Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

Protocol – Guidance for Virtual/Remote Meetings

Preliminary Points

So why remote meetings and how do they work?

Basically the operation of Virtual Meetings provides for any council meeting to be observed by the public without the need for any Councilor or Member of the Public to attend in person. The arrangements have been brought in temporarily due to Covid-19 social distancing and the other measures designed to reduce the incidence of potential spread of the corona virus.

In practice, elected members can participate remotely in meetings observed by the Public utlising `Teams Software`. The meetings are managed (administrated) by Democratic Services who working with the Chair of a meeting produce a `public streaming` of the meeting via switching video filming between speakers at meetings.

The meeting will start with the camera observing the Chair presenting the meeting and/or showing the Agenda and procedure to follow. As the meeting progresses, when the Chair invites presenters of items or speakers, the camera is switch from the Chair to the individual speaker for the time they are speaking, that is the video the public see. As each speaker concludes their question or statement the video moves to the next speaker and so on.

This video is continuously streamed live and recordings are made so that even if a member of the public misses a meeting they can catch up via watching the recording via the council website later.

What should I consider before joining a virtual/remote meeting?

- Ensure you are wearing appropriate clothing reflecting the status of the meeting.

- Ensure nothing inappropriate can be seen in your background. (*Some versions of Microsoft Teams have a facility to blur out your background if desired*).

- Where background cannot be digitally obscured, have an appropriate background ensuring you do not have any personal items in view in order to protect your

privacy and that of your home. (A blank wall with no personal pictures for example)

- Ensure you are well lit and not in silhouette against a bright background.

- Consider your body language and how you want to present – this comes across strongly in the video format.

- Sound quality is important too. Choose a quiet room. Try to ensure you are not likely to be disturbed by noise coming from other parts of your house or outside – e.g. pets, music, washing machines, traffic etc. which can become exaggerated by your microphone and cause a distraction in a video conference.

- Try to ensure all other occupants of your house know you are in a meeting and don't make unexpected or unintended interruptions.

- Bear in mind that some meetings may contain confidential information so you must make arrangements to ensure that other members of your household do not overhear.

- Be careful to not allow exempt or confidential papers to be seen in the camera/video-feed.

- Smartphones or devices placed on your lap are not recommended. Involuntary movement of the camera is very distracting to your audience, and will detract from what you are saying.

- Place your device on a hard surface such as a desk or table top to keep the camera steady, the microphone unimpeded, and your head and shoulders in the frame at all times.

Joining a Microsoft Teams meeting

- Open Microsoft Teams, click on the "Calendar" and click to "join" the appropriate meeting. Please try to join the video conference at least 15 fifteen minutes before the start to allow yourself and the Governance Officer the opportunity to test the equipment

- <u>Mute your microphone and turn off your video at all times unless you have been given leave to speak by the Chair of the meeting.</u> You may find headphones help to block out distractions and focus your attention on the conference.

Running the Meeting – Etiquette and the Chair's Role

- Video conferencing depends on the observance of strict etiquette and the Chair's direction. Participants are called to speak by the Chair. Points should made quickly and then the Chair moves on to the next 'caller'/participant.

- The Chair of a meeting should be mindful of the need to ensure fairness at all times when conducting meetings which are held remotely.

- All participants should keep their contributions short and succinct. The Chair of the meeting must maintain strict control. Where a degree of cross-party conversation

may be tolerated in a conventional meeting, such behaviour in a video conference will render the meeting inaudible to all.

- Each Member should familiarise themselves with the order of the agenda and items before the meeting.

- The chair will run through the preliminaries (webcasting announcement, apologies etc.), - see draft script in the **Appendix** to this Protocol.

- The Chair will then invite the relevant Member/Officer to present each item in turn.

- At the conclusion of the Member/Officer presentation, the Chair will invite Members in turn to speak. Members may indicate if they wish to speak using 'Chat' as described above.

- Members may only speak when invited to by the Chair.

- Only one person may speak at any one time.

- Any Member wishing to speak should indicate by inserting a `Q` in the chat section of the Teams Meeting.

- The Chat should not be used for any other purpose during the meeting – records of the chat are open for all Councilors/Officers to view/access

- The Chair will monitor with the support of Democratic Services the Chat Service

- When invited to Speak by the Chair the Member should state their name before addressing the meeting (i.e. "Councilor Example and I want to ask…" *This is because the meeting is being broadcast on the internet*)

- When referring to a specific part of a report, Members should mention the page/paragraph number so that all participants and members of the public have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times.

- Remember to unmute your microphone and switch on your video when you speak and mute your microphone and switch off your video again when you finish.

- Remember that your remarks/views as in normal meetings are open to public scrutiny but particularly in this format are permanently digitally recorded in full and published in full on the Council's website.

- Documents can be shared on screen during presentations.

Appendix - Chair's Opening Remarks

Good evening (and welcome members of the public) to this meeting of …….

This meeting is being held 'virtually' in accordance with Part 2 of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 – and the Council's Supplementary Council Procedure Rules.

In summary, the Regulations were brought in as a response to the Coronavirus epidemic. They remove the requirement for Members to be physically present in the room. They allow us to debate, participate and vote through remote video conferencing while observing the social distancing measures needed to restrict the spread of the virus.

Can I ask all Members and officers to observe the following principles:

- **Please mute your microphone and turn off your video** at all times unless I have called upon you to speak.
- **Remember to mute your microphone and turn off your video again** when you have finished.
- Indicate at the start of the meeting if you wish to speak and through the MS Teams Chat channel if you wish to speak again. I will call Members to speak at my discretion and according to the demands of the agenda.
- In terms of voting, for a small meeting I will ask each councilor in turn.
- In terms of voting, for a large meeting the votes will be determined by a consensus. If there is no consensus, voting will be carried out by a roll call.

While this formality may seem a little strange to members used to open debate across the floor of the chamber, I hope everyone will understand the overall benefits for the conduct of virtual meetings if we all observe the discipline of this process.