



Clapham Junction Action Group

2 May 2021

To Cllr Guy Humphries

The future of Planning Applications Committee in Wandsworth

Dear Cllr Humphries

One year ago started the first lockdown in England due to the spread of Covid cases. From that date, the usage of video-conference tools exploded: Zoom meetings for home schooling, Microsoft Teams to maintain communication in companies, Google Meet, but also Houseparty and many other similar tools to keep in touch with friends and love ones. All around the country, Councils had to adapt in an unprecedented move to not only continue functioning on a day-to-day basis, but allow the necessity scrutiny that forms part of the local democracy, with online committee meetings, publicly accessible.

In this unprecedented event, the government gave permission to hold such meetings in virtual mode. Unfortunately, the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 runs out on 6 May 2021, and the government has decided not to extend the emergency permission (arguing that it would require primary legislation, and the parliament has other priorities in the context). Indoor meetings will be permitted from 17 May, as per Government's roadmap.

However, although Council meetings and Committee meetings should be held indoors, it does not mean that Councils should stop broadcasting the debates as they did with remote-meetings. Actually, Luke Hall, Minister of State for Regional Growth and Local Government wrote to Council leaders at the end of March making clear that continuing video-meeting is encouraged:

"I would encourage you to continue to provide remote access to minimise the need for the public to attend meetings physically until at least 21 June"

The provision of June 21st (using the wording "at least") is also an indication that such broadcasting could continue after the date. Actually, the Minister acknowledges that he has received a number of requests from local authorities to continue with remote meetings beyond the scope of the pandemic.

What will happen in Wandsworth?

We have no indication yet of what the Council intends to do after 6 May. Currently, virtual meetings are well attended (especially in comparison to the small area reserved for the audience in the Council building): 80 people on 24th March, 274 viewers on 25th November 2020 ([Arding & Hobbs' decision](#)), 145 viewers on 22nd October (planning application covering Alton Estate in Roehampton) ... etc.

The Battersea Society raised the issue in a letter dated 8 April 2021 addressed to you, saying:

"Our view is that virtual meetings have worked well, and have extended the possibilities for people wishing to attend and to listen to discussions on individual applications. It is also an environmentally friendly route through a reduction of a need for travel.

We should be grateful if you could let us and others know how you and your colleagues intend to proceed at its next meeting on 25 May and subsequently."

We totally agree with the Battersea Society of this matter. In fact, it was part of the [aspirations published by CJAG three years ago](#) already:

"The Council will improve transparency of planning decisions by ensuring that records/videos of the PAC discussions are accessible on the Council website within the week following the meeting."

When asked about the possibility to broadcast a live video of the monthly Planning Application Committee meetings, the Council said that they were nowhere near any solution for the PAC meetings as... this is an expense (sic!).

Even nowadays, there is no indication on the website where to watch videos other than a sentence in the agenda of each meeting, [such as](#):

Venue: This meeting will be held virtually. Please copy this link into your address bar to watch it: https://richmond.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/484556. The link is also on the agenda.

Some links are not even clickable (clickable for 22 April, not clickable for 24 Mar 2021), you have to copy and paste in your browser! When following some links, you cannot watch the recording, as this seems limited in time, but without explanation.

More importantly, we could not find any page explaining in full the Council policy on streaming, with links to past recording, explanations on how to connect... etc, as you can see in so many other Council websites.

Many other Council give example of what we could expect

In comparison, a quick search on the Internet will give plenty of Councils providing detail facility for remote access to their meetings. For example, we can cite two London boroughs such as the City of Westminster with a page explaining all about [Stream Council meetings](#) and Haringey with a series of explanations on [how to access virtual meetings](#), streaming the meeting online, listening to the meeting, [view archived meetings](#), ... etc.

We should be grateful if you could let us know how the Council intends to proceed for the next PAC meeting in May and what broadcasting will be put in place for further meetings as to promote local democracy in view of the experience from the last 12 months.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cyril Richert', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Cyril Richert

Chair – Clapham Junction Action Group

<http://cjag.org>

Cc

Councillor Richard Field

Councillor Tony Belton

Councillor Annamarie Critchard

Councillor George Crivelli

Councillor Paul Ellis

Councillor Claire Gilbert

Councillor Graham Loveland

Councillor Piers McCausland

Councillor Miss. Lucy Mowatt

Battersea Society

Putney Society

Wandsworth Society