.

4.4. <u>Meeting procedures</u>

At the start of the virtual meeting, the Democratic Services Officer will check all required attendees are present (viewing the participant list).

The Democratic Services Officer will also have details of any Members of the public attending and / or press. The public and press will be notified via the meeting information on the website that they will need to contact the Democratic Services Officer to obtain the link or code for the meeting.

The Chair will ask all Members and Officers to **turn off all unnecessary microphones,** unless they are speaking. This prevents background noise, coughing etc which is intrusive and disruptive during the meeting. Members would then need to turn their microphones back on when they wish to speak.

The Chair, who will use video when speaking will ask all participants to **turn off their video cameras.** It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to turn off the video (unless you are the Chair or speaking). This helps with call quality. There is no facility for the Democratic Services Officer to turn off other participants video (like you can with microphones) or even see who has their video turned on, so it is even more important that participants are aware of this.

Some of the virtual meetings will be recorded by the Council in line with the current audio recording protocol. Participants will be asked to only turn on their microphones **when they are invited to speak and keep their video functions turned off**. This is good practice for all meetings, but especially important because the meeting is recorded. The recording is not like a webcast, because what is being recorded can be different to what you see on screen, even as a meeting organiser. So, participants could be being filmed, even if they are not speaking, simply by virtue of having their video switched on. It might be helpful to think in terms of switching the mic on and off at the appropriate times, just like it would be in the committee room.

For members of the Committee who wish to speak in the debate, they should click on the meeting chat facility and simply write their question or state they wish to ask a question so that the Chair and meeting administrator are aware. When the Chair invites someone to speak at the meeting, the speaker should say whom they are for the benefit of everyone listening to the meeting so it is clear who is speaking at any point.

It is important that the chat function is used solely for this purpose or to raise a point of order, otherwise it is very distracting if other questions/conversations are happening within the chat, simultaneous to the meeting.

When referring to reports or making specific comments, Councillors should refer to the report and page number so that all Members of the Committee have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times.

4.5. <u>Minutes of the meeting</u>

Following consent from the committee, the Chair will sign the minutes of the meeting as a correct record at the next scheduled virtual meeting of the committee remotely using an electronic signature.

4.6. <u>Public Participation</u>

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the current public participation scheme.

This can include speaking and / or asking formal questions and / or making representations at various Committee in line with the scheme.

Members of the public can listen to or observe the proceedings of a committee. They are asked to contact the Democratic Services Officer to obtain a conference ID which will allow them to dial into the meeting.

When a member of the public is addressing a meeting, in line with the public participation scheme, they will be invited to speak at the appropriate time by the Chair.

Both they and the Democratic Services Officer will need to ensure their microphone is enabled so the meeting can hear them.

It must be switched off again after they have made their statement or asked their question.

4.7. Voting
Within the Team facility, there is a straight-forward mechanism to deal with voting.

The chat function should be used to ask the Committee to take a vote. When it comes to taking formal votes, the Democratic Services Officer will type in the chat 'All those in favour'. Those in favour of the proposal should type in 'yes' and those against should type 'no'. Members wishing to abstain from voting should type 'abstain' or alternatively no response will represent an abstention.

If a Chair does not wish to use this mechanism, they may choose to ask each Member (of the Committee) to vote in turn. If this is the case, Councillors should express their vote verbally and the Democratic Services Officer will record the outcome of votes and announce these to the meeting.

4.8. Confidential or exempt issues

There are times when part of a council meeting is 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 periods of a meeting.

Any Councillor in remote attendance needs to ensure that only they are able to hear the debate or consider any exempt information else they could be in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct.

If there are members of the public and press that attempt to listen to the private / closed session part of the meeting, then the Democratic Services Officer will ask them to leave or if necessarythen to virtually remove the participant from the meeting.

4.9. Disturbance from Members of the Public

In line with the council's procedural rules, if any member of the public disrupts a meeting the Chair will ask them to stop and if necessary advise them that they may be asked to leave the virtual meeting.

If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Chair can ask the Democratic Services Officer to remove them as a participant from the meeting.

4.10. Technical issues

In the event that the Chair or Democratic Services Officer identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chair should declare an adjournment while the fault is addressed.

If it is not possible to address the fault or if the meeting becomes inquorate at any point, the meeting can only continue with information items only and decision items will have to be postponed to the next virtual meeting.

5. Implications

5.1. General principles

There are some general principles to guide how remote formal meetings to which the public will have access, will operate. These include:
- People being clear about their respective roles.
- Recognising that meeting remotely requires a different approach to the agenda and to behaviour than a meeting in person;
- The need to think carefully about – and plan for – how everyone involved in the meeting will be able to actively contribute;
- Having a clear focus on the actual outcome of the meeting.

Remote meetings will not be able to run in the same way as meetings are run in person as participants will not be able to pick up on physical and verbal cues from others such as nods or shakes of heads. The focusing of attention on a speaker (or others in the room) all play an important role.

In light of the uncertainty of the Covid19 pandemic and with councils focusing resources on delivering essential services, getting remote meetings "right" will be a challenge. Virtual meetings are new ways of working for councils and it should be recognised that there may be occasions where despite planning things can go wrong.

5.2. Expectations

People's physical presence in the same space has a significant impact on behaviour. Behaviour which might seem normal when everyone is in the council chamber – heckling, applause, the raising of points of order, all part of the cut

and thrust of political debate – are likely to feel alien and possibly slightly absurd when participants are sitting at tables in their homes. It's necessary to emphasise the cognitive dissonance that may result, and the way that we will need to shift our expectations of how "normal" meeting activity will need to change.

- Plan to do less. Committees are likely to transacting less work; agendas and work programmes may need to change at short notice. Planning to do less in committee than would be usual will provide flexibility when things don't go as planned;
- Take more time to prepare. Chairs and committee members will need to put more time into thinking about a meeting's outcomes;
- Take more time in the meeting. There will be a need to pause discussion, remind people of the process and the meeting's outcomes, and work to ensure that everyone is able to contribute.

5.3. Supporting members

The amount of work to effectively Chair these meetings is likely to increase and report authors and presenting officers will need to be mindful of how they can support the Chair and committee in these new arrangements. This includes producing reports timely for publication, providing clear and easy to read information in presentations or slides that are viewable on small screens and being clear what is expected of them at formal meetings.

6. **Background papers**

6.1. Appendix 1 - A precis of the Regulations for local authorities to hold virtual meetings.