TANDRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL - TEMPORARY VIRTUAL MEETING PROTOCOL FOR COUNCIL, COMMITTEE AND SUB-COMMITTEE MEETINGS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 make provision for remote attendance at, and remote access to Council meetings held on or before 7 May 2021.

1.2   The Regulations enable the Council to hold meetings without all, or any, of the Members being physically present in a room. They allow for remote meetings through electronic and digital means at virtual locations using video and telephone conferencing, live webcast and live interactive streaming.

1.3   The "place" at which the meeting may be held may 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 or could be a number of these combined. The meeting may also be held in a meeting room or Council Chamber with a proportion of the membership and any participating public additionally attending remotely.

1.4   In order for Members to be able to attend meetings of the Council remotely, they need not be physically present, provided they are able to hear and be heard (and where practicable, see and be seen by) other Members and members of the public attending remotely or in person.

1.5   This Protocol is intended to be a living document and any minor amendments will be amended as and when required by the Monitoring Officer. Any further relevant regulations issued under the Coronavirus Act 2020 (in so far as they may impact on virtual meetings) or further guidance and advice issued by the Government or changes proposed by Members will in the first instance be amended by the Monitoring Officer in conjunction with all Political Group Leaders and then considered by Full Council.

2.0   MEETINGS OF COUNCIL, COMMITTEES AND SUB-COMMITTEES

2.1   The meeting link with meeting ID and password will be set up prior to the Committee or Council meeting and members of the public and press who are entitled to attend must contact the Clerk or other relevant support officer (section 4 refers) to this effect by email.

2.2   Where health advice and the law permits, and if there are no adverse IT implications, Members may choose to meet in the Council building in-person, with or without an Officer present in the same room. Subject to those provisos, Members can either attend the meeting in person (exercising suitable physical distancing) or join remotely. Alternatively, all Members, officers and members of the public and press invited to do so may join remotely.

2.3   Meetings may be livestreamed and /or recorded for members of the public and the media to watch – with the exception of confidential items – which will be discussed in private as usual.

3.0   THE CHAIRMAN'S ROLE

3.1   The Chairman will normally confirm at the outset of each meeting and at any reconvening of a meeting that they can see and hear all participating members. The Chairman or an Officer may perform a "roll call" of all Members present.

3.2   Once the "roll-call" has been completed, all attendees, other than the Chairman and key support Officers, must be muted.

3.3   The Chairman will, at the beginning of the meeting, explain the protocol for Member and public participation. The Chairman can decide a practical protocol for management of the debate and decision-making e.g. the way the vote is taken by Members. Such a protocol can be amended from time to time and does not require Council approval for any change.

3.4   Similar to hosting a physical meeting when Members get stuck in traffic, there will be occasions when a Member encounters a technical issue that cannot be resolved in time for the start of the meeting. Within a timely manner before the issue causes a distraction, the Chairman will decide if the meeting should go ahead without the Member.

3.6   The meeting will still be chaired in the normal manner. If Members speak over others, or if there is a time delay and matters are not heard, the Chairman will ask Members/ speakers to repeat, and to speak in turn.

3.7   The Chairman will follow the rules set out in the Standing Orders when determining who may speak, as well as the order and priority of speakers and the content and length of speeches in the normal way.

3.8   The Chairman's ruling during the debate will be final.

4.0   OFFICER SUPPORT

4.1   Virtual meetings shall be serviced by one or more officers performing various support functions, including the roles traditionally undertaken by a committee clerk and other duties to ensure the IT runs as smoothly as possible.

4.2   The attendance of those Members at the meeting will be recorded by the Clerk or other support officer.

4.3   The Clerk or other support officer might have a greater input to guide the meeting to the next item, as some Members may not have access to an agenda for the duration of the meeting (if they do not have a printer).

4.4   Members are requested to use any 'chat function' which might be available to alert the Clerk or other appropriate officer if they encounter difficulties during the meeting (e.g. struggling to hear the debate). If the 'chat function' cannot be used, such messages to officers should be sent via other channels (contact details to be notified in advance of the meeting).

5.0   BEFORE THE MEETING

5.1   If it is a Member's first online meeting using the remote meeting software, then the Member should ask for a meeting dry run to make sure that s/he is comfortable using the software.

5.2   It may be helpful to have a secondary messaging function, such as WhatsApp for example, set up to be able to communicate between group members. However, Members need to make sure any notifications are silenced so they do not disturb the meeting.

5.3   It will assist the meeting if those Members who wish to speak on a particular item could indicate their wish to speak to the Chairman and to the Clerk in advance of the start of the meeting where possible. Political groups are also encouraged to co-ordinate this activity where possible in respect of Council and other meetings likely to result in a high number of requests to speak.

5.4   Members need to remember that remote meetings could be viewed by members of the public, as we are already used to with our webcasting facility. Please make sure this is taken into consideration when preparing for the meeting.

5.5   Members should optimise their remote location area before the meeting as this will be visible during the meeting. Members need to consider what is in the background if they are unable to blur it. Members also need to consider the lighting in their room as participating in a video conference from a dimly lit room makes it difficult for other participants to see you.

6.0   ETIQUETTE FOR JOINING AND PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

6.1   Members are encouraged to join the meeting promptly (i.e. at least fifteen minutes before the scheduled start time) in order to resolve any issues with joining and avoid disrupting the meeting.

6.2   Members should type their name on joining the meeting in full, e.g., "Cllr Joanne Smith" (where the conferencing platform enables this).

6.3   Microphones should be muted when not speaking. This is done in order to reduce feedback and background noise.

6.4   Any camera (video-feed) should show a non-descript background or, where possible, a virtual background and Members should be careful to not allow exempt or confidential papers to be seen in the video-feed.

6.5   Distractions make a significant impact during a remote meeting. To reduce potential distractions and stay engaged, Members should turn off or silence their phone (if you are not using it to call in). If you're connecting on your computer, close down all other apps and browser windows to eliminate notifications.

6.6   As this is a formal meeting, Members should be aware that interruptions e.g. family members moving around in the background, pets, phones ringing etc, will be distracting and potentially disruptive to the proceedings.

6.7   Once the meeting begins, Members should keep their eyes on their webcam – not on themselves. It may not feel natural at first but looking at your face on your computer screen while you're speaking limits eye contact and reduces feelings of engagement among other participants.

6.8   The chat facility must not be used for private conversations between Members.

6.9   Members wishing to speak should indicate their wish to do so in the manner prescribed by the Chairman.

6.10   Only one person may speak at any one time and, unless raising a point of order or speaking in personal explanation, Members should not interrupt others.

6.11   Just before they speak, Members should unmute their microphone and activate the video-feed (if available or unless speaking to a diagram, presentation slide or drawing).

6.12   When you speak, the Chairman may ask you to state your name for the benefit of those who might not be able to see you. Members should avoid rustling papers etc in the background when talking.

6.13   When referring to a specific report, page, or slide, mention the report, page, or slide so that all Members have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times.

6.14   If you have to leave the meeting, let the Clerk or appropriate support officer know via the chat facility and notify them when you are back. Any Member returning is asked not to interrupt (e.g. please don't announce your return).

7.0   VOTING

7.1   When the Chairman is satisfied that there has been sufficient debate and (if the rules of the meeting require) there is a proposer and seconder for the item being discussed he/she will progress to a decision.

7.2   The method of voting will be at the direction of the Chairman to ensure that the outcome is beyond doubt.

8.0   QUORUM

8.1   The normal quorum requirements for meetings as set out in the Council's Standing Orders will also apply to a remote meeting.

8.2   In the event of any apparent failure of the video, telephone or conferencing connection, the Chairman should immediately determine if the meeting is still quorate:

- if it is, then the business of the meeting will continue; or

- if there is no quorum, then the meeting shall adjourn for a period specified by the Chairman, expected to be no more than ten or fifteen minutes, to allow the connection to be re-established.

9.   PART 2 REPORTS AND DEBATE

9.1   There are times when meetings are not open to the public, when confidential, or "exempt" issues – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 – are under consideration. It is important to ensure that there are no members of the public at remote locations able to hear or see the proceedings when such items are being discussed. Any Member in remote attendance could be in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct who fails to disclose that there are other persons present who may be able to see and/or hear the meeting if they are not entitled to do that.

9.2   If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the Chairman will remove those participants from the meeting at the appropriate time. Before this happens, the members of public and press must be made aware why they are being removed from the meeting.

9.3   It would be good practice to turn off smart speakers such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home or smart music devices. These could inadvertently record phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

10.0   DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

10.1   Any Member participating in a remote meeting who declares a disclosable pecuniary interest, or other declarable interest, in any item of business that would normally require them to leave the room, must also leave the remote meeting. Their departure will be confirmed by the Clerk or other relevant support officer who will arrange for the relevant Member to re-join the meeting at the appropriate time.

11.0   AFTER THE MEETING

11.1   Participants should leave the meeting by activating the relevant "end meeting" function of the conferencing software. The Chairman or the Officer can also end the meeting for all participants. Minutes of the meeting will be published on the Council's website in the usual manner.