

Rother District Council

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 13 December 2021

Title: Hybrid Meeting Protocol

Report of: Lisa Cooper, Democratic Services Manager

Cabinet Member: Councillor Oliver

Ward(s): N/A

Purpose of Report: To consider and agree the Hybrid Meeting Protocol for formal meetings

Decision Type: Non-Key

Officer

Recommendation(s): It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) the Hybrid Meeting Protocol be approved and adopted; and
- 2) the Chief Executive be granted delegated authority to agree any further amendments to the protocol in light of experience in consultation with all Group Leaders.

Reasons for

Recommendations: To establish the rules of engagement for Members and the public when joining formal committee meetings remotely.

Introduction

1. At the meeting held in February this year Cabinet agreed to the allocation of funding for the installation of a hybrid meeting system for the Council Chamber (Minute CB20/103 refers). The project has been successfully managed and delivered by the Council's Transformation Team with installation taking place during the week commencing 25 October, testing and training during November 2021 and a soft-launch (streaming of meetings only) during December 2021.
2. This project delivers on the key objective within the Council's Corporate Plan "To improve access to Council meetings, open the Council to the public ensuring increased transparency, meaningful consultation and better visibility by end 2023."
3. Whilst current legislation does not permit formal decision-making committees to be held as a hybrid meeting, i.e. all voting committee Members must be physically present in the meeting room, non-committee Members, non-voting committee Members, officers and members of the public with speaking rights will be able to join meetings remotely.

4. It is hoped to offer and implement hybrid meetings from January 2022 and this report puts forward a draft protocol for approval that sets out the expectations of those attending remotely (Appendix 1).

Considerations

5. The draft protocol at Appendix 1 has been compiled taking into account the latest national guidance on hybrid meetings, consultation with key officers and Members and neighbouring East Sussex authorities who operate hybrid meetings. The key points for elected Members and officers are:

Attendees:

- must join hybrid meetings from a suitable location on a Rother issued device, where possible;
 - are encouraged to join meetings at least 15 minutes before the start time, to ensure connection is working; the physical meeting will commence on time and once started there will be no opportunity to assist those trying to join if there are any technical issues;
 - any Member intending to join a meeting remotely is requested to confirm one day in advance of the meeting, where possible;
 - should always apply the corporate backdrop;
 - must have their cameras off and microphones muted when not speaking;
 - should indicate to the Chairman by “hands-up” when they want to speak.
6. It is considered that attendance at a hybrid meeting does NOT constitute attendance at a meeting for the purposes of the 6-month rule.
 7. Officers will usually be physically present at meetings when there are significant or controversial items / major planning applications. Whether an officer attends a meeting in person or remotely will be a decision for the Head of Service / Director or Chief Executive / Deputy Chief Executive in consultation with the relevant Chair.
 8. Members are reminded that if they just want to listen / watch a hybrid committee meeting, they can do so via the live broadcast, like a member of the public; the least number of remote participants present in a hybrid meeting the better, as this will assist the Chairman and supporting officers in managing the meeting. The remote meeting is for participation, the webcast is for observation.

Environmental

9. The introduction of hybrid meetings will assist with the Council’s carbon reduction programme. There will be a reduction in journeys to and from the Town Hall by Members, officers and participating public who would otherwise have travelled to Bexhill-on-Sea to attend meetings in person.

Equalities and Diversity

10. This project delivers on the key objective within the Council’s Corporate Plan “To improve access to Council meetings, open the Council to the public ensuring increased transparency, meaningful consultation and better visibility by end 2023.”

11. The installation of the new hybrid system will improve the customer experience, not only in terms of improved sound and vision of live-streamed and recorded meetings but accessibility. Members of the public will be able to join meetings remotely to participate in public speaking schemes operated by the Council, without the need to travel to the Town Hall. This protocol will ensure that the rules of engagement and expectations are clear for all participants.

Conclusion

12. The installation of a hybrid meeting system will allow the Council to provide remote access for non-Committee Members who wish to participate, Committee Members who are unable to attend the meeting but whom can still join and participate, but not vote, officers, invited guests and speakers and members of the public.
13. It is essential therefore that the rules of engagement are clear and understood by all. It is envisaged that with experience, the protocol may require amendment and it is requested that the Chief Executive be granted delegated authority to agree any amendments to the protocol in consultation with all Group Leaders.
14. Cabinet are asked to approve the draft protocol and delegation to the Chief Executive to amend further in light of experience.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	Yes
Crime and Disorder	No	Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	No	Exempt from publication	No

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Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Hybrid Meeting Protocol
Relevant Previous Minutes:	None.
Background Papers:	None.
Reference Documents:	None.

Hybrid Meeting Protocol – Formal Meetings

Officers and Members MUST:

1. Join remote hybrid meetings from a suitable location and where possible, on a Rother District Council issued device, or an approved alternative arrangement.
2. Join the meeting at least 15 minutes before the start time; failure to do so may result in non-attendance / admittance to the meeting.
3. Apply the corporate backdrop, where technically possible.
4. Leave microphones muted and cameras off when not speaking and indicate to the Chair by the “hands-up” facility when wanting to speak.
5. Not use the chat facility – this will be disabled for hybrid meetings – there will be no chat between remote attendees.

Members

1. Attendance at a remote hybrid meeting will NOT constitute attendance at a meeting for the purposes of the 6-month rule.
2. Members are requested to confirm 1 day in advance of the meeting of their intention to join remotely, where possible.
3. For the purposes of the call-in procedure in relation to executive decisions, at least one of the two Members requesting a call-in must have been physically present at the relevant Cabinet meeting.
4. Committee Members present remotely will have speaking rights only – there will be no rights to move or second a Motion or vote on a Motion.
5. The Chair and Vice-Chair of any Committee MUST always be physically present at the meeting to Chair the meeting and in the case of the Vice-Chair take over proceedings where necessary. If the Chair is unable to attend the physical meeting and attends remotely, the meeting will be Chaired by the Vice-Chair or another Member elected to Chair the meeting who is physically present.
6. Committee Members present remotely will be asked for their contribution before non-committee Members who are in remote attendance.
7. Members attending remotely with a declaration of interest of a Personal and Prejudicial or Disclosable Pecuniary Interest nature will have to leave the remote meeting room and be invited to re-join following the item.
8. Members physically present in the meeting room must NOT also join the meeting via MS Teams.

Officers

1. Officers will be expected to be physically present at meetings for significant or controversial items / major planning applications. The decision whether an officer attends a meeting remotely or in person will be made in conjunction with the relevant Head of Service / Director or Chief Executive / Deputy Chief Executive and in consultation with the relevant Chair.
2. If an officer requires support in delivering a presentation, they must source this from within their own department and discuss their arrangements with Democratic Services five working days before the meeting.

Public and other invited guests / speakers

1. Members of the public will be able to join hybrid meetings remotely using a suitable device for the purposes of participation in any public speaking scheme in operation and in any other circumstances where they have been specifically invited to address a committee. They will be required to leave their cameras and microphones off until they are invited to speak.
2. They will be required to leave the remote meeting room once their participation has concluded. Other (non-public) guests and speakers invited to address a Committee will be asked to leave at the discretion of the Chair of the relevant committee.
3. For the purposes of speaking to a planning application, members of the public will be let into the remote meeting room at the start of the relevant planning application and will be asked to leave once the application has concluded. Members of the public will not be permitted to share content during a live broadcast. Any material to be shown by the public will have to be provided to Rother District Council in advance of the meeting.