



MEETING PAPER

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

Subject: **Consultation: Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting at Local Authority Meetings**

Meeting: **Full Council on 26 November 2024**

Relevant dates: Consultation published on 24 October 2024; **deadline 19 December 2024**

Consultation access: [Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings - GOV.UK](#)

Officer: Town Clerk

1. Summary

1.1 Government is consulting on its *intention* to introduce legislation to give local authorities the flexibility to attend formal Council meetings remotely and to permit proxy voting. Note the use of the word 'flexibility' indicates this is likely to be a discretionary power.

1.2 Proxy voting is a form of voting whereby a member of a decision-making body may delegate their voting power to another representative to enable a vote in their absence. It is possible some councillors may find that, due to their personal circumstances, they are temporarily unable to participate in meetings even if remote attendance provisions are in place. Provisions for proxy voting could provide additional flexibility to those who really need it on a time-limited basis, allowing affected councillors to indirectly exercise their democratic duty, participate in their local authority's governance, and ensure that their views are taken into consideration. In the context of local authorities, the representative would have to be another elected councillor of the local authority.

1.3 These proposals build on support for modernising democracy and increasing inclusivity. However, careful consideration to safeguards is needed.

2. Detail

2.1 The COVID pandemic brought to the fore the question of remote access to meetings. LTC responded quickly, of business necessity ahead of an appropriate legal framework, and embarked on online meetings during this period. Post-pandemic, belated temporary leeway was removed and legislation remains restrictive for statutory meetings; councillors must attend in-person in order to be able to vote in decision-making. However, LTC has increased its transparency and inclusivity by continuing public access to statutory meetings and using online meetings for councillors/other attendees for many other meetings.

2.2 On 6 May 2021, LTC responded to a Government Call for Evidence on remote access meetings [210506 Response.pdf](#). While being realistic about the early connectivity problems (which now have been largely overcome by improved technology and experience), the response was in favour of enabling remote access to meetings, including to help improve equality and diversity.

2.3 On 29 June 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) highlighted the ongoing debate about whether ‘hybrid meetings’ should be allowed; this being where councillors can attend in-person or remotely and, in both cases, fully participate in decision-making. The LGA said the ‘Overwhelming majority of councils want hybrid meeting powers’ and ‘One in 10 councils surveyed had a councillor who had stepped down in their authority since May 2021 due to the requirement for them to attend council meetings in-person.’

2.4 The LGA highlight the difficulties created by the absence of legal hybrid meetings including:

- a. Problems recruiting and retaining councillors, especially those balancing caring and career commitments
- b. Problems for persons with disabilities, health or mobility issues. This includes not being able to use remote access to meetings as a ‘reasonable adjustment’.
- c. Reduction in public attendance and engagement (according to LGA research which showed these had increased during the pandemic – although most authorities will now enable remote public access anyway).

2.5 The advantages of hybrid meetings are the opposite to those above, but it is worth expanding:

- a. Not only is recruitment and retention of councillors improved but the knock-on effect is greater diversity of councillors, including more women, young and disabled people
- b. Attendance levels at meetings improves. Where relatively minor matters might prevent attendance in-person, such as travelling for work, bad weather and traffic jams, these need not prevent a councillor from accessing meetings remotely from home or any other location.
- c. Meetings are healthier as councillors are less likely to feel obliged to attend for major decision-making meetings, when they have colds, stomach bugs etc.
- d. Improved technology can mean better meeting control, audio, and accessibility for those meeting remotely (even better than those present in-person at meetings).
- e. Decreased costs for councillors in attending meetings (taxi, petrol, parking, lost work etc.,) and a resultant improved environmental footprint.
- f. A better work-life balance and reduced stress for councillors who can participate to a greater extent in family, work, leisure and other commitments, without having to travel to meetings.

2.6 Important safeguards, might include the need to:

- a. Preserve confidentiality and data protection where confidential matters arise, requires careful management by councils. This includes councillors remotely accessing from areas where only relevant councillors or authorised other persons are present and where they are undisturbed so that they can focus on business. The Code of Conduct will apply should councillors wrongfully reveal confidential information; guidance should be provided to councillors to help them to comply;
- b. Ensure the identity of participants can be verified;
- c. Maintain order and transparency by applying suitably amended Standing Orders equally to hybrid and in-person meetings; and
- d. Strong communication and interaction must be maintained at a suitable level to ensure any problems arising from lack of social contact from in-person meetings are ameliorated.

2.7 Proxy voting is not something LTC has taken a formal position on to date and it is important to note that councils are unlikely to be compelled to adopt proxy voting in a particular form. While there are advantages of enabling greater representation of views within meetings; these votes (where provided in advance) are not likely to be informed by views expressed by participants or the public attending meetings.

2.8 Important safeguards, might include the need to:

- a. Restrict the use of proxy voting to specific circumstances (the consultation asks whether physical/mental conditions, caring responsibilities, parent leave or other responsibilities would be appropriate);
- b. Require anyone submitting a proxy vote to do so, in writing, through another councillor; and
- c. Require anyone submitting a proxy vote to declare any interests and lobbying and to confirm they have read any related papers provided by the Council for the purposes of the relevant decision.

3 Recommendations/Decisions

- a. To note the consultation and the previous response made by LTC in response to the Call for Evidence;
- b. To agree a position on proxy votes and the circumstances in which councillors should be able to so vote, and confirm the position on hybrid meetings;
- c. To agree an officer delegation (or alternative) to submit a response welcoming *discretionary* powers to introduce hybrid meetings and proxy voting, including suitable safeguards such as those referred to in this paper;
- d. To note that Full Council will need to formally agree whether to adopt hybrid meetings and proxy voting and related procedures, in the event that legislation is implemented; and
- e. To agree a paper be submitted to Full Council with guidance to councillors on compliance and changes to Standing Orders, in the event that legislation is implemented, changing these fundamental features of statutory meetings.