

Remote council meetings temperature check 2021

Research Report

April 2021



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Summary

Background

During the coronavirus emergency, councils have had to find other ways of working in order to meet social distancing guidelines and to keep members, staff and the public safe. One of the methods they were able to use was holding their public meetings remotely. In order to understand how councils made use of these powers and their views as to how such powers might be used in the future, the Local Government Association conducted a 'temperature check' of councils in England. The findings of the research were also intended to contribute to an MHCLG call for evidence on the matter.

On 29 March 2021, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to monitoring officers in all English councils. Monitoring officers were asked to coordinate a single response for their council. The survey was in the field for two weeks, until 9 April. A total of 243 responses were received giving a response rate of 74 per cent.

Key findings

- Every council that responded to the temperature check said they had made use of powers to hold public meetings remotely during the coronavirus emergency.
- All councils that gave a view said that they thought powers to hold public meeting remotely should continue to be available, whether or not their council intended to use these powers.
- Assuming they had the power, more than four-fifths of councils (83 per cent) said they would be very likely or fairly likely to conduct meetings remotely once the coronavirus emergency was over.
- Just under four-fifths (79 per cent) said they would be very likely or fairly likely to hold hybrid meetings.

Introduction

During the coronavirus emergency, councils have had to find other ways of working in order to meet social distancing guidelines and to keep members, staff and the public safe. One of the methods they were able to use was holding their public meetings remotely. In order to understand how councils made use of these powers and their views as to how such powers might be used in the future, the Local Government Association conducted a ‘temperature check’ of councils in England. The findings of the research were also intended to contribute to an MHCLG call for evidence on the matter.

Methodology

On 29 March 2021, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to monitoring officers in all English councils. Monitoring officers were asked to coordinate a single response for their council. The survey was in the field for two weeks, until 9 April. A total of 243 responses were received giving a response rate of 74 per cent.

Table 1 and **Table 2** provide a breakdown of responses by authority type and region.

Table 1: Response rate by type of authority		
Type of authority	Number of responses	Response rate %
Counties	20	83
Shire districts	129	73
London boroughs	20	61
Met districts	33	92
Unitaries	41	69
All	243	74

Table 2: Response rate by region		
Region	Number of responses	Response rate %
East of England	36	75
East Midlands	28	72
Greater London	20	61
North East	9	75
North West	35	85
South East	48	70
South West	25	76
West Midlands	26	81
Yorkshire and the Humber	16	73

Technical notes

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the number of respondents who answered each question. Please note that bases vary throughout the survey.
- Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.

Remote council meeting temperature check

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

Use of powers to hold meetings remotely

Councils were asked to whether they had made use of powers to hold public meetings remotely. Every council that responded to the temperature check said they had made use of those powers.

Table 3: During the coronavirus emergency, has your council made use of powers that allow it to hold meetings remotely?

	Per cent (%)
Yes, we have made use of these powers	100
No, we have not made use of these powers	0

Base: all respondents (243)

Future use of powers to hold meetings remotely

All councils that gave a view said that they thought powers to hold public meeting remotely should continue to be available, whether or not their council intended to use these powers. One council said they did not know.

Table 4: Do you think powers that allow councils to hold public meetings remotely should continue to be available (whether or not your council intends to use these powers).

	Per cent (%)
No, these powers should not be available to councils	0
Yes, these powers should continue to be available to councils	99.6
Don't know	0.4

Base: all respondents (243)

Councils were asked how likely they would be to use powers, if they had them, to hold remote council meeting once the coronavirus emergency was over. They were asked about both remote meetings, where all members attend remotely, and hybrid meetings, where members can choose whether to attend in person or remotely. More than four-fifths of councils (83 per cent) said they would be very likely or fairly likely to conduct meetings remotely. Just under four-fifths (79 per cent) said they would be very likely or fairly likely to hold hybrid meetings.

Table 5: Assuming your council has the power to hold remote meetings when the coronavirus emergency is over, how likely or not would it be for your council to hold meetings in the following formats?

	Very likely %	Fairly likely %	Not very likely %	Not at all likely %	Don't know %
Remote meetings (all members attend remotely)	55	28	14	2	1
Hybrid meetings (where members can choose whether to attend in person or remotely)	63	16	13	3	4

Base: all respondents: (remote meetings – 240; hybrid meetings – 243)

Comments about use of remote and hybrid meetings

Councils were also asked if they had any additional comments in relation to holding remote or hybrid council meetings and 164 took this opportunity.

Virtual meetings were described as having worked well throughout the pandemic by nearly all respondents, and as positively benefitting local democracy in a variety of ways as described in the points below. Any attempt to remove the ability of councils to decide for themselves how to run meetings was viewed as a retrograde step by nearly all respondents who stated their support and the importance of and for councils to retain the choice and ability to decide whether to run virtual and/or hybrid meetings for themselves. Although some respondents did raise concerns over the need for additional investment in technology in order to run hybrid meetings in the future, regardless of this, it was still their ability to retain the option of doing so that was of key concern to respondents.

Many respondents described similar positive outcomes and benefits as a result of holding virtual meetings throughout the pandemic and these were:

Benefits for modern local democracy

Online meetings during the pandemic had led to more transparency and overall visibility in the decision-making process and had encouraged and created public and press interest. A return to face-to-face meetings was largely thought to be a regressive step and it was the element of council choice over the type of meetings they chose to hold in the future which was seen as vital and of continued benefit to the democratic process.

“The ability to hold virtual meetings has been hugely beneficial to both the council, councillors and the public. It has ensured flexibility for attendance for both councillors and members of the public. All parties have embraced the process and it has increased engagement, transparency and overall visibility

in the decision-making process”.

County council, West Midlands

“Remote meetings have been a positive step forward. They have been progressive in terms of both member and resident participation in local democracy. The recent decision of the government to not continue local authorities’ powers to hold meetings remotely is a regressive step that will undo the gains made over the last year in participation in local democracy.”

London borough, Greater London

“Modern local government requires modern and efficient working practices and remote meetings are used for modern business.”

District council, East of England

“The remote meeting provisions have allowed the public to access council meetings in ways that they have never done before - as we move into a digitally enabled future it is hard to understand why council meetings have to remain in the 19th century.”

Unitary authority, South East

Increased public interest and participation

Many respondents described increased public interest in and participation and engagement with the democratic process, as a result of online council meetings taking place. Online meetings had made council business more easily accessible to a wide audience and a return to physical meetings only was seen as a barrier to this progress. It was noted that the recently improved accessibility which made it easier to attend and participate in meetings could potentially encourage other prospective candidates from under-represented groups to consider standing for public service.

“It is astounding that this facility is not being extended. It is absolutely essential for democratic engagement and inclusivity. We never had people attend our meetings (except attendees at regulatory committees with “skin in the game”) prior to using Zoom and have had significant attendances via Zoom including an extraordinary council meeting watched by around 700 people. If you want a diverse membership including those with working/caring commitments and/or disabilities, and you want to promote widespread democratic engagement between residents and councils, remote/hybrid meetings are essential.”

District council, West Midlands

“Remote meetings have created a cheap and effective way for the public to engage and attend meetings in circumstances that they previously failed to do. Additionally, it has meant the press have stepped up reporting on democracy.”

Metropolitan district, North West

“Remote meetings are much more inclusive than in-person meetings, as a wider range of people can attend and in greater numbers.”

London borough, Greater London

Improved councillor attendance

Many respondents said that conducting online meetings had led to improved member participation. Virtual meetings were especially beneficial for those councillors with other commitments such as caring responsibilities or employment or those with health issues as it made it easier for them to attend. Online meetings also benefitted those living in rural areas or those who would otherwise have long distances to travel to attend face-to-face council meetings.

“...remote meetings have increased attendance and have been an assistance to councillors (and officers) with jobs, carer responsibilities, and access and mobility issues. To lose that function whilst social distancing requirements remain will be disastrous”

Metropolitan district, Yorkshire and the

Humber

“The ability to cut down councillor travel time has enabled members who work to have greater access to meetings during the day. As an example, members have been able to take part in meetings which they may not have been able to without this facility due to the impact of their working day. Again, this has an impact on creating greater accessibility and thus broadening the inclusivity of those who may wish to be a councillor but are restricted due to working patterns.”

District council, East Midlands

Safety

The safety benefits of holding hybrid or virtual meeting was also mentioned by some respondents. Difficulties in maintaining social distancing at proposed face-to-face meetings was of real concern, as was the logistical challenge for councils to find large enough venues to accommodate meetings safely as well as the costs they would incur in doing so. The age profile of members was also mentioned as they often fell within a particularly vulnerable age group making face-to-face meetings increasingly unsafe.

“The government’s decision is out of sync with its own careful steps out of lockdown and potentially puts members of the public, elected members and officers at risk to support and enable the exercise of local democratic accountability at a time where the under 50s population will still be largely unvaccinated.”

Metropolitan district, Yorkshire and the

Humber

Cost saving

Some respondents mentioned the cost savings benefits to the council from holding virtual meetings. Efficiencies had been made as hospitality, travel, venue and staffing costs were no longer being paid. Virtual meetings were described as cheap and effective.

"The financial cost of reverting to in-person meetings from 7 May will increase by approximately £500 per public meeting compared to pre COVID-19 costs as the council will need to find alternative premises for the in-person meetings, to ensure that they are COVID compliant - this is an additional cost that would not have to be incurred if the council were able to hold remote or hybrid meetings."

Unitary authority, West Midlands

Supporting the 'green agenda'

Some respondents explained that running virtual meetings was beneficial in supporting the green agenda, as no longer travelling to meetings had already substantially reduced their carbon footprint.

"We estimate that by being able to hold remote meetings members' mileage has reduced by approximately 60,000 miles in year, which equates to six tonnes of carbon emissions and £28,000. Even a partial use of virtual meetings in future would bring significant cost and carbon savings, particularly when multiplied across the sector."

County council, South East

Annex A: Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this temperature check. You can navigate through the questions using the buttons at the bottom of each page. Use the 'previous' button at the bottom of the page if you wish to amend your response to an earlier question.

If you stop before completing the return, you can come back to this page using the link supplied in the email and you will be able to continue where you left off. To ensure your answers have been saved, click on the 'next' button at the bottom of the page that you were working on before exiting.

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.

Q1 Please amend the details we have on record if necessary.

- Name _____
- Authority _____
- Job title _____
- Email address _____

Q2 During the coronavirus emergency, has your council made use of powers that allow it to hold public meetings remotely?

- Yes, we have made use of these powers
 - No, we have not made use of these powers
-

Q3 Do you think powers that allow councils to hold public meetings remotely should continue to be available (whether or not your council intends to use these powers)?

- No, these powers should not be available to councils
- Yes, these powers should continue to be available to councils
- Don't know

Q4 Assuming your council has the power to hold remote meetings when the coronavirus emergency is over, how likely or not would it be for your council to hold meetings in the following formats?

	Very likely	Fairly likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely	Don't know
Remote meetings (all members attend remotely)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hybrid meetings (where members can choose whether to attend in person or remotely)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5 If you have any comments in relation to council powers to hold remote or hybrid meetings, use the space below.

Please write in

Q6

Once you press the 'Next' 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](#)



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