

Response ID ANON-N2UZ-45MP-N

Submitted to **Local Authority Remote Meetings - Call for Evidence**

Submitted on **2021-06-16 17:36:35**

Your personal data

1 Are you happy to continue?

Please tick this box if you are happy to continue:

Yes

Introduction

2 What is your name?

[REDACTED]

3 What is your email address?

[REDACTED]

4 What is your organisation?

Organisation:

Cheltenham Borough Council

5 Where in the UK is your organisation based?

England

6 What type of organisation are you responding on behalf of?

Please select an option from the drop-down list below:

District Council

The Current Arrangements

7 Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meetings arrangements work?

Very Well

Please explain your answer in more detail; though note you will be asked about specific advantages and disadvantages of remote meetings in further questions:

Very well. The ability to convene meetings remotely has allowed for decision making to continue without interruption since the first lockdown in March 2020. Remote meetings have seen increased member attendance and increased public participation and attendance, enabling a greater level of transparency in the council's decision-making processes. The need to delegate nearly all decisions to officers was also avoided, ensuring input from elected representatives and subsequently a higher level of democratic accountability.

The number of YouTube views for nearly all committee meetings has been considerably higher than the number of members of the public who attended physical meetings before March 2020. For example, livestreamed Cabinet meetings have been typically viewed by around 100 people, compared to only a handful prior to lockdown. The only exception to this was Full Council meetings, which were already being webcast live to YouTube before the pandemic, and maintained a similar level of views.

Permanent Arrangements

8 Generally speaking, do you think local authorities in England should have the express ability to hold at least some meetings remotely on a permanent basis?

Yes

Please explain your answer in more detail:

Yes. We feel strongly that it should be a matter for each local authority to decide which meetings (if any) it wishes to hold remotely. Allowing the flexibility to hold remote meetings would not compel any individual local authority to do so, but would allow those that do to make local choices for their area. It would also enable authorities to put in place hybrid arrangements, should that be suitable for their local needs. The decision-making would be on the basis of agreed criteria, and guided by openness and transparency requirements that already exist at a national level.

Benefits of Remote Meetings

9 What do you think are some of the benefits of remote meetings?

More accessible for local authority members, Reduction in travel time for members, Meetings more easily accessed by local residents, Greater transparency for meetings, Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion, A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings

For each benefit you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:

The main advantage of remote meetings is the greater degree of flexibility, which is particularly useful considering pandemic-related guidelines and restrictions, which are subject to change at short notice and may continue for some time.

Requiring meetings to take place physically brings with it the difficulty of finding premises that are open, willing to take short notice bookings and big enough to accommodate socially distanced meetings of up to 50 people. For larger meetings such as Full Council, physically meetings mean having to hire a suitable venue, at additional cost, which may not have the audio visual and meeting management software integration, which is beneficial to running efficient and effective meetings and decision-making.

Remote meetings are also more accessible for local authority members, with an obvious reduction in travel time for attendees and consequently a positive environmental impact. Meetings are generally more easily accessed by local residents via the internet (which is especially relevant to those who may be away from the area when a meeting is being held), leading to increased public attendance, participation and greater transparency.

Meeting chairs have found it easier to manage meetings in a structured fashion, with the ability to mute members and use the 'lobby' feature for those declaring an interest and members of the public. A virtual format also promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings.

Remote meetings also offer a better use of the public's time, since they are not travelling to then have to wait for their particular item to be discussed, but rather can tune in for that item alone. Participants in licensing hearings have indicated that they found it easier to access meetings around work commitments, while public speakers at Council meetings indicated that they found remote meetings less stressful than attending in person.

Cost of remote meetings

10 [For local authorities only] Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

Unsure

Please explain your answer in more detail:

Feedback from participants suggests that fuel costs for members and officers have decreased. However, some costs have increased due to the need for extra resources to provide remote meetings. The meeting software used (Webex) cost £3,000 in 2020/21 and would increase to £12,000 in 2021/22.

Disadvantages of Remote Meetings

11 What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements?

Meetings are less accessible for local authority members of local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection, Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology

For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:

Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection or are unfamiliar with video conferencing technology.

At first, meetings took longer to administer due to the need for recorded voting by roll call and the need for participants to become familiar with the system. As time passed, this was reduced and meetings did not take any longer than they previously did in person.

Additional Democratic Services Staff need to be involved, although this had already become a factor since the introduction of live streaming in 2019. This may require a review of staffing numbers in the team.

For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain any suggestions you have to mitigate/overcome them.:

The remote meeting technology used by the council (Webex) allows for participants to join via a number of different devices including their mobile phone, so poor quality internet connection does not necessarily prevent them participating.

Advantages of Physical Meetings

12 What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

Please provide your answer in the box below:

Face-to-face meetings offer a more formal environment, require less resource to oversee and have a reduced risk of technical issues affecting the meeting. In

some circumstances, specific meetings may need to be face-to-face and this would be covered in the agreed criteria. Some members indicated that they missed face-to-face interaction with officers and other councillors.

Constraints on Remote Meetings

13 If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, for which meetings do you think they should have the option to hold remote meetings?

I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they should have the option to hold remotely

Please explain your answer in more detail:

Local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which meetings should have the option to meet remotely, and to explore possibilities around hybrid meetings.

14 If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, in which circumstances do you think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings?

I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely

Please explain your answer in more detail:

Local authorities should be able to decide for themselves in which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely, and to explore possibilities around hybrid meetings.

If the flexibility to hold online meetings is restored to councils it is essential that the government avoids being overly prescriptive about the circumstances under which councils can use virtual and hybrid meeting formats. Councils and councillors are best placed to decide how and when to use different meetings formats to balance the advantages and disadvantages of different meeting options and reflect the variety of local authority types and governance arrangements. Councils will need considerable flexibility for local determination as to how and when to utilise virtual and hybrid meetings to ensure they can realise the benefits of different meeting options to suit their local context.

15 Would you have any concerns if local authorities in England were given the power to decide for themselves which meetings, and in what circumstances, they have the option to hold remote meetings?

No

Please explain your answer in more detail:

No. The remote meetings conducted by the council reflected high standards of governance and administration.

16 If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome?

Please provide your answer in the box below:

Public Sector Equality Duty

17 In your view, would making express provision for English local authorities to meet remotely particularly benefit or disadvantage any individuals with protected characteristics e.g. those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

Yes

Please explain your answer in more detail:

Yes, it would benefit individuals with protected characteristics. Those with disabilities (especially mobility issues) are likely to find it easier to join a meeting remotely than physically. It would also make it easier for individuals who do not have access to a car or to regular public transport, and for those who have caring responsibilities.