Report on Remote Meetings, Hybrid Meetings, and Proxy Voting

This report summarises the key discussions and considerations from a recent webinar on **Remote Meetings and Proxy Voting**, addressing their implications for council operations and potential legislative changes. It evaluates the pros and cons of hybrid and virtual meetings and provides guidance on the issue of proxy voting, with recommendations for participating in the current consultation.

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1. Hybrid Meetings

Hybrid meetings allow for simultaneous in-person and remote attendance by councillors and the public. While this format offers flexibility, it poses several practical and procedural challenges.

Pros:

- **Flexibility:** Enables councillors to attend remotely, accommodating those with health issues, work commitments, or travel constraints.
- **Inclusivity:** Encourages broader participation, including attracting councillors who may struggle to commit to physical attendance.
- **Environmental Benefits:** Reduces travel, lowering carbon footprints.
- **Public Access:** Offers multiple ways for residents to attend, promoting accessibility.

Cons:

- **Technical and Logistical Challenges:**
    - Requires robust IT infrastructure, reliable internet connections, and potentially new software.
    - May necessitate additional staff to manage technology and participants.
- **Cost Implications:** Investment in IT equipment, support, and training may strain council budgets.
- **Equity Issues:** Residents without internet access or digital literacy may be excluded, creating a two-tier system.
- **Management Complexity:**
    - Balancing remote and in-person contributions could strain clerks, who must provide equal support to all attendees.
    - Managing hybrid public attendance could complicate maintaining order and transparency.
- **Legislative Considerations:** Requires updates to standing orders and potentially inconsistent implementation across councils.
- **Transparency Concerns:** The dual format may hinder fairness in decision-making processes, especially for contentious issues.

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2. Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings involve all participants attending remotely. This format was widely adopted during COVID-19 and has its own set of strengths and challenges.

Pros:

- **Accessibility:** Simplifies participation for councillors and residents, including those with physical, logistical, or time constraints.
- **Efficiency:** Streamlined processes, with links shared in advance, reducing logistical burdens.
- **Public Engagement:** Meetings can be recorded and shared online, allowing residents to view proceedings at their convenience.
- **Inclusivity:** Encourages participation from a wider demographic of councillors, including those unable to attend in person due to other commitments.
- **Cost Effectiveness:** Generally requires fewer resources compared to hybrid meetings.
- **Confidentiality:** Proven methods from COVID-era meetings can manage sensitive sessions effectively.

Cons:

- **Technology Dependence:** Relies entirely on IT infrastructure and internet reliability.
- **Limited Public Interaction:** Virtual attendance may make managing public participation more difficult compared to in-person interactions.
- **Engagement Challenges:** Online formats may reduce opportunities for robust debate and relationship-building among councillors.
- **Equity Issues:** Residents without internet access or digital literacy may be excluded, creating a two-tier system.

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3. Proxy Voting

Proxy voting allows a councillor to delegate their voting rights to another member in their absence. This approach has sparked debate due to its potential benefits and drawbacks.

Pros:

- **Continuity:** Ensures that urgent matters requiring a vote can proceed even if some members cannot attend.
- **Practicality:** Offers a solution for councillors with short-term or long-term commitments preventing attendance.

Cons:

- **Predetermination Risks:** Delegated votes undermine the principle that councillors should make decisions based on debates and discussions at the meeting.
- **Transparency Concerns:** Voting by proxy could erode trust in council decisions, as absent councillors may not be fully informed.
- **Legislative Challenges:** Implementing proxy voting would require careful guidelines and enforcement to ensure fairness.

Recommendation:

Given the risks of predetermination and the potential for undermining the integrity of decision-making, it is advisable **not to support proxy voting** in the consultation.

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4. Recommendations for Consultation

1. **Hybrid Meetings:**
   - Support local decision-making on implementing hybrid meetings, allowing councils to tailor arrangements to their specific needs.
   - Highlight the importance of addressing technical, logistical, and cost challenges, as well as equity issues for non-digital residents.
   - Advocate for hybrid meetings primarily for committees or sub-committees, reserving in-person attendance for major decisions such as annual, budgeting, or precept meetings.
2. **Virtual Meetings:**
   - Strongly support enabling fully virtual meetings, given their efficiency, inclusivity, and environmental benefits.
   - Emphasise the need for clear protocols to manage confidential sessions and ensure accessibility for all stakeholders.
   - Support local decision making on the implementation and use of virtual meetings.
3. **Proxy Voting:**
   - Recommend against proxy voting due to its conflict with the principles of informed decision-making and predetermination.

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5. Conclusion

The introduction of hybrid or virtual meetings offers significant opportunities for improving accessibility, flexibility, and public engagement. However, careful consideration must be given to the associated challenges, including costs, technical infrastructure, and maintaining equity and transparency. Proxy voting, while seemingly practical in some scenarios, undermines the integrity of council decision-making and is not recommended.

Participation in the consultation should reflect these balanced considerations, advocating for options that enhance council operations while upholding fairness, transparency, and inclusivity.

Consultation questions:

1. In what capacity are you responding.
2. Do you agree with the broad principle of granting local authorities powers to allow remote attendance at formal meetings?
3. If you answered yes to the above question do you think there should be specific limitations to remote attendance?

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

Any formal meeting allowing remote attendance should have at least two thirds of members in physical attendance.

Or 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.

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.

Add any further comments

4. If you are an elected member can you anticipate that you personally may seek to attend some of your council meetings remotely?

4a. Enter reason for no response.

4b. If you answered 'Yes' to question 4, please indicate below which of the following options best describes your likely pattern of attending meetings remotely:

Very occasionally

From Time to time

Regularly but not always

All the time

5. If you are responding to this consultation on behalf of a council as a whole, what protium of the councils current elected members are likely to seek to attend council meetings remotely?
Less than 10 %
More than 10% but less than 50%
More than 50% but less than 90%
Most of them 90% to 100%

6. 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?
Council should be able to allow full remote attendance at up to half of the council meetings in a 12-month calendar period
Council should only have the flexibility to change a meeting from in-person to online, or vice versa, due to unforeseen and exceptional circumstances.
Councils should not have the flexibility to conduct fully remote meetings to ensure there is always an in-person presence.
Any other comments you may have.

7. 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?
Tick all the boxes that correspond with your views
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
Councils should be required to ensure that standard constitutional arrangements are followed for hybrid and fully remote meetings.
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.
Any other comments

8. 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 options that apply.
It is a positive modernising measure
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
Councils would be more resilient in the event of local or national emergencies which prevent in-person attendance
Add any other reasons that it should be considered.

Should not be considered because:
Councillors should be physically present at all formal meetings
It could lead to a significant number of councillors habitually attending remotely and ultimately reduce the effectiveness of councils
councils 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
Add any other reason why this should not be considered.

9. 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.
It would benefit members
It would disadvantage members
Neither
Add any further comments you have on this 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

11. 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?
Physical or medical conditions
Caring responsibilities
Parental leave or other responsibilities
Any other reasons

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

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