

Item

VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETINGS-CONVENTIONS



To:

Civic Affairs Committee 8/07/2020

Report by:

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Wards affected:

All

1. Introduction

1.1 The report reviews the local conventions on how council meetings are run in a virtual way arising from the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 and associated Regulations. Full Council on 28 May 2020 agreed that they be reviewed by the Committee after one month and the Committee is authorised to make any changes at any time taking into account from the Council's Monitoring Officer.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Committee is asked to:

- (i) Note that the officers recommend no change to the conventions at this stage, except for how voting is undertaken at Full Council (see appendix), but they will be kept under review taking into account both local and national experience.
- (ii) Consider any changes to the conventions Members have suggested in light of experience at meetings held so far.
- (iii) Note that a longer term review of the use of virtual meetings will be undertaken as the national experience matures and in line with the council's own transformative agenda.

3. Background

- 3.1 Since 14 May when virtual meetings began there have been:
- 3 x Licensing Sub-Committees (with public participation)
 - 3 x Planning Committees (with public participation)
 - 1 x Council (with public participation)
 - 2 x Civic Affairs Committees
 - 1 x Joint Development Control Committee (with public participation)
 - 1 x Scrutiny Committee (with 3 more scheduled between publication of this report and the committee meeting).

Member and officer experiences

- 3.2 Virtual meetings have, so far, been relatively trouble free in that
- no meeting has been totally abandoned because of a technical issue (at two meetings approx. 10 minutes had to be repeated because of no sound/a Member dropped out; at another meeting a member had to move location within the house to get a better connection)
 - the public who wanted to have a say have been able to and have been seen
 - Members have helpfully and positively engaged with the new way of working
- 3.3 A lot of preparatory work by officers and Members has ensured a successful induction. Being part of a virtual meeting is a very different experience to a normal meeting. Chairs of committees have adopted an approach that works for them and takes into account the context of the meeting they are in. The conventions provide a framework within which to work and up to now appear to provide each Chair adequate opportunity to adapt to the circumstances of the meeting.

Officers are regularly reviewing and looking to improve the experience for users and will continue to do so.

- 3.4 Good practice/observations are:

- Joining the meeting in good time to check the connection works for the participant
- Regular comfort breaks are very important, Planning Committee particularly (which has had to meet more often as the number of

applications agenda has been reduced to make the meetings-in theory-more manageable)

-Only using meeting chat to indicate a wish to speak or leaving the meeting/attracting the Chair/officers attention

-Each meeting is available post meeting as a recording and this enables any viewer to monitor in great detail every contribution

Members have been emailed a copy of this report and any comments received will be passed onto the committee on 8 July.

Public viewing and participation

- 3.3 Making meetings available to view, on early evidence, has been higher than if the meetings had been held at the Guildhall. Take Planning Committee on 17 June, which considered a major application at the Station (the current car park area) which was watched by 95 people, far more than could be accommodated at the Guildhall. Members have commented for some years on the positives of public access to committee meetings in the home environment, rather than having to go to the Guildhall and these early viewing figures back this up.

Observations so far are:

-Public speakers can arrive to the meeting pre-live and there is no way this can be prevented

-An easier access to the public broadcast via the agenda has recently been added

National picture and likely continuation

- 4.1 The Local Government Association is lobbying the Government to allow part virtual/part physical location committee meetings as lockdown and social distancing is eased. Officers will monitor the national picture and consult with members on the possible permutations.
- 4.2 There will inevitably be a national discussion about the positives and the negatives of virtual meetings when deciding what, if anything, will continue into the long term. Councillors across the country have had to move from holding meetings together in a civic building, to participating from their individual homes in approximately 2 months- there would have been objection, resistance, probable refusal without a the national crisis and a need to get business done. The financial position of Councils' post-Covid will inevitably have an impact on any long term

approach, but the city council should seriously look to embrace the positives in the longer term and the new normal.

4. Implications

(a) Financial Implications

There may be some small savings on not producing so many paper copies of agenda although more Members are requiring paper copies than initially anticipated. Longer term financial implications will depend on how council meetings will run eg. use versus non-use of buildings, continued use of a virtual meeting solution and interaction with officers via Teams or equivalent.

(b) Staffing Implications

Running virtual meetings does require more democratic service officers (2 or 3 at each meeting throughout against 1 in the committee room or area committee venue) as there is more than one role to perform and this will be an important consideration in any assessment.

(c) Equality and Poverty Implications

(d) Environmental Implications

(e) Procurement Implications

(f) Community Safety Implications

No addition to the comments made in 18 May committee report.

5. Consultation and communication considerations

Chairs specifically and all other members have been asked to comment on their experience of the conventions so far.

6. Inspection of papers

If you have a query on the report please contact Gary Clift, Democratic Services Manager, tel: 01223 - 457011, email: gary.clift@cambridge.gov.uk.

Interim proposals for Cambridge City Council conventions for virtual meetings in accordance with the [Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels \(Coronavirus\) \(Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings\) \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2020](#)

1.1 Access to documents

- (i) Democratic Services will publish the agenda and reports for committee meetings on the Council's website and will notify councillors by email. Papers will not be available for inspection at the Council's offices. Printed copies will not normally be circulated to councillors [an exception will be made for Planning Committee councillors (who wish paper copies) and any other councillor with specific requirements].

A majority of Members are choosing to continue with paper copies as the default. Printed agenda are not getting to Members in the same timely way because of changes to production/despatch work practices (ie. So it can be 2 or 3 days after on line publication that a member gets a hard copy).

- (ii) Before the meeting, any document to be referred to during the meeting should be shared with participants and published (where appropriate) in advance on the council's website, and ensure that every page and slide is numbered, wherever possible.

1.2 General etiquette about councillors joining and participating in a remote meeting

- (i) Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting 15 minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disrupting or delaying the official start of the meeting. If a councillor needs to leave the meeting at any point, then they must draw that to the Chair's attention.
- (ii) Apologies for absence should be submitted in advance and the councillor should advise Democratic Services if an Alternate will be attending.
- (ii) Councillors should leave their cameras on (as long as bandwidth for streaming permits)
- (iv) The Chair will introduce the meeting and will check which councillors are present by roll-call. The Chair will remind councillors to mute their microphones

when not speaking. This is done in order to reduce feedback and background noise. Democratic Services Officers may use this mute function as well.

It is recommended that this is not done at Full Council. Experience of the Annual Meeting on 28 May was not to roll call for saving time reasons. It is not necessary to have a full roll call as officers and Members can see who is present on the participant icon in Teams (and the meeting is recorded for reference back).

1.3 Protocol for councillors speaking at meetings

- (i) The Chair will determine who may speak, as well as the order, frequency and priority of speakers. (Through Teams this may be that councillors may use the 'chat' message function to indicate a wish to speak). The Chair may instruct the Democratic Service Officer to assist them in carrying out any of these functions. The Chair's ruling at any meeting on how this will be managed shall be final.
- (ii) Councillors will speak when invited to do so by the Chair with only one person to speak at a time.
- (ii) When referring to reports or making specific comments, councillors should refer to the report and page number so that all councillors have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times.
- (iii) Ward Councillors and Parish Councillors (latter re. JDCC) will be able to speak (e.g. speaking on behalf of constituents) at a virtual meeting with the permission of the Chair which should be gained in advance.
- (iv) Any councillor with a disclosable pecuniary interest or other declarable interest which would usually require them to leave the room, must leave the remote meeting and the officer will confirm they have left and will invite them back to re-join at the appropriate time.

1.4 Voting

- (i) Where a vote is required, the Chair will ask each councillor to vote in turn. Councillors should express their vote verbally, either for, against or abstain.
- (ii) The Democratic Services Officer will announce the outcome of the vote to the meeting. Names will not be recorded in the Minutes, unless requested under Council Procedure Rules (32 and 46)

It is recommend at Full Council for timing reasons that the Mayor asks if there is agreement to the proposal and a roll call (by using the hands up function in Teams) is

used for votes against and for abstentions, with each in turn reported after the vote to the meeting by the Chief Executive or Clerk.

1.5 Public participation at virtual committee meetings

The following conventions will supplement public speaking rights in Part 4b of Council Procedure Rules in the context of a virtual council or committee meeting of Cambridge City Council

- (i) The public who wish to observe/hear the proceedings of a committee are able to do so by a live stream. The public who wish to speak will contact democratic services by noon two working days before the meeting and will be provided with a link to participate in the meeting.
- (ii) The public participating will be able to be heard (and ideally be seen) by other participants and will be able to hear (and ideally see) other participants.
- (iii) Representations should be submitted in writing as well. This is as a back-up in case of a technical failure preventing the video or audio representation at the meeting being made. If a public speaker loses connection, the officer will attempt to bring the speaker back into the meeting, they will try to: a) invite the speaker back to the Teams platform; b) if unsuccessful then telephone the speaker (if provided with a number); c) or read out any written submission (sent in advance) on the speaker's behalf. If a speaker is unable to either join, or re-join a meeting, the Chair may still permit the meeting to determine the business to be transacted.
- (iv) Once the public contribution has ended, they will be muted by the officer/Chair.
- (v) The Chair's decision on how this process operates will be final.

1.6 Disruption

While the Council welcomes input from the public, it is important for the integrity and orderly management of the meeting that the public who join the meeting follow the direction of the Chair.

The Chair will warn a member of the public if they are disrupting proceedings. If the member of the public ignores the Chair's warning then they will be muted and/or removed from the (virtual) meeting. The Chair's action taken in relation to disruption is final.

1.7 Dealing with exempt items of business

- (i) There are times when council meetings are not open to the public, when confidential, or "exempt" information – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local

Government Act 1972 – is under consideration. The Chair and Democratic Services Officer must ensure that there are no members of the public at remote locations able to hear or see the proceedings during such meetings or parts of meetings.

- (ii) Any councillor in remote attendance who fails to disclose that there are other persons present, such as those who may be able to see and/or hear the meeting, who are not so entitled will be in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct.

1.8 Dealing with technical difficulties

- (i) In the event that the Chair or Democratic Services Officer identifies a technical failure of the virtual meeting, the Chair may need to declare an adjournment while the fault is addressed.
- (ii) If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting is inquorate, the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate, the meeting will continue. Those Councillors affected and attending remotely would be aware and have to accept that the meeting would continue and a vote would be taken without their attendance.
- (iii) If it is not possible for general public access to the virtual meeting because of a technical failure by the Council, the meeting cannot proceed.
- (iv) 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 Chief Executive, in consultation with the relevant Executive Councillor/Chair and spokes shall explore such other means of taking the decision as may be permitted by the Council's constitution.

1.9 Interpretation of Conventions and Council Procedure Rules

Where the Chair is required to interpret the Council's existing practices in light of the requirements of remote participation which are provided for under the Regulations, they shall take advice from a senior legal officer or senior democratic officer prior to making a ruling. The Chair's decision in all cases shall be final.

2.0 Review

These conventions will be reviewed as soon as practicable by the Civic Affairs Committee after one month from the first virtual meeting as agreed by Full Council on 28 May 2020.