MHCLG - Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence Leeds City Council Response

Leeds City Council is delighted to provide a submission to the Government's Call for Evidence in respect of Remote Meetings.

The views expressed in this response are balanced and informed by practitioners (both Chairs and lead officers) involved in Licensing, Planning, Community Committees, Scrutiny, Executive/Cabinet decision making.

In addition they reflect views expressed by third party contributors including applicants, objectors, campaigners and scrutiny witnesses.

Our response to each question is highlighted in <mark>yellow</mark> along with a commentary collated from responses provided.

Andy Hodson
Head of Democratic Services

Q1. Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meetings arrangements work?

- <mark>Very Well</mark>
- Well
- Neither well nor poorly
- Poorly
- Very Poorly
- Unsure

In Leeds there are several Committees, Boards and Panels that have continued to meet in a remote setting we have

- Full Council
- Executive Board
- Regulatory Committees comprising Planning and Licensing
- Statutory Committees
- 10 Community Committees
- Advisory & Procedural Committees
- 5 Scrutiny Boards

All the Councils 99 members serve on at least 1 of these Committees, Boards and Panels and the majority serve on several them.

The Council also has several Co-optees who serve on these Committees, Boards and Panels.

There have been more than 200 formal public meetings in the 2020/21 municipal year – all held remotely - with a significant number of additional consultative working groups also taking place remotely.

Having the ongoing flexibility to determine whether meetings are held physically, remotely or on a hybrid basis to best suit the needs and expectations of participants would enable the Council to build on the significant - and unexpectedly positive – experience of remote working over the last year.

The benefits of having the option to use remote technology have included increasing the ease of access for elected members with other employment and/or family commitments, as well as health concerns that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The number and nature of participants (particularly expert witnesses) has increased and the public have been able to access full meetings – and individual sections of meetings - more readily.

As an example of that in practice, a range of young people were recently able to join a meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Board for a valuable discussion on how best to support the mental health and well-being of children as the city recovers from the pandemic. The young people in question were able to discuss their experiences and share their views directly without taking unnecessary amounts of time out of their school day. The Board members highlighted the significant value of that insight in informing their subsequent recommendations to local authority decision makers and education providers.

It is also worth noting that as our city seeks to meet its environmental targets around carbon reduction, and strives to improve air quality, remote working provides an additional tool to help reduce unnecessary journeys into the city centre.

Q2. Generally speaking, do you think local authorities in England should have the express ability to hold at least some meetings remotely on a permanent basis?

- <mark>Yes</mark>
- No
- Unsure

- Local authorities are best placed to determine which tools they should use to maximise the effectiveness of individual meetings. Our recommendation to Government would be that the local authority 'toolbox' should include the options to meet physically, to meet remotely or to adopt a hybrid approach.

- This would not only offer greater flexibility for committees to engage a wider range of people in scrutiny but would also help 'future proof' our services so that there would be no break in continuity in the event of potential future disruption caused by the pandemic, a security incident (where civic buildings may be unavailable), or severe weather incident.

- Recent experience suggests that if permissible the format for meetings would vary according to the needs of different committees and the desired outcomes of specific meetings. The decision as to whether to adopt a physical, remote or hybrid approach would be informed by the matters subjects under discussion and the participants contributing.

- Given the steps forward made removing the ability to have remote or Hybrid meetings has restricted the flexibility for Committees, Boards and Panels and risks losing the positive progress that remote working has delivered over the last year.

Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements? Please select all that apply.

- More accessible for local authority members
- Reduction in travel time for councillors
- Meetings more easily accessed by residents
- Greater transparency for local authority meetings
- Documents (e.g. minutes, agendas, supporting papers) are more accessible to residents and others online
- Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion
- A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings
- I do not think there are any benefits to remote meetings
- Other (please specify)

Remote access has enabled existing elected members to better balance employment and family commitments with their role as a councillor.

As is the case across local and national government, despite significant improvements in recent years the Council in Leeds does not proportionally reflect the diverse population of the city it represents.

Physically restrictive requirements to attend on-site council meetings are arguably one of the persistent barriers to broadening access to those who have other employment, personal and/or family commitments. Looking to the future, making better use of remote working practices could help enable a wider range of people to become – or continue to be - councillors.

From an environmental perspective, remote meetings have reduced multiple short journeys into the city centre. At the very minimum, considering only the core membership of the various Committees, Boards and Panels thousands of journeys into the city centre have been avoided in 2020/21. Once other participants are considered even more journeys will have potentially been avoided.

Committee members have directly fed back that the use of remote working enables them to make more effective use of their time by avoiding unnecessary travelling to the city centre for face-to-face meetings.

While it is rare for large numbers of members of the public to attend physical meetings in the city centre, webcasts of 1 plans panel meeting alone attracted in the region of 1,000 live views suggesting improved ease of access is increasing engagement. The archiving of webcasts also enables more convenient access for those who cannot watch proceedings live.

Q4. (For local authorities only) Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

- Yes
- No

Aside of the environmental benefits of a reduction in travel already referenced, the move to remote meetings increased the pace of the broader adoption of digital practices within the Council thereby reducing traditional costs associated with ;

- printing paper agendas.
- Venue hire
- Travelling/accommodation costs

Q5. What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements, and do you have any suggestions for how they could be mitigated/overcome? Please select all that apply.

- It is harder for members to talk to one another informally
- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or residents who have a poor-quality internet connection
- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology
- There is less opportunity for residents to speak or ask questions
- Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format
- Debate is restricted by the remote format
- It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format
- It is more difficult to chair meetings in an orderly fashion
- Virtual meetings can be more easily dominated by individual speakers
- It might enable democratically elected members to live and perform their duties outside their local area on a permanent basis, therefore detaching them from the communities they serve
- It may create too substantial a division between the way national democracy (e.g. in the House of Commons) and local democracy is conducted
- I do not think there are any disadvantages to remote meetings
- Other (please specify)

As was the case for many people who abruptly found themselves moving from a traditional office environment to home working in the initial phase of the pandemic, many of our elected members and officers initially found the pace of change very challenging, especially in light of varying levels of digital skills. A lack of familiarity with remote working platforms was a particular concern.

However, following an extensive training plan to assist both officers and members the digital skills of both council officers and elected members have increased dramatically over the last year. A wide range of staff can now knowledgeably provide effective support to all those participating in remote public meetings.

Members have commented that lengthy meetings on Remote Platforms are tiring and do not replicate the nuances of political debate.

Chairing a Hybrid meeting where committee members are both in physical and remote attendance adds complexity, whereas these difficulties are overcome in circumstances where speaking by remote participants is known in advance (e.g. expert witnesses or a designated speaker in a full Council debate.

All participants in meetings have been successfully supported to do so. Elected Members have welcomed the fact that a wider range of individuals have been able to contribute to meetings and this has been directly attributable to reduced travel requirements on several occasions.

For example, a participant in London was able to make himself available to join a scrutiny meeting remotely for 2 hours rather than having to make time to travel from London to Leeds - and back - in order to be able to take part.

Where an elected member has lacked confidence in their digital skills additional training has been provided – both on a group and individual basis. Additional dedicated support has been made available for members during the times at which public meetings are taking place. We have also made use of tools such as 'chat functions' as an extra way in which participants can make the Chair and/or support officers aware of technical concerns during a meeting.

Additional equipment has been provided to address persistent connectivity concerns for some members and staff are able to advise all participants on alternative means of accessing a meeting if they experience temporary connectivity problems – for example, using web access where an app is not enabling access to remote platforms, using laptops rather than tablets to enable access to full functionality within a platform, or providing headsets to improve audio experience.

Developing consistent 'housekeeping' rules with committee members has fostered a supportive culture with shared expectations and equity of opportunity to participate. For example, where members have not indicated they wish to contribute to discussion on an item, Chairs have been encouraged to directly invite comment from that participant to ensure technological issues are not preventing participation.

A long-standing Chair noted that he has – unexpectedly - found it easier to manage potentially disruptive behaviours from participants whilst chairing remote meetings.

Q6. What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

There are certainly circumstances where committee members view physical meetings as preferable to remote sessions – for example, where members of the public are invited to share with a meeting particularly sensitive or emotive experiences. That is why we are recommending that local authorities should have the choice and the flexibility to adopt the right format for the right meeting.

While we do not want to lose the benefits of remote or Hybrid meetings where that format provides advantages for a meeting, we likewise would want to preserve the advantages of physical meetings where that format is better suited to a committee's needs.

Giving local authorities choice over how they conduct individual meetings will maximise our ability to deliver a flexible, agile service that can be responsive to individual circumstance.

Many of our Committees, Boards and Panels have received richer open forum contributions and it has made open forum more accessible as people only have to allow the time for their slot and not travel time.

One meeting held a children/ school focused session and again it made it much easier for head teachers to join and to involve children.

We have also seen greater numbers watching the sessions providing greater awareness of the public

Going forward it would allow us to invite speakers from other parts of the country and facilitate input from international contributors – this will make the sessions more valuable and allow us to look at best practise without limitations.

In terms of debate the virtual meeting has not made this any worse as in a live meeting members raise their hand and are invited to speak. Our experience in Leeds is that Members have been respectful, do use raised voices or interrupt when Members are speaking – mimicking how the physical meetings operate.

Q7. If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, for which meetings do you think they should have the option to hold remote meetings?

- For all meetings
- For most meetings with a few exceptions (please specify)
- Only for some meetings (please specify)
- I think local should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they should have the option to meet remotely
- I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings for any meetings
- Unsure

In the same way as the House of Commons and the House of Lords have flexibility, it should be for local authorities to determine in what circumstances remote meetings are appropriate.

Government are asked to ensure local authorities are given the explicit powers to determine the most appropriate arrangements informed by their own local circumstances.

Q8. If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, in which circumstances do you think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings?

- In any circumstances
- Only in extenuating circumstances where a meeting cannot be held face-to-face or some members would be unable to attend (e.g. severe weather events, coronavirus restrictions)
- I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely
- I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings under any circumstances
- Other (please specify)
- Unsure

As noted above - it should be for local authorities to determine in what circumstances remote meetings are appropriate. Government should set the broad framework for meetings, statutory notice periods for agendas and reports, Member Attendance, right of the public to view proceedings live and after the event (and attend physical meetings) and make stipulations around record keeping such as minutes and background papers but not restrict the format for how meetings are undertaken,

Government are asked to ensure local authorities are given the explicit powers to determine the most appropriate arrangements informed by their own local circumstances

Q9. Would you have any concerns if local authorities in England were given the power to decide for themselves which meetings, and in what circumstances, they have the option to hold remote meetings?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

It is our view that the Democratic process is most effective when those functions are supported by an organisational culture that recognises the value of democratic accountability and transparency, and promotes a constructive relationship with the Executive and senior officers.

Local authorities are best placed to understand their own circumstances and their own communities. They are therefore also best placed to determine when, in what circumstances and for which committees remote working practices may be appropriate.

Our view is that these arrangements should be codified in a protocol locally within a Council's Constitution with that protocol agreed at a meeting of the Full Council.

Q10. If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome?

N/A

Q11. In your view, would making express provision for English local authorities to meet remotely particularly benefit or disadvantage any individuals with protected characteristics e.g. those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Increasing the ways in which meetings can be conducted presents opportunities to expand participation and increase engagement. Informal feedback from those with health concerns and caring responsibilities who have participated in recent meetings has been positive – several elected members have reported that it enables them to better balance their responsibilities.

Indeed, the requirement to return to physical meetings from 7 May 2021 has already led to one committee member with caring responsibilities having to withdraw her short-term participation due to concerns about the associated health risks of physical attendance for a vulnerable dependent. Remote participation would have removed this barrier and ensured her continued participation.

Remote meetings would also benefit individuals with disabilities as they would be able to use their own assistive technology where appropriate.

As an organisation we would welcome the flexibility to be able to better respond to circumstances such as those outlined above and to maximise participation. The ability to use a hybrid format to achieve that participation would bring immediate benefits – particularly when we already have the technology in place to enable us to do so.