
Council

3 December 2024

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities: Councillor A S Khan

Director approving submission of the report:

Director of Law and Governance

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

**Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting at Local Authority Meetings –
Consultation Response**

Is this a key decision?

No – The Council’s Constitution states that Government consultations which are high profile or a particular matter of public importance will be decided by Council

Executive summary:

The Government is consulting on the detail and practical implications of allowing remote and hybrid attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings in England.

The consultation seeks views on how flexibility might be increased in a way which balances the principle that significant in-person engagement at local authority meetings remains vitally important while recognising that there will sometimes be a need to accommodate Members’ requirements to attend council meetings remotely. Views are also being sought on the possible introduction of proxy voting for occasions when an Elected Member, due to personal circumstances, may be unable to attend even remotely, for example during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

Recommendations:

Council is recommended to:

1. Approve the Council’s proposed response to the consultation set out in the Appendix (to be circulated prior to the meeting).

2. Delegate authority to the Director of Law and Governance to finalise and thereafter submit the Council's response to the consultation.

List of Appendices included:

The following appendices will be attached to the report:
Appendix 1 – Proposed Council response to the consultation (to be circulated)

Background papers:

None

Other useful documents

Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/enabling-remote-attendance-and-proxy-voting-at-local-authority-meetings/enabling-remote-attendance-and-proxy-voting-at-local-authority-meetings>

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

Yes: 3 December 2024

Report title: Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting at Local Authority Meetings – Consultation Response

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1. Legislation requires that specific local authority meetings be held in person. In April 2020 in response to the Covid pandemic, the Government introduced temporary regulations that allowed meetings to take place remotely until 7 May 2021. Since the lapse of these temporary provisions, there has been significant debate among local authorities about the benefits of being able to hold some meetings remotely with many organisations, including the Local Government Association calling for Councils to be given the freedom and flexibility to choose for themselves whether and when to allow virtual attendance at their meetings.
- 1.2. This consultation seeks views on whether and how permanent arrangements could be introduced to allow remote and hybrid attendance at local authority meetings in England. It also seeks views on proxy voting for which there is no current provision.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1. The Government has stated its intention to reset the relationship between central and local Government as partners in delivering better outcomes for communities. It has identified a key element of this approach as supporting the sector to modernise post democratic engagement, raise standards and widen the range of candidates standing for Council by removing unnecessary barriers. Government has launched a consultation which runs until 19 December 2024 seeking views on the detail and practical implications of how holding remote meetings and allowing proxy voting might help contribute to these aims to inform policy development.
- 2.2. In its foreword to the consultation, the Government states that the attendance of Elected Members at local authority meetings is a core part of the democratic process at the local level and is integral to Members carrying out their functions effectively. In addition to the value of Members coming together to debate and discuss the issues which impact the lives of the people they represent; it is also important that local residents have the opportunity to engage directly with the people they have elected to take key decisions on their behalf.
- 2.3. At the same time, the Government recognises that there are circumstances in which it may not always be possible for Members to attend Council meetings in person. It is with this in mind that the Government intends to amend the law to introduce provisions for remote attendance at local authority meetings.
- 2.4. The Government's intent is that this increased flexibility will strike the balance between the principle that significant in-person engagement remains vitally

important, and a recognition that there will sometimes be a need to accommodate Members' requirements to attend Council meetings remotely. The Government hopes that this will encourage a wider diversity of people willing and able to stand and actively participate in local democracy by creating improved conditions where meetings are accessible and inclusive.

2.5. In addition, Government is seeking views on the possible introduction of proxy voting for those occasions when an Elected Member, due to personal circumstances, may be unable to attend even remotely, for example during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

2.6. **Coventry's experience**

2.6.1. Like other local authorities, Coventry experienced remote and hybrid meetings from April 2020 to May 2021 when temporary regulations were put in place which removed the requirement for in person meetings at the start of the Covid pandemic.

2.6.2. This allowed Councillors to continue to take decisions in line with the provisions of the Constitution at a time of national emergency, rather than relying on alternative emergency arrangements provided for in Coventry's constitution. It also allowed Councillors with Covid to continue to participate in decision-making. This also enabled members of the public to continue to speak at relevant meetings.

2.6.3. The arrangements required to support remote and hybrid meetings needed careful planning and detailed processes and procedures to be put in place. The resources required to support the meetings by governance, administrative and IT officers was greater than that for servicing in person meetings, especially at meetings where members of the public were also able to speak such as the Planning Committee. It relied on software, hardware, internet connections and power all working for everyone involved to be able to participate effectively, which for the vast majority of time they did.

2.6.4. Chairs of meetings commented that at times it was harder to manage meetings remotely as it was more difficult to "read the room" and many Councillors commented that some meetings such as full Council, where detailed questions and debates take place, were not as effective.

2.6.5. All meetings were broadcast in order to meet accessibility requirements and the Council was able to monitor the number of views, which were higher than the number of people who normally attended meetings in person.

2.8 Options considered

2.8.1 The Council could decide not to respond to the consultation. This would mean it has had no opportunity to influence any proposals. This option is not recommended.

- 2.8.2 The Council could contribute to the consultation to help inform any proposals. This is the recommended option.

Results of consultation undertaken

- 2.7. This report is a response to a national consultation.

3. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 3.1. The consultation closes on 19 December 2024. The appendix will be circulated prior to the Council meeting on 3 December, 2024.

4. Comments from Director of Finance and Resources and Director of Law and Governance

4.1. Financial Implications

There are no decisions arising from this report. The proposed response recommends that the practical implications of enabling hybrid or remote meetings on local government arrangements should be considered including the increased resource implications with such new burdens.

4.2. Legal Implications

The consultation seeks views on amendment to the current legislation to permit online and virtual meetings.

This is due to the fact that Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act, which governs most formal meetings in local government, makes no explicit provision for remote or hybrid meetings or proxy voting.

5. Other implications

5.1. How will this contribute to the One Coventry Plan?

Should the measures proposed in the consultation be introduced, the Government's stated aims of the proposals include widening the diversity of people willing and able to stand and actively participate in local democracy by creating improved conditions where meetings are accessible and inclusive as well as enabling Councillors to participate during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

5.2. How is risk being managed?

Should the measures proposed in the consultation be introduced, the Council would need to introduce appropriate procedures and measures to enable decision-making to operate effectively within the new legislation.

5.3. What is the impact on the organisation?

Should the measures proposed in the consultation be introduced, the proposed consultation response highlights the need for the resource implications to be addressed.

5.4. Equalities / EIA?

The Government has not carried out an impact assessment at this point but if any policy changes are made following the consultation they will be subject to appropriate assessment.

5.5. Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment?

None

5.6. Implications for partner organisations?

None

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