

BRANCH LIAISON OFFICER

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Post-pandemic Branch Meetings – Guidance

Background

As the country emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, and progresses along the roadmap to relax the restrictions imposed to limit social interaction and thus the transmission of the virus, this document sets out updated guidance for Branch Officers to assist with their decision-making process on how Branch meetings can be conducted post-pandemic.

It is recognised that every RCTS Branch is individualistic, and mirrors the characteristics and wishes of its own Branch Members. This will be informed by the demographics, location, age profile and interests of a Branch's members - there cannot be a "one size fits all" solution.

These notes are being issued in June 2021, against an expectation that the general relaxation of social distancing measures promised for 21 June 2021 does actually take place.

The Trustees of the Society will support whichever route any Branch chooses as most appropriate for their members – either a total resumption of physical meetings, a continuation of web-based presentations and meetings, or any combination in between these extremes, which will be designated a "blended" delivery approach.

Government Guidance and Rules

It is imperative that whatever rules and regulations are in force within the UK as decided by the Westminster government, or the devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales that might apply to the Scottish or South Wales Branches respectively, or indeed to Society members that reside in a devolved governmental region, that any Society meeting – physical or virtual – must comply with the current applicable legislation.

Virtual or Physical Meetings?

By virtue of the attendances at web-based virtual meetings, it can be argued there is sufficient evidence to support a continuation of virtual meetings as part of the Society's offer in the future. Conversely, there will be Members who have missed the social interactions that only a physical meeting can provide. Perpetuating face-to-face meetings will be assisted by a return to this format

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as soon as possible and within Governmental laws and guidance. It could be that Branch Committees may wish to consult with their members to gauge potential support for a resumption of physical meetings, continuation of virtual meetings or a blended approach of offering both formats.

Physical Meetings Guidance

Officers' Newsletter 193 (August 2020) provides Branches with the original guidance on risk assessments and track and trace protocols. This guidance was updated in Newsletter 195 (October 2020) and the Society will continue to update its guidance as and when lockdown and social distancing measures change. Both newsletters are available from Branch Liaison.

In terms of donations and book sales, these should only happen in a Covid-safe environment. To minimise cash handling, a collection tin with a "no change given" policy will mitigate the risk of handling notes and coins on the night of the meeting.

Advertising Your Meetings

It will be prudent – in the short-term at least – to remind those reading your meeting listing in the *RO*, or on the Society's website, or in other railway press, exactly what type of meeting - virtual or physical – is being planned. It would also be wise to alert those readers that changes may be announced with shorter notice than usual if Government restrictions change.

Meeting Types

1 *Classic face-to-face or physical meeting.* Branches are already experienced in organising these and know what facilities need to be provided for the speaker and audience in the room.

2 *Zoom presentations.* Meetings conducted entirely in a virtual environment. Ensure there is a host/chairman as well as the presenter to ensure discipline and meeting etiquette is maintained. Meeting guidance is a subject in its own right and can be located elsewhere within the Society. While there are other web-conferencing platforms, the Society's advice is built upon its experience with Zoom.

3 *Cinema-style presentations.* Basically, a Zoom meeting where the presenter is not present, but the audience is present, as if for a physical meeting in a venue room. The presentation is enabled via Zoom and given on a screen (like a cinema!). There are additional technology challenges with this presentation mode, not least of which will be the speed and bandwidth of the venue's own Internet connection, and whether the venue permits broadcasting. In addition, there are potential and significant copyright issues with the material being broadcast, as well as obtaining the venue's permission to broadcast the presentation to the audience present in the venue.

4 *Synchronous broadcasts.* This refers to a presentation being given at a physical Branch meeting, but also simultaneously broadcast via Zoom to members and guests joining virtually. There are additional technological challenges with this presentation mode, not least of which will be the speed and bandwidth of the venue's own Internet connection, and whether the venue permits broadcasting. In addition, there are potential and significant copyright issues with the material being broadcast, as well as obtaining the presenter's consent for his/her material to be broadcast and the venue's permission to broadcast the presentation to a wider external audience.

Branch Meeting Programmes

It is thought likely that Branches will host a programme of both physical and virtual meetings during the 2021/22 meeting season. This will enable a proper assessment of the demand for a return to physical meetings as well as ensuring those many members who joined the Society during 2020/21 precisely because we were holding virtual meetings are not cast aside. "Mix and match" could be a prudent suggestion.

It is anticipated that those Branches who have very successfully organised Zoom Branch meetings will feature a blended programme delivery approach, in other words a combination of some physical and some virtual meetings.

It is important not to forget to respect the wishes of outside speakers and presenters on what meeting type and delivery mode they prefer.

Branch Zoom Licences

The Board of Trustees is working on a scheme under which licences will be purchased centrally for individual Branch usage, and Branch contributions towards the cost of these will be required – further details to follow once these have been finalised and agreed.

This approach will remove the future burden on two individuals to host nearly all Branch virtual meetings to date, which has required them to devote an inordinate amount of time to RCTS meetings during the pandemic. This will also give increased flexibility to Branches to schedule their own meetings, which will no longer be constrained by the availability of these two Zoom hosts.

An updated guide to hosting Zoom meetings will be produced and circulated in the next few weeks, as well as continuing support for those Branch Officers who may not yet feel confident enough in setting up and running Zoom meetings completely independently.

National Meetings

These have become a feature following an experiment during Spring 2021. The intention would be to schedule these on a fixed day of the month, every month/every 2 months between September and March of each "season".

The intention is to complement and not detract from the Branch offerings and will endeavour to feature more prominent speakers and/or more controversial subject matter that appeals to a national audience.

These national RCTS meetings will be more widely publicised to promote the Society's charitable objectives and interests.

Co-operation and Collaboration

In order to provide the widest possible participation in Society Events, it will be important to plan and schedule meetings and Zoom presentations within a spirit of collaboration and co-operation between Branches and National Meeting organisers to avoid clashes as far as possible. There are insufficient days each month to avoid any clash so a process to resolve these issues is under consideration.

Help for Branches that have not hosted Zoom meetings

To date there are 13 Branches that have not yet hosted a Zoom meeting for a variety of reasons. Help is available to assist the Officers in these Branches to hold virtual meetings and to overcome any concerns, together with further specific advice needed to re-start physical meetings.

Dependency on the Society's two main licence holders can put an undue strain on their personal time. However, if they are unable to help, there may well be other options available – so please ask either James or myself as signatories to this newsletter.

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