GUIDELINES FOR VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETINGS

Prepared by Ruth McGowan

MOVING MEETINGS ONLINE

The Victorian Government has announced amendments to the LG Act 2020 to enable virtual council meetings, effective from May 1. This will ensure councils meet the requirements of physical distancing to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

The changes enable online attendance at ordinary council meetings, delegated committees, and regional library corporations' board meetings. Council meetings will also be live-streamed.

Currently, all councils are facing the challenge of adjusting to delivering online meetings.

Online council meetings need to:
- meet legislative and governance requirements
- address risks and technical challenges
- be professionally broadcast
- equitably delivered for the elected representatives
- accessible to the community

Ruth McGowan can assist councils as an experienced facilitator of online meetings. She has prepared the following guide based on her experience and advice from Mayors and CEOs on what works (and what to avoid). These tips complement the advice from Local Government Vic, the MAV & VLGA, and your council team.

"I hope these tips add value to the discussions Mayors and councillors are now having with their CEO and officers and assist in delivering professional and effective online meetings."

SET YOUR GOALS

Discuss and agree on the objectives and goals of moving to a virtual meeting platform, for council and your community at this time.

Agreement will help the council to maintain high-quality and professional meetings that serve the community, now and in the future.

In addition to the health benefits and meeting the requirements of the Local Government Act (and amendments), there is likely to be other benefits council will achieve by moving their ordinary council meetings online.

For example, remote meetings have the potential to deliver equity benefits, such as improved accessibility, both for councillors and the public, in their ability to participate and observe meetings. Online meetings have added benefits of improved transparency and accountability.

Many councils are finding that virtual meetings are shorter than in-person meetings.

To ensure efficient time management by the Mayor, develop a run-sheet for the meeting.

Set goals for time-blocks to be allocated to:
- Introductions, welcome, acknowledgements
- Discussion on various agenda items
- Breaks
- Reports
- Questions, clarifications, comments - both for councillors and public

Ruth McGowan

COORDINATE THE TECH

Determine the technology platform based on:
- Security (including the ability to maintain confidential, in-camera conversations and avoid 'gate crashers')
- Ease of use for all participants
- Capacity to record and broadcast live (consider the potential to caption meetings)
- Ability to meet the internet capacity and download/upload speeds of participants
- Ability to synchronise with other technology, such as the use of electronic polls

Provide the right 'tools of the trade' for participants to join in remote meetings, e.g. good quality camera, sufficient lighting, high-quality video & audio, consider providing headphones with a microphone.

Train remote participants in:
- the use of and positioning of the camera for a clear visual
- how to achieve good quality sound
- assessing the suitability of the background (e.g. tidy not cluttered)
- using a private office space with no interruptions for the duration of the meeting

Consider privacy implications for live streams that may expose private details of participants in the background.

For participants in busy households, be aware that bandwidth will be reduced with many users of the internet and meetings may crash! In this situation, negotiate council meeting times or establish a hotspot (IT will help).

Seek agreement on the use of a virtual background for live streamed, public meetings to maintain privacy (e.g. use an image of the council chamber, council logo or a scene from the municipality).

In this new environment of virtual meetings, there are new ground rules and extra scrutiny. Ensure councillors are clear on the changes.

Provide a printed handout of instructions for councillors on how to connect, the new meeting procedures and whom to call for IT help.

MANAGING TWO SITES

A council meeting may also be held simultaneously in a council building as the primary site and include participants who are working from home.

This mixed format (sometimes referred to as a 'shandy' meeting) is often used for less formal, council briefings.

If this is the case, consider:
- The additional technology required to view all remote participants on the one screen and include adequate lighting of all participants
- How remote participants can easily see all the participants gathered physically in the one place
- Ensuring high-quality sound, both incoming (from remote participants) and outgoing (from the council office site)
- How participants meeting in both the physical venue and joining remotely, will be recorded for the public live stream

REVISE PROCEDURES

These are new circumstances, requiring new 'road rules'. Develop new guidelines, processes, and expectations by workshopping the processes with your council team.

Council will need to establish meeting management roles.

Determine who will be the:
- Host (The one who invites participants – usually the CEO, or Governance Manager)
- Meeting Chair (usually the Mayor)
- Content manager (CEO, Manager Governance)
- It can also be useful to have on hand a professional Co-Facilitator (who works virtually with the Mayor to assist them in managing the chatbox, meeting-timing and keeping track of speaking order)
- An Observer (to review the meeting overall, track the live-stream feedback, report on what works/what does not for future meetings as part of continuous improvement)

The Council will need to develop agreed guidelines on how the council leadership team will manage council meetings, briefings and councillor-only sessions.

Consider the practical aspects such as:
- Who is allowed to talk and when, so as to reduce one councillor dominating
- Stay muted when not talking
- The chatbox; agree on the purpose, conditions of use, who will monitor/respond
- Consider the use of private chats versus the option where a chat is open to all participants to read. Will you record chats?
- Use of shared screens. Determine, who can do this and for what purpose
- Use of polls to assess feedback from councillors, such as when putting forward a motion to the vote
- The circumstances when breakout rooms may be used

SET YOUR MEETING ETIQUETTE

Seek agreement on how you will respectfully work together.

Discuss how to manage the following:
- Managing introductions and welcome
- How people will identify themselves when speaking to the camera
- When people will be put on or taken off mute (and whose role it will be to do this)
- Agree on what is the preferred professional screen appearance (i.e. dress-code, whether to mute or not, virtual backgrounds)
- The order of speaking and how to notify the Mayor/Chair when a councillor wants to speak
- Agreed time limits for 'who has the mic'
- Stay focused on the meeting, turn phones off and avoid distractions (noting that during the live-streaming, members of the public can take screenshots of individual councillors)

Clarify the procedure if someone has to leave the meeting, either for a conflict of interest, to meet good governance or another reason and explain how they do so practically (and re-enter)

Be clear on processes that ensure fairness and equity of input.

This could include:
- Procedures for an equitable approach to deciding which councillors will move or second motions and determining who will speak on motions
- Decide how the council will engage with the public on agenda items and how feedback, comments or questions will be communicated in a virtual meeting

Be prepared to have technical problems and:
- Start meetings with enough time beforehand to iron out any issues.
- Have a 'Plan B' if the internet drops out for a councillor
- Have a computer support officer on hand for meeting participants to phone if one-on-one help is required.

CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE

While it is unknown how long councils will be required to manage virtual council meetings, we can be sure that online meetings will continue to be needed for a while yet.

I believe that virtual meetings will become integrated into council operations, well beyond these 'COVID times'.

This experience provides an opportunity for continuous improvement. By reflecting and reviewing meetings, you will improve the experience for all.

Regularly evaluate your meetings to enhance the experience by:
- Conducting a short survey of councillors, CEO and EMT following each meeting, to ascertain what worked well or did not
- Seeking feedback from a sample of community observers on how your virtual meetings can be improved (put a survey on your council webpage, social media, Facebook poll)
- Revising and adapting procedures to continuously improve

Lastly, test your processes thoroughly prior to your next online, live streamed ordinary council meeting.

When you have things sorted, share your knowledge with community groups who may need to organise virtual meetings for themselves.

It's time. if you do not have virtual meeting guidelines in place, then develop them now with the input of all those in your team, including officers, CEO and Councillors.

SUPPORTING COUNCILS IN TURBULENT TIMES

Ruth McGowan is an experienced consultant to local and state governments. She supports council in crisis management and disaster recovery as a coach, trainer, and through innovative virtual meeting facilitation.

Drawing on her experience as a Mayor in the 2009 Black Saturday disaster, Ruth provides tailored support to leaders in challenging times. She also delivers e-training on the topics of running professional virtual meetings, how to Get Elected, Leading in Turbulent Times and Political Intelligence.

Ruth's many years of exceptional community leadership was honoured with an Order of Australia Medal in 2014 and in 2019 she wrote the Australian guide to successful political campaigning, Get Elected.

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