

**Call for evidence – continuation of remote meetings**

**Date: 25 May 2021**

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**About the District Councils' Network**

The District Councils' Network (DCN) is a cross-party member led network of 183 councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA) and provide a single voice for district services within the Local Government Association. District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people - 40% of the population - and cover 68% of the country by area.

**DCN response**

**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

They have worked well, and as officers and members become more comfortable with the technology they work very well.

**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

It should be for local authorities to decide what works best for their decision-making processes, for their officers & members and most importantly for their residents.

If councils can meet openness & transparency and access to information requirements, they should be allowed to proceed in the most suitable way.

Furthermore it would give councils the opportunity to develop hybrid sessions, mixing remote and in person accessibility to best support local democracy

**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)

Member attendance has been improved whilst meeting remotely. Members have joined a meeting that they normally wouldn't have been able to attend, for instance due to travel time between venues which also reduces associated emissions contributing to our ambitions to meet net zero.

Public engagement has also increased due to remote meetings. To give an example one District can currently seat around 60 people in its public gallery which was only ever full on a couple of occasions for Planning Committee meetings. Since holding remote meetings, they have over 300 residents viewing live at the same time, on a couple of occasions and this has increased to over 500 views after the meeting.

Accountability and public trust can only improve as a result of mixing in more remote meetings alongside in-person meetings, increasing transparency, engagement and quality of democracy overall.

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

- **Yes ✓**
- No
- Unsure

Some of our Districts have said that there has been a reduction in costs. For instance reduction in travel expenses, savings in opening of council offices, and some staff savings. There are wider savings beyond financial too, such as the environmental savings, and wider effectiveness in decision-making linked to the accessibility opportunities created by remote meetings.

**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)

Ultimately there are issues to deal with, but they are often straightforward to overcome and are not sufficient reasons not to support the availability remote meetings.

Poor internet quality has presented a small problem, particularly intermittent weather-related internet issues, but in general it has shown that most areas have a connection of sufficient quality to attend a remote meeting.

There is no question that it has been more difficult for members who are unfamiliar with the technology, but Districts can provide training for all members and only had one who struggled but was able to attend meetings by phone.

Councils are also provided training and test sessions for members of the public who wished to speak at meetings and if they weren't comfortable, they could dial into the meeting by phone.

There is no difference in the ability for members to participate or ask questions as we used exactly the same procedures in remote meetings.

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

It is easier to support the chair and provide one-to-one advice in a face-to-face meeting.

The meetings are not as resource-intensive to support, for example the number of officers required to host the meeting, provide technical support and monitor the debate.

We would add that the opportunity to hold remote meetings means that councils can hold hybrid meetings involving in-person and remote accessibility options.

**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 should be for each local authority to decide how they should operate, knowing its business, its members and its residents. It is unlikely that most would decide to hold all meetings remotely, but having the option is important.

**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

**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 employ professional officers who, along with their members, are able to make decisions on how they hold meetings in a sensible and professional manner.

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

**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

Remote meetings have already demonstrated benefits to many individuals – they are far more accessible to people with disabilities and make it possible for those with caring responsibilities to attend meetings.

For instance some Districts have received comments from councillors and members of the public who have been grateful for the ability to attend where they would not normally be able to due to caring for children or being unable to travel to the council offices.

However, we understand that in-person meetings can also be extremely valuable and accessible in different ways. The key is allowing councils locally to decide how to mix remote and in-person meetings to best empower local democracy.