Magor with Undy Community Council

Virtual Public Meetings Protocol

Introduction

The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations permits local authorities to conduct and make lawful decisions at virtual meetings.

Remote attendance at Council meetings is permitted as long as certain conditions are met. These include that councillors are able to hear and be heard by the other councillors in attendance. Also, being able to hear and be heard by any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting. A visual solution is preferred, but audio is sufficient. This also relates to members of the public attending the meeting also being heard.

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).

Zoom

Magor with Undy Community Council has agreed to use Zoom as its virtual meeting application for hosting remote and virtual meetings. Members of the public do not need to be a member of the Council to join a Zoom meeting.

Setting up the Meeting

Meetings will be set up by the Clerk and/or Chair of the Council/Committee.

Access to Agendas and Supporting Documents

The Clerk will publish the agenda and supporting documents for Council and Committee meetings on the Council's website in the usual manner and will notify councillors by email in line with usual practice. Agendas will feature an encapsulated link to the virtual meeting instead of the physical meeting venue.

External Participants and Members of the Public

Any external participants will receive the meeting request via the link being shared on the agenda instead of the physical meeting venue, they can then use all the functions of Zoom (video/chat) in the meeting.

Joining the Meeting

Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly at least three minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disrupting the meeting.

Any other attendees are invited to use the link published with the meeting agenda. This will open the Zoom app on the device automatically or take the attendee to an online screen, both options work in the same way.

All attendees must use their real name.

Recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of a meeting by any means is not permitted without the Council's prior written consent

Starting the Meeting

At the start of the meeting, the Clerk will check that all required attendees are present by viewing the participant list.

The Chair will ask all councillors, members of the public, media and any other meeting attendants to turn off all microphones unless they are speaking. This prevents background noise, coughing etc. which is disruptive during the meeting. Councillors will need to turn their microphones on before speaking and to turn it back off after participating.

Public Participation

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the Council's Standing Orders 3 (e) - (g). This can include speaking, asking questions and/or making representations. When a member of the public is addressing a meeting, the Chair will invite them to speak at the appropriate time.

Both they and the Clerk will need to ensure their microphone is enabled so the meeting can hear them. If they have video capability on their device, then they should turn this on so the Council or Committee can see them.

The member of public must be directed to switch off their microphone again after they have made their statement or asked any question(s). The Chair has the ability to mute if necessary and the ability to remove a disruptive member of public if necessary and this should be made apparent at the beginning of the meeting.

The Meeting and Debate

For councillors who wish to speak in the debate, they should click on the raise hand facility and await to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chair. Once councillors have spoken, they must mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise.

Meeting Etiquette Reminder

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking.
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.
- If you are not using video, then please state your name.
- The only persons to keep on their microphone throughout the meeting are the Chair and/or the Clerk

Voting

Within the Zoom facility, there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting. This can be found in the participants' window.

When the Chair asks the Council or Committee to vote, those in favour of the proposal should use the "Yes" icon, those against should use the "No" icon. No response will represent an abstention. In order for this to work the Chair of the meeting must ensure this function is turned on before setting up the meeting. For instructions on how to do this please refer to https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001286183-NonverbalFeedback-During-Meetings#h_6922651d-d279-44bd-b36a-cc2a30696c70.

If a Chair 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.

Reports and Debate

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 who fails 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 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 smart music devices. These could inadvertently record phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

Interpretation of Standing Orders

Where the Chair is required to interpret the Council's existing Standing Orders in light of the requirements of remote participation, they shall take advice from the Clerk prior to making a ruling. However, the Chair's decision shall be final.

Disorderly Conduct by Councillors

In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders 2 (a) - (c), if a Councillor behaves in a disruptive manner, the Chair may move "That the member named be no longer heard" which, if seconded, must be put to the vote without discussion.

If the same behaviour persists and if a motion is approved "that the member named do leave the meeting", then they will be removed as a participant by the Chair or Clerk.

Disturbance from Members of the Public

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

If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Chair/Clerk will mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

After the Meeting

Participants should leave the meeting by clicking on the red "end meeting" button to hang up. The Chair/Clerk can also end the meeting for all participants.

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

Technical Issues

In the event that any meeting participant identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chair 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, the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate, then it should continue.

Those attending remotely would be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and a vote would be taken without their attendance.

If the meeting was due to determine an urgent matter or one which is time-limited and it has not been possible to continue because of technical difficulties, the Chair and Clerk shall explore such other means of taking the decision as may be permitted under the full Council resolution detailed in minute 169.2 of the Extraordinary Council meeting dated 16th March 2020.

Disability

It is also important for authorities to ensure that the needs of any disabled members are taken into account when considering the practicality of a remotely attended meeting.