

## **County Council's response to the Government's Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence**

N.B. Responses provided to questions are in bold.

### **Questions**

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

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

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)

### **Notes:**

- WSCC has been webcasting many formal meetings for some time. In addition to Full Council meetings (which have been webcast for 12 years), it was decided two years ago to webcast all meetings of Cabinet, scrutiny committees and the Planning and Rights of Way Committee. Other meetings were being webcast where the agenda was likely to generate public interest. So, the online accessibility of formal meetings considered to be of greatest public interest predates the public health emergency.
- Documents were already available via the Council's website, and via the online links in the webcast live during the meeting.
- Anecdotal member feedback is that chairing virtual meetings has been challenging; that different skills are required and that it can be difficult for chairmen to get a feel for the mood of 'the room'.
- Remote meetings should encourage more diverse councillor membership – those with children/caring responsibilities, those with limited mobility, and those who are working may all find it easier to stand as councillors.
- Remote meetings have reduced travel costs and had a positive environmental impact in West Sussex.

- The Council's Governance Committee has agreed that all informal member meetings should continue to be held virtually (to include member training); this was in recognition of the fact that such meetings work well virtually and a desire to see continued savings from travel and to support delivery of climate change strategy objectives.

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

- **Yes**
- No
- Unsure

**Notes:**

- Total savings of £108,000 were made during 2020/21 as a result of meetings being held remotely. Savings were made up of approximately £6,000 per month on member travel, £2,000 on meeting refreshments, £1,000 on venue hire and other miscellaneous spend.

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

**Notes:**

- Once groups of people from different households are allowed to meet indoors, members will be able to make alternative arrangements for meeting and interacting informally.
- While we have enabled residents to speak at formal virtual meetings, it has not been without its challenges (particularly due to the different digital platforms used and the variability of broadband connections).
- In West Sussex free internet access is provided at our public libraries so residents can watch a webcast.
- N.B. the response above that there is less opportunity for local residents to speak or ask questions should be qualified: there **have** been some opportunities for public to speak at Planning & Rights of Way Committee meetings, as they did prior to meetings being virtual. In addition, stakeholders have been invited to speak at some scrutiny committee meetings. However, the Council's forums for local community engagement, County Local Committees, were cancelled during 2020/21

due to Covid-19 related service pressures (not due to the need to hold meetings virtually). These were the Council's only meetings providing a public question and answer session. Therefore, whilst there have been some opportunities, these have been reduced, but this is not directly attributable to virtual arrangements.

- There is a potential positive impact in terms of democratically elected members being able to be more connected to the communities they serve through digital means: councillors have continued to engage with their communities, replacing in-person opportunities with digital. This has the potential to reach out to a more diverse range of residents who previously might have been unable or uninclined to attend meetings/surgeries etc.

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

- It's easier to sense another person's mood when you can read their body language face-to-face.
- We have had instances of the technology failures during the course of some critical formal virtual meetings.
- Face-to-face meetings require fewer support staff.
- The public might perceive meetings considering controversial issues to be better held face-to-face, with the attendant ability for the public to attend/participate in/observe proceedings in person (although this hasn't been tested: the fact that public have been able to watch webcasts of ALL council meetings during the pandemic may have led to a different perspective).
- It is important to note that the options for meeting arrangements may not just be a choice between face-to-face and remote: the potential impact of hybrid meetings should also be considered. One disadvantage of hybrid meetings would be if the Regulations only permitted those present to vote. Hybrid meetings may not appear to be transparent or democratic if some of the councillors attending aren't able to take a full part in the meeting.

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 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

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

**Note:**

- The criteria applied by authorities in determining which meetings could be held remotely would need to be agreed cross-party, following public consultation, and subject to frequent review, at least in the short term. There should no question that a proposal to hold a meeting remotely is in any way an attempt to stifle or otherwise affect the democratic process.

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

**Note:**

- Carefully agreed criteria, subject to early review, with cross- party support, subject to early review.

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

**Note:**

- The permanent provision to hold remote meetings might encourage more diverse councillor membership – those with children/caring responsibilities, those with limited mobility, those who are working may all find it easier to stand as councillors.
- In West Sussex, some members have up to an hour and a half's drive to get to a meeting at our County Hall. Some can therefore save two to three hours of travel by participating virtually, which can be a great help for members needing to manage other commitments.