## Management of Virtual Committee Meetings

Report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Governance and Monitoring Officer

**1.0     Introduction**

1.1     Since the Prime Minister introduced new guidance at the end of March 2020 on social distancing and only attending work for essential business, the Democratic Services and IT Teams have been collaborating at pace to enable the Council to hold committee meetings virtually whilst still adhering to its statutory duties and the regulations that came into force on 4 April 2020.

1.2     The council held its first virtual meeting on 26 May 2020, being a quorate only, politically proportionate Annual Council Meeting.

1.3     It is intended that wherever possible, all Council meetings (including committee meetings), will continue by way of virtual committee meetings until the guidance on social distancing is amended to allow such meetings to take place physically in a practical manner.

1.4     This guidance is based on the use of the Microsoft Teams virtual meetings software.

**2.0     Current Position**

2.1     The council is currently using the Microsoft Teams platform to hold virtual meetings.

2.2     The virtual meetings will be simultaneously webcasted on the Council's existing webcasting platform provided by Public-i, thereby fulfilling the Council's duty under the Regulations to ensure that the proceedings can, as a minimum, be heard by a member of the public 'attending' the meeting.  In practice, the proceedings of all such meetings will also be viewable by the public.

2.3     Public participation at virtual meetings by way of video or audio participation can also be facilitated, but has not yet been undertaken in a committee context. However, the same solution has been used by Democratic Services to admit external parties during hearings held to consider school admission appeals and has worked well.

2.4     24 new iPads have been provided to those Councillors who required replacement devices in order to attend and participate in remote meetings on Microsoft Teams.

2.5     There has been a recent update to the desktop version of Microsoft Teams that allows the number of active participants on the screen to be extended from the current 4 to 9; however this feature has not yet been rolled out by Microsoft Teams/ Apple to mobile devices.

2.6     There has been a recent update to Microsoft Teams for user of iPads to use the "raise hand" function which should be used by Members when indicating that they wish to speak (see draft guidance on etiquette at Annex 1).

2.7     The Democratic Services Officer will undertake their clerking role in the same way as if they were in a physical meeting with the addition of informing Members just prior to the meeting starting that it is to be webcast and confirming when the webcast has finished. The Democratic Services Officer will be available to advise the Chair and Members as they do in physical meetings and will also facilitate the admission of the public to exercise public speaking rights when appropriate. The Democratic Services Officer will take the minutes of the meetings and facilitate voting where necessary by a named vote.

2.8     A training session on how to Chair a Microsoft Teams meeting effectively will be offered to any Chairs who wish to receive such training.

## 3.0     Future Developments

3.1     Democratic Services are working with the current webcasting provider (Public-i) in relation to a new video conferencing solution (Connect Remote) that they are developing which is specifically designed for, and tailored to, the needs of formal local authority meetings including features such as remote electronic voting and speaker management.

3.2     Councillors have the option of joining the meeting using a simple web-browser on a laptop without the need to install any software, or alternatively using a dedicated app on iPads or android tablet devices. All iPads currently deployed to councillors support the installation of the Connect Remote app.

3.3     The video feed would automatically be exported to our existing webcasting platform for live public viewing. This would negate the requirement for the Council use and manage two systems at once (e.g. webcasting and Microsoft Teams) and reduce the staffing resources needed to manage each meeting, if we chose to do so.

3.4     Democratic Services will be undertaking testing of this potential solution from week commencing 1 June 2020.

## 4.0     Recommendation

The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to comment on and note the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none


Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Vicki Bates on Tel: 0161-474 3219
or vicki.bates@stockport.gov.uk

Annex 1

**DRAFT GUIDANCE ON BEHAVIOURAL EXPECTATIONS AND ETIQUETTE FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS**

*This Guidance has been prepared for discussion at Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council's Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee on 1 June 2020 and includes guidance provided publically by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, LLG, LGA and ADSO.*

**1.0 Introduction**

1.1 Since the Prime Minister introduced new guidance at the end of March 2020 on social distancing and only attending work for essential business, the Democratic Services and IT Teams have been collaborating at pace to enable the Council to hold committee meetings virtually whilst still adhering to its statutory duties and the regulations that came into force on 4 April 2020.

1.2 This Guidance has been prepared to assist Members in taking part in virtual meetings and includes guidance provided by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, LLG, LGA and ADSO.

1.3 It is unlikely that the virtual meetings will proceed in the same way as meetings in person and accordingly there is the need to recognise that meeting remotely requires a different approach to the agenda and to behaviour than a meeting in person.

1.4 All virtual meetings will be simultaneously webcast on the council's existing webcasting service, Public-i.

**2.0 Process and Etiquette**

Preparation

2.1 As the participants in the meeting will not all be in the same physical space it will not be as easy to pick up on physical and verbal cues from others. Accordingly, the Chair should give consideration to taking more time in their formal role by taking time to pause the discussion, remind members of the process and the purpose of the meeting and the outcomes that want to be achieved whilst allowing everyone to contribute.

2.2 It may be appropriate for some Chairs to have informal meetings or discussions with other Members and/or officers in advance in order to prepare for meetings, particularly to ensure that public participation is facilitated and how.

2.3 All Members should test that they have access to the remote platform at least a day in advance of the meeting and endeavour to join the actual meeting 15 minutes in advance.

2.4 Ensure that you are dialling in from an area of your home where you are less likely to be disturbed.

2.5 Ensure that your broadband connection is sufficiently stable to join the meeting. If your broadband connection has low bandwidth, you should change your iPad to the 4G data setting (from WiFi) or tether your iPad to another data allowance (another mobile phone) to attempt to facilitate a better connection. If you are unable to join by video call then there will be an option in the meeting invitation in your calendar to join by audio only. When you are in the meeting if your connection is unstable you can turn off your camera which should improve stability of the connection.

2.6 Ensure that your background is as neutral as possible. Some platforms provide a facility to blur the background. Ensure that you have no confidential information that is visible on camera and that there is no personal information or photographs in the background that you would not want to share (remember that the meeting will be being simultaneously webcast to the public).

2.7 Ensure that you are familiar with the functions of the software that you are using to dial in, in particular:

2.7.1 How to mute and unmute yourself. As a general rule you should always have your microphone muted when you are not speaking. Ideally you should use earphones or a headset to participate in meetings as it reduces the risk of feedback from using your device's external speakers and also ensures the confidentially of any confidential discussions from other people of your household.

2.7.2 How to turn your camera on and off if you are taking private advice or talking to someone else who may enter the room from which you are attending the meeting or if you need to eat during the meeting (eating during virtual meetings is discouraged unless for health reasons).

2.7.3 The ability to use the "raise hand" feature (by which the chair can be made aware that you want to speak). If you are using an iPad to join the meeting and the "raise hand" function is not visible to you when you press on the "three dots" as below then you will need to update the Microsoft Teams App in the App Store so that the below is visible:
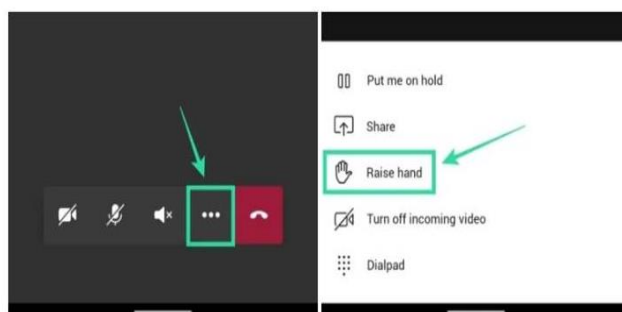
<u>The Chat Feature</u>

2.8 Microsoft Teams provides a Chat Feature by which participants can communicate with each other in written form. The Chat Feature is viewable by any members of the public in attendance at the meeting, so it is suggested that the use of Chat in public meetings should be discouraged or kept to a minimum. Appropriate use of the Chat Feature could include the following:-

  2.8.1 The Chair queuing up the order in which they will invite contributions from committee members (in conjunction with the "raise hand" function);

  2.8.2 A committee member asking for a point of clarification to be raised or to ask a question or make a comment;

  2.8.3 Attempting to resolve minor technical problems (e.g. a member might have difficulty seeing or hearing what is happening or contributing).

## 3.0 Conclusion

3.1 It is vital that Members and officers remember that the public will be observing meetings. This may be easily forgotten, where participants are joining meetings from home. When connected to formal meetings via webcam or audio-only, Members and officers should assume at all times that what they are saying and doing is visible to the public in just the same way as it would be in the committee room/council chamber.

3.2 The Council appreciates that some Members may find virtual committee meetings challenging for a number a reasons ranging from technology, home environment and disabilities or impairments. If you do have concerns then please contact the Monitoring Officer as soon as possible to discuss how we can support you further (vicki.bates@stockport.gov.uk).