

From the Chairman of the Association
Cllr James Jamieson

Partners to this letter:
The Association of Democratic Services Officers
Lawyers in Local Government
The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
The National Association of Local Councils
The Society for Innovation, Technology and Modernisation

12 October 2020

To:
Rt Hon Robert Jenrick – Secretary of State, MHCLG
Chloe Smith MP – Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office

Dear Robert

Extending the ability for councils to hold meetings remotely

We are writing to you to set out the clear case for extending the ability for councils to hold meetings flexibly beyond May 2021 while we continue to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, and to make this a permanent power for councils to be able to utilise. We are also offering to encourage councils to adopt good practice and build on the advice and support we are already delivering including through the Remote Meeting Hub.

The power given to councils to hold decision-making meetings on-line and remotely during the COVID-19 crisis, enabled by the Remote Meetings Regulations made under the Coronavirus Act 2020, has enabled councils to get on with supporting their residents and businesses and delivering essential services.

We cannot be certain how the COVID-19 pandemic will evolve over the next few months to years, but it remains essential for councillors to have the ability to hold council meetings and make decisions without the need for all members of the meeting to be physically present. Beyond COVID-19, this ability will also be essential to allow councils to manage any emergency situation.

As such, we collectively ask on behalf of local government that the temporary change to the meeting rules set out in the Local Government Act 1972, enabling councils to hold their meetings without all of the persons, or without any of the persons, being together in the same place, be made permanent. This would mean councils would have the power to determine if a meeting should take place in person or remotely, and the circumstances for that would need to be established transparently in a councils' constitution, standing orders or policy. We believe this is a sensible direction of travel, getting the most value out of the investment that councils have made to establish the necessary technology and infrastructure.

Appreciating that this will require primary legislation, we ask that as a minimum we have confirmation that Government is planning to extend the power beyond 7 May 2021, **subject to Parliament approving the act's renewal every six months** as is currently set out in the legislation.

In addition to the clear benefits of being able to operate a council remotely in emergency situations, improved flexibility in how meetings are held could encourage a greater diversity of candidates to put themselves forward as councillors, including those in full-time employment. The issue of meeting

accessibility was identified in the LGA's work on [enabling women, parents and carers to become councillors](#). Encouraging more diversity in those putting themselves forwards as potential local councillors is a key aim of the LGA's '[Be a Councillor](#)' campaign and NALC's 'Make a Change' campaign.

We have seen many examples across the country where holding meetings online has encouraged greater numbers of the public to participate. This improves the transparency of local government decision-making and helps public understanding of what their local councils does. In the longer term, it may encourage more people to vote and become involved in their local community and council.

Our partnership has been working collectively since the need to hold meetings remotely arose. A snapshot survey we undertook in August-September of councils showed that 90 per cent supported extending the ability of councils to hold meetings remotely, and 91.8 per cent confirmed they had held remote meetings.

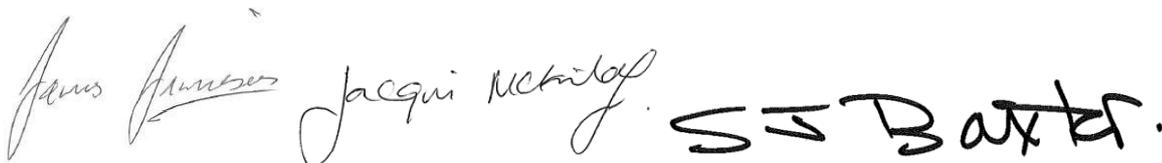
We know there have been some challenges, with our survey revealing the main one as the existing skills set of some users in operating the technology. The technology itself was identified as a challenge by 40 per cent of respondents, and we know there have been some issues with security and connectivity. On this, we support the Government's commitment to delivering gigabit-capable broadband to all premises by 2025 and the agreement with mobile network operators to improve mobile coverage across rural areas via a Shared Rural Network by 2026.

Securing the ability to hold remote meetings in the long term means councils can be confident in working through these issues. The [Remote Meeting Hub](#) we collectively set up has been providing councils with support, guidance and examples of good practice. The hub has an [interactive map](#) to help members, officers and residents explore which video conferencing software local authorities across England are using, how the meetings are streamed to the public and press while also collating council meeting calendars in one place for the most up to date information on local democracy around the country. If the provision to hold meetings flexibly was made permanent, we would look to continue to work together to provide support and promote good practice.

We want to stress that we are not advocating that all council meetings are operated remotely. There is great value to being able to hold debates in person and to connect with political colleagues and officers, as well as being able to directly engage with residents. However, having the power to be able to hold a meeting remotely, should that be determined either necessary in specific circumstances or as a way to ensure participation, is a sensible option that should be available to councils.

We look forward to hearing from you about this issue.

Yours sincerely



Councillor James Jamieson
Chairman
Local Government Association

Jacqui McKinlay
Chief Executive
Centre for
Governance and Scrutiny

Cllr Sue Baxter
Chairman
National Association of Local Councils

Examples of online meeting successes

“Since we’ve been streaming our meetings, we’ve had viewing numbers of up to 200 during Planning Committee meetings (compare this to our public gallery which seats about 60 and has only ever been full a handful of times), and views of the video following the meeting exceeding 500. We’ve even had audiences for all of our other committees – not always large audiences, but definitely more than we ever had in the chamber. It has also improved member attendance due to not having to travel long distances and for those who relied on public transport (which was not always reliable for them).”

“I did a survey of school appeals and discovered that we had 100% parental attendance compared to a physical meeting level of 87%.”

“At our last Council meeting, we had much higher attendance than normal – over sixty people, when normally we would get at most 2 or 3 members of the public. We have never had a meeting with zero audience, which was common when we met physically. Councillor attendance has also been higher than normal during this period, and that will continue as we head into the winter months, when we would often have Councillors simply not able to turn up because of roads blocked due to snow up in the Pennines.”

“Our full Council meetings have been viewed a total of 869 times for the same period in 2019 and 1239 in 2020; an 80% rise in views for Executive Board and almost a 30% rise for full Council meetings. Given that all meetings are now broadcast, overall the total number of views for all our committee meetings between April – Sept 25th in 2020 is close to 10,000.”

“The remote meeting format has enabled public access to Council meetings for a much larger audience than what would be possible via a physical meeting. For instance, at a remote [City Plans Panel](#) held in May we were able to accommodate 716 viewers to the live broadcast, with a further 299 subsequently viewing the archived footage – this illustrates how remote meetings can facilitate increased accessibility of committee meetings, both during the current restrictions and beyond.”