# STRETTON ON DUNSMORE PARISH COUNCIL

# VIRTUAL MEETING PROTOCOL

## 1. Introduction

Town and Parish Councils have been given provision under 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") to hold legal virtual meetings in order that Town and Parish Council business can be maintained. This legislation is in place until 7th May 2021 and allows councils to meet remotely on a date and time which is most convenient to them. This protocol should be read along side the Standing Orders.

This protocol provides the means and guidance for the conduct of any remote meeting of Stretton on Dunsmore Parish Council (SoDPC) and its various Committees and or Sub-Committees, held under the provisions of the Regulations.

SoDPC has chosen to use the Zoom platform in order that the meeting is publicly available.

Remote attendance at SoDPC meetings is permitted as long as certain conditions are met. These include that councillors are able to:

- Hear and be heard by the other Councillors in attendance.
- Hear and be heard by any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting.
- A visual solution is preferred, but audio is sufficient. This also relates to members of the public attending the meeting also being heard.

## 2. Advertising the Meeting

The Clerk will host the meeting using the SoDPC zoom account. The meeting will be a formal SoDPC meeting and will be held using the agenda and summons which the Clerk will publish as usual. A code and link to the virtual meeting will be published on the agenda which will be displayed on the noticeboards and SoDPC website in order that the public are able to attend; just as they would be able to attend a meeting in the Community Centre. Attendees will also have the ability to dial in to the meeting via telephone.

## 3. Attendance of Press and Public

The regulations clarify that a meeting being "open to the public" includes access to the meeting through remote means (video conferencing, live webcast, interactive streaming). The meeting will be recorded and kept on file for a maximum period of 3 months, or until the minutes have been approved by SoDPC. There maybe occasions where SoDPC choose to share the recording via social media or the website. Requests for a copy of the recording from members of the public or press will be considered by SoDPC on an individual basis.

Upon joining the meeting, members of the public will be held in a waiting room and asked to ensure that their name appears on their profile. The Clerk may ask if the attendee wishes to address the Parish Council during the public forum and remind them of the protocol. Members of the public are requested to have their video on (where possible) when addressing the council but remain on mute, with their video turned off when simply observing. Members of the public must introduce themselves if they wish to speak.

Members of the public may only speak during the public forum and must remain silent throughout the remainder of the meeting. This also means they should not use the 'chat function' to communicate with other attendees.

The Chairman with the support of the Clerk have the ability to mute and to remove a disruptive member of public if necessary. In line with Standing Orders, if any member of the public interrupts a meeting the Chair will warn them accordingly. If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Clerk will mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

**4. Joining the Meeting**

The Clerk and Chair will open the meeting at least ten minutes prior to the advertised start time. Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly at least five minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disrupting the meeting. Attendees will collect in the Zoom 'waiting room' prior to the meeting. Councillors are requested to check their audio and video function before joining and ensure that their own name is displayed on their profile.

**5. Meeting Protocol**

Meetings will be governed by the usual Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and associated policies. All attendees will be set to 'mute' on entry to the meeting and only the Chairman of the meeting will remain unmuted. All other participants if they wish to speak will be invited to unmute. As the 'Host', the Clerk will have the ability to mute or remove anyone deemed a nuisance at the Chairman of the meeting's request.

Meeting participants may wish to protect their personal environment by choosing a virtual background in the Zoom Settings 'Virtual Background' or alternatively should consider what can be seen behind them while on camera. All Councillor attendees will display their name in order for the public to be able to identify them, just as they would at an in-person meeting.

**6. Meeting Etiquette**

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking.
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.
- If you are not using video then please state your name.
- The only person to keep on their microphone throughout the meeting is the Chair.

**7. Declarations of Interest**

If a Councillor has declared an interest in an item on the agenda, they will be placed in the waiting room for the duration of that agenda item. Once the item has been concluded, they will be re-admitted.

**8. The Meeting and Debate**

For Councillors who wish to speak in the debate, they should either click on the raise hand facility or raise their hand on the video screen and await to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chair. If a Councillor is using a telephone without a screen to access the meeting they should make the Chair aware that they wish to speak. Once Councillors have spoken, they must mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise. Clerk will display any documents required using the 'share screen' function.

**9. Voting on Motions**

Within the Zoom facility, there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting. When the Chair asks the Council or Committee to vote, those in favour of the proposal should use the "thumbs up" icon, those against

should use the “thumbs down” icon. No response will represent an abstention (but the Clerk may ask for clarification on this.)
If a Chair does not wish to use this mechanism, they may choose to ask each Councillor to vote in turn. If this is the case, Councillors should express their vote verbally and the Clerk will record the outcome of the vote and announce it to the meeting.

**10. Confidential Items**
There are times when Council 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 during such meetings. Any Councillor in remote attendance could be in breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct if they fail 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. If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the clerk 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. The zoom meeting will cease to record for that confidential item. It would be good practice to have all confidential items at the very end of the agenda. It would also 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.

**11. After the Meeting**
Participants should leave the meeting by clicking on the red “end meeting” button to hang up. The clerk can also end the meeting for all participants. Meeting minutes will be published on the SoDPC’s website in the usual manner.

**12. Technical Issues**
If any meeting participant identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chair should declare a recess while the fault is addressed. If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting becomes inquorate through this fault, the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate, then it should continue.

Those attending remotely would be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and a vote would be taken without their attendance. If the meeting was due to determine an urgent matter or one which is time-limited and it has not been possible to continue because of technical difficulties, the Chair and Clerk shall explore such other means of taking the decision as may be permitted under the ‘Scheme of Delegation to the Proper Officer.’