

9 June 2021

Report of	Assistant Director of Corporate and Improvement Services	Author	Richard Clifford/Matthew Evans ☎ 507832/03300 538006
Title	Local Authority Remote Meetings Call for Evidence		
Wards affected	Not Applicable		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The government has launched a call for evidence on the use of the arrangements which provided express provision for local authorities to hold meetings remotely. This report sets out a proposed response to the call for evidence. This is based on reviews to the Governance and Audit Committee in October 2020 and March 2021.

2. Recommended Decision

- 2.1 To approve the response to the call for evidence at Appendix 1 of this report.

3. Reason for Recommended Decision

- 3.1 The government call for evidence closes on 17 June 2021.
- 3.2 The proposed response highlights the advantages and disadvantages of remote meetings, but based on the evidence of the experience at Colchester Borough Council of remote meetings is supportive of arrangements that would allow all decision making meetings to be held remotely and to allow local authorities to have the flexibility to decide for themselves the circumstances in which they should have the option to meet remotely.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 No alternative options are recommended.

5. Background Information

- 5.1 The Government has launched a call for evidence about the use of provisions that were put in place for local authorities to meet remotely during the course of the Covid 19 pandemic. These provisions were set out in the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus)(Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings)((England and Wales) Regulations 2020. These regulations enabled local authorities to:
- have flexibility to hold meetings at any time of day and on any day, to alter how frequently meetings can be held and to move or cancel meetings without requiring further notice.
 - to hold meetings remotely. For the purposes of any statutory requirement, members of the local authority are considered as attending a meeting if they can hear, and where practicable see, and be heard and, where practicable, be seen by other members and the public. This allowed for meetings to be held by remote means including via telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webchat and live streaming. The “where practicable” wording is important because it means that it is not an absolute requirement that every participant can be seen all the time, even when they are speaking.
 - to make standing orders about remote attendance at meetings in relation to voting, access to documents and facilities that can be employed to allow the meeting to be held remotely to suit their own circumstances. (Remote Meetings Procedure Rules and Remote Meetings Protocol were agreed).
 - the “place” at which a local authority meeting is held is not confined to the council building. The “place” may be where the instigator or arranger of the meeting is, or electronic, digital or virtual locations such as internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers. It could be an officer’s or member’s home.
 - requirements for a meeting being “open to the public” are satisfied by a local authority holding the meeting remotely. This enabled local authorities to facilitate and hold remote meetings outside of the council offices and/or remotely and allows for members of the public to attend remotely.
 - where documents must be “open to inspection”, this is satisfied by the documents being published on the council’s website. Documents include notices, agendas, reports, background papers, minutes etc. The publication, posting or making available of documents at council offices includes publication on the Council’s website. The normal five clear working day notice of publication of agendas continue to apply.

The regulations expired on 7 May 2021.

- 5.2 The Government has received representations from a number of local authorities and local government sector bodies making the case for permanent express provision for remote meetings. Colchester Borough Council made representations supported by all the political groups, for the government to legislate to allow remote meetings to continue. The Government has indicated that it would like to hear from interested parties about the advantages and disadvantages of making such arrangements for remote meetings permanent and the use of the arrangements to date. The call for evidence closes on 17 June 2021 and the government has asked that where possible quantitative data be used to support any responses.

- 5.3 The call for evidence takes the form of list of questions and these questions together with proposed responses, are set out at Appendix 1. The proposed answers are shown in bold.
- 5.4 The Governance and Audit Committee has kept the use of remote meetings under review and received a detailed report to its meeting on 20 October 2020 and an update report on 23 March 2021 covering the issues. The 20 October 2020 report was informed by a survey views from members and those officers in senior management positions or who regularly attended Committee meetings . Members of the public were also invited to comment but no public responses were received. The information gathered for these reports and the conclusions in the debate have been used to inform the response to the call for evidence. From our own experience of remote meeting these have worked well for members, have environmental benefits and have increased democratic engagement with the Council's decision-making process.
- 5.5 The overall tenor of the response is supportive of the government introducing legislation which would permit local authorities to have the ability to hold formal decision-making meetings remotely or with hybrid arrangements, although some disadvantages are acknowledged. It also endorses the suggestion that local authorities should have the flexibility to decide for themselves the circumstances in which they should have the option to meet remotely.

6. Standard References

- 6.1 There are no particular references to the Strategic Plan; consultation or publicity considerations or financial; community safety; health and safety or risk management implications from the response to the consultation. There would be clear financial, health and safety and environmental and sustainability implications from any decision to allow remote meetings to recommence and some of these issues are addressed in the response to the Call for Evidence.

Appendices

Response to Call for Evidence – Appendix 1

Background Papers

Reports to Governance and Audit Committee on Remote Meetings 20 October 2020 and 23 March 2021

Open Consultation

Local Authority remote meetings: call for evidence

The answers given to these questions are supported by reports and their appendices that were submitted to Governance and Audit Committee on 28 July 2020, 20 October 2020, and 23 March 2021.

Answers selected have been highlighted by **bold** text.

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

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

The feedback from members, officers and the public has generally been very good. Whilst there is a natural desire to have face to face meetings all participants are getting used to the new skills of digital meetings. Democratic Services have not received any specific complaints or concerns about the meetings. Additionally, of 32 Councillors who responded to a survey:

29 felt that they had the right equipment to fully participate in remote meetings;
28 felt that they had received sufficient training to enable them to participate in remote meetings;
23 felt that the Council's Remote Meeting Protocol was helpful

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

Please explain your answer in more detail.

Members and those officers in senior management positions or who frequently supported or presented at Committee meetings were surveyed in relation to a number of aspects of remote meetings. Overall the surveys demonstrated a positive response to remote meetings, with very positive feedback to the Democratic and IT teams that have facilitated them. The key question of whether meetings should be remote, hybrid or face to face in the future prompted the following response:

How should future meetings be conducted?	Councillors	Officers	Total
Remote	13	8	21
Face to face	8	1	9
Hybrid of remote and face to face	7	3	10
No view	4	1	5

Some of the comments that were received from Members:

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

“I believe that 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.”

“In person, with the option to dial in, especially if visiting and especially for briefings.”

“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.”

Some of the comments that were received from Officers:

“All online. It’s the future.”

“Online/virtual is definitely the best choice.”

“A mixture of online and Town Hall.”

“Evening meetings are definitely better for Officers online as they have often had a full day of meetings anyway. I think a combination would be ideal.”

**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)

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

Attendance at meetings has risen, with fewer members attending Committees as substitutes. Members have been able to log in and participate in meetings from across the country, when they would not have been able to attend a physical meeting.

There are direct environmental benefits from holding meetings remotely, mainly from the reduction in car journeys and CO2 emissions from the Town Hall for meetings and are set out in a table below. A return to physical meetings would mean that these environmental benefits would be lost and there would be a merit in exploring hybrid meetings as far as possible in order to retain as many environmental benefits as possible.

Length of round journey (miles)	Avoided miles travelled	Saving of CO2 (tonnes)	CO2 avoided from vehicle emissions (kg)
4	1256	0.37	370
6	1884	0.55	550
10	2140	0.91	910

There are accessibility benefits from holding meetings remotely in that they allow people to view or join meetings from the environment of their choice, rather than from travelling to and accessing the meeting at the Town Hall. Members of the public have been able to join remote meetings from other countries, and have been able to join to speak online while keeping their identity protected, where they have reason to need to do so. Public engagement has increased significantly, the number of online views for each committee is considerably more than the previous audio streaming.

There is evidence that remote meetings have helped increase public engagement with meetings and have improved the transparency of decision making. An analysis was conducted of the number of views of each meeting held remotely June 2020 – October 2020. The figures show that more people were viewing through the YouTube live stream than listened through the audio stream for the similar period the previous year. There were 5780 views of meetings on You Tube from June – September 2020. The comparative figure for listens on the previous audio streaming system over the same period last year was 3,517. This indicates that more members of the public were engaging with remote public meetings.

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

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Please explain your answer in more detail.

Agendas have become entirely digital, saving on printing costs. Additionally, not using Council buildings to host meetings has resulted in savings of CO2 emissions and the associated costs of lighting and heating meeting venues.

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)

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

Some feedback received is that Members miss the opportunity to chat informally with their colleagues around the meeting setting, and they find that the remote meeting format does not allow Members to fully interact with each other.

A small number of Members have struggled with accessing and participating in remote meetings, and have required additional support during this process. Some Members do find it more difficult to reference agenda papers electronically while also participating in a remote meeting.

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

Work has already been undertaken to provide dedicated equipment to Members to allow them to join and participate in remote meetings. This includes distribution of new equipment and individual bespoke training. Members with weaker internet connections have been offered assistance to provide greater connectivity.

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

Some Members believe that remote meetings take longer, and it is harder to concentrate on the discussion. Face to face meetings would also allow Members and Officers to fully interact with each other both before and during the meeting.

There is also a potential for fewer staff to be required to administer entirely face to face meetings, although hybrid meetings may still require additional support.

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 should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they 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

It is considered that due to the support that has been expressed for element of remotes meetings, that there should be an option to make joining any face to face meeting remotely. Each Council should therefore be given the opportunity to allow remote, hybrid or face to face meetings at their discretion to better serve the diverse needs of Officers, Members and members of the public.

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

Each Authority will be aware of the specific needs and circumstances of its Officers, Members and members of the public, and should be afforded the opportunity to operate in the most effective way, with any decision taken in respect of remote meeting attendance subject to the usual process, challenge and scrutiny.

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

No, provided any such decision was taken as the result of a clear and public decision making process, in accordance with correct governance, and subject to debate, challenge and scrutiny.

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

N/A

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

Allowing Authorities greater flexibility in determining how meetings are run can only assist those with protected characteristics. In providing a greater range of options to access the democratic process, people with very different circumstances are still able to participate in meetings in a manner of their own choosing. Those who find it difficult to attend physical meetings may log on and participate over the internet, while retaining the option for physical public attendance at meetings if this is the preferred method of interaction.