

## **MARDEN PARISH COUNCIL**

### **VIRTUAL MEETING SOFTWARE SELECTION DURING COVID 19**

#### **CORONAVIRUS ACT 2020**

#### **Background**

The last meeting before the enforced lockdown was held on Thursday 19 March. Once enforced lockdown was implemented by the Government, all Parish Council meetings and associated activities were cancelled. On 3 April NALC (England & Wales) issued guidance on future meetings.

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (“the 2020 Regulations”) came into force on 4 April. These regulations:

1. Enable Councils to hold remote (video and teleconferencing) meetings for a specific period until May 2021 latest
2. Removed the requirement to hold an Annual Meeting of the Parish Council
3. NALC’s view is that this also applies to the 2020 Annual Parish Meeting
4. Enable Councils to amend standing orders on
  - a. how voting will be carried out
  - b. how members of the public and press can access documents and virtually attend meetings
5. Public notice of time and place of the meeting is deemed to be given if published on the Council’s website.

The specific conditions set out must allow Councillors to join via a video link system or by telephone, as long as every Councillor can be heard by every other Councillor and by the public.

#### **Review of currently available software**

There are a considerable number of remote (virtual) meeting platforms available, with many improvements as well as new platforms appearing on an almost daily basis. NALC has indicated that Councils should decide on the best option based on their own needs and capacity. There are a number of considerations that Marden Parish Council should take into accounts as follows:

1. The choice of platform needs to take into account current broadband speeds in the area. Almost all of the Parish has reasonable broadband speeds, additionally, mobile phone coverage is generally good.
2. The platform needs to be easy to use given the likely differences in computing ability throughout the parish.
3. A computer, mobile phone or tablet will be required in order to participate in a virtual meeting, and ideally all participants should have an email address.
4. Cost of software. This can range from free to £100’s per month depending upon size. The free options tend to be limited in some functionality or restricted participation and time limits set.
5. Security of meetings. Ideally all attendance should require a password to enter the meeting.
6. A requirement to have the ability for the Clerk to schedule the meeting while the Chair has control of the way the meeting is managed.
7. The ability to record the audio of the meeting as standard, to be kept only until minutes are adopted as with current audio recordings of meetings. There would be no intention to record video or make the audio recording available to parishioners who were unable to participate.
8. Ability control the different requirements of Councillors and members of the public. These are meetings held in public, not public meetings.

9. Must allow for the potential numbers of parishioners attending. While Marden Parish Council has not had many parishioners attending its monthly meetings, the seriousness of the current situation could lead to a significantly higher level of interest and therefore this must be taken into account.
10. The length of time meetings will last.

The main platforms / Software reviewed is as follows:

- a. Microsoft Teams
- b. Skype
- c. Zoom
- d. Google Hangouts
- e. GoToMeeting
- f. ezTalks Cloud Meeting
- g. Zoho Meeting
- h. Cisco WebEx
- i. Adobe Connect

Almost all of the above (and there are many more) have Apps for Computer, mobile phone and tablet as well as browser access. The vast majority are designed for large organisations and are over complicated and costly for Parish Council needs.

Parish Councils require a limited set of functions to meet the requirements listed above. A review online of Parish Council virtual meetings to date (and it is early days) is that Zoom is the most popular and is priced very competitively. Some examples of Parish Councils who have used or are about to use Zoom as their platform of choice are:

- a. Wellington Parish Council
- b. Ledbury Town Council
- c. Linton Parish Council
- d. Eardisley Parish Council

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

The requirements listed above for Marden Parish Council are met by **Zoom**.

It provides lag-free video, crisp audio and instant sharing at a reasonable price for its Pro version (£11.99/month/host). Zoom is arguably one of the best, communications tools available on the market today. The solution offers a consistent user experience and has excellent tools that are optimised to work reliably.

Marden Parish Council consider purchasing at least one host Pro licence subscription as this allows for assignment of a co-host during the meeting and a nominated scheduler to arrange meetings. Prior to the first public meeting we will have a trial run with all the councillors in order to understand the software and the procedures required to run the meeting effectively.

April 2020