**New provisions for remote parish meetings**

January 2024

From 25 January 2024 when the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2024 received Royal Assent, parochial church councils can transact business remotely or by a mixture of in-person and remote means in addition to the established practice of in-person meetings. The new provisions are principally in a new Rule 83A of the [Church Representation Rules](https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-resources/church-representation-rules).

In addition, the annual parochial church meeting and the meeting of parishioners (which elects the churchwardens) may also take place remotely or in a hybrid format. Many PCCs will have met online during the Covid-19 related “lockdowns” and some PCCs may have continued that practice until the present. They were supported in doing so through a change to the Church Representation Rules in 2020which allowed PCCs to conduct business by correspondence (whether on paper or by email) where the chair of the PCC decides that particular business can properly be conducted in that way: see rule M29. PCCs could meet virtually and discuss matters which would later be confirmed by an exchange of emails. However, it was the business by correspondence which was the legal means by which the PCC worked, not the remote meeting.

The recent change now allows the PCC to meet virtually – eg by Microsoft Teams or Zoom and to transact their business in that medium. While video-based meetings have become the “norm” in many walks of life there are some considerations that PCCs should bear in mind before making use of the provision.

First of all, the provision says the following:

* A meeting includes any forum where members “may attend, speak at, vote in, or otherwise participate in without any, or without all, of the persons being together in the

same place”.

* A reference to a place where a meeting is held, or is to be held, includes a reference to more than one place, including electronic, digital or virtual locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers.
* A person is to be regarded as present at a meeting at any given time if the person is at that time able to hear and be heard by, and where practicable to see and be seen by, the other persons present.
* A reference to being present at a meeting includes a reference to being present by electronic means, including by telephone conference, video conference, live webcast or live interactive
* streaming.

The following guidance is offered so that the PCC will use the new provision to the best advantage of its members:

* In order to be inclusive and not alienate people who might struggle or dislike meeting virtually, members of the PCC should first be consulted on how they find the technology, what they like and dislike about it, and any particular problems they have about using it.
* Get a feel for where the consensus is. Would the PCC prefer to meet online to save journeys, say, in the evenings, or would something be lost if the PCC can’t meet in person and enjoy each other’s fellowship? Is the level of discussion the same? Do meetings proceed more briskly? Is that a good thing?
* Do the PCC want to have a mixture of in-person and virtual meetings? Could the virtual meetings be reserved for urgent business and the in-person meetings refocussed to deal with particular discussion points such as a particular meeting with focus of work with young people and the “ordinary” business meetings taking place virtually?
* Review at least annually whether the pattern of meetings is working and whether the experience of the members has been enriching or not, and efficient or not.
* Where there is negative feedback about online meetings, can the problems be addressed. Eg. do there need to be more breaks? Is the time of day the right one – a worker who stares at a computer screen all day, may not be in the right frame of mind to bolt onto a long day a further video meeting?
* Identify the members where the technology is problematic, perhaps because they don’t have a study or quiet space to retreat to have video meetings, or because they have hearing problems, or because they don’t have a good internet connection or an internet connection at all. Can they be helped to become equipped and comfortable with the technology or will the move to go online exclude them? Can they “team up” with another remember of the PCC who does have access and who can share their computer?
* Establish good etiquette for online meetings. That might involve muting when there is a danger of background noise, and keeping cameras on when possible.
* Identify the people who appear to have become silent in video meetings. Is that because they have nothing to say, or do not feel that they have an opportunity to break into the discussion?
* Do people have easy access to “the papers” for the meeting when they are using their computer for the meeting?
* Ensure that the confidentiality of the meeting is preserved by reminding PCC members that people who should not be at the meeting should not be able to hear what is going on. If a private space cannot be found, use headphones.
* It may be helpful if a person is appointed to look after the technicalities of a virtual meeting is not also the chair of the meeting as it is difficult for the person to both chair the meeting and to admit joining members.
* There is some Church of England guidance on [using Zoom](https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/digital-labs/blogs/how-use-zoom-church-meeting-bible-study-prayer-session-or-small-group) for church meetings.

The new provision relates not only to PCC meetings but also the (annual) parochial church meeting and the meeting to elect the churchwardens. The following considerations should be borne in mind:

* Although the meeting could be purely online, it will normally be sensible for it either to be held wholly in person or as a hybrid meeting (ie some people in attendance and some joining virtually). That is because the meeting is intended to be a meeting of all parishioners and there is a greater prospect of excluding people due to digital poverty and other issues if the meeting is wholly online. Equally, a hybrid meeting can allow those who are housebound or otherwise not able to be at church to join in.
* If the meeting is to be wholly online effective communication to parishioners about how to join the meeting is essential.
* Hybrid meetings can be difficult to run if the persons joining from home wish to participate. It is important to speak to someone who knows how to set up the technology and how best to run such a meeting. Pausing to see whether anyone joining virtually has something to say is good practice.
* It may be that most matters which will need a decision from parishioners can be dealt with by a show of hands and general unanimity will occur. However, if counted votes are required, either because they are required legally or there is a split in support for a particular proposition, some thought ought to be given in advance to voting. This might still be done by show of hands if the number of people joining virtually is manageable. If a large number are joining virtually, it would be better to use a voting system integrated into Zoom or Teams or similar where the data of who voted against, for or abstained is readily available, and for this to be tested in advance. Such votes should not be rushed and if there are errors, they should be re-run. If necessary, in the event of a surprise, the meeting can be adjourned and a special meeting held on another occasion when the vote can be run properly and with advance planning having gone into the meeting.
* If rules of procedure need to be made to deal with matters such as voting, the parochial church meeting can make them under Rule M7.
* The form (Form M1) for giving notice to the annual meeting should be modified as follows:

in the sentence beginning “The Annual Parochial Church Meeting will be

held”, for the words from “in” to “on” substitute “[*in................................*]

[*and*] [*if applicable, insert details of how to access remote meeting*] on”.