WISBECH TOWN COUNCIL

VIRTUAL MEETINGS PROTOCOL

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   The Government introduced on 4 April 2020 new regulations – the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 - made under the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Section 78) - which allow meetings to take place "without all of the persons, or without any of the persons, being together in the same place".

1.2   The regulations allow all local authority meetings before 7 May 2021 to be held remotely; this could be through electronic and digital means at virtual locations using video and telephone conferencing, live webcast and live interactive streaming.

1.3   Members of the public have the right to be able to "attend" the remote meetings.

1.4   The "place" at which the meeting may be held could be a council building, or where the organiser of the meeting is located, or an electronic, digital or virtual location, a web address or a conference call telephone number.

1.5   The arrangement that the council puts in place needs to be one whereby all of the councillors present are able to:

- hear, and where practicable see, and be so heard, and, where practicable, be seen by, the other members in attendance;
- 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;
- be heard and, where practicable, be seen by other members of the public attending the meeting.

1.6   In line with the regulations, this protocol is designed to provide a guide to virtual formal council and committee meetings involving members, officers and the public during the Covid-19 crisis.

1.7   It is a matter for each local authority to decide how it conducts meetings.

Advice from the National Association of Local Councils in relation to remote meetings says "Council meetings must still be advertised and the public have a

right to observe. If you would normally allow public questions or input in your meeting, it is worth trying to keep this approach with remote meetings too".

2. MEETINGS OF THE TOWN COUNCIL AND ITS COMMITTEES

2.1 Meetings of Wisbech Town Council and its Committees will take place remotely using the Zoom video conferencing system (whereby all participants would be seen on screen at the same time and could also be heard), linked to You Tube where appropriate (to enable members of the public to observe the democratic process).

The Clerk to the Council would prepare a briefing note for the Chairman of the meeting, where he or she so requires, to support him or her in managing the meeting electronically.

Open Forum

2.2 The Council will continue to operate an Open Forum/Public Participation element (of 15 minutes duration) at the beginning of all meetings. A member of the public wishing to make a representation to a meeting would need to submit the text in writing, to the Town Clerk, prior to the meeting, as there would be no opportunity for it to be raised in person by the member of the public.

The Chairman of the meeting (or the Town Clerk if the Chairman prefers) would read-out the representation(s) from the member(s) of the public.

Speaking at meetings

2.3 A member who wishes to speak during a meeting would need to raise his or her hand. The Chairman would invite the member to speak.

If more than one member indicates a wish to speak, each one would be invited, in the order of their indication, by the Chairman, to speak.

When discussion on an agenda item had concluded and both a Proposer and Seconder for a course of action had been achieved, the matter would be put, by the Chairman, to a vote.

Voting

2.4 This would be by show of hands. Voting to be managed by the Chairman (inviting members to indicate by a show of hands), supported by the Town Clerk (counting the votes and announcing the outcome).

3. OPERATING A VIRTUAL MEETING

Councillors Joining a Virtual Meeting

3 .1 Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly (i.e. at least ten minutes before the scheduled start time) to give time for any issues with joining

to be resolved and to avoid disrupting the meeting once underway. The Chairman will remind councillors to mute their microphones when not speaking.

For a member to participate in the meeting, he or she would need to have access to electronic equipment which possesses a camera, screen, microphone and speakers.

For the member to be able to see all of the participants, all of the time, at a meeting, it is likely that he or she would need to view the meeting on a laptop or a PC screen (using the Gallery View feature on the Zoom video conferencing system).

Access to documents

3.2   The Town Clerk will despatch, by e-mail to all councillors, the agenda and associated documents for council and committee meetings and publish them on the Council's website, as is the current practice for meetings of the council and its committees. Printed copies of documents will not be circulated, nor will they be available for inspection at the Council's offices.

Public Access

3.3   The following wording will be added to the Council's website:

"Due to Government guidance on social-distancing and the Covid-19 virus, it will not be possible to hold a physical meeting of the XXX on XXX. Arrangements are being made for the press and public to follow the decision-making via the Zoom video conferencing system.

Details of how to watch the meeting will be published on the agenda for the meeting".

This information would also be published using the council's social media platforms.

The requirement to ensure that meetings are open to the public includes access by remote means, including video conferencing, live webcast and live interactive streaming. Where a meeting is accessible to the public through such remote means, the meeting is deemed, under the 2020 regulations, to be open to the public whether or not members of the public are able to attend a meeting in person.

Registering Attendance and Meeting Etiquette

3.4   At the beginning of the meeting, the Chairman would welcome members and then carry out a "roll call" (by reading-out, in alphabetical order, members' surnames) of all members present. Confirmation would be given by each member through switching-on their video and unmuting their microphone to confirm (by saying "here") that they are present.

3.5   The Clerk will maintain a record of members' attendances and apologies for absence, which would be included in the minutes of the meeting; as is current practice.

3.6   Remote attendance by members counts for the purpose of the "six months rule" (Section 85 of the Local Government 1972 refers).

3.7   All members and officers, except the Chairman, would keep their microphones on mute unless invited by the Chairman to speak. Any member returning to the meeting after a disconnection should not to interrupt proceedings when returning.

Protocol for councillors speaking at meetings

3.8   Members who wish to speak during a meeting would need to raise his/her hand. The Chairman may ask each person in turn if they have any points they wish to raise on a particular item before completing the discussion on that item.

When referring to reports or making specific comments, councillors should mention the report and page number, so that all members have a clear understanding at all times of what is being discussed.

Dealing with technical difficulties

3.9   In the event that the Chairman or Town Clerk or other host of the meeting identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chairman would declare an adjournment while the fault is addressed.

3.10   If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting becomes inquorate, the meeting would be abandoned until such time as it could be re-convened. If the meeting were to remain quorate, the Chairman would decide if the meeting should continue, depending upon the difficulties being experienced, or whether it should be adjourned until a later time or date

Adopted by Wisbech Town Council on 25 May 2020