



NOTICE OF MEETING

AND SUMMONS TO ATTEND

**The meeting of Sprowston Town Council
will be held in the Delves Room, at Sprowston Diamond Centre, School Lane
Sprowston on Wednesday 11 January 2017 at 7.30pm**

AGENDA

Item No.

1. To receive declarations of interest.
2. To receive apologies for absence (proforma enclosed).
3. To confirm the minutes of the Council meeting held on 7 and 14 December 2016. Pages 1 - 6
4. To receive correspondence & agree action/response arising from the minutes.
5. To receive any written reports from Sprowston County and District Councillors. Page 7
6. To adjourn the meeting to allow members of the public & Councillors with prejudicial interests to speak¹.
7. To receive the report of the Town Clerk and make decisions on: Pages 8 - 25
 - 1.1 Value Added Tax
 - 4.1 Norfolk Association of Local Councils - Consultation on Video Conferencing
 - 4.2 Parish and Town Council Support
 - 5.1 Norfolk County Council - Better Broadband for Norfolk Project
8. Adjourn the meeting for a short break.
9. To receive any written/verbal reports from the Council's Committees and Working Groups.
10. To receive any written and verbal reports from Members representing the Council on or at outside organisations. (proforma enclosed)
11. To consider the Schedule of meetings dates for 2017/18 Page 26
12. To receive the summary of income and expenditure and Balance sheet to 31 December 2016 Pages 27 - 36
13. To set the Precept for 2017/18 Pages 37 - 44
14. To confirm the payment of accounts to 11 January 2017. Pages 45 - 47
15. To receive the schedule of Direct Debits Pages 48
16. To receive the schedule of credit card payments. Pages 49
17. To receive the Internal Audit Report Interim for 2016/17 Pages 50 - 58

18. To consider planning applications to 11 January 2017
19. To receive any Police Liaison Officer's report.

Pages 59 - 60

Page 61



June Hunt
Town Clerk

6 January 2017

Council Office. Sprowston Diamond Centre . Sprowston . Norwich.NR7 8TR
Tel: 0845 004 6227 or (01603 408063) . Fax: (01603) 418113 . Email: townclerk@sprowston-tc.gov.uk

Footnote:

¹ Members have a statutory legal duty under the Local Government Act 2000, to declare any personal or prejudicial interest they have in items contained in the above agenda. Failure to do so may result in the individual Councillor being reported to the Standards Board for England.

Planning Applications listed above are those in the office at the time of publication of the Agenda. The Council may consider others received up to the date of the meeting if appropriate. Plans may be viewed in the Council office during office hours, and are available from 7 pm on the date of the meeting. Alternatively, to view on line please go to www.broadland.gov.uk and follow the links through to planning.

It should be noted that Councillors Mr Knowles, Mr Moncur (Chairman) and Mr Ward will or could be making comments on the planning applications at this meeting as a non-statutory consultee on behalf of the Town Council. However, as all three Councillors are on the Planning Committee of Broadland District Council they would like it made clear that their views could change at those meetings when more information could lead them to a differing view than that expressed at this meeting. To this end they will be abstaining from voting on planning matters, apart from in the case of a tied vote when the Chairman will make the casting vote.

This Meeting is open to the Public and the Press. Copies of this Agenda and Draft Minutes referred to above are available from the Council Office. Signed copies of the Minutes may also be downloaded from the Council's website www.sprowston-tc.gov.uk (go to Agenda and Minutes page). They are available (unless marked confidential) for public inspection at the Council Offices during public opening hours.

In the interests of openness and transparency, Councillors and members of the public are reminded that the law permits any person to film, record, photograph or use social media in order to report on the proceedings of a meeting of the Council. The Council request that anyone wishing to record the meeting lets the Council know beforehand so appropriate arrangements can be made to facilitate the recording.

COUNCIL MEETING – 7 DECEMBER 2016

At the meeting of the Sprowston Town Council held at Sprowston Diamond Centre, School Lane, Sprowston on Wednesday 7 December 2016, the following Members were present:-

Mr I Moncur – Chairman

| | | |
|-----------------|---|---------------|
| Mr W F Couzens | - | Mr K Lashley |
| Mr R A Fowkes | - | Mrs J Leggett |
| Mr R J Knowles | - | Mr J H Mallen |
| Mrs B J Lashley | - | Mr J M Ward |

In attendance

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| Mrs J Hunt | - | Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer |
| Mrs E Elliot | - | Committee Officer |

No members of the public were present

16/297. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY AND OTHER INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests were received.

16/298. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Verbal apologies for absence were received and accepted by the Council from Mr T Landamore, Mr C L Noble, Mrs J Poynter and Mr N Shaw.

16/299. RESIDENT'S QUESTIONS

As there were no residents present the Chairman moved to the next item of business.

16/300. PLANNING

The Town Clerk reported that observations had been requested by the District Council's Head of Planning on applications received since the last meeting.

Having considered each application and the accompanying plans the Council

RESOLVED

(a) to raise no objection to the following applications:

2016/1985 - erection of security fence at Unit B60B9, Pinetrees Road

2016/1986 - build new enclosed brick front porch to replace existing open porch. New porch to include a water closet room at 172, Blithewood Gardens

(b) to oppose the granting of planning application 2016/1933 outline approval 20151386 - sub-division of plot & erection of dwelling & garage at Grange Cottage, Salhouse Road on the grounds that the size of the proposed development will put pressure on the trees and is too close to the treeline.

16/301 REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES 2017/18

(a) Cemetery and Memorial Charges

Mr J M Ward proposed, seconded by Mr K Lashley that effective 1 April 2017 a 3% increase be applied to all cemetery and memorial fees rounded, on being put to the vote the motion was **CARRIED**.

(b) Sports Hire Fees

Mr L Lashley proposed, seconded by Mr J H Mallen that effective 1 April 2017 Casual Bowls adults and children fee to remain unchanged and a 3% increase be applied to all other sports hire fees rounded, on being put to the vote the motion was **CARRIED**.

(c) Facility Hire Fees

Mr I Moncur proposed, seconded by Mr J M Ward that effective 1 April 2017 Sprowston Pavilion hire fee be increased to £18.00 per hour and all other facility hire fees remain unchanged, on being put to the vote the motion was **CARRIED**.

(d) Allotment Rents and Water Charges

Mr I Moncur proposed, seconded by Mr K Lashley that effective 1 October 2017 allotment rents for 2017/18 remain unchanged, on being put to the vote the motion was **CARRIED**.

16/302. DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL EXPENDITURE PROGRAMME 2017/18

Having considered the 2017/18 draft budget against the Council's reserves, and following a lengthy debate it was

RESOLVED to remove Harrisons Wood BMX £50,000 and Trim Trail £20,000 from the draft revenue and capital expenditure budget and agree a 1.69% increase on the previous year based on an estimated Tax base for 2017/18 of 5,064. The reserves of £5,979 for Cemetery Land Fund and £100,000 from the Nursery Fund were to be included in the General Fund by way of a transfer.

16/303. PRECEPT

RESOLVED to authorise the Town Clerk to submit, under Section 50 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, a precept requirement to Broadland District Council of £563,722 to meet the Council's funding requirement for 2017/18.

16/304. CORRESPONDENCE

The Town Clerk referred Members to the Police Budget 2017/18 Consultation circulated at the meeting for Members to complete.

There being no other necessary business the Chairman of the Council thanked Members for their attendance and declared the meeting closed.

11 January 2017

CHAIRMAN

COUNCIL MEETING – 14 DECEMBER 2016

At the meeting of the Sprowston Town Council held at Sprowston Diamond Centre, School Lane, Sprowston on Wednesday 14 December 2016, the following Members were present:-

Mr I Moncur – Chairman

| | | |
|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| Mr W F Couzens | - | Mrs B J Lashley |
| Mrs S L England | - | Mr K Lashely |
| Mr R A Fowkes | - | Mrs J Leggett |
| Mr R J Knowles | - | Mr J H Mallen |
| Mr T Landamore | - | Mrs J Poynter |

In attendance

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| Mrs J Hunt | - | Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer |
| Mrs E Elliot | - | Committee Officer |

No members of the public were present

16/305. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY AND OTHER INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary and other interests were received.

16/306. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Written apologies for absence were received and accepted by the Council from Mr J M Ward and Ms G Landamore and verbal apologies from Mr C L Noble and Mr N Shaw.

16/307. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Council meeting held on 23 November 2016, having previously been circulated to all Members were subject to the following amendment

Minute 16/283 (ii) second paragraph, **delete** Mrs B J Lashley commented that she did feel that and **insert** Mrs B J Lashley commented that she did **not** feel that

confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

16/308. POLICE LIAISON OFFICER'S REPORT

Members noted the instances recorded in the crime statistics for Sprowston since the last meeting.

Mr W F Couzens expressed his concern with regard to the number of violent crime incidences.

Mr T Landamore commented that it was difficult to compare the incidences of violent crime to previous years.

16/309. PRECEPT

The Town Clerk reported that Broadland District Council had re-estimated the tax base (Band D) figures for Sprowston which had impacted on the Council's previous precept request and it was

16/309. PRECEPT (CONTINUED)

RESOLVED

to authorise the Town Clerk to withdraw the initial precept request from Broadland District Council and to place an item on the agenda at the next Council Meeting.

16/310. REPORTS FROM COUNTY AND DISTRICT COUNCILLORS

A written report was received from Mr J M Ward.

Mrs J Leggett verbally reported that:

- (1) she had attended a meeting where BT Business had stated that they would provide broadband on future housing developments of 30 plus dwellings.
- (2) at a Norfolk County Council meeting held on 12 December 2016 there was a motion to prioritise the Norwich Northern Distributor Road western link, the Long Stratton bypass and the third river crossing at Great Yarmouth. Consultation was open until January 2017.

16/311. RESIDENT'S QUESTIONS

As there were no members of the public present the Chairman moved to the next item of business.

16/312. REPORT OF THE TOWN CLERK

COMMUNITY BUILDINGS, ALLOTMENTS, PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

1.1 Barkers Lane Shelter

Having considered the report of the Town Clerk it was

RESOLVED to accept the quotation from K. Rackham & Son Engineering Ltd to replace all roof panels at Barkers Lane shelter with 3mm sheet panels powder coated at a cost of £3,913.64 plus VAT

1.2 Harrisons Woodland Blue Boar Lane

Mr T Landamore reported that complaints were being received from residents' of Harrison's Drive regarding parking to access Harrisons Woodland and it was

RESOLVED that signage be erected in Harrisons woodland opposite Harrisons Drive with a map of the area including Cottage Plantation highlighting areas of interest and the car park.

CEMETERY

2.1 No Matters were reported

STREET LIGHTING

3.1 No matters were reported

16/312. REPORT OF THE TOWN CLERK (CONTINUED)

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

4.1 Broadland District Council Buy in Broadland Scheme

Members noted the email inviting Broadland Businesses to get involved in the new Buy in Broadland scheme.

4.2 Norfolk County Council Road Crossing Patrol Consultation

Mrs J Leggett reported that the primary school mentioned in the email from Norfolk County Council's School Crossing Patrol Manager was Sprowston Junior School and that the crossing did not meet the criteria as there was a pelican crossing at the site.

4.3 Broadland District Council Community Assets Register

Members noted that Broadland District Council will not include Cottage Plantation or Sprowston Sports and Social Club on the community asset register due to the landowners, Gurney Estates, registering their objection to the register containing their property.

The Town Clerk commented that Harrison's Woodland and Cottage Plantation would eventually be transferred to the Town Council and the Sports and Social Club has been offered a long lease.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Chairman write to Broadland District Council stating that this was not in the spirit of the scheme.

4.4 Norfolk Pension Fund

Members noted the Employer Results Report Valuation as at 31 March 2016 together with the Formal Valuation showing pension contributions to 2020.

PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION

5.1 Beeston Park Programme Board

Members noted that the draft Design Code for the development of Beeston Park had been released.

5.2 Norfolk County Council - Upgrade of surface water drainage system Cannerby Lane

Following a discussion regarding the drainage improvement scheme on Cannerby Lane Mrs J Leggett agreed to enquire if there was an outlet into the water drainage system, and if not what effect it would have on the surrounding area.

16/313. MEETING ADJOURNMENT

On the motion of Mr I Moncur, seconded by Mr K Lashley it was **RESOLVED** to adjourn the meeting for a short break.

The meeting was reconvened.

16/314. REPORTS FROM COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES AND WORKING GROUPS

No written reports were received.

16/315. REPORTS FROM MEMBERS REPRESENTING THE COUNCIL ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

No written reports were received.

16/316. PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS

The Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer presented the schedule of accounts to 14 December 2016 totalling £37,347.33 and answered Members' questions arising therefrom.

On the motion of Mr R J Knowles, seconded by Mr I Moncur it was

RESOLVED that payment of the accounts to 14 December 2016 totalling £37,347.33 be approved and the schedule authorising payment signed by Mr J H Mallen and Mr R A Fowkes.

16/317. SCHEDULE OF CREDIT CARD PAYMENTS

The schedule of credit card payments totalling £464.47 was approved and noted.

16/318. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED to exclude the Press and Public from the meeting for the remaining business because otherwise, information which is exempt information by virtue of Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, would be disclosed to them.

16/319. PERSONNEL REPORT OF THE TOWN CLERK

RESOLVED: that the post of Administrative and Finance Officer be upgraded from NJC salary scales 15 - 25 to 26 - 28 and job description changed to reflect the additional duties effective 1 January 2017. No further increment to be made until 1 April 2018, notwithstanding cost of living inflation as applied to the NJC salary scales.

There being no other necessary business the Chairman thanked Members for their attendance and declared the meeting closed.

11 January 2017

CHAIRMAN

1st January 2017

Report from Councillor John Ward

Broadland District Council

Working in conjunction with the County Council, Broadland has listed its own priority public health actions:-

Promote healthy living and healthy places

Protect communities and individuals from harm

Provide services that meet community needs

Work in partnership to transform the way we deliver services.

Circle Housing Group, who provide some of our affordable housing have merged with Affinity Sutton to become Clarion Housing Group. They are pledged to deliver good service and have ambitious plans to build 50,000 new homes over the next 10 years, some of which will come to Broadland.

Norfolk County Council

Since 1st April, over 500 weddings have been conducted in the Benefactors Room at Norwich Castle and 8 weddings at Strangers Hall.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £455,000 for the Marriotts Way Heritage Trail Project. Work will now start on the 30 month project to plan a host of activities and events to inform visitors of the trail's industrial and natural history.

The County Council's emergency support teams worked round the clock at Christmas offering care and support to both children and adults. From 5.30pm 23rd December to 9am 28th December they handled 238 referrals (233 last year) – 147 relating to adults and 91 to children.

Avian Flu: the Secretary of State has made the whole of England an Avian Influenza Prevention Zone. All poultry must be kept indoors or if this is not practical be kept separate from wild birds. Any queries to NCC's Food & Farming Manager jon.peddle@norfolk.gov.uk

COUNCIL MEETING – 11 JANUARY 2017

Report of the Town Clerk

COMMUNITY BUILDINGS, ALLOTMENTS, PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

1.1 Value Added Tax

The commencement of the project to redevelop and extend Sprowston Diamond Centre needs to ensure that this Council's full refund of VAT is correct and in line with the guidance for retrieval. To facilitate this I have obtained the following quotations for VAT consultations.

- (i) Accounting Solutions DCK Beavers Ltd
- (ii) Elysian Associates

Members should note that this Council has received an Option to Tax for development of Sprowston Diamond Centre; however, at present due to the nature of the Council there is uncertainty as to how VAT retrieval can be progressed at this time. Both companies come with recommendations from local parish councils.

Recommendation: to discuss the appointment of a VAT Consultant and to instruct the Town Clerk with regard to the two quotations received.

CEMETERY

2.1 No matters to report.

STREET LIGHTING

3.1 No matters to report.

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION AND PERSONNEL

4.1 Norfolk Association of Local Councils – Consultation on Video Conferencing

Attached, are details of a consultation regarding the above.

Option: for Members to comment on the consultation.

4.2 Parish and Town Council Support in 2017-18

This Council has maintained membership of the Norfolk Association of Local Councils affiliated with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). The membership to the Norfolk Association is based on the annual precept of local councils for the current year 2016-17 set at £1215.54; at present the annual yearly increase for support to be applied to the 2017-18 membership is not known.

This Council has been approached by Norfolk Parish Training and Support, a new partnership set up by three Norfolk clerks, who provide support and training to Norfolk parishes following the disbanding of the Norfolk Parish Training Partnership, and as an alternative support provider to Norfolk ALC.

Full details and answers to questions are available on their website www.norfolkpts.org/support.

The Clerk is the primary source of advice and support to the Council. However, from time to time questions, issues or situations arise where it is helpful (or necessary) to seek additional advice or guidance from outside. This might be in the form of informal telephone support from another experienced local clerk, or from a specialist professional such as a lawyer, accountant etc.

This Council does have the support of an external HR and Health and Safety professional (Elcons).

Norfolk ALC and Norfolk PTS provide training courses for Members and Clerks, with the latter offering 20% reduction. Norfolk PTS would offer training courses without the discount and without an ongoing support arrangement.

The cost of Norfolk PTS subscription for 2017-18 is calculated as 1% of the precept value, capped at £500 for larger councils such as this Council.

Option: to consider the report of the Town Clerk and make recommendation.

PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION

5.1 Norfolk County Council – Better Broadband for Norfolk Project

Attached, for Members information is correspondence regarding the new communications cabinets to be installed on the verge at the junction of Mallard Way and Atlantic Way.



June Hunt
Town Clerk



Accounting Solutions

from DCK Beavers Ltd

Mrs June Hunt, Town Clerk
Sprowston Town Council
Sprowston Diamond Centre
School Lane
Sprowston
Norwich
NR7 8TR

9th December 2016

Dear Mrs Hunt,

Quotation for VAT Consultancy

Thank you for your recent enquiry. We would be delighted to assist in determining the most effective means of avoiding/minimising the VAT impact of your proposed project to redevelop your community building. From previous experience, we have found that is rarely possible to elucidate all the facts from telephone conversations and/or exchange of correspondence (even by e-mail). The consequence of not being in possession of the full facts can prove extremely costly. This has convinced us that the most important aspect of dealing with the issues that may arise is to ensure that we fully understand all the VAT implications not only of the project/expenditure being contemplated, but also the underlying VAT situation arising from the council's current and future activities.

Consequently, our preferred practice is for two of our consultants (almost always including the writer) to attend on the council in person, meet with the Clerk, RFO, any other Senior Officers and as many Councillors as are able to attend for a full investigation and discussion of the situation. Where possible we also like to visit the site of any new proposed development. Such an arrangement:

1. Provides us with the opportunity to gather a comprehensive feel for the situation and, more importantly
2. Allows the Council's decision makers to ask as many questions as may arise, and receive answers to those questions at first hand.

Our visit is always followed up with a comprehensive written report enumerating the issues that arise and providing recommendations as to the best practical and cost effective solutions to all current and potential difficulties. The report will also detail the practical assistance that we can and will provide to guide the Council through the minefield of Local Council VAT legislation.

Our Standard fee for attending on the Council, and reporting back promptly, is as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Director | 575.00 |
| Second Consultant | <u>465.00</u> |
| Total Fees | 1040.00 |
| Travel costs (358 Miles @ 45p/mile) | <u>161.10</u> |
| Total charge | <u>1201.10</u> |

All the above charges are subject to VAT at the Standard Rate (currently 20%) and include time spent in our office for compilation of the report and completion of any necessary HMRC forms for submission.

Unit 1, Uffcott Farm, Uffcott, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN4 9NB

Tel: 01793 739110 Fax: 01793 731550

Web: www.dckbeavers.co.uk

DCK Beavers Limited, Registered office as above. Registered in England No. 3832919

Time (usually in our office) dealing with any follow up action/correspondence is chargeable at £75/hour (Director) or £60/hour (Consultant). All such follow up fees will be quantified and agreed in advance of any work actually being undertaken.

It may be possible to reduce these fees if we are able to combine with another appointment in your area.

If the above arrangements are acceptable, please make contact with Stuart Perkes, our Practice Administrator, to arrange a suitable date for us to visit you.

Yours sincerely



Derek R Kemp
Accounting Solutions
from DCK Beavers Ltd

VAT & TAX CONSULTANTS

Sprowston Town Council (“STC”)

Value Added Tax Advisory Services

Proposal

Background

We were pleased to meet with you and Susan on 9th November 2016 to discuss 2 projects

- the extension to the Diamond Centre from a VAT point of view, and
- to consider your day to day VAT position.

Funding

The anticipated spend on the extension is expected to be £1.5million with the additional £250,000 VAT.

STC are hoping to borrow the £1.5million from the Public Loans Board. In addition, SPC hope to recover the VAT incurred.

Income generation

The main use of the building will continue to be by the community for a variety of uses including badminton, corporate entertaining, fairs and car boot sales, flea markets etc.

VAT

The building extension

We understand that there is an Option to Tax in effect on the Diamond Centre. There will be some VAT issues connected to the extension of the Diamond Centre, the occupation by the Council itself and charity users.

- Building project report £500

This would include a report of the VAT analysis of the project, the risks of doing little to mitigate the VAT and the potential solutions if the Council Members wish to pursue the routes suggested by us.

The VAT review

- VAT review £1,500

VAT & TAX CONSULTANTS

The VAT review will look to confirm the VAT liability of the Council's supplies and activities and to ensure the correct VAT recovery position for the last 4 years. This period of time is necessary because HMRC can assess retrospectively for a 4-year period.

Fee quote

Our hourly rate is £150.00. If it works out to take less time, then obviously of fee would be reduced accordingly.

Any further work on the future plans of refurbishing the Pavilion in terms of VAT will be the subject of a separate fee quote.

Finally, fees are fully inclusive of travel costs and expenses and are a team rate meaning that it would make no difference to the final cost how many of us attend meeting etc. the hourly rate would remain the same.

21st November 2016

Elysian Associates

Consultation on Video Conferencing

What is in this for local councils?

Local councils will be interested in a consultation which might have implications for the way they hold their meetings. The consultation proposes to allow joint committees and combined authorities to hold their meetings by video conferencing. Local councils can create joint committees. If the proposals are implemented, this might lead the way for proposals to allow similar options for full council meetings.

The consultation can be found at

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/566746/Connecting_Town_Halls_consultation.pdf

Date: 11 January 2016 deadline for responses.

References to local councils: 0

Pages: 10

Detail

This LAIS reports on the publication *Connecting Town Halls: Consultation on allowing joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conferencing*. As the title suggests, the proposals (for the first time) would introduce participation through video conferencing at certain forms of local authority decision-making meetings.

The current proposals do not apply to whole council meetings; they apply only to 'joint committees' and 'combined authorities'. This consultation derives from concerns about the mechanisms for decision-making for new combined authorities under devolution arrangements, covering a wide geographical area. In this context and given the current pressure to work jointly, it was also likely that joint committees of the many authorities would be set up. It should be noted that the Local Government Act 1972 provides for joint committees of local councils as well as principal authorities.

In order to implement the proposals, Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972, which requires local authorities (including local councils) to conduct decision-making through those physically present and voting, would have to be amended. The proposals do not state that local councils would be excluded from the planned change in the law.

Although some local councils might consider it unlikely that video conferencing would ever be used by them, it is known that some councils are already executing similar practice. It should be emphasised that it is currently not lawful for local council councillors to participate within the decision-making of council meetings unless they are physically present and voting at the meeting venue but there have been instances where councils have erroneously permitted councillors to do so, which is indicative that there is some appetite for decision-making by video conferencing.

In such cases where this unlawful practice takes place, the remote participant is normally in a private venue such as a home or hotel room, which would not be permitted under these proposals.

The Consultation Questions

Q1: Do you agree that local authorities operating joint committees should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

Q2: Do you agree that combined authorities should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

LAIS notes:

- Government refers only to the practicalities of geography and extended travel time and costs under new combined authority arrangements (which were not envisaged when most of the current principal authority councillors took up their positions) as reasons for permitting video conferencing for certain types of meeting. If these proposals go ahead, it is not clear on what basis Government would continue to resist an extension to council and other meetings as no points of principle are raised within the consultation to distinguish meeting types. This causes concern that a consultation ostensibly raised for one purpose will lead to a legal change which will set a precedent for wider application without the upfront and full debate that such a proposition would deserve.
- Any consultation about a major change to decision-making ought to be clear in its application. As written, the proposal appears to apply equally to any joint committees involving local councils and it is not clear on what basis local councils would be excluded.
- There is a safeguard written into the proposals which requires video conferencing facilities with public access to be made available. However, the proposals are not clear about this provision (see below).
- There are a range of views on video conferencing of participation. Positive views include the encouragement of greater diversity and inclusion, participation by those leading busy lives and environmental and economic reasons connected with travelling to meetings. Concerns include a lack of adequate broadband in certain locations, the absence of face-to-face contact and relationship building and concerns that moving to technology-based meetings will exclude some members of the public and make decision-makers less accessible. While Government is embracing the positive aspects of video conferencing, the proposals, as currently stated, do not create a framework for these positive aspects to flourish and, further, could lead to a decline in public engagement with democratic processes (see below).

Q3: Do you agree that the safeguards outlined in paragraphs 14 to 20 above are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when these meetings are held by video conference?

LAIS notes:

- The proposals only relate to video conferencing and state that this “must mean that not only can the participants of the meeting see and hear one another, but members of the public can see and hear all the participants, just as if the meeting were taking place in a single meeting room with a public gallery.” The proposals are clear about the fact that both participants and members of the council must be able to see and hear the meeting as if the meeting were at the same physical location. It is not clear that there would be the same personal connectedness with elected councillors as previously enjoyed by those members of the public who hitherto had wished to attend meetings.
- The consultation refers to ‘appropriate safeguards to maintain town hall transparency’ (as specified in paragraphs 14 to 20). The consultation refers to current transparency and scrutiny that would continue to apply. However, the specific new safeguards that would be introduced are only that access to video conferencing facilities to hold council meetings must be made available at local authority or combined authority sites that are suitable for holding a meeting with public access and no council or member can participate from their own home or a private venue.

December 2016 LAIS1395

- While it is appreciated that Government will continue existing transparency and scrutiny arrangements, such as the right to broadcast from meetings, it is noted that video conferencing will not automatically open up meetings to a new public audience but might affect those who enjoy the current arrangements. There is no requirement to live-stream and publish the video conference on the internet (although to do so is permitted). Additionally, it is not clear that a participating councillor has to use the local council meeting venue video conferencing facilities i.e. it could be the case that all participants are in a separate public place from the public, reducing opportunities for personal contact, interaction and the pressure of being directly under the public gaze. Consequently, the proposals as currently stated, appear to enable worse practice and less public engagement than is currently the case.
- It is not clear whether a central meeting place for the joint committee or combined authority as a whole would always be maintained so that members of the public could still attend along with any decision-makers who wished to meet in person.
- Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 currently requires notice of meetings to be published so that the public are aware of the place, time and venue of the meeting. These proposals do not refer to any changes to ensure that the public are aware of the venues to access video conferencing facilities for the purpose of observing the meeting.

How to make your comments

The consultation closes on 11 January 2017.

Enquiries about the consultation to: stuart.young@communities.gsi.gov.uk TEL: 0303 44 42005

Consultation responses to: videoconferencingconsultation@communities.gsi.gov.uk or by post to: Stuart Young, Department for Communities and Local Government 2nd Floor, NE, Fry Building 2 Marsham Street London SW1P 4DF.

References

Connecting Town Halls: Consultation on allowing joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conferencing can be found at

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/566746/Connecting_Town_Halls_consultation.pdf

Local Government Act 1972 can be found at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/contents>

Norfolk Association Response to the Consultation on Video Conferencing

Dear Mr Young

This is the response from the Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) and the Norfolk Association of Local Councils (Norfolk ALC). SALC and Norfolk ALC are the membership organisations for town and parish councils (local councils) and provide advice, information, training and representation for the hundreds of councils within their respective counties.

We note that the proposals (for the first time) would introduce participation through video conferencing at certain forms of local authority decision-making meetings. While we note that this consultation derives from concerns about the mechanisms for decision-making for new combined authorities under devolution arrangements, covering a wide geographical area, the Local Government Act 1972 provides for joint committees of local councils as well as principal authorities. The proposals do not state that local councils would be excluded from the planned change in the law.

Our specific comments on the consultation questions are provided below:

Q1: Do you agree that local authorities operating joint committees should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

Q2: Do you agree that combined authorities should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

Government refers only to the practicalities of geography and extended travel time and costs under new combined authority arrangements (which were not envisaged when most of the current principal authority councillors took up their positions) as reasons for permitting video conferencing for certain types of meeting. If these proposals go ahead, it is not clear on what basis Government would continue to resist an extension to council and other meetings as no points of principle are raised within the consultation to distinguish meeting types. This causes concern that a consultation ostensibly raised for one purpose will lead to a legal change which will set a precedent for wider application without the upfront and full debate that such a proposition would deserve.

Any consultation about a major change to decision-making ought to be clear in its application. As written, the proposal appears to apply equally to any joint committees involving local councils and it is not clear on what basis local councils would be excluded.

There is a safeguard written into the proposals which requires video conferencing facilities with public access to be made available. However, the proposals are not clear about this provision (see below).

There are a range of views on video conferencing of participation. Positive views include the encouragement of greater diversity and inclusion, participation by those leading busy lives and environmental and economic reasons connected with travelling to meetings. Concerns include a lack of adequate broadband in certain locations, the absence of face-to-face contact and relationship building and concerns that moving to technology-based meetings will exclude some members of the public and make decision-makers less accessible. While Government is embracing the positive aspects of video conferencing, the proposals, as currently stated, do not create a framework for these positive aspects to flourish and, further, could lead to a decline in public engagement with democratic processes (see below).

Q3: Do you agree that the safeguards outlined in paragraphs 14 to 20 above are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when these meetings are held by video conference?

SALC and Norfolk ALC welcome the statement that video conferencing “must mean that not only can the participants of the meeting see and hear one another, but members of the public can see and hear all the participants, just as if the meeting were taking place in a single meeting room with a public gallery.” The proposals are clear about the fact that both participants and members of the council must be able to see and hear the meeting as if the meeting were at the same physical location. However, it is not clear that there would be the same personal connectedness with elected councillors as previously enjoyed by those members of the public who hitherto had wished to attend meetings.

The consultation refers to ‘appropriate safeguards to maintain town hall transparency’ (as specified in paragraphs 14 to 20). The consultation refers to current transparency and scrutiny that would continue to apply. However, the specific new safeguards that would be introduced are only that access to video conferencing facilities to hold council meetings must be made available at local authority or combined authority sites that are suitable for holding a meeting with public access and no council or member can participate from their own home or a private venue.

While it is appreciated that Government will continue existing transparency and scrutiny arrangements, such as the right to broadcast from meetings, it is noted that video conferencing will not automatically open up meetings to a new public audience but might affect those who enjoy the current arrangements. There is no requirement to live-stream and publish the video conference on the internet (although to do so is permitted). Additionally, it is not clear that a participating councillor has to use the local council meeting venue video conferencing facilities i.e. it could be the case that all participants are in a separate public place from the public, reducing opportunities for personal contact, interaction and the pressure of being directly under the public gaze. Consequently, the proposals as currently stated, appear to enable worse practice and less public engagement than is currently the case.

It is not clear whether a central meeting place for the joint committee or combined authority as a whole would always be maintained so that members of the public could still attend along with any decision-makers who wished to meet in person.

Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 currently requires notice of meetings to be published so that the public are aware of the place, time and venue of the meeting. These proposals do not refer to any changes to ensure that the public are aware of the venues to access video conferencing facilities for the purpose of observing the meeting.

SALC and Norfolk ALC would be pleased to discuss its reservations about these proposals with you. Please feel free to contact me to progress this.