

Remote Meetings Case Studies

Brighton & Hove City Council

In response to the COVID-19 emergency Brighton & Hove City Council opted to run council meetings online under new Government regulations to ensure democracy is transparent.

Working closely with IT&D colleagues, the team confirmed that all Members had access to Skype for Business on their hybrid devices and i-phones and internet capability. This was already the council's chosen form for instant communications and was considered the best option to take forward as a video conferencing platform given it has a professional level of functionality, familiarity with users, and resilience for a high volume of attendees.

Working with colleagues from Communications, a guide on the use of Skype for meetings and how to participate in a virtual meeting was then produced and issued to all Members as well as being shared with the DS team and officers who would be involved in the forthcoming virtual meetings.

As the majority of committee meetings were already web cast, contact was also made with our Web Cast provider, Auditel, who were able to update the equipment to ensure skype meetings could be web cast.

In order to prepare councillors, the DS team ran a mock Planning Committee and worked closely with the Groups Political Advisors to ensure all Members were prepared. This included the Groups holding their own meetings via Skype to enable them to practice using the technology and identify learning needs. to ensure they do not encounter connectivity issues.

How is the new approach being sustained?

As of 31st March, a virtual Policy & Resources Sub-Committee was held via Skype and web cast, with lessons learnt taken forward for the Planning Committee meeting on 22nd and then the full Council meeting on the 23rd April 2020. Both are available to view on the council's website.

The full Council being held to consider the City Plan Part 2 and 52 of the 54 Members taking part, with the meeting hosted by the Head of Democratic Services to ensure access and timings of speeches could be managed and chaired by the Mayor.

The meeting also involved the use of a palantypist to meet the accessibility needs of one Member with hearing difficulties. This involved being able to provide the skype link to the person providing the support to the Member, enabling them to join the meeting and for them to send a specific url to the Member so that they could then see the words on their screen. Feedback from the Member has been very positive.

The team will also be carrying on their training sessions with Members and officers to ensure everyone has the skills and knowledge to confidently participate. Pre-registered

public question speakers will also be given the opportunity to join the meetings and offered support with the technology to ensure they are able to participate fully and hold their members and council to account.

The need for two members of the DS Team to be involved will be reviewed, for Planning Committee, there is a clear need if public participation is to be well managed, with people coming into the lobby and then entering and leaving the session.

Lessons learned

- It is important to check with Members and officers involved in the virtual meetings that they are fully up to speed on the use of the technology and have a back-up device.
- Skype works well but has some drawbacks and going forward Microsoft Teams (the replacement for Skype) is likely to be adopted.
- Accessibility needs to be taken into consideration, but these will have additional resource implications and will need to be funded appropriately.
- Continued training sessions for councillors and officers will need to be offered and planned.

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North Kesteven District Council

At North Kesteven District Council, we use Teams meetings. We did investigate Teams Live Events, but to be honest I really didn't like it... it seemed overly complicated and definitely appears more geared up for webinars than effective interactive meetings. The final nail in the coffin was that fact that live events are not compatible with 'presenters' on iPads – all our Members have council-issued iPads...

Teams meetings are so much easier to use, and are so much better equipped for dealing with interactive meetings. Teams meetings can't be live streamed from the meeting itself, so we use AudioMinutes, which links with Modern.gov and streams live to the meeting agenda page. We have a separate tablet that is placed next to a laptop and literally records ambient sounds. It is a bit of a rough and ready solution, but is really straight forward, meets the Regulations and the sound quality is absolutely fine.. We record the Teams meeting too, and then upload the video the day after.

Our first meeting was Council on 23rd April. We had 15 Members present in the Council meeting. We have 43 Members on Council, but group leaders came to an agreement in advance to reduce membership to make the meeting more manageable. We took a report to this Council meeting to recommend a reduction in planning and scrutiny committees for

the time being. You will hear on the recording that things got a little heated in relation to political balance, but the recommendations were approved. www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/Council23April

Indicating a wish to speak – we used the chat function and Members simply typed: ‘speak’. The clerk monitored these requests and advised the Chairman. This worked very well.

Voting – we used roll-call so Members could clearly be heard and seen casting their vote

We have our first planning committee scheduled for 12th May. www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/Planning12May

We are keeping the same process we used for Council.

We will have public speaking, but have suspended the public speaking scheme in part – so no questions of them. You can invite ‘guests’ to Teams meetings. We have tested this extensively (including with our own family!) and are confident in the system. Just in case though – our Protocol and Procedure Rules dictate that registered speakers have to submit their verbal presentation in writing in advance – so if any issues the Chairman will read their speech on their behalf and meeting continues.

Top Tips

- Test, test and test again!!!!
- Have mock meetings with your members and officers (dress rehearsals)
- Agree an ‘etiquette’ for meetings (ours is attached for info)
- We set up a Whatsapp group for the Chairman and key officers – so could message each other ‘outside’ of the meeting – the equivalent of whispering advice at the top table in the Chamber.
- Have a decent script for your Chairman – so they keep on track and feel supported.
- Share the work of the meeting; delegate to other DSOs, IT, legal, planning officers, or even CMT! For our Council meeting we had :

Person 1	Clerk – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide advice as needed • monitor speakers via chat • take votes
Person 2	Clock watch! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep track of each Member’s speeches and advise if over the permitted time. Advise meeting if needed
Person 3	Take minutes
Person 4	AudioMinutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live stream meeting
Person 5	Listen via website live stream <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advise Clerk immediately via private WhatsApp group if any issues

NKDC Remote Meeting Etiquette

Equipment: You must only access Teams and the meeting via your NK issued iPad. Meetings will be audio live streamed, and the video recording will be uploaded to the website within 2 working days of the meeting.

Remember: the public can hear and see you, even if you can't see or hear them.

Think: – about your surroundings and your body language.

“Councillors 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” - Centre of Public Scrutiny.

Members are asked to adhere to the following etiquette:

Before the meeting:

- Proactive communication with officers. If you have any questions about any reports – please feel free to contact officers in advance of the meeting to discuss.
- Make the remote connection to the meeting 10/15 minutes before the start to ensure no issues
- Switch off your mobile phone / turn to silent to avoid unnecessary interruptions
- **Power:** Remember to charge your iPad in advance of the meeting / ensure you are plugged into a power source.
- **Location and background** –
 - Find a suitable location for the meeting, where you will be comfortable and will not be disturbed.
 - You will need to consider your location for the meeting and what is visible in the background. A plain wall can create a good background for a remote meeting and you should remove anything that you may not wish to be on view such as family photos or recognisable products / brands.
- **Interests** - If you have any interest to declare or you are need advice, please speak with Democratic Services in advance of the meeting.

Other helpful guidance:

- Ensure you have read any documents in readiness for the meeting. Agendas will be shared in the usual way with all participants through Modern.gov.
- Prepare some handwritten notes or lists for ease of reference during the meeting. This preparation may save you time when referring to the agenda and participating in the meeting.
- Find a suitable location for the meeting, where you will be comfortable and won't be disturbed.

- You are encouraged to wear smart attire, as you might normally during a physical meeting.

Check your Smart speaker!

- Many of us now have smart speakers in our homes such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home or smart music devices. These may be recording phone/video conversations and this could be an inadvertent breach of GDPR.
- If you have any of these devices that connect to the Internet, we strongly advise you to either turn them off or move them out of the room in which you are working.
- This is particularly important for meetings that include consideration of Exempt / Confidential items.

During the meeting

• You may want to drink tea/coffee or water during the meeting, which is fine. Please do check your glass or mug is quite neutral through, with no particular branding, slogans or images, which could be viewed as offensive.

- Mute microphones and video-feed when not talking.
- Only speak when invited to by the Chairman.
- Only one person may speak at any one time.
- When invited to speak - turn on the microphone and camera, then state your name before you make a comment.
- When referring to a specific page or slide, ensure you mention the page or slide number.
- **CHAT function**
 - Please note that all those present in the meeting can view the CHAT area – comments are **not** private.
 - This function is to be used:
 - To indicate you wish to speak, please type 'speak'
 - If you are asked to clarify an amendment, the Chairman may ask you to write this in the CHAT function
 - if you need to leave the meeting early – please indicate this in the CHAT function
- **Voting**
 - Democratic Services will do a roll-call of Members in alphabetical order – please state your vote – for, against, or abstain
- **Exempt Items**
 - Democratic Services will end the live stream to the public website, along with the recording of the meeting.
 - The Chairman will then ask each Member to verbally declare that there are no other persons present who are not entitled to be - either hearing or seeing consideration of such items, and/or recording the proceedings. Failure to comply could be in breach of Code of Conduct responsibilities.

End of the meeting

- Chairman will close the meeting.
- All Members will be asked to promptly leave the meeting using the red 'hang up' button.
- Members must not participate in any further discussions.

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