



Virtual Meeting Policy

1. Introduction

Diss Town Council recognises that virtual meetings can support accessibility, public engagement, partnership working and efficient Council business where their use is appropriate.

For the avoidance of doubt, formal meetings of the Council, its committees and sub-committees must be held in accordance with current legislation, the Council's Standing Orders and any relevant government guidance in force at the time. This policy does not authorise any formal meeting arrangement that is not permitted by law.

At the date of this review, virtual attendance at formal Council, committee and sub-committee meetings is not permitted unless current legislation allows it. The Government has indicated support for remote and hybrid attendance policies, but the Council must not adopt or operate such arrangements for formal meetings unless and until the necessary legislation and guidance are in force.

This policy therefore applies to informal Council business, briefings, training, officer meetings, working groups, public engagement sessions and other non-decision-making meetings held online.

2. Status of Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings may be used where they support the work of the Council and where there is no legal requirement for the meeting to be held in person.

Examples may include:

- informal councillor briefings;
- officer and councillor liaison meetings;
- training sessions;
- working group discussions;
- public information or engagement sessions;

- meetings with external bodies or contractors; and
- other non-statutory meetings where no formal Council decision is being made.

Where a formal Council, committee or sub-committee meeting is required, the Town Clerk will confirm the lawful meeting arrangements before the meeting is called.

3. Agendas, Papers and Access to Documents

Where agendas or supporting documents are required, these will be published or circulated in accordance with the Council's normal procedures, Standing Orders, Publication Scheme and relevant access to information requirements.

Where a virtual meeting is being used for informal or engagement purposes, the Town Clerk or meeting organiser will determine what papers are required and how these should be circulated.

Anyone who is unable to access documents online may contact the Council to request an alternative format or copy, where appropriate.

4. Approved Virtual Meeting Platform

The Council will use an approved virtual meeting platform to host virtual meetings. This may include Zoom, Microsoft Teams or another suitable system approved by the Council.

Joining instructions will be issued by the Town Clerk or meeting organiser in advance of the meeting, where appropriate.

Participants must not share meeting links more widely unless authorised to do so by the Town Clerk or meeting organiser.

5. Meeting Management

The Chair or meeting organiser will manage the discussion and ensure that attendees have a fair opportunity to contribute.

Attendees should:

- join the meeting using their own name where possible;
- keep microphones muted when not speaking;
- use the meeting platform's "raise hand" function, or another agreed method, to indicate that they wish to speak;
- avoid background noise or disruption;
- follow the Chair's or meeting organiser's instructions; and

- behave in accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, policies and expected standards of behaviour.

Where a meeting includes members of the public, arrangements for public participation will be confirmed in advance.

6. Public Participation and Engagement Sessions

Where public participation or public engagement is permitted, the Chair or meeting organiser will manage contributions in accordance with the purpose of the meeting and any relevant Council procedures.

Members of the public may be asked to submit comments or questions in advance, or may be invited to speak during the meeting at the Chair's discretion.

The Council may mute participants, remove disruptive attendees, or end a meeting where behaviour prevents the meeting from being conducted safely, respectfully or effectively.

7. Connectivity and Technical Difficulties

Participants are responsible for ensuring, as far as reasonably possible, that they have suitable access to the meeting platform.

If technical issues affect the running of the meeting, the Chair or meeting organiser may decide to:

- continue the meeting;
- pause the meeting;
- move to telephone or alternative arrangements, where suitable;
- defer the item under discussion; or
- end and rearrange the meeting.

Where the meeting is informal, loss of connection will not normally invalidate the meeting, but the Chair or meeting organiser may decide whether the discussion can reasonably continue.

8. Attendance

Attendance at virtual meetings may be recorded where appropriate.

For informal meetings, attendance records will be kept only where this is necessary for administrative, training, safeguarding, governance or audit purposes.

Attendance at virtual meetings does not amount to attendance at a formal Council, committee or sub-committee meeting unless legislation permits remote attendance for that type of meeting.

9. Confidentiality

Confidential or sensitive business must be managed carefully in virtual meetings.

Where confidential matters are discussed, the Chair, Town Clerk or meeting organiser must be satisfied that only authorised attendees are present and that the meeting arrangements protect confidentiality.

Participants must not record, broadcast, share, photograph or otherwise disclose confidential discussion or papers without authority.

Where confidentiality cannot be properly protected, the item should not proceed virtually.

10. Recording

Virtual meetings may only be recorded where this is lawful, appropriate and authorised.

Where recording takes place, attendees will be informed at the start of the meeting or in the meeting invitation. Any recording will be managed in accordance with the Council's Data Protection Policy and any relevant legal requirements.

This section does not remove any statutory rights relating to the filming, recording or reporting of formal public meetings where those rights apply.

11. Security

The Council will take reasonable steps to protect the security of virtual meetings. These may include:

- using waiting rooms or lobby functions;
- controlling admission to the meeting;
- restricting screen sharing;
- disabling file sharing where appropriate;
- removing disruptive or unauthorised attendees;
- locking the meeting once all expected attendees have joined; and
- using separate meeting links for confidential business where needed.

Meeting links should be treated as confidential unless the Town Clerk or meeting organiser confirms otherwise.

12. Data Protection and Information Governance

All virtual meetings must be conducted in a way that protects personal data, confidential information and Council records.

Participants must take care not to display or disclose confidential documents, personal data, private messages or other information that should not be shared.

Any records created from a virtual meeting, including notes, minutes, chat messages or recordings, will be managed in accordance with the Council's Data Protection Policy, document retention arrangements and any applicable legal requirements.

13. Accessibility

The Council will seek to make virtual meetings accessible where reasonably practicable.

Participants who need assistance to access a virtual meeting should contact the Council in advance so that reasonable arrangements can be considered.

14. Review and Legislative Change

This policy will be reviewed every four years, or sooner if there is a change in legislation, government guidance, Standing Orders or Council procedure.

If legislation is introduced to permit remote or hybrid attendance at formal Council, committee or sub-committee meetings, this policy should be reviewed before those arrangements are adopted by the Council.

Committee note

The existing Virtual Meeting Policy has been reviewed and rewritten to remove reliance on the temporary Covid-era remote meeting regulations and to clarify the lawful and practical use of virtual meetings by the Council.

The revised policy makes clear that, unless legislation permits otherwise, formal Council, committee and sub-committee meetings must continue to be held in accordance with current legislation, Standing Orders and relevant guidance. The policy is therefore focused on informal meetings, briefings, training, working groups, officer meetings, public engagement sessions and other non-decision-making meetings where virtual arrangements may be appropriate.