

Classification	Item No.
Open / Closed	

Meeting:	Standards Committee
Meeting date:	1 st July 2025
Title of report:	Remote Meeting Attendance & Proxy Voting Update
Report by:	Michael Cunliffe, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Decision Type:	N/A Report for information only
Ward(s) to which report relates	All

Executive Summary:

Following time-limited Covid remote attendance permissions that expired in 2021, local authority meetings have been required to be held in a single, specified, physical 'place'.

On the 24th October 2024, the government published a consultation on remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings. The consultation closed on the 19th December 2024 and received 5,844 responses. The consultation sought views on the practical implications of allowing remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings.

Consultation Results:

The multiple-choice responses to each question were analysed and broken down. The majority (63%) of responses to this consultation came from elected members. Most other responses were on behalf of councils themselves (22%) or from members of the public (15%). 32 responses received were from sector representative bodies. Respondents who responded in their capacity as an elected member or on behalf of a council body were asked to indicate what type of local authority they represent. Most responses came from town or parish councils (3,327) and district or borough councils (858).

A significant majority (86%) of respondents were in favour of the broad principle of allowing remote attendance at council meetings. Support for remote attendance was consistently high across the different respondent categories.

Over half of respondents (56%) who were in favour of the broad principle of remote attendance at council meetings did not think that there should be limitations placed on remote attendance. A third

of respondents thought that elected members should only be able to attend meetings remotely in exceptional circumstances, and a third thought that two thirds of elected members at a meeting should be present in person.

The analysis of responses identified three key themes: digital limitations, the risk of bias and inclusion in local democracy.

- 1. On digital limitations, some authorities (particularly parish councils) noted that they may not have equipment to facilitate hybrid meetings. Some respondents noted concerns about whether members joining online would fully participate in meetings; others were concerned about whether hybrid or fully remote meetings would reduce public access to meetings, or impact the quality of meetings.*
- 2. On risk of bias, some respondents noted concerns about who would develop and implement limitations on remote attendance: many respondents felt that these decisions should be made by councils, because they best understand their local challenges, while some noted that this would place a burden on councils and result in possible challenges of bias if limitations excluded specific groups or were perceived to be unfair.*
- 3. In relation to inclusion, respondents noted that allowing online attendance would encourage more people to become councillors. Respondents believed that remote attendance may remove barriers to becoming a councillor for people with disabilities or caring responsibilities.*

Most responses from elected members indicated that they may seek to attend some meetings remotely (74%).

Some respondents noted that they felt that in-person attendance makes elected members more accountable for their actions, and the decisions made. Other respondents noted that online and hybrid meetings could be more complex to run and reduce productive engagement.

Most respondents indicated that they would attend meetings remotely very occasionally (49%) or from time to time (38%). Very few respondents anticipated attending remotely all the time (2%).

Three quarters of responses on behalf of councils believed that less than half of their members would seek to attend meetings remotely over the course of a year. Only 11% indicated that almost all of their members (90% to 100%) would seek to attend meetings remotely.

Only 16% of respondents thought that councils should not have the flexibility to meet fully remotely under any circumstances. Other responses were split between preferring that councils could meet fully remotely at up to half of their meetings (38%) and preferring that councils could only meet remotely in exceptional circumstances (46%).

Themes of inclusion and transparency were raised, and some respondents mentioned that remote meetings would be beneficial in the context of climate change and reducing emissions. Other respondents noted the benefits of remote meetings for rural councils with poor public transport provision.

Proxy Voting:

Respondents were narrowly opposed to the principle of introducing proxy voting measures, with 47% answering “no” and 36% answering “yes”.

Broadly speaking, responses from members of councils and members of the public were more evenly split, while responses on behalf of councils and sector representative bodies were overwhelmingly opposed.

Some respondents felt that proxy voting should be allowed in all instances where an elected member cannot attend a meeting; others felt that it should be reviewed case by case.

Respondents generally identified key issues in relation to proxy voting in response to this question, rather than identifying specific circumstances in which proxy voting would not be appropriate. Themes included the potential lack of accountability, pre-determined voting, and misuse. Some respondents felt that proxy voting would not be necessary if meetings could be held remotely or in a hybrid form.

Respondents suggested limiting the number of proxy votes a year, limiting the circumstances in which they can be used (personal limitations or meeting limitations), and ensuring clear records.

Conclusion:

The government is of the view that in-person authority meetings remain vital for local democracy, but that hybrid and remote attendance, and proxy voting, will enable local authorities in England to develop more modern, accessible, and flexible working practices.

Arguments for and against remote attendance and proxy voting have been carefully considered and the government plan to legislate support for permanent provision in relation to both policies, when parliamentary time allows.

On remote attendance, the government aims to permit local authorities to develop their own locally appropriate policies, if they decide to hold remote meetings.

On proxy voting, the plan is to require principal (unitary, upper and second-tier) councils to implement proxy voting schemes, to provide consistency for members who are absent when they become a new parent, or for serious or long-term illness. This requirement would apply to meetings of full council. For all other meetings, proxy voting may be used but will not be required, and substitute or pairing schemes may be more appropriate.

The government will work collaboratively with the relevant sectors to develop clear and supportive guidance in relation to both remote attendance and proxy voting policies.

Recommendation(s):

That the Standards Committee note the update and a further report be produced once more information is released.

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