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| To: | Annual Council |
| Date: | 20 May 2020 |
| Report of: | Head of Law and Governance |
| Title of Report:  | Protocol for remote meetings |

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| Summary and recommendations |
| Purpose of report: | This report asks Council to adopt a protocol for remote meetings |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council |
| Corporate Priority: | All |
| Policy Framework: | N/A |
| Recommendation(s):That Council resolves to: |
| 1. | Adopt the Protocol for Remote Meetings (Appendix 1)  |
| 2. | Delegate authority to the Head of Law and Governance to revise the Protocol for Remote Meetings as may be necessary as practices evolve to ensure the effective operation of remote meetings.  |

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| Appendices |
| Appendix 1 | Protocol for Remote Meetings  |

# Introduction and background

1. To enable local authority meetings and decision making to continue while social distancing is enforced during the Covid 19 pandemic, the Government passed the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 No.392 (‘the Regulations’) which came into force on 4 April 2020. The Regulations enable local authorities for the first time to hold meetings remotely at virtual locations without all, or any, of the Members being physically present together in a named room. The Regulations remain in force until 7 May 2021.
2. To provide clarity about how Oxford City Council will operate remote meetings under the Regulations, Council is recommended to adopt the Protocol for Remote Meetings (Appendix 1).

# Protocol for Remote Meetings

The Protocol for Remote Meetings attached as Appendix 1 has been formulated by an officer project group whose work has been overseen by a cross-party Member Reference Group chaired by the Leader of the Council.

The Member Reference Group agreed that the Council will facilitate remote meetings using the video conferencing platform Zoom and that, as far as possible, the arrangements for public contributions at meetings should mirror existing practice, as set out in the Constitution and on the [Getting involved at council meetings webpages](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20236/getting_involved_at_council_meetings). It was identified that remote meetings would need to be supported by an additional officer role, that of “host”, responsible for controlling access to meetings and monitoring attendance to ensure a quorum is present. It was not considered that these duties could reasonably be taken on by the Chair or the Clerk. It was further agreed that a protocol would be supplemented by a training offer and the provision of new hardware to members who need it.

The Protocol for Remote Meetings is intended to provide clarity to members, officers and the public about how remote meetings will be accessed and operated including provisions for public contributions, meeting etiquette, the management of meetings and procedures such as declarations of interest, voting and the exclusion of the press and public if required. It also seeks to clarify what constitutes attendance at a remote meeting and how any technical difficulties that may arise, such as a participant losing their remote connection to the meeting, should be handled.

The Protocol contains some specific provisions for planning committee and licensing sub-committee meetings due to the particular risks associated with the decisions of those bodies being challenged. These provisions require voting by roll call to provide clarity about voting and to stipulate that members who leave or otherwise disconnect from a remote meeting cannot participate in the debate or vote on the application, unless the discussion is paused for the period of their non-attendance, mirroring the requirement for normal meetings set out in the Planning Code of Practice (Constitution Part 24.19).

As the holding of remote meetings is a new development for the Council, Council is recommended to delegate authority to the Head of Law and Governance to revise the Protocol for Remote Meetings as may be necessary as practices evolve to ensure the effective operation of remote meetings.

# Financial implications

1. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

# Legal issues

1. The legal implications of holding remote meetings under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 No.392 are covered in this report. The Regulations apply notwithstanding any other legislation or pre-existing procedure rules of the Council governing meetings. This means that, wherever there is a conflict, the Protocol for Remote Meetings takes precedence in relation to the governance of any remote meeting.

# Level of risk

1. Adopting a Protocol for Remote Meetings will help to reduce and manage the risks associated with the holding of remote meetings. To not adopt a Protocol for Remote Meetings would increase these risks.

# Equalities impact

1. The adoption of a Protocol for Remote Meetings would provide clarity to the public about access to and engagement in council meetings and decision making during the Covid 19 pandemic and would not have differential negative impacts on individuals or groups with protected characteristics.

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| Background Papers: None |