

# Bedford Group of Drainage Boards

## Protocol on Virtual and Hybrid Meetings

### Purpose of the Protocol

The purpose of this protocol is to provide guidance to the Board, members and the public about how virtual and hybrid meetings will operate.

Virtual meetings are where all participants are online and remote. Hybrid meetings are a combination of face-to-face meetings and virtual meetings, whereby some members, staff and public attend the meeting in person and some members attend remotely. Both Board and Committee meetings may be in person, virtual or hybrid. For the purposes of this protocol, “hybrid” refers to both virtual and hybrid meetings.

### General Principles

Standing Orders allow for hybrid meetings, as follows:

- 4 *The Board shall meet at a place to be confirmed on the agenda including: in person, remote or a combination of the two. A place where a meeting is held or is to be held includes more than one place including electronic, digital, or virtual locations including internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers. A member in remote attendance is present if they are able at that time:*
  - a) *To hear and, where practicable, see and be so heard and, where practicable, be seen, by other members in attendance.*
  - b) *To hear and, where practicable see, and be so heard and, where practicable, be seen, by any members of the public entitled to attend part of or all of the meeting.*

Underpinning this Protocol are the fundamental principles that conduct shall be compliant with the Code of Conduct for members and that the integrity and security of any confidential information is maintained.

A fundamental principle is that the attendance of a member or an officer is equally valid irrespective of whether they are attending in person or from a remote location. It will not be appropriate for any member to make an adverse comment or inference in respect of any other member or officer’s chosen location for attendance.

Hybrid meetings should promote engagement, dialogue and transparency in the same manner as if the meeting were held physically.

Hybrid meetings will follow the Board’s usual meetings practice in terms of publication of agendas and reports, and they will follow normal standing orders and procedural rules where possible.

All voting will be carried out either by affirmation of the meeting, by using the electronic voting system and on the virtual meeting platform in use, or by means of a rollcall of all members present both remotely and in person.

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All voting results will be announced by the Chair before moving to the next item of business.

### **Before the meeting**

Before a hybrid meeting, the notice, agenda and meeting papers will be circulated to all members by email (and by post to those members that have also specifically requested a hard copy), in accordance with the Board's Standing Orders. Notice of the meeting and the agenda will also be available on the group's website.

Clear instructions for the process of logging in, asking questions, and voting through electronic facilities will be provided to members before the meeting, and links to the website will be provided within the notice of the meeting.

All members wishing to attend remotely must give prior notice to the Executive Assistant, the contact details of which will be set out in the meeting notice.

### **During the meeting**

Members attending remotely will be expected to join the meeting at least five minutes before the proposed start time for the meeting to ensure that they are able to connect.

The Chair plays a vital role in the orderly conduct of the meeting. Chairs will be fully supported by officers to enable the Chair to conduct the meeting in accordance with the Standing Orders and the principles of this Protocol.

At the start of the meeting, the Chair will ensure that the system allows everyone to participate. The Chair will make an introduction to the meeting and provide a reminder of the meeting arrangements.

If a quorum is achieved the meeting will proceed in any event, notwithstanding a member's or members' failure to achieve a connection. If a member joins the meeting at a later time they must make themselves known immediately to the Chair and comment and vote only on those complete agenda items remaining.

When attending remotely, members need to ensure that they can remain on-line throughout debates and during voting in order to maintain the integrity of the decision-making process and to reduce the opportunity for legal challenge of any decision.

When attending remotely, members and any participants must ensure that the room from which they are accessing the remote meeting is suitable in terms of privacy and that no disturbance occurs during the course of the meeting as it is important to ensure a degree of formality in the proceedings.

Given the nature of hybrid meetings the Chair will ensure that every member has the opportunity to participate in the meeting and that members are called to speak in the order that they indicate their wish to do so wherever they are attending the meeting from. Members who are attending remotely should use the 'raise hand' function to indicate that they wish to speak. Officers will assist the Chair

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in monitoring the requests to speak. The Chair will allow officers to speak if they indicate that they wish to do so.

Members, officers and the public must have the right to speak and be heard through electronic facilities in a similar way as if they were attending physically. In addition to being able to ask questions live, members may also be able to electronically submit questions by typing within a dedicated meeting application or be able to send questions to a designated email address.

Where a question is asked live remotely during the meeting, the Chair of the meeting should ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that the question is audible or visible to all other participants attending the meeting. Members attending the meeting should also be able to hear or see questions which are submitted electronically via a dedicated meeting application, or which have been sent in advance by email. This should be the case regardless of whether or not the questions are in fact answered (for example, if a chair declines to answer a question because it is undesirable in the interests of the Board or the good order of the meeting).

During the meeting whilst a member is not speaking, their microphone should be set to mute, and this should be clicked to un-mute (sound) when invited to speak by the Chair. Members are encouraged to keep their cameras on at all times. However, it is recognised that if a member is experiencing poor connectivity, it may be necessary to turn their video off.

Members use of the 'chat' function should be restricted to issues such as informing the meeting that they are leaving temporarily or permanently, or that they are having connectivity issues. The 'chat' function should not be used to make contributions to the debate or to send informal messages to other attendees. Members are reminded that 'chat' messages will be visible to viewers of the meeting.

### **Connectivity**

If connectivity is lost for any remote attendee during the proceedings so that the quorum is not met, the Chair will require the meeting to be paused in order to allow re-establishment of connectivity if at all possible. If it proves impossible to re-establish connection for a sufficient number of members to reach a quorum, the meeting will be adjourned to a later date. The Chair will make every effort as is reasonable to enable those members experiencing connectivity problems to take part in the debate. However, provided the meeting remains quorate, connectivity problems for one or more members will not be a reason to challenge the validity of the meeting or the minutes.

### **Public Speaking**

Public speakers will be contacted by email or by phone in advance of the Board or Committee meeting to establish whether they wish to attend in person or remotely. Remote attendees will be provided with a link to the meeting. All remote public speakers will be invited to join the meeting when they enter the 'waiting room' but must remain in mute mode and not speak unless invited by the Chair to do so. The Chair will invite each speaker to begin their presentation at the appropriate time. Speakers are requested to provide their presentation in writing to the Chair in advance of the meeting, so that it can be circulated to members prior to the meeting. In the event of issues with connectivity, the Chair

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may choose to read the speaker's presentation on their behalf. Speakers will then 'leave' the meeting following the relevant agenda item, if necessary, with support from the meeting host, in the same way as they would at a physical meeting.

### After the meeting

Decisions made at all meetings are effective immediately. The Board or Committee will ensure that minutes are prepared of each meeting. Minutes will be recorded and are effective in accordance with Standing Orders and with Schedule 2 3(4) of the Land Drainage Act 1991 which states:

- (4) *A minute of the proceedings of a meeting of an Internal Drainage Board, or of a committee of such a board, purporting to be signed at that or the next ensuring meeting by a person describing himself as, or appearing to be, the chairman of the meeting to the proceedings of which the minute relates—*
- (a) *shall be evidence of the proceedings; and*
  - (b) *shall be received in evidence without further proof.*
- (5) *Until the contrary is proved—*
- (a) *every meeting in respect of the proceedings of which a minute has been so signed shall be deemed to have been duly convened and held;*
  - (b) *all the proceedings had at any such meeting shall be deemed to have been duly had; and*
  - (c) *where the proceedings at any such meeting are the proceedings of a committee, the committee shall be deemed to have been duly constituted and to have had power to deal with the matters referred to in the minute.*
- (6) *The proceedings of an Internal Drainage Board shall not be invalidated by any vacancy in the membership of the Board or by any defect in the appointment or qualification of any member of the Board.*

Hybrid meetings in general business session may also be recorded for the purposes of drafting accurate minutes, in accordance with the Recording, Filming and Reporting of IDB Meetings Policy. These recordings are erased immediately after the Board has confirmed the minutes as a true record of the meeting.

Technical difficulties connecting into a hybrid meeting by one or more members will not be a reason to challenge the decisions or minutes of a meeting unless the meeting has become inquorate as a result of the technical difficulties.