

Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence

Q1. Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meetings arrangements work?

- Very Well
- Well
- Neither well nor poorly
- Poorly
- Very Poorly
- Unsure

While the introduction of virtual meetings was resource-intensive with substantial demand for training, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant culture shift in the way people transact business and access services. It has also left Councils well-equipped with robust protocols for virtual participation and engagement. The flexibility and convenience have generated many benefits; these are explored later in this response.

Q2. 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
- No
- Unsure

Nottinghamshire County Council favours continuation of the powers to enable maximum flexibility.

Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements? Please select all that apply.

- More accessible for local authority members
- Reduction in travel time for councillors
- Meetings more easily accessed by local residents
- Greater transparency for local authority meetings
- Documents (e.g. minutes, agendas, supporting papers) are more accessible to local residents and others online
- Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion
- A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings
- I do not think there are any benefits to remote meetings
- Other (please specify)

In addition to those advantages noted above, allowing Councils to meet virtually would provide the following benefits:

The risk of meetings being abandoned because they are inquorate would be reduced. As the time commitment required by Members would decrease, and the ability to attend wherever they are, Members could attend where they would otherwise have submitted their apologies, for example where Councillors work away from the locations at which their meetings are held.

This ties in with advantages around securing attendance in adverse weather. Decision-making meetings can be jeopardised where there are weather events that mean it is unsafe for members to travel or they are physically unable to reach the meeting venue. Safety of those attending meetings is of particular benefit where meetings run into or are held in the evening. On rare occasions in the past, the Council has had to cancel meetings or cut them short due to extreme weather conditions. By retaining a virtual meeting option, such scenarios, whilst rare, could hopefully be avoided all together.

Recent years have seen adverse weather events around the time at which Councils are required to set their budgets. Adverse weather events, which could stop make a meeting inquorate or skew the political balance (where political representation is locality based), could jeopardise a Council's ability to set its annual budget. It could also protect other key decisions that councils need to make. It also improves opportunities for members of the public to participate, regardless of where they live in the area and the prevailing conditions.

The size of some Council areas is so significant that travelling to a meeting venue can greatly impact the time commitment of those Councillors who live further away. For example, in a large rural county like Nottinghamshire, a Councillor living in the north can spend a minimum of two hours travelling, meaning a meeting that lasts half a day would require them to commit a full day's worth of time. This increased efficiency also benefits Councillors who are Members of more than one local authority; reduced travel times enable them to attend back-to-back meetings. It also helps them connect with their local parish Councils – reducing the time they need to spend on County Council business and associated journeys would increase their availability to attend meetings of other bodies.

By allowing greater flexibility in how Councils can hold their meetings, there is an opportunity to broaden the range of candidates who stand for election. A required physical presence at a meeting venue could deter prospective candidates.

During the period within which the Council has run virtual meetings, it has seen an increase in the number of people who have viewed its meetings. Recordings of Council meetings have enjoyed several hundred views, which exceeds not only the number of people who would typically attend a meeting, but the capacity within the public gallery. This carries the added advantage of reducing the burdens necessary for people to engage with Council meetings, particularly in areas where there are long distances to travel and limited public transport. Virtual participation also allows members of the public to engage more efficiently – they can hear debate and participate in any public speaking sessions without having to sit through long agendas until the item in which they are interested is considered.

Provision for Councils to choose the format of meetings would also be advantageous where unanticipated events occur, for instance, fire or flood. It is not always possible or cost effective to find an alternative venue of sufficient size and with appropriate

facilities, particularly at short notice. The alternative provision will allow democratic processes to continue with the minimum disruption. It would also allow Councils to react to any local pandemic (or other infectious disease) flare-ups.

One further advantage of remote meetings is the positive environmental impact. As stated previously, some Councils, covering large areas would require meeting attendees to travel significant distances. It is not always possible to use public transport to access meetings, meaning a wider reliance on private vehicles. It would have the added benefit of contributing to the national effort to cut carbon emissions from transportation in line with the Government's carbon change target of cutting emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels.

Q4. (For local authorities only) Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

- Yes
- ~~No~~
- ~~Unsure~~

The Council has made savings from holding remote meetings. The amount the Council has spent on Members' travel claims has reduced. The figures given below are the full year total; some reduction will be accounted for from the reduction in permitted travel however, a significant proportion is the result of Councillors not submitting travel claims for attending meetings.

- 2018/19 - £58,447.90
- 2019/20 - £55,158.55
- 2020/21 - £7,385.80

The Council acknowledges that increased officer resource is required to support virtual meetings, however this has reduced as both members and officers have become used to the approach. Some of the resourcing requirements stem from the livestreaming of meetings. This demand would continue if live broadcasting became a legal requirement, as it means that more people would be required to ensure the meeting is legal in terms of decision-making rather than, if the live broadcast was to fail, continuing with the meeting and uploading the recording afterwards.

Q5. What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements, and do you have any suggestions for how they could be mitigated/overcome? Please select all that apply.

- It is harder for members to talk to one another informally
- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or 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
- ~~There is less opportunity for local residents to speak or ask questions~~
- ~~Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format~~
- ~~Debate is restricted by the remote format~~
- ~~It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format~~
- ~~It is more difficult to chair meetings in an orderly fashion~~
- ~~Virtual meetings can be more easily dominated by individual speakers~~

- ~~It might enable democratically elected members to live and perform their duties outside their local area on a permanent basis, therefore detaching them from the communities they serve~~
- ~~It may create too substantial a division between the way national democracy (e.g. in the House of Commons) and local democracy is conducted~~
- ~~I do not think there are any disadvantages to remote meetings~~
- Other (please specify)

Of those potential disadvantages set out above, the following mitigations could apply:

- Members talking to one another informally: Local authorities could encourage group networking as well as organising non-political events that provide an opportunity for colleagues from different political groups to mix, including training events and drop-in sessions. There would also be the opportunity to develop relationships through those meetings that are held face-to-face or using a hybrid model.
- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection: Councils could explore options with councillors about whether there are ways their connectivity could be improved. However, a hybrid meeting offer would provide an in-person alternative for people with poor quality internet connections
- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing technology: A hybrid model would provide a non-technological means of participating for those Councillors and members of the public who are less familiar with video conferencing technology. The numbers of people who are less familiar with video conferencing technology will have significantly reduced from the position at the start of the pandemic out of necessity. It would also be incumbent on local authorities to provide a comprehensive training and support for Councillors to enable them to access remote meetings.

Nottinghamshire County Council has mitigated these disadvantages through:

- Its meeting on-boarding arrangements. The measures that the Council has put in place prior to the start of meetings, which have seen more Members chatting with one another across groups than would in the Council Chamber.
- Intensive training when virtual meetings began.
- The ICT support available to Members regarding both internet access and familiarity, with support available at every meeting and VIP support for Councillors combined with active call monitoring and response during meetings.

Q6. What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

The main advantages of in-person meetings are the opportunities that are provided for building informal networks, both cross-party and with officers, in particular following local elections. Councils can ensure that there is a balance of in-person

activity to enable these relationships to be built, particularly if the Council has the flexibility to determine how it wishes to hold its meetings.

The other key disadvantage relates to the energy within a meeting, which is different in virtual meetings. Remote meetings remove the ability to read people's body language and detect nuance can be inhibited by virtual meetings, which means that skilful chairing is required.

Q7. 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?

- For all meetings
- For most meetings with a few exceptions (please specify)
- Only for some meetings (please specify)
- I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which meetings should have the option to meet remotely
- I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings for any meetings
- Unsure

Nottinghamshire County Council believes that provision should be made that would enable local authorities to determine for themselves which meetings to hold fully remotely, in a hybrid format or in-person.

Q8. 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?

- In any circumstances
- Only in extenuating circumstances where a meeting cannot be held face-to-face or some members would be unable to attend (e.g. severe weather events, coronavirus restrictions)
- I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely
- I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings under any circumstances
- Other (please specify)
- Unsure

Nottinghamshire County Council believes that provision should be made to give local authorities the flexibility to determine, in accordance with arrangements defined within their Constitution, when it is more appropriate to hold fully remote meetings, hybrid meetings or in person meetings (see responses to questions 9 and 10).

Q9. 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?

- Yes
- No

~~Unsure~~

Local authorities are best positioned to make these determinations; they understand their local communities and councillors. A nationally mandated approach would not reflect local concerns, priorities and infrastructure. For example, mandating that meetings must be held fully in person where matters heavily affect rural communities with poor public transport links could automatically disenfranchise them, reducing transparency and accountability (to be read in conjunction to the answers to questions 8 and 10).

Q10. If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome?

Any risk of politicising decisions about the format in which meetings should take place can be mitigated by providing a framework that sits within Councils' Constitutions, with the format to be agreed with the Proper Officer.

Q11. 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
- ~~No~~
- Unsure

Provision for remote meetings could positively affect people with the following protected characteristics:

- Remote meetings can have a positive impact on people with disabilities. People with disabilities can be spared the need to travel, and with appropriate adaptive technologies, engage with democracy more independently than they might otherwise be able, or where they might not previously have been able to engage. This has advantages for both Councillors and members of the public and could reduce barriers that prevent people with this protected characteristic from standing for election.

People whose disabilities that may lead to their immune system being suppressed could also experience positive impacts. Allowing the continuation of remote meetings would allow them to reduce their personal contacts.

There is a potential for a negative impact on people with certain disabilities, for example visual impairment, if all meetings are held fully remotely and their disability meant that they would be unable to join the meeting remotely. Conversely, the use of remote meetings could have a positive impact for people with other disabilities. Thinking specifically of users with hearing impairments, there are tools within remote meetings systems that offer closed captioning, which can assist if a venue does not have an induction loop or no sign language interpreter is available.

Permitting remote access to meetings would also have a positive impact on those who care for people with disabilities, providing flexibility and preventing discrimination by association.

Given that remote meetings have operated successfully during the pandemic it could be argued that their continuation would constitute a reasonable adjustment.

- Remote meetings could have a positive impact on anyone with the protected characteristic pregnancy and maternity. As there are no formal provisions that allow Councillors to take maternity leave, remote meetings would enable any Councillor protected by virtue of this characteristic to continue their role with greater flexibility and reducing the risk that they would become disqualified if they are unable to attend meetings in person.
- Allowing for meetings to be held remotely could have a positive impact on younger people, who are more pre-disposed to transacting business digitally. The impact is also positive as it could increase both candidacy and participation by people of working age.

Provision for remote meetings has the potential to negatively affect people with the following protected characteristics:

- Holding remote meetings could have a negative impact on older people; this group can have lower levels of IT confidence and skill. This could be mitigated by providing comprehensive, tailored training for Members or by offering alternative methods through which Councillors and members of the public could engage, for example through hybrid meetings. It is also important to recognise that during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital participation has become widespread, increasing the likelihood that some of those people who had previously been reluctant to, or unable to engage digitally, have developed new skills and confidence.
- Fully remote meetings also have the potential to negatively impact people with disabilities, both Councillors and members of the public, who would find it easier to attend a meeting in person. This could be mitigated against by using a hybrid meeting format where there is an option for them to attend County Hall in addition to joining online.

Having considered the potential for positive and negative impacts on different protected characteristics, the ability to hold hybrid meetings would present a solution that would mitigate negative impacts while retaining the benefits of those positive impacts provided by the ability to hold remote meetings.