

The proposal for remote attendance

The government intends to legislate to give local authorities the flexibility to allow elected members to attend formal council meetings remotely. We believe that this modernising measure of providing broad flexibility to enable remote attendance will have the dual positive impacts of diversifying the representation of those willing and able to stand for elected office and enhance the resilience of local authorities in the face of local or national emergencies.

The intent is that this legislative change would give local authorities the flexibility to allow members to attend remotely.

Question

Do you agree with the broad principle of granting local authorities powers to allow remote attendance at formal meetings?

Suggested response:

Yes

Question

If you answered Yes to the above question, do you think that there should be specific limitations on remote attendance?

Please tick all the options below that correspond with your view and use the free text box for any other comments.

- a) Any formal meeting allowing remote attendance should have at least two thirds of members in physical attendance.
- b) Members should only be able to attend council meetings remotely in exceptional circumstances, such as those who are medically or physically unable to attend, or for reasons of local or national emergencies.
- c) There should be no limitations placed upon councils with regard to setting arrangements for remote attendance of council meetings, up to and including full remote attendance.

Suggested response:

Indicate (a) only.

Further comments:

A limit on those joining remotely should be in place with the presumption that all Members will attend in person. Reasons for remote attendance should be given. For example, such as being unwell with a cough or cold; in the event of poor weather conditions if travelling from the other side of the District; and if away on holiday in the UK.

Question

If you are responding to this consultation on behalf of a council as a whole, what proportion of the council's current elected members are likely to seek to attend council meetings remotely over the course of a year?

- less than 10%
- more than 10% but less than 50%
- more than 50% but less than 90%
- most of them 90% to 100%

Suggested response:

Indicate more than 50% but less than 90%.

Question

The government recognises that there may be cases in which it is necessary for councils to hold meetings fully remotely. Do you think there should be limitations placed on the number of fully remote meetings councils should be able to hold?

- a) Councils should be able to allow full remote attendance at up to half of council meetings within a twelve-month calendar period.
- b) Councils should only have the flexibility to change a meeting from in-person to online, or vice versa, due to unforeseen and exceptional circumstances.
- c) Councils should not have the flexibility to conduct fully remote meetings to ensure there is always an in-person presence.
- d) [Free text box]

Suggested response:

Indicate b) only but populate d) stating that Councils should be given flexibility to hold meetings in a fully remote manner only in exceptional circumstances where it wasn't possible to reconvene for a later date.

Question

Do you think there are there any necessary procedural measures that would help to ensure a remote or hybrid attendance policy is workable and efficient?

Please tick all the options that correspond with your view and use the free text box for any other comments.

a) Councils should be required to publish a list of attendees joining the meeting remotely and give notice if a meeting is being held with full remote attendance.

b) Councils should be required to ensure that standard constitutional arrangements are followed for hybrid and fully remote meetings.

c) Councils should be required to make arrangements to ensure restricted items (where a council decision is taken in private to protect confidentiality) are managed appropriately and to require remotely attending members to join from a private location.

d) Other [Free text box]

Suggested response:

Indicate b) and c) and populate d) stating that Councils should build in remote attendance provisions within their Constitution to ensure that this is managed effectively with the minutes, recording who joined the meeting in a remote manner.

Question

Do you think legislative change to allow councillors to attend local authority meetings remotely should or should not be considered for the following reasons?

Tick all the statements below that apply to your point of view.

Suggested response:

Tick all the statements on the left as below, should be considered because...

In addition, add free text stating that the legislative change should be considered to give elected Members flexibility in terms of attendance.

Should be considered because

Should not be considered because

It is a positive modernising measure.

Councillors should be physically present at all formal meetings.

It would likely increase the diversity of people willing and able to stand for election in their local area, making councils more representative of the communities they serve.

It could lead to a significant number of councillors habitually attending remotely and ultimately reduce the effectiveness of councils.

Councils would be more resilient in the event of local or national emergencies which prevent in-person attendance.

It would be more difficult for councillors to build personal working relationships with colleagues, and engage with members of the public in attendance at meetings.

Free text box – please state any other reasons

Free text box – please state any other reasons

Question

In your view, would allowing councillors to attend formal local authority meetings remotely according to their needs particularly benefit or disadvantage individuals with protected characteristics, for example those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

Please tick an option below:

- it would benefit members
- it would disadvantage members
- neither

Please use the text box below to make any further comment on this question.

[Free text box]

Suggested response:

Indicate that it would benefit Members.

Proxy voting

Proxy voting is a form of voting whereby a member of a decision-making body may delegate their voting power to another representative to enable a vote in their absence.

It is possible some members may find that, due to their personal circumstances, they are temporarily unable to participate in meetings even if remote attendance provisions are in place. Provisions for proxy voting could provide additional flexibility to those who really need it on a time-limited basis, allowing affected members to indirectly exercise their democratic duty, participate in their local authority's governance, and ensure that their views are taken into consideration. In the context of local authorities, the representative would have to be another elected member of the local authority.

Question 10

In addition to provisions allowing for remote attendance, do you consider that it would be helpful to introduce proxy voting?

- yes
- no
- unsure

Suggested response:

Indicate no.

Question

If yes, for which of the following reasons which may prohibit a member's participation in council meetings do you consider it would be appropriate?

Please select all that apply:

- *physical or medical conditions*
- *caring responsibilities*
- *parental leave or other responsibilities*
- *other [Free text box]*

Question

Are there circumstances in which you feel proxy voting would not be appropriate?

Suggested response:

Appointing proxies isn't considered appropriate as there is a presumption that an elected Member will vote on an item once it has been debated. The alternative to proxy arrangements is the provision of substitutes where a Member can advise of non-attendance and a substitute from the relevant political group can attend in their absence with full voting powers and having advance notice will have had access to relevant agendas and reports.

Question

If you think proxy voting is appropriate, are there any limitations you think should be placed upon it?