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Democratic Services  
Officers



# the good governance hub

## BLOG

# Remote Meetings

The campaign for remote/hybrid meetings (led by ADSO and LLG) continues, due to the reluctance of the Government to allow local councils the modern-day technology it itself uses in Parliament.

Remote meetings were allowed for a temporary period during the pandemic. The regulations expired on 7 May 2021 meaning that councils had to revert to in-person meetings. It was widely accepted that the ability to meet remotely during the covid period allowed local democracy to continue and some would argue to be improved through increased openness and transparency in relation to the decisions being taken. But the benefits of these meetings far exceed the original reason for allowing them (as a response to covid). The benefits are many, including:

- Increased attendances at remote council meetings by both councillors and the public
- Significant cost savings for some authorities arising from much less travel to meetings
- The environmental benefits of less travel, particularly in the large county authorities
- A better work/life balance for councillors
- Improved equality of access to meetings for all and opening up opportunities for more people to stand for election as councillors
- More transparency and openness for the public to see and engage in council meetings
- An option to move council meetings online when there are constraints or emergencies, for example bad weather such as snow or flooding.

The Government issued a 'call for evidence' over 2 years ago seeking the views of interested parties. Over 4300 submissions were received by the Secretary of State, demonstrating a high level of interest in this issue. The Government has not yet published the outcome of the call for evidence (2 years on) and has refused to disclose the details of the submissions they received, despite a Freedom of Information request from ADSO and LLG.

A number of letters sent to recent Secretary of States by ADSO and LLG have largely been ignored. One meeting was granted with civil servants but they were unable to give us any indication of when and if a decision would be made.

The Government initially cited a lack of legislative time to introduce the legal provision required. The Levelling Up Bill has been working its way through Parliament in recent months and the matter of remote meetings was debated in the House of Lords. This is an ideal opportunity for the Government to introduce an amendment to the Bill to provide the necessary legislative change required. But that opportunity is being wasted by its intransigence.

The question in our minds is – what is the objection? Why has the Government sat on its hands in terms of local government when remote access to debates in Parliament has been in place for some years. The Government is not making its position clear. The silence is deafening. We can therefore only second guess. Is it because they do not trust councils to hold such meetings properly? If so, they should have no concerns. Local government reacted very quickly when the first lockdown was imposed and set up remote meetings within their governance rules. The Handforth Parish Council debacle was an extreme exception, and need not have got to the situation it did with better management of the proceedings. Most council meetings at all levels were compliant and well run. Decision making and local democracy continued. Public attendance increased as residents saw the advantages of accessing meetings from their own homes. Vulnerable 'at risk' councillors continued to serve their residents and take part in decision making. Councils started to see the potential of financial savings and green benefits, reducing their travel expenses and car journeys to and from meetings. Councillors spent less time getting to and from council offices. Those who had previously been prohibited from standing as councillors for family and other reasons suddenly realised that remote/hybrid meetings could be the solution. There is also an inconsistency which the Government has failed to address. Through its own regulations, Education School admission and exclusion appeal hearings can take place remotely. In addition, a recent Magistrates Court judgement ruled that remote Licensing hearings are lawful. So, we have some meetings that can take place lawfully and others can't.

It's time the Government stopped prevaricating, published the results of its own call for evidence and allowed councils to have the choice to meet remotely.

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