



Remote Meetings Questionnaire

Members

Introduction

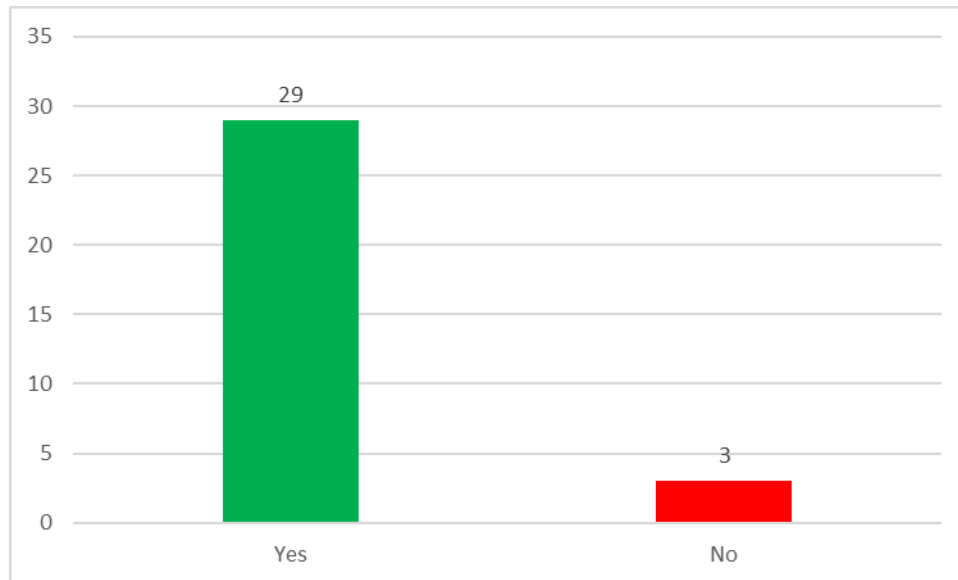
Since May 2020 following the Covid-19 Coronavirus lockdown, Colchester Borough Council has been conducting committee meetings on-line.

Now that all committees have met on-line, at least once, Members were asked to provide their views on how they have found the process, and if they have any suggestions on how remote meetings can be improved going forward.

Members were surveyed in September 2020 with 32 responses being received.

Q1. Do you have the right equipment to enable you to fully participate in remote meetings?

If not, what do you feel would help you?



Comments:

Luckily I have my own

Yes - but rather belatedly

Some more support
needed navigating IT

Yes, plus a backup kit

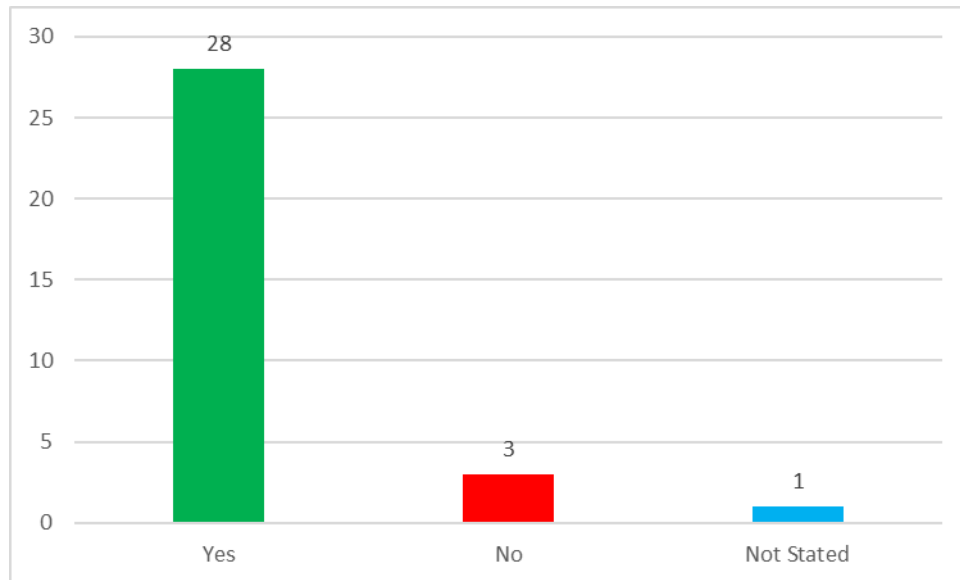
Yes, although when on
the go, headphones for
use with a mobile phone
would be helpful.

No mic on Laptop and no
CBC email or calendar on
iPad so a bit of
forwarding goes on.
Need to pick up emails
on Ipad.

I need hard copies of
meeting papers. I cannot
read on line and take
part in a zoom/teams
meeting.

Q2. Do you feel that you have received sufficient training to be able to participate in remote meetings?

If not, what further training do you feel that you need?



Comments:

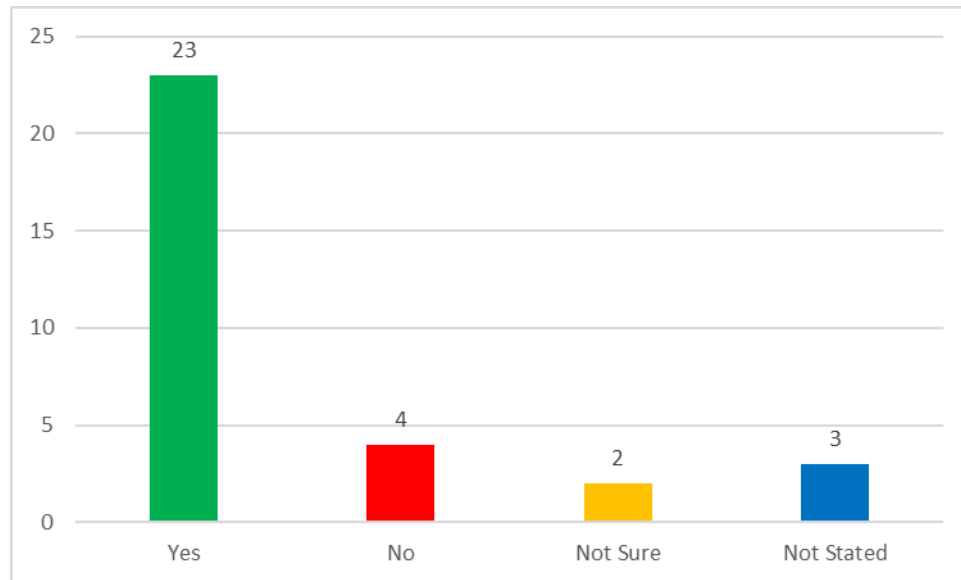
No - I am now able to access meetings but there were difficulties at the beginning and I feel that all Councillors should have been given full instructions much earlier on

At present I can only access Teams on my phone and not council laptop. This makes it more difficult to participate fully. I have requested help several times but as yet no one has solved my problem.

I need help with navigating moving from ECC teams and CBC teams

3. Do you feel that the Remote Meeting Protocol is helpful?

Are there any other issues that should be included in the Remote Meeting Protocol?



Comments:

Yes, but don't sit in the dark, also try not to have your face in shadow or sit in front of a window with sunlight behind you.

Yes the remote meeting protocol is helpful.

If you're going to read something out hold the paper up rather than looking down and all I can see is the top of a head. When speaking turn camera on. Keep slides to a minimum.

Reminders that the public watch these meetings and having Councillors roll up cigarettes and smoking is not a good sign. Also drinking alcohol and asking for alcohol on screen is not a good image.

Feel though that all should be reminded in making sure that we put a good image over when on camera.

I think we need more clarity on how often we need votes when there are no objections to proposals and things can be passed nem con.

Some meetings have left members of the public as part of the meeting when they should be removed. This needs tighter management in future.

Not sure what the protocol is?

Just a reminder that in public meetings councillors should remain visible.

Clearer instructions on indicating to speak - electronic hands up or waving frantically. Keep mics off.

Q4. What do you feel are the benefits and disadvantages of remote meetings?

4a. Benefits:

The answers to this question have been grouped into the below themes:

Saves on time, travel and money	Better than nothing when it is not possible to hold actual meetings.	Easier to attend.	Safer at home Easier to book No disadvantages
Keeps councillors focused.	Being able to meet without risking staff and cllrs also it saves from an environmental perspective by reducing pollution.	Only benefit is that meetings are being held and decisions made.	Easier to fit around work and childcare commitments.
Objectivity, lack of interruptions, control.	Less need to travel in to town so often, especially during winter and cold wet evenings.	Clothing can be less formal.	Flexibility, more time efficient (especially if a visiting councillor).
Remote Meetings are valuable as a supplement to normal meetings. They can be quickly set up and organised, as well as recorded and broadcast.	The "Chat room" is really quite useful.	Remote is good for briefings.	Ability to attend to other matters (without first seeking the consent of the Mayor or chairman) during boring contributions, or those that just repeat what has already been said.
	Not having to Shout at people when they can't hear me.	No travel means not getting stuck in traffic = more time with family therefore less resentment.	

4b. Disadvantages:

The answers to this question have been grouped into the below themes:

You miss the human contact.

Personal interaction,
discussion with colleagues,
gaining information from
officers.

Remote meetings do not allow
members to fully interact with
each other.

Meetings take longer. Harder
to concentrate on the
discussion.

Can't read body language
especially on full council
meetings when you need to
scroll through all the screens.

No before or after chat which
is often an important
opportunity to find common
ground and resolve issues.

it's hopeless in term of public
scrutiny as we are feeling too
safe in our own territory.

When a controversial planning
application comes before the
committee, remote meetings
do not convey the strength of
feeling among the public
attending.

Not so easy to have a full
discussion as someone may
raise a point but it is difficult to
ask questions while they are
talking and the moment could
have passed by the time you
are able to speak.

Communication is often more
than verbal, body language is
lost on Teams and Zoom.

With no travel required - that
time is regularly filled with
another meeting. This can lead
to eye strain and brain faze.

The disadvantage is that there
is now hardly any break times
and we do need to build these
in more.

Responses can be slow and not
so spontaneous at times. Eyes
get very tired looking at the
screen.

No atmosphere .. no eye
contact ... no social
interaction.

Loss of human connections
with fellow councillors.

Connectivity is a problem also
residents can feel left out if
they do not have the
equipment.

Can't informally interact with
others. Hard to "read the
room" especially when
chairing.

Possibility that less
preparation will be carried out
for meetings.

Danger of parties becoming
further apart with polarisation
without face-to-face contact.

Q5. Do you feel that there are any areas of remote meetings that could be improved?

If one is not on the particular panel / committee, having to access the meeting through YouTube is a nightmare. There should be the possibility for non-panel members to join too.

Voting by hand rather than named vote, except for reasons normally given in full council.

We should be supplied with council laptops.

Keep agendas as short as possible. I'm not a fan of the chairing style where the chair comes to every member in turn for questions.

Dress code for Councillors. No silly slogans displayed on screen.

Shorter meetings.

The time lag when people are trying to umute Perhaps need an officer to do that quickly for all.

Perhaps the concept of a chat room before meetings could improve interactions between Councillors.

On the whole I think staff have done well to get us all up and running!!!

Is there a way of looking/referencing at the agenda details/page when on the screen. Looks like needing two screens, one for being on the meeting and one to follow the agenda.

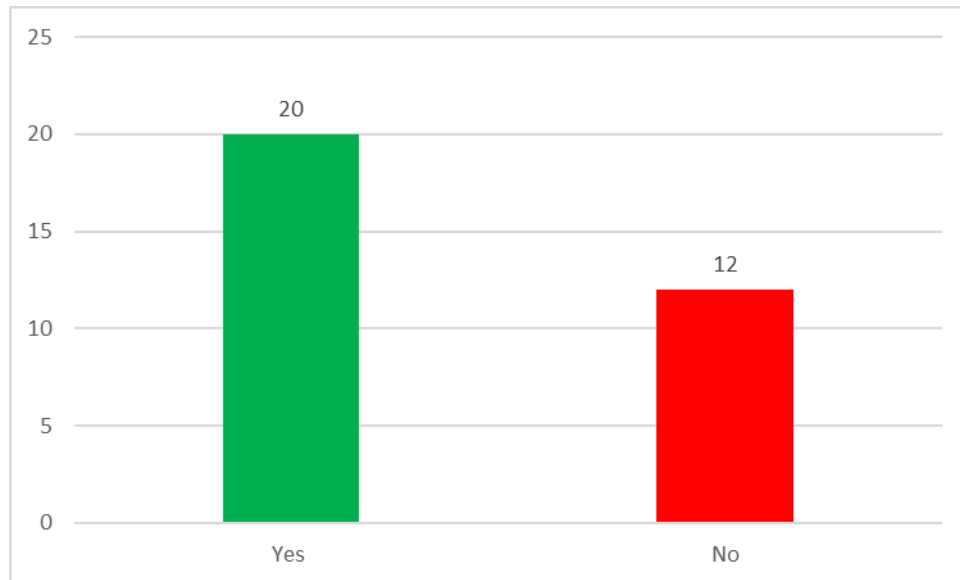
I think we could take more advantage of opportunities for submitting questions without needing to speak. It would save time if we could use the chat function, or something similar, to submit questions.

Currently just everyone learning that muting the microphone when not speaking is essential. As is ensuring it is muted and turning off the camera during breaks.

How voting is handled especially in full council.

6. Do you feel that you are given enough break times during meetings?

If not, what do you think is a reasonable time between breaks?



Comments:

90 minutes.

Staring at a screen is a tiring experience. I think a minimum of 10 minutes between sessions is essential.

Shorter meeting talk time and regular breaks, every 45 minutes there's a 5 minute breath.

No. even when its my own loo I have to dash and there still isn't time to put the kettle on as well!

Finish by 8pm.

It's incredibly tiring making sense of spoken word. Sometimes I realise I'm concentrating so much on understanding what's being said I realise I've lost sense of what is being said. I only need 1 speaker to not be clear and then I'm playing catch up.

Sometimes the meeting goes on for more than 2 hours before a break time.

Enough break times.

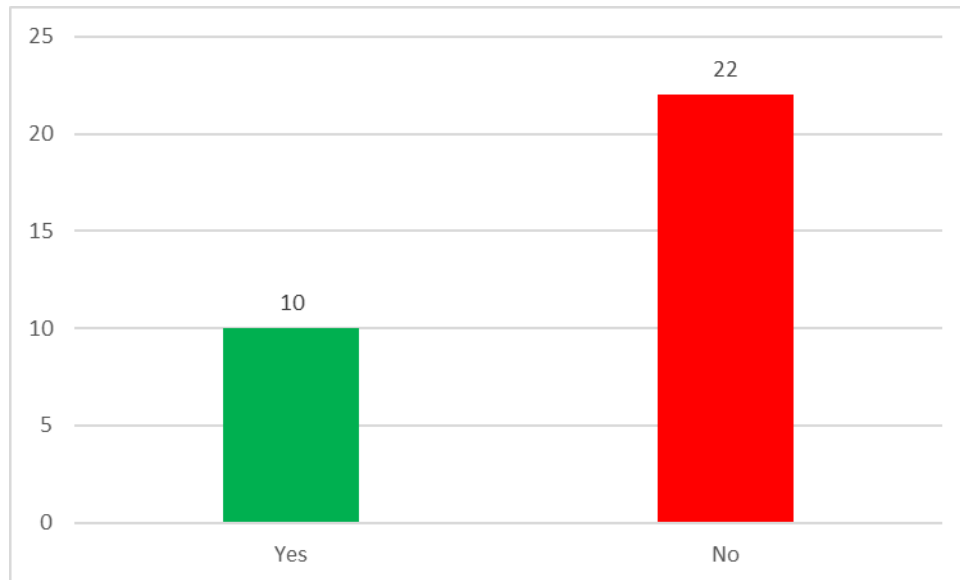
A 10 minute break should be sufficient. Although perhaps a 30 minute break during a very long (4 hour meeting) would enable participants to eat supper/dinner/tea.

Rather have 5 minutes every hour than longer less often.

Length of agendas need to better reflect the concentration and endurance of members. Evening meals seem to be a thing of the past . I often have 4 evening meetings per week.

Q7. Currently the maximum meeting time allowed is four hours, do you feel that is appropriate for remote meetings?

If not, what should the maximum meeting length be?



Comments:

3 hours quite enough, except perhaps for Full Council.	3 hours max.	No, unlimited and on chair and committee discretion.	No meeting, whether real or virtual should last more than 2 hours.
This is a non-issue.	I think 3 hours should be the limit.	I believe four hours is too long staring at a screen, even with breaks. I would suggest a maximum of three hours with at least one break.	Types of meeting should have a target ideal. Many meetings should be no more than an hour. Committee meetings of any kind should be no more than 3.
I think that 3 hours should be the maximum. Its very hard to concentrate for 4 hours on a video call.	No. This is much too long to be sat at a computer. Perhaps 2 hours would be sufficient.	We should be considering indicative timings for items on long agendas which will help give people an idea of whether we are running ahead or behind schedule and if there'll be a rush to meet a deadline.	It's not ideal. Four hours is really too long, but I understand that the roll call for votes is the main factor that lengthens meeting times.
It all depends on what is being discussed but if meetings are too long then it makes it difficult to concentrate.	I really don't think any meeting should last longer than two hours as even with breaks.	Far too long - 2 hours. Cut the waffle and just get the business done.	Exhausting, not only for the hearing impaired but those that struggle with vision.

Q8. If you chair a committee or panel, are there any particular challenges that you face performing that role in a remote meeting?

Comments:

I don't chair a CBC meeting but do chair others (eg CBH) and find the challenge is to keep a number of balls in the air; particularly spotting who wishes to speak in a meeting of 24+.

I am not chair of any meetings, although I would think the chairperson has to be very alert.

Noting break times, reading the room on whether formal votes are necessary or not. Having to keep attention to several things during the meeting (speaker, hands up in the participant pane, any interjections or potential connection issues).

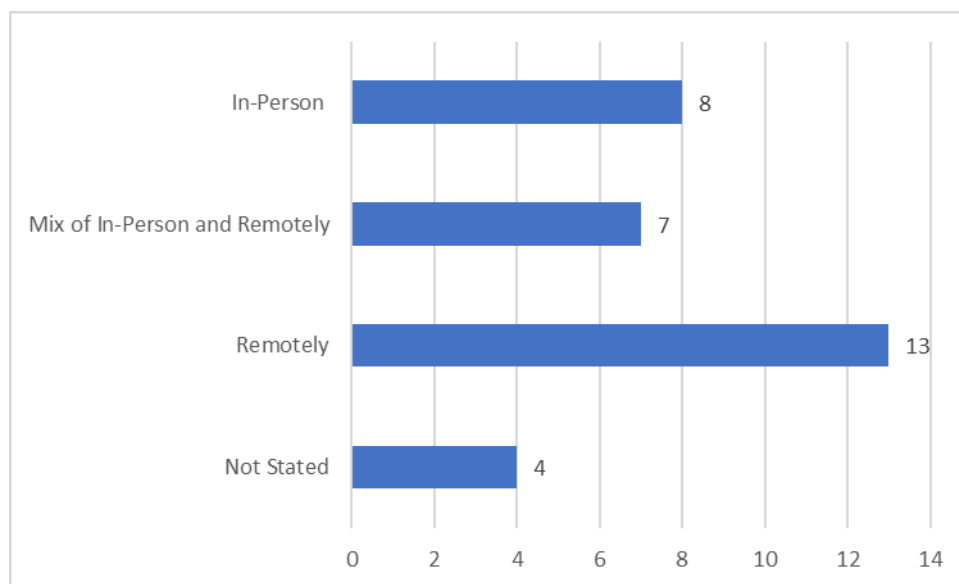
Not really - but I have to use two computers - one for the electronic papers and one for the Zoom call because flitting between two screens can be difficult while still trying to chair the meeting.

No, all ok.

Meetings too long.

The democratic services staff have been excellent. So no.

Q9. How do you think future meetings should be conducted?



Comments:

We should meet in-person for crucial, important meetings but others could continue remotely.

I believe the Council ought to now return to the Town Hall and Rowan House. When Members and Officers can meet together, democracy will be better served. Virtual meetings ought to now be restricted to occasional training sessions, if essential.

As they are until it is safe to return to normal public meetings.

As now. But a firm reminder of meeting disciplines, hands etc and a mandatory break at 90 minutes unless the meeting is close to an end.

Would like to see an element of remote meetings kept long term - maybe hybrid enabling people who cannot attend physically to still participate (attendance by Councillors has gone up and substitutions down) and briefings etc could be kept online.

As many as possible should be conducted virtually. Certainly ALL briefings. Cllr's and officers should be afforded the opportunity of attending physical meetings 'virtually'. For example visiting Cllr's to Planning Committee could be given a 10min warning that their slot is approaching, giving time to prepare, attend and leave the meeting. A process which up until now has taken a considerable amount of time (driving in, parking, sitting through a plethora of applications until yours is reached,

a sensible mixture of online/real as far as is possible in covid-19 scenario.

In-person with option to dial in, especially if visiting and especially for briefings.

Q10. Are there any other general issues or concerns, relating to remote meetings, that you would like to raise?

Difficult for members with families to attend a meeting without interruptions. Also it is difficult when things like phone calls or people coming to the door occur. Members would either have to ignore the call or leave the meeting for a time and therefore miss what other members have said.

I think we should carry on remote meetings but have physical meetings peppered in.

I think, frankly, that they have worked pretty well, and hats off to those as who have organised and sorted them out - at pretty short notice. I would like the facility to have a copy of what i've said here, please (!) Roger Buston.

A strain on eyes and concentration, meetings too long and no interaction with others in the meeting, difficult to read agenda notes and look at screen.

Lower public attendance.

Meetings are too long.

No, but there may be issues around the ability of the public to access meetings that we need to understand.

They do allow flexibility around attendance and are an easy way for the public and expert witnesses to participate.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the various staff and officers who have worked hard to ensure the remote meetings flow as smoothly as possible.

Making sure officers and members put over a good image on camera.

If these are to continue in the longer term, we might want to consider using different types of formal and informal virtual meetings. For example, it would be interesting for the Cabinet to have a meeting that was entirely Have Your Say, answering questions from residents.

Just to thank the democratic services team for their efforts so far.

Zoom is feeling the strain and is overloaded. Last night's meeting was breaking up.

It feels less democratic in terms of the public. Although I do appreciate they can tune in, there is no immediate feedback. We don't like heckling but it's the fastest way to get feedback.