



## VIRTUAL MEETINGS POLICY & GUIDANCE

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### INTRODUCTION

1.1 These are unprecedented times resulting in a new approach to managing public meetings. Biddulph Town Council has embraced this opportunity and has developed this document to provide guidance and reassurance about the management of Town Council functions going forward.

1.2 The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4 April 2020.

Broadly speaking, the 2020 Regulations enable local councils to hold remote meetings (including by video and telephone conferencing) for a specified period until May 2021.

The 2020 Regulations also remove the requirement to hold an annual meeting. The 2020 Regulations apply to local council meetings, committee and sub-committee meetings in England.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY

2.1 Regulation 5 (6) of the 2020 Regulations enables local councils to make standing orders to specify:

- (i) how voting will be carried out,
- (ii) how members and the public can access documents and

how remote access of the press and public by electronic means will take place. Councils should make these decisions based on their own needs and capacity.

2.2 The purpose of this document is to set out Biddulph Town Council's expectation with regards to the management of virtual meetings in line with Regulation 5 (6).

## PROVISIONS

3.1 Through consultation with Officers and Members, Zoom has been selected as the platform of choice to conduct Virtual Public Meetings whilst Social Distancing is being enforced.

3.2 The intention is to have one Council Meeting per month. This Council Meeting will deal with all the Council's business, as well as any business that committees may normally deal with.

At this stage, only urgent business will be discussed, although this will be kept under review. There may also be Finance Strategy and Management Committee meetings to move forward projects such as the allocation of grants and preparation of audit documentation.

The same principles detailed in this document apply to all virtual meetings of the Town Council.

### 3.3 Meeting Etiquette

Meeting etiquette and rules are very similar to those of a normal Council Meeting held in person. These are difficult times and people may be worried about their health or family members; they may be frustrated being isolated at home, and there may be challenges with using new technology particularly if there are technical difficulties.

Everyone in the meeting will need to be respectful and compassionate towards one another, emotions may be higher than usual but that only makes it more important that everyone approaches the meeting with respect and in the spirit of the Town Council's Code of Conduct.

### 3.4 What are the specified conditions to enable local councils to meet remotely?

Regulation 5(2) of the 2020 Regulations provides that a member in remote attendance attends the meeting at any time if the member is able at that time:

- a) to hear, and where practicable see, and be so heard and, where practicable, be seen by, the other members in attendance,
- b) to hear, and where practicable see, and be so heard and, where practicable, be seen by, any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting in order to exercise a right to speak at the meeting, and
- c) to be so heard and, where practicable, be seen by any other members of the public attending the meeting.

All of the above conditions must be satisfied.

### **3.5 Election of a Mayor or Chair**

Regulation 4 of the 2020 Regulations provides that where an appointment would otherwise be made or is required to be made at an annual meeting of a local authority, the appointment continues until the next annual meeting of the authority or until such time as that authority may determine (Regulation 4 (2)). This would apply to the election of the Mayor, the first business at the annual council meeting. Therefore, the current Mayor will remain in place until an annual meeting is held (possibly next year) unless the council decide to elect a replacement earlier.

### **3.6 Making meetings accessible for the public**

Please note that all Meetings will be recorded, with the audio being published to the website.

Meetings will also be added to Facebook to enable the public to watch them 'live'.

### **3.7 Council discussions**

The Mayor should still chair the meeting. They should take the opportunity of any practice meetings to ensure they are confident following the agenda, managing input from councillors and staff, and keeping the meeting to time.

Some suggestions to aid this are:

- Asking everyone to mute themselves when not speaking - this helps keep background noise to a minimum which will improve everyone's ability to hear the discussions.
- If everyone is able to join by video, then they could raise their hands when they wish to speak.
- If some people cannot join by video, then raising hands will not be an option. In this scenario, the Mayor will ask people to state clearly when they would like to speak. Alternatively, another option might

be for the Mayor to read from a list of councillors' names and ask them in turn if there is anything they wish to say or ask. This may take more time but allows for a more controlled approach.

- The Mayor may ask everyone to state their name before they start speaking so that it is always clear who is speaking.
- In order to keep track of who is 'present' at the meeting, the Chief Officer will complete a roll call at the beginning of the meeting. Whilst it may not always be possible to monitor temporary technical issues, the Chief Officer will continue to observe attendance throughout the meeting. Where a vote is needed, this may be a named vote to ensure that the meeting is quorate.

### **3.8 Voting**

At face-to-face meetings, it is clear who has voted for each option on a particular issue. Biddulph Town Council recognise that this may be more challenging with virtual meetings. As a result, a number of principles will be followed:

- If everyone be joining by video, Councillors will raise hands to vote, as in a physical meeting.
- Where it is not possible to see everyone, the Chief Officer will complete a roll call of councillors' names and ask them to state their vote.

The method of voting will be approved by the Chair of the meeting with the aim of ensuring that every vote, whether visually or by telephone, is clear and unambiguous.

## **GUIDE TO USING ZOOM**

### **4.1 Installation**

Zoom can be used either on a web browser or downloaded to your machine or phone. There is advice that suggests it is more stable when installed, so you may wish to download it rather than use it on a web browser.

To sign up to Zoom, go to <https://zoom.us/> and click "Sign up, It's Free" in the top right-hand corner.

To download the software, go to [https://zoom.us/download#client\\_4meeting](https://zoom.us/download#client_4meeting) and select the top option: Zoom Client for Meetings.

### **Joining a Meeting**

A code will be emailed to Councillors, published at least 3 clear days before the meeting, and will take a form similar to: 111-222-3333. There will also be a link, which could also be used to access the meeting.

To join a meeting within Zoom, click on “Join a Meeting” and enter the code when prompted. Please ensure that your audio is muted, but your camera enabled upon entering the meeting.