

# Impact of in-person council meetings survey 2021

October - November 2021



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# Summary

## Background

Between October and November 2021, the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a survey of councils in England. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the impact of in-person council meetings for statutory and decision-making meetings, and how this may affect councils in the short- to long-term. The survey asked about a range of topics including councillor attendance at meetings, public engagement, benefits and challenges, as well as costs incurred. A copy of the survey questions can be seen in Annex A.

Monitoring officers were the primary points of contact for this survey, although councils were free to assign completion of the survey to whichever officer was best placed to do so. This report focuses on responses from principal authorities<sup>1</sup> (including district and county councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts, and London boroughs). The survey achieved an overall response rate of 42 per cent of principal authorities.

## Key findings

- Almost three-quarters of respondents (72 per cent) thought that councillor attendance was lower since returning to in-person meetings.
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (73 per cent) thought that attendance by members of the public is lower since returning to in-person council meetings.
- More than half of respondents (53 per cent) thought that engagement by members of the public with council meetings is lower since returning to in-person meetings.
- Over four-fifths of respondents (84 per cent) thought that the costs associated with statutory council meetings had increased.
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (71 per cent) thought that the costs associated with statutory council meetings had increased since the return to in-person meetings compared with when meetings were held in-person prior to March 2020.
- Over half of respondents (55 per cent) said that some councillors had been unable to attend all or the majority of in-person council meetings since May 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst parish councils were also invited to participate in the survey, this report focuses on the responses from principal authorities.

- Just over four-fifths of respondents (81 per cent) said that they had not had any meetings that were cancelled or not quorate due to councillors being unable to attend.
- More than four-fifths of respondents (89 per cent) said that there had not been any councillors in their council that had stepped down or fallen foul of the six-month rule<sup>2</sup> since returning to in-person meetings.
- Over nine-tenths of respondents (93 per cent) said that they were concerned with statutory council meetings being held exclusively in person over the winter period.
- The top concern of respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in person over the winter period was the safety of councillors at council meetings (94 per cent).
- More than three-quarters of respondents (77 per cent) were concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in person in the long-term.
- The top concern of respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in person in the long-term was the resilience of council decision-making in the event of other public health emergencies (84 per cent).
- Just over four-fifths of respondents (84 per cent) think that the return to exclusively in-person meetings since May 2021 has been a negative step for local democracy.
- Over one-third of respondents (36 per cent) said that they would not return to fully virtual meetings for all of their council meetings if it were permitted.

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<sup>2</sup> The six-month rule requires councillors to attend at least one meeting in a six-month period or risk losing their seat.

## Methodology

In October 2021 the LGA sent an online survey invitation via email to monitoring officers or other senior officers in principal councils in England for whom contact information was available<sup>3</sup>.

The response rate for principal councils was 42 per cent. Amongst these councils, the highest response rate was in metropolitan districts, whilst the lowest response rate was in London boroughs.

**Table 1: Response rates of principal councils by authority type**

	Per cent
<b>Principal respondents</b>	<b>42</b>
Metropolitan district	53
Unitary authority	51
County councils	42
District councils	40
London borough	30

Base: 141 principal respondents

Amongst principal councils, the highest response rate was in the West Midlands. The lowest response rate was in Greater London.

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<sup>3</sup> As well as these unique invitations, a general invitation was also sent out to parish councils, to incorporate feedback from these authorities. However, this report focuses on the responses from principal authorities.

**Table 2: Response rates of principal councils by region**

	Per cent
West Midlands	55
North East	50
Yorkshire and the Humber	50
South West	48
East of England	44
East Midlands	41
North West	41
South East	36
Greater London	30

Base: 141 principal respondents

This level of response rate means that these results should not be taken to be more widely representative of the views of all councils. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

Some respondents did not answer all questions in the survey, so within this report findings are based on different numbers of responses. This number (the base) is shown below all tables.

Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables have been rounded to one decimal place – percentages may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.

## Survey Findings

### Attendance of councillors

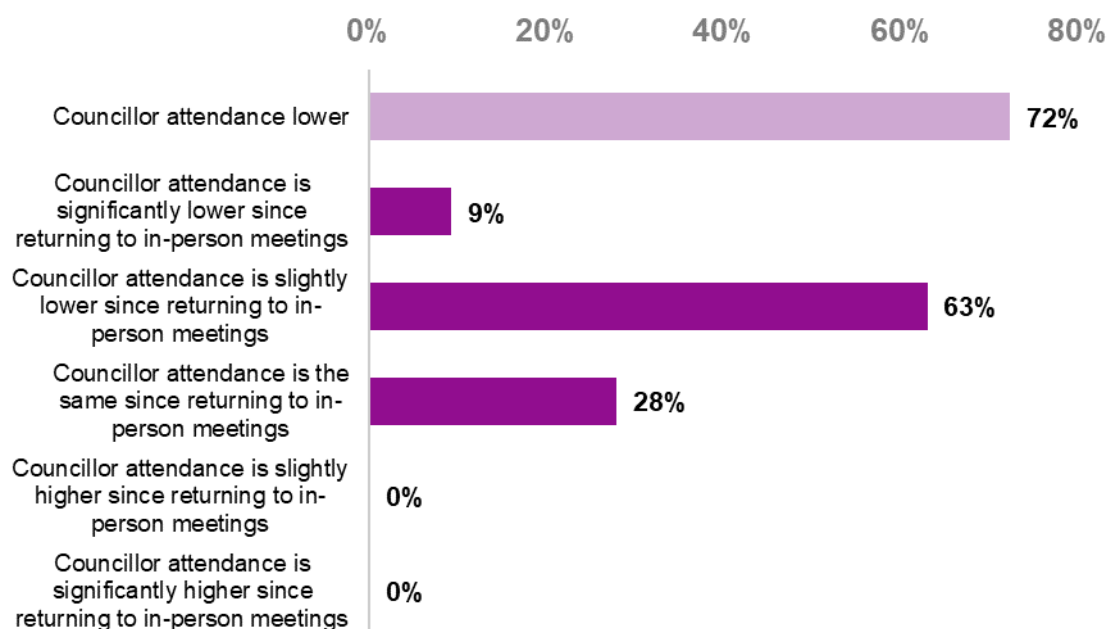
Across principal councils, almost three-quarters (72 per cent) thought that councillor attendance was lower since returning to in-person meetings. Just over one-quarter (28 per cent) thought that attendance had stayed the same.

**Table 3: The impact of in-person council meetings on councillor attendance compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**

	Per cent
<b>Councillor attendance is lower since returning to in-person meetings</b>	<b>72</b>
Councillor attendance is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings	9
Councillor attendance is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings	63
Councillor attendance is the same since returning to in-person meetings	28
Councillor attendance is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings	0
Councillor attendance is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings	0

Base: 140 principal respondents

**Figure 1: The impact of in-person council meetings on councillor attendance compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**



Percentages of 140 principal respondents



## Attendance by members of the public

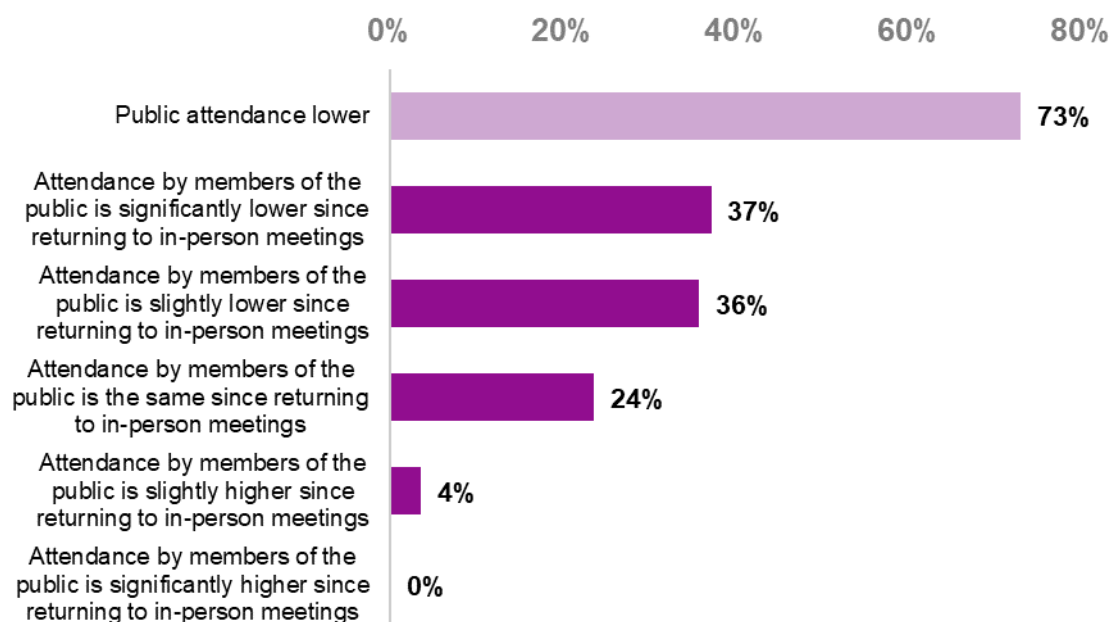
Across principal councils, almost three-quarters (73 per cent) thought that attendance by members of the public is lower since returning to in-person council meetings. Just under one-quarter (24 per cent) thought that attendance had stayed the same.

**Table 4: The impact of in-person council meetings on attendance by members of the public compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**

	Per cent
<b>Attendance by members of the public is lower since returning to in-person meetings</b>	<b>73</b>
Attendance by members of the public is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings	37
Attendance by members of the public is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings	36
Attendance by members of the public is the same since returning to in-person meetings	24
Attendance by members of the public is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings	4
Attendance by members of the public is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings	0

Base: 140 principal respondents

**Figure 2: The impact of in-person council meetings on attendance by members of the public compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**



Percentages of 140 respondents

## Engagement by members of the public

Across principal councils, more than half (53 per cent) thought that engagement by members of the public with council meetings<sup>4</sup> is lower since returning to in-person meetings. Just over two-fifths (42 per cent) thought that engagement has stayed the same.

**Table 5: The impact of in-person council meetings on engagement with the public compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**

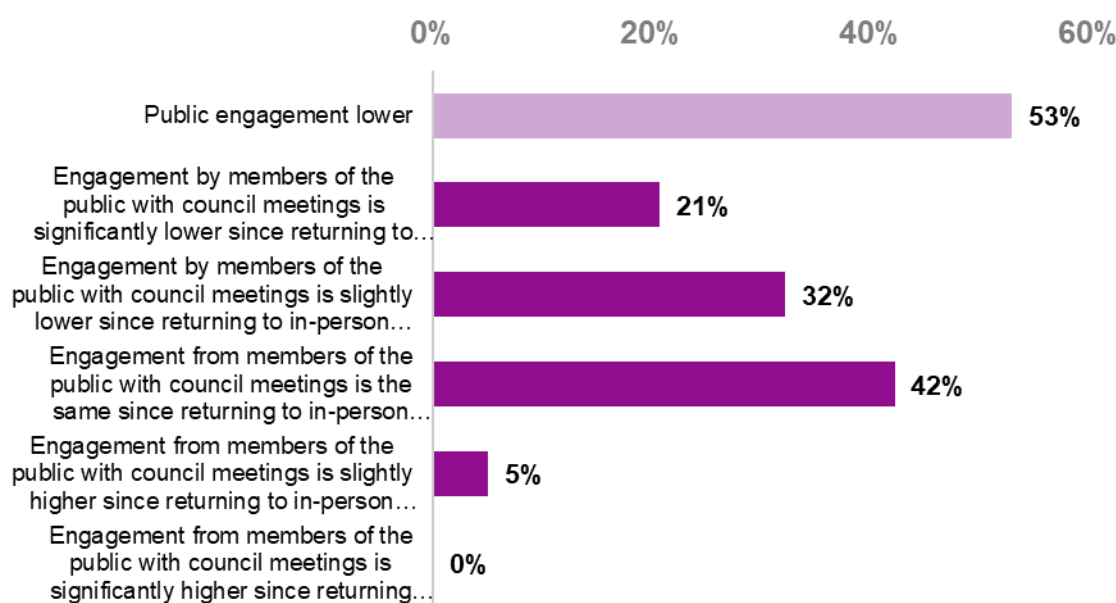
	Per cent
<b>Engagement by members of the public with council meetings is lower since returning to in-person meetings</b>	<b>53</b>
Engagement by members of the public with council meetings is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings	21
Engagement by members of the public with council meetings is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings	32
Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is the same since returning to in-person meetings	42
Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings	5
Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings	0

Base: 140 principal respondents

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<sup>4</sup> For example, submitting questions or asking in-person questions.

**Figure 3: The impact of in-person council meetings on engagement with the public compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**



Percentages of 140 principal respondents

### Costs associated with meetings

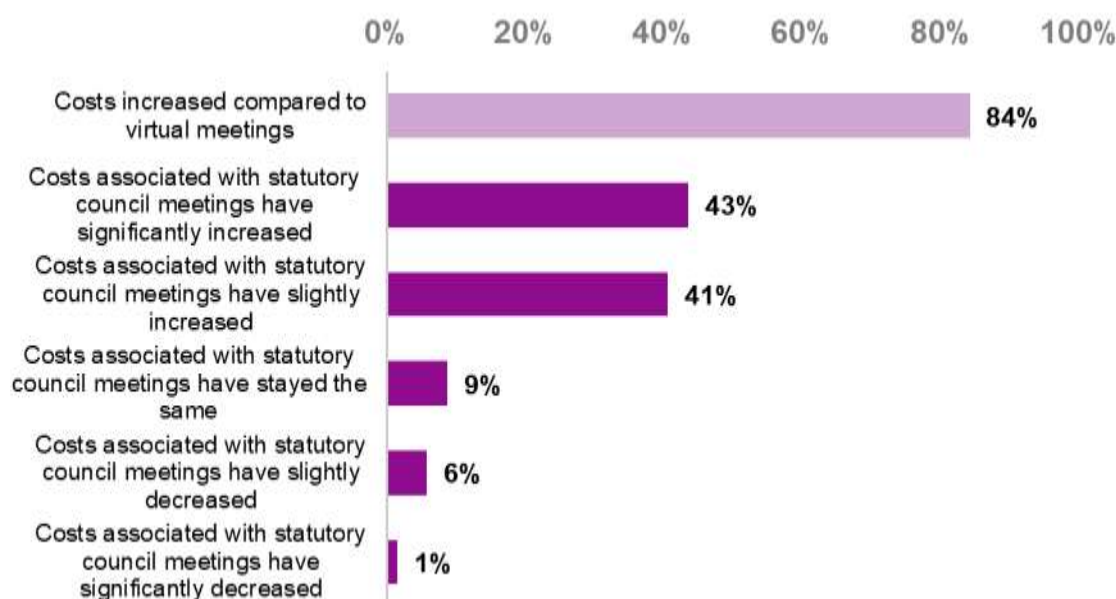
Over four-fifths (84 per cent) of respondents from principal councils thought that the costs associated with statutory council meetings had increased. Less than one-tenth of respondents (7 per cent) thought that costs had decreased.

**Table 6: The impact of the return of in-person council meetings on the costs associated with running statutory meetings compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**

	Per cent
<b>Costs associated with statutory council meetings have increased</b>	<b>84</b>
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly increased	43
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly increased	41
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have stayed the same	9
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly decreased	6
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly decreased	1

Base: 138 principal respondents

**Figure 4: The impact of the return of in-person council meetings on the costs associated with running statutory meetings compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted**



Percentages of 138 principal respondents

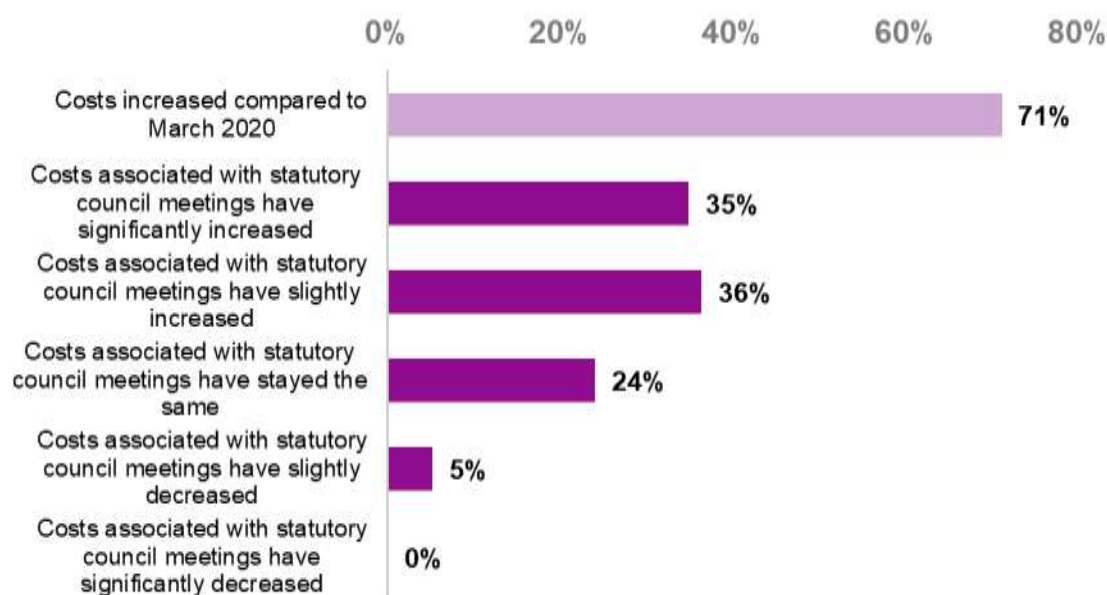
Across principal councils, almost three-quarters of respondents (71 per cent) thought that the costs associated with statutory council meetings had increased since the return to in-person meetings compared with when meetings were held in-person prior to March 2020. Almost one-quarter (24 per cent) thought that costs had stayed the same.

**Table 7: The impact of the return of in-person council meetings on the costs associated with running statutory meetings compared to when meetings were held in-person prior to March 2020**

	Per cent
<b>Costs associated with statutory council meetings have increased</b>	<b>71</b>
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly increased	35
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly increased	36
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have stayed the same	24
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly decreased	5
Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly decreased	0

Base: 138 principal respondents

**Figure 5: The impact of the return of in-person council meetings on the costs associated with running statutory meetings compared to when meetings were held in-person prior to March 2020**



Percentages of 138 principal respondents

### Ability of councillors to attend all or the majority of meetings

Over half of respondents from principal councils (55 per cent) said that some councillors had been unable to attend all or the majority of in-person council meetings since May 2021.

**Table 8: Whether any councillors at the respondents' council have been unable to attend all or the majority of in-person meetings since May 2021**

	Per cent
Yes	55
No	40
I don't know	5

Base: 139 principal respondents

When asked to explain the reasons for councillors being unable to attend council meetings, the top responses included: 'health', 'covid', 'vulnerable', 'concerns', 'risk', 'illness', 'commitments', 'work', 'issues', 'family', 'shielding', 'unable', 'ill', 'isolating', 'infection', 'childcare' and 'safety'. Other responses can be seen in figure 6 below.

**Figure 6: Reasons provided for why the councillor(s) has/have been unable to attend council meetings**



### Cancellation of meetings

Across principal councils, just over four-fifths of respondents (81 per cent) said that they had not had any meetings that were cancelled or not quorate due to councillors being unable to attend.

**Table 9: Whether respondents had any meetings that were cancelled or not quorate due to councillors being unable to attend**

	Per cent
<b>One or more meetings</b>	<b>19</b>
Yes, more than one meeting	6
Yes, one meeting	13
No	81

Base: 139 principal respondents

## Councillors stepping down or falling foul of six-month rule

More than four-fifths of respondents from principal councils (89 per cent) said that there had not been any councillors in their council that had stepped down or fallen foul of the six-month rule<sup>5</sup> since returning to in-person meetings.

**Table 10: Whether any councillors in the respondents' council has stepped down or fallen foul of the six-month rule since returning to in-person meetings**

Per cent	
Yes	11
No	89

Base: 139 principal respondents

## Running meetings in-person over the winter period

Over nine-tenths of respondents from principal councils (93 per cent) said that they were concerned with statutory council meetings being held exclusively in person over the winter period. Only 7 per cent were not concerned.

**Table 11: Whether respondents are concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person over the winter period**

Per cent	
<b>Yes, I am concerned</b>	<b>93</b>
Yes, I am very concerned	32
Yes, I am slightly concerned	61
No, I am not concerned	7
I don't know	0

Base: 139 principal respondents

Across principal councils, the top three concerns with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in person over the winter period were the safety of councillors at council meetings (94 per cent), the safety of officers at council meetings (91 per cent), and the resilience of council meetings if infection rates increase locally (85 per cent).

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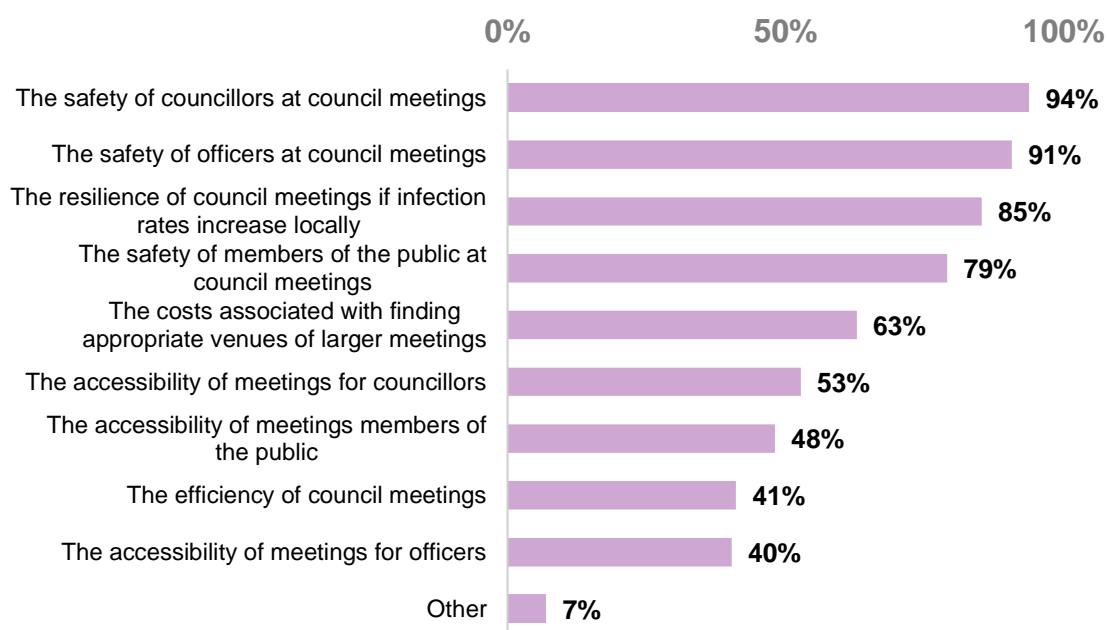
<sup>5</sup> The six-month rule requires councillors to attend at least one meeting in a six-month period or risk losing their seat.

**Table 12: Concerns of the respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person over the winter period**

	Per cent
The safety of councillors at council meetings	94
The safety of officers at council meetings	91
The resilience of council meetings if infection rates increase locally	85
The safety of members of the public at council meetings	79
The costs associated with finding appropriate venues of larger meetings	63
The accessibility of meetings for councillors	53
The accessibility of meetings members of the public	48
The efficiency of council meetings	41
The accessibility of meetings for officers	40
Other	7

Base: 129 principal respondents. Note: percentages are relative to the number selecting "very concerned" or "slightly concerned" in Table 11.

**Figure 7: Concerns of the respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person over the winter period**



Percentages of 129 principal respondents



## Running meetings in-person in the long-term

More than three-quarters of respondents from principal councils (77 per cent) were concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in person in the long-term. Just over one-fifth of respondents (21 per cent) said that they were not concerned.

**Table 13: Whether respondents are concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person in the long term**

	Per cent
<b>Yes, I am concerned</b>	<b>77</b>
Yes, I am very concerned	19
Yes, I am slightly concerned	58
No, I am not concerned	21
I don't know	2

Base: 139 principal respondents

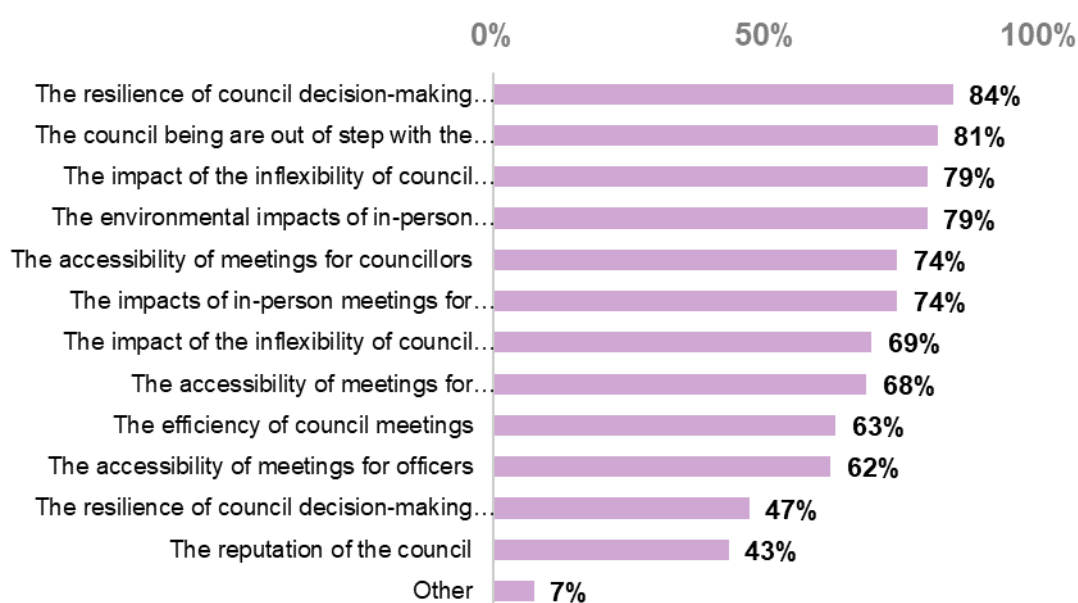
Across principal councils, the top concerns with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in person in the long-term were the resilience of council decision-making in the event of other public health emergencies (84 per cent), the council being out of step with the modern technological environment (81 per cent), the impact of the inflexibility of council meetings on the willingness of prospective councillors to stand for election (79 per cent), and the environmental impacts of in-person meetings (79 per cent).

**Table 14: Concerns of the respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person in the long term**

	Per cent
The resilience of council decision-making in the event of other public health emergencies	84
The council being are out of step with the modern technological environment	81
The impact of the inflexibility of council meetings on the willingness of prospective councillors to stand for election	79
The environmental impacts of in-person meetings	79
The accessibility of meetings for councillors	74
The impacts of in-person meetings for people with caring responsibilities	74
The impact of the inflexibility of council meetings on the retention of councillors	69
The accessibility of meetings for members of the public	68
The efficiency of council meetings	63
The accessibility of meetings for officers	62
The resilience of council decision-making in the event of other civil emergencies i.e. flooding, wildfire or terrorist attack	47
The reputation of the council	43
Other	7

Base: 107 principal respondents. Note: percentages are relative to the number selecting "very concerned" or "slightly concerned" in Table 13.

**Figure 8: Concerns of the respondents with respect to running statutory council meetings exclusively in-person in the long term**



Percentages of 107 respondents

## Positive and negative aspects of in-person meetings

Just over four-fifths of respondents from principal councils (84 per cent) think that the return to exclusively in-person meetings since May 2021 has been a negative step for local democracy. Only 3 per cent of respondents thought it has been a positive step.

**Table 15: Whether respondents think that the return to exclusively in-person meetings since May 2021 has been a positive or negative step for local democracy**

	Per cent
I think it is a negative step	84
I think it is the same	12
I think it is a positive step	3
I'm not sure	1

Base: 139 principal respondents

Respondents were asked to provide examples of the positive aspects of being able to meet in person for council meetings. Examples included a reduced administrative burden, networking opportunities, better communication, face-to-face interaction, less time spent on travel, socialisation, pre- and post-meeting conversations, increased fluidity, easier dialogue, wellbeing benefits, reduced issues with technology and bringing people together.

Respondents were also asked to provide examples of the challenges of being required to meet exclusively in person council meetings since May 2021. Examples included hiring additional staff, fear and anxiety around Covid-19, social distancing requirements, reduced attendance, lower public engagement, higher costs, health and safety, venue size and managing everyone's needs.

## Return to fully virtual meetings

Over one-third of respondents from principal councils (36 per cent) said that they would not return to fully virtual meetings for all of their council meetings if it were permitted.

**Table 16: Whether respondents would return to fully virtual meetings for all of their council meetings again, if this was allowed**

	Per cent
Yes	29
No	36
I'm not sure	35

Base: 139 principal respondents

Respondents were asked if they had any other comments to share regarding the impact of in-person council meetings. Examples included:

- Individual councils should be awarded the flexibility to make their own decisions on whether a meeting is held in person, virtually or through a hybrid model.

- Decisions to have virtual or in-person council meetings should consider the on-going risk of Covid-19 and the varying costs with adhering to safety measures.
- It is important to ensure councils can embrace new technology and opportunities to be sustainable.
- It is important to consider the wellbeing of individuals when making decisions about the format of council meetings (e.g., anxiety, stress, isolation).
- The format of council meetings (i.e., in person or virtual) impacts public engagement and councillor attendance differently depending on the context.

## Annex A

### Copy of the survey questions Survey on the impact of in-person meetings

Since 7 May 2021, councils have had to return to in-person council meetings for statutory and decision-making meetings. This survey is looking at the impact of the return to in-person meetings and how it might affect councils in the short- to long-term. We anticipate that the answers will be used by the LGA to represent the interests of councils at a national level.

In the survey, 'council meetings' refers to statutory and decision-making council meetings which must meet in-person according to the High Court judgement earlier this year. For more information on the judgement see the [LGA Virtual Meeting Hub](#).

All responses will be treated confidentially. Information will be aggregated, and no individual or authority will be identified in any publications without your consent. Identifiable information may be used internally within the LGA but will only be held and processed in accordance with our [privacy statement](#). We are undertaking this survey to aid the legitimate interests of the LGA in supporting and representing authorities. By completing this survey you are agreeing to us processing your information.

This survey is intended for officers who are responsible for democratic services at local authorities. **Each local authority should only complete one submission.** If elected members wish to contribute towards our work around virtual council meetings, they can contact [jessica.norman@local.gov.uk](mailto:jessica.norman@local.gov.uk) directly.

The deadline for responses is the **12th of November 2021**.

If you would like to see an overview of the questions before completing the survey online, you can access a PDF here: [Survey on the impact of in person meetings](#)

End of Block: Introductory and privacy text

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Start of Block: Demographics question



Please amend the details we have on record if necessary.

If you are responding on behalf of more than one authority please note this in the 'authority' box below, but please check with us first whether a separate return is needed for each authority.

- Name (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- Authority (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- Job title (3) \_\_\_\_\_
- Email address (4) \_\_\_\_\_

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In what part of the council do you sit:

- Democratic services (1)
  - Legal services (2)
  - Corporate services (3)
  - General governance (Parish/Neighbourhood/Town/Community) (4)
  - Other (please specify below) (5)
- 

End of Block: Demographics question

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Start of Block: Questions

**1. Compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted, how is the attendance of councillors at statutory in-person meetings?**

For example, decision-making committees, cabinet, full council.

- Councillor attendance is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings (1)
  - Councillor attendance is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings (2)
  - Councillor attendance is the same since returning to in-person meetings (3)
  - Councillor attendance is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings (4)
  - Councillor attendance is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings (5)
- 

**2. Compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted, how is the attendance of members of the public at statutory in-person meetings?**

- Attendance by members of the public is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings (1)
  - Attendance by members of the public is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings (2)
  - Attendance by members of the public is the same since returning to in-person meetings (3)
  - Attendance by members of the public is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings (4)
  - Attendance by members of the public is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings (5)
- 

**3. Compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted, how do you think the return to in-person statutory meetings has affected public engagement with council meetings?**

For example, submitting questions or asking in-person questions.

○ Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is significantly higher since returning to in-person meetings (1)

○ Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is slightly higher since returning to in-person meetings (2)

○ Engagement from members of the public with council meetings is the same since returning to in-person meetings (3)

○ Engagement by members of the public with council meetings is slightly lower since returning to in-person meetings (4)

○ Engagement by members of the public with council meetings is significantly lower since returning to in-person meetings (5)

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Page Break

**4. Compared to when virtual council meetings were permitted, how has the return to in-person meetings impacted the costs associated with running statutory meetings?**

- Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly decreased (1)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly decreased (2)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have stayed the same (3)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly increased (4)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly increased (5)
- 

**5. Compared to when meetings were held in-person prior to March 2020, how has the return to in-person meetings impacted the costs associated with running statutory meetings?**

- Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly decreased (1)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly decreased (2)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have stayed the same (3)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have slightly increased (4)
  - Costs associated with statutory council meetings have significantly increased (5)
- 

**6. Are there any councillors at your council who have been unable to attend all or the majority of in-person meetings since May 2021?**

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
  - I don't know (3)
- 

**7. Why has(ve) the councillor(s) been unable to attend council meetings?**

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**8. Have you had any meetings that have been cancelled or not quorate due to councillors being unable to attend?**

- Yes, more than one meeting (1)
  - Yes, one meeting (2)
  - No (3)
- 

**9. Have any councillors in your council stepped down or fallen foul of the six-month rule since returning to in-person meetings (whether or not this resulted in them losing their seat)?**

The six-month rule requires councillors to attend at least one meeting in a six-month period or risk losing their seat.

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
- 

**10. Are you concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in person over the winter period?**

- Yes, I am very concerned (1)
  - Yes, I am slightly concerned (2)
  - No, I am not concerned (3)
  - I don't know (4)
- 

**11. What are you concerned about?**

Please select all that apply.

- The resilience of council meetings if infection rates increase locally (1)
  - The safety of councillors at council meetings (2)
  - The safety of officers at council meetings (3)
  - The safety of members of the public at council meetings (4)
  - The costs associated with finding appropriate venues of larger meetings (5)
  - The accessibility of meetings for councillors (6)
  - The accessibility of meetings for officers (7)
  - The accessibility of meetings members of the public (8)
  - The efficiency of council meetings (9)
  - Other (10)
-

**12. Are you concerned about running statutory council meetings exclusively in person in the long-term?**

- Yes, I am very concerned (1)
  - Yes, I am slightly concerned (2)
  - No, I am not concerned (3)
  - I don't know (4)
- 

**13. What are you concerned about?**

Please select all that apply.

- The resilience of council decision-making in the event of other public health emergencies (1)
  - The resilience of council decision-making in the event of other civil emergencies i.e. flooding, wildfire or terrorist attack (2)
  - The accessibility of meetings for councillors (3)
  - The accessibility of meetings for officers (4)
  - The accessibility of meetings for members of the public (5)
  - The impact of the inflexibility of council meetings on the willingness of prospective councillors to stand for election (6)
  - The impact of the inflexibility of council meetings on the retention of councillors (7)
  - The reputation of the council (8)
  - The council being out of step with the modern technological environment (9)
  - The efficiency of council meetings (10)
  - The environmental impacts of in-person meetings (11)
  - The impacts of in-person meetings for people with caring responsibilities (12)
  - Other (13)
- 

**14. Do you think the return to exclusively in-person meetings since May 2021 is a positive or negative step for local democracy?**

- I think it is a positive step (1)
  - I think it is a negative step (2)
  - I think it is the same (3)
  - I don't know (4)
- 

**15. Can you give an example of the positive aspects of being able to meet in person for council meetings again?**

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**16. Can you give an example of the main challenges of being required to meet exclusively in person for council meetings since May 2021?**

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**17. Would you return to fully virtual meetings for all your council meetings again, if this was allowed?**

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)

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**18. Do you have any other comments you would like to share about the return to in-person council meetings?**

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**19. Are you happy to be contacted about your responses to this survey?**

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

End of Block: Questions

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Start of Block: Survey end and privacy statement text

Once you press the 'Submit' button below, you will have completed the survey.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted. You can find our full privacy policy here: [click here to see our privacy policy](#)

End of Block: Survey end and privacy statement text

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