

## **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 31<sup>st</sup> 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 22<sup>nd</sup> and then the full Council meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

**Contact:** Mark Wall, Head of Democratic Services, Brighton & Hove City Council  
[mark.wall@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:mark.wall@brighton-hove.gov.uk)

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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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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](http://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 12<sup>th</sup> May. [www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/Planning12May](http://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"> <li>• provide advice as needed</li> <li>• monitor speakers via chat</li> <li>• take votes</li> </ul>
Person 2	Clock watch! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep track of each Member’s speeches and advise if over the permitted time.</li> </ul> Advise meeting if needed
Person 3	Take minutes
Person 4	AudioMinutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live stream meeting</li> </ul>
Person 5	Listen via website live stream <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advise Clerk immediately via private WhatsApp group if any issues</li> </ul>

## 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.

**Jennifer Swift**

**Democratic Services Team Leader**

Tel: 01529 308243 | Mob: 07816 294714  
Email: Jennifer\_Swift@N-KESTEVEN.GOV.UK  
www.n-kesteven.gov.uk  
Kesteven Street, Sleaford, NG34 7EF

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### **Thanet District Council: A Google Case Study**

As Thanet District Council is a Google based Council, we use Google Meet to provide video conferencing and virtual meetings, these meetings are then streamed live to the Council's YouTube channel via YouTube Live. We stream the meetings via our YouTube channel as you need to be inside the Council's network in order to watch the live stream sent out by Google Meet. Using YouTube allows the public to view our meetings via a well known, highly visible and easily accessible location. Participation in the meetings is secure and locked down to only invited people.

We find Google Meet to be simple, user friendly and it is well equipped for interactive meetings. The video and sound quality of the stream are very good and whilst a basic broadband connection is adequate, the quality is improved along with the quality of the user's broadband connection.

A concise view of the person talking and anything 'presenting only' is created, via Google's live stream. The Digital Team then live broadcasted to the council's corporate YouTube channel, removing any other cameras or messaging. Our pre-configured software connects to the YouTube channel which enables us to keep the stream constant and crops the live video. Our YouTube channel has all the live streams pre-advertised with corporate thumbnails, with the ability for the public to set reminders. We also publicise this on the Council's social media channels.

Using YouTube live to stream the meetings allows us to maximise the amount of integration with our Modern.gov software via the media tab function. We now have the YouTube link to our virtual meetings set up within both the PDF of our agendas and as an embedded live stream within our [agenda pages](#). After a meeting, a recording of the meeting then replaces the live stream in the same location and is again publicised on the Council's social media channels.

Officers can make use of the present your screen feature within Google Meet which allows them to make presentations. We have used this facility to show photographs and plans at our Planning Committee but it can equally be used to share video or sound. We are also looking to use this functionality in order to adapt our interactive Member training programme to online courses in the coming months.

Our first meeting was on 14 April, which was a Licensing Board wherein the applicant fully participated in the meeting through their own Google account. It also involved excluding the press and public, this meant that Members left the Google Meet hosting the officers and the applicant and moved to an entirely separate one supported by the clerk and the Council's legal officer to deliberate. Everyone then rejoined the original Meet for the announcement of the result.

We have also had a Members' Briefing every fortnight since 8 April, with over 45 Councillors attending each one, with another six or seven officers doing presentations, using the technology, without the streaming to YouTube. These have been a great way of keeping members up to date and act as an opportunity for Members to practise and become more confident with the technology.

In addition, we have also held meetings including our Cabinet meeting that discussed our local plan and a planning committee that dealt with a number of significant applications. Again, both of these meetings went very well. We have upcoming meetings scheduled for and we have agendas published for another [Planning Committee](#), a [Local Plan Cabinet Advisory Group](#) and our [Overview and Scrutiny Panel](#).

Members of the public are requested to utilise an existing clause within our constitution that allows them to appoint a person to speak on their behalf and we have a specific officer that attends our meetings in order to read these out for the public. We also ask them to submit these speeches at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting.

Training Members and allowing time for them to practice is key, we trained all 56 of our members on a one to one basis in the week before our first meeting and continue to offer refresher training for them whenever they like. We have also conducted a number of practice meetings prior to our actual meetings to iron out any issues.

Our advice would be give members as many opportunities to practice as possible - no-one ever got better at doing something on the odd occasion. We often use Google Meet instead of telephone calls, as this offers Members more opportunities to build their confidence using the technology.

A good script is paramount for your chairman, as is making sure they follow it closely, there is less room to freestyle in a virtual environment. Making sure everyone is aware of the etiquette for meetings is also a key facet, we created one and circulated it members. One small thing that surprised us, is that if you have any Councillors that are partners or spouses or who happen to live together, make sure if they are in the same meeting that they participate from separate rooms, as this prevents very loud feedback from the microphones.

Our current levels of support for meetings are as follows:



- One DSO to act as clerk and as a compere to the meeting (if the chairman isn't confident)
- One DSO to act as technical support for Councillors (this is accessed by calling them up on their work phone. This can be two if the meeting is large)
- One Digital team member (who takes the Google Meet and streams it via the Council's YouTube channel and watches the stream to make sure it works)
- Occasionally the clerk and compere role is also split, depending upon the type of meeting.

We have also spent a lot of time over the last year to try and get our Members to submit their questions in advance of meetings to allow for proper answers to be given at the meeting. We have also started to ask Members to tell us if they intend to attend a meeting they aren't a part of so that we know in advance how many people to expect. Whilst not everyone will heed our request, both these measures help greatly in being able to plan for how a meeting is going to go.

Hope you've found this useful, if you have any questions please feel free to contact us:  
[Committee@thanet.gov.uk](mailto:Committee@thanet.gov.uk)

Nick Hughes, Committee Services Manager, Thanet District Council.

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### **Fareham Borough Council**

#### **Preparatory Work:**

We used Microsoft Teams meetings for our individual member decisions but for our Planning Committee we used live events which seemed a sensible approach as Teams was already available in the Council.

To give us time to investigate how a live event works, test connectivity and have test sessions, we deferred our April Planning Committee to the 6<sup>th</sup> May.

Our ICT team were already exploring the technology used by Members of the Planning Committee and whether these would support a live event, as ipads don't.

Giving consideration to how members of the public would be involved with the meeting in giving their deputations, we were hesitant to look at a different technical solution as we already had Teams running and had concerns that some members of the public might try to disrupt the meeting for their amusement, but needed to engage public participation so under emergency delegated powers, we changed our Deputation Scheme to allow written deputations of 500 words (approximately 3 minutes' speaking). These deputations would be read by the Committee Officer (she had 15 in the end!)

Ward Councillors who had indicated they wished to make representations were invited to the meeting and were asked to keep their microphone and camera switched off for the entire meeting, unless they were speaking.

A Chairman's script was prepared to assist the Chairman with the running order and the Head of Democratic Services gave an introduction as to the meeting procedure and assisted the Chairman where necessary.

The Committee Team were allocated roles and 3 officers were 'producers' for the meeting with one undertaking this as their main role and two as back-up. One officer provided phone support (as below) and the other as Minute taker. This helped individuals to focus on their main roles.

Our office phones which had been diverted to various Committee Officers were transferred to one Officer who acted as point of contact should any Councillors need any technical support and also for members of the public who had queries. This Committee Officer also watched the meeting as a member of the public and was able to give feedback, as well as sending a few reassuring texts throughout.

We advised our Customer Services team about the meeting in case members of the public called the main Council switchboard. This was useful as it meant they could assist with answering questions such as where the link to the meeting was published.

Test, test, test again (and watch it back!) We had several different test scenarios where Officers tested the meeting together (particularly useful to get to grips with screen sharing and running through power-point this way) and then we ran mock meetings as live events. This enabled the link to the mock meeting to be shared afterwards where Members could see how the meeting would look for the public.

These test scenarios identified that when MS Teams ran updates, these disrupted the App and we had the situation where we had Councillors' devices were working well but an update would take place which threw everything out!

The tests also gave us a chance to see that slowing things down a little really helped with the production side which ultimately resulted in a more professional meeting because there was little/no lag due to the producer having to send people live.

Our Hints and Tips guide circulated to Members echoes most of the points already raised via documents available on the ADSO website, and we felt it was important to give Members a steer for things to consider which they may not have done already (happy to share this). The link to the live event was published on the meeting page on our website (via ModGov) and the recording will be available for 14 days following the meeting.

If we had to adjourn the meeting for either a short period of time or to another day, we prepared power point slides so these could be displayed on the live event for the public to see. Members were briefed that if their cameras failed, as long as they could be heard (and hear), then the meeting would be legal.

We were told that MS Teams Live Events had a 4-hour limit, so things got a little nervous after 3½ hours. Having a 'remote' Committee Officer was really beneficial as she set up another meeting and had this ready to send to Members and publish the link in the event the meeting got cut-off (it didn't). The Head of Democratic Services had advised the meeting of the potential for this technical hitch, so anyone watching would have been aware what was happening.

### **The Meeting:**

All Members and Officers had their cameras and microphones switched off through the meeting, unless they were speaking.

We decided not to engage the 'chat' function in Teams and instead if a Member wanted to speak, they turned their camera on and waved. The 3 committee officers would see this and advise the Chairman, if he hadn't seen this. When invited, Members switched their camera on to confirm they could see and hear the meeting and gave their introductions. The Chairman ran the order of Members as they would usually be seated in the committee room and Declaration of Interest, comments and voting took place in this order with Members answering a rollcall.

We did have one Member whose connectivity dropped out during an item and the Chairman advised the meeting of this and that Member was unable to take part in the debate or vote. He remained 'unconnected' to the meeting until the end of that item.

### **Learning Points:**

Despite all of our extensive planning, 20 minutes before our Planning Committee was due to go live, MS Teams Live Events experienced a UK and Europe wide outage, so despite the Democratic Service Officer's motto being "Prepare for the worst, hope for the best", we are reliant on technology so some things cannot be prepared for as they are totally out of our control. We dusted ourselves off and tried again (successfully) on 20<sup>th</sup> May.

Have your Comms team available to put out messages on websites/social media in the event of meeting deferral scenarios.

And finally, thank you to all ADSO members who have shared their experiences on the forum and whose meetings we have watched. Also, a very big thank you to Jess at Crawley BC who gave up some of her valuable time to have an old-fashioned telephone conversation with me to chat through their experiences.

Samantha Wightman  
Information & Committee Manager  
Fareham Borough Council  
[swightman@fareham.gov.uk](mailto:swightman@fareham.gov.uk)