

Surrey County Council Remote Meeting Guidance, Rules and Etiquette



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Introduction:

The Government's Coronavirus Act has seen new regulations that permit the use of virtual or remote meetings by local government committees.

It is the view of the Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) and the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) in their guidance document that the Regulations, and therefore the standing orders, have an automatic amending effect on an authority's existing rules and can be applied immediately in order to run committee and cabinet meetings remotely. These standing orders are temporary and will run until 7 May 2021.

Prior to the adoption of the new regulations Surrey County Council made interim arrangements to take decisions and hold meetings remotely. The regulations go beyond these measures and so a new approach is required. Guidance has been put together by professional bodies including the Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO), Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and the Local Government Association (LGA).

Regulations:

Under the Coronavirus Act 2020 new regulations have been created enabling local authorities to hold meetings remotely before 7 May 2021, they have removed the requirement for an Annual General Meeting (AGM) and postponed all local elections until 6 May 2021.

These new regulations remove obstacles to local decision making being done remotely and make it incumbent on local authorities to make remote meetings open to the public via video conferencing technology.

The regulations set out criteria that must be met for these meetings to be lawful:

- Advance notification is still required in advance (5 days unless under urgency procedures)
- Members must be able to hear and (where practicable) see and be heard and (where practicable) be seen by other members in attendance at the meeting. This full requirement also extends to members of the public attending to exercise a right to speak at the meeting. Members of the public observing the meeting must as a minimum be able to hear (but if practicable be seen as well).

Changes to Surrey County Council Practice:

We are intending to hold meetings as close to business as usual as possible which means finding ways to utilise our existing standing orders and accepted ways of working while recognising the limitations the current situation will continue to impose on meetings.

Upcoming committees will be held as official remote committee meetings under the new Remote Meeting Regulations arising from the Coronavirus Act.

These meetings will be hosted using the council's Microsoft Teams software so that it can be streamed live on the Council's website allowing the public to observe proceedings. This is the key development arising from the regulations – the public should be able to observe council meetings and participate via the normal channels (i.e. questions and petitions).

How it will work

Please see below a few things that you need to be aware of as a Chairman or member of a committee. These principles will apply to all meetings though will be of more relevance in some cases than others.

Before the meeting:

- With remote meetings being more difficult to get to grips with preparation will be key. It will be helpful if you are familiar with the agenda and reports and you have the briefing open
- Full committee pre-meetings will be the norm to agree who may lead questioning on a particular item and to discern the desired outcome (e.g. recommendations for a select committee, conditions met for a planning item and so on) and make sure the committee is ready for the meeting
- Make sure your internet connection is working, your machine is fully charged or plugged in and any additional equipment such as headphones is in place ahead of the meeting

Joining the meeting:

- Please can you join the meeting at least 15 minutes before it is due to start, using your calendar invite, so that we can ensure everyone is on the call and deal with any technical issues. There will be officers on the call to help you
- In this period will not be streaming the meeting so you can speak to other attendees and it will not be public. The Committee Manager will notify attendees when we are about to start streaming live

The Live Stream:

- As mentioned above, the Committee Manager will confirm when the meeting is being streamed live and when the live stream has ended

Technical Difficulties:

- If the technology fails for a wholly remote meeting, and the meeting is no longer open to the public, any decisions made could be challenged as unlawful
- The regulations state that if there is a failure that means that the public cannot stream the remote meeting the Chairman will adjourn the meeting immediately. If the meeting cannot be restored the remaining business will be considered at the next ordinary meeting
- To mitigate any potential problems Democratic Services will provide additional support to meeting including an officer Members can contact directly for support during the meeting

Confidential information (Part 2):

- It is very important that we end the live stream of the meeting if there is a need for a Part 2 discussion so please bear this in mind and notify the Committee Manager directly if there is a need to do this. If we do need to move into a private session,

please wait for confirmation that the live stream has stopped from Democratic Services before starting any other conversations or moving onto any Part 2 business.

Cameras and microphones:

- The Chairman will keep their camera on throughout the proceedings of the meeting
- The Committee Members need to have their cameras only when speaking. Please only turn on your mic when it is your turn to speak.
- Officers only need to turn on their camera and microphone when they are presenting their report and responding to any questions or comments from Members on a report
- Officers - When the item has finished, please turn off your camera and microphone. If you have more than one item and these are not consecutive then please turn off your camera and microphone until we get to your next item

The meeting chat function:

- Members of the public will not be able to view what is being typed in the chat function BUT
- The meeting chat is subject to FOI so this will only be used by Members to notify the Chairman if they wish to indicate they wish to speak, raising points of order or that they need to leave the meeting and not for other comments or private conversations

Attendance:

- Remote meetings in public will count towards your attendance record. If you are unable to attend please provide your apologies in the normal to the relevant Chairman or Committee Manager/Scrutiny Officer
- At the start of the meeting the Chairman will call each member individually to confirm that they are in attendance and that they can be heard/seen via MS Teams

Quorum:

- The rules on quorum remain the same $\frac{1}{4}$ of the voting members of the committee which in most cases equals three Members

Asking a question/making a comment:

- It's no longer possible to silently indicate that you would like to ask a question so you will need to indicate that you wish to speak by pressing the 'raise your hand' symbol on the toolbar or by typing in the chat function. The Committee Manager will acknowledge your request on the chat function using this icon:



- Ideally, a pre-meeting will help committees to organise questioning and speakers making the meeting itself more smooth and stress-free
- When you are invited to speak by the Chairman please unmute your microphone and ensure your camera is on
- Officers – please introduce yourself when you first respond

Declarations of interest:

- It remains your responsibility as a Member of the council to declare any personal, prejudicial or pecuniary interests in advance of an agenda item.
- If you cannot participate as a result of a declaration you will be asked to leave and re-join the meeting. Democratic Services will contact you directly to advise you when you can re-join the meeting.

Voting:

- Generally, when the debate on an item has concluded the Chairman will call the recommendations and Members will need to agree their consent by saying 'agreed' in the usual process of general assent
- The Committee Manager will announce the result of the vote but how each Member voted will not be minuted
- Chairman can use a recorded vote if this is requested or s/he deems it necessary
- Votes at the Planning & Regulatory Committee are an exception - it will require each Member to cast their vote one-by-one as their name is called out by the Chairman

Recording of the meeting:

- The meeting will also be recorded but there may not be a visible notification of this so please bear in mind that the recording will be running in the background.
- The recording will be published on the website after the meeting so that it can be accessed after the live stream has concluded in the same way we have done with webcasts when meetings are taking place at County Hall.

Public Participation:

- The public retain their right to ask a question in writing in advance of the meeting and have it answered in writing at a committee. They will also be invited to ask supplementary question if they wish
- Petitioners will still have 3 minutes to present their petition to the committee
- The questioner or lead petitioner will be added to the meeting to allow them to speak as per the constitution

Disruption:

- Should there be any public attempt to disrupt the business of a committee the Chairman may mute participants, adjourn the meeting to resolve the disruption and ultimately choosing to remove participants from the call

After the meeting:

- The Chairman will sign the minutes electronically as hard copies will not be available meeting the legal conditions required
- Decisions sheets and minutes will be published as normal

Training

A visual guide has been produced to guide you through joining a meeting, participating and leaving a meeting using Microsoft Teams (annex 1 of this guidance).

A training video has been produced which will outline the exact process during the meeting. Members can also request individual 1:1 training from Democratic Services which provides a walkthrough of MS Teams and allows you to ask any specific questions you may have.