

Response ID ANON-N2UZ-4532-W

Submitted to **Local Authority Remote Meetings - Call for Evidence**

Submitted on **2021-06-10 11:40:08**

Your personal data

1 Are you happy to continue?

Please tick this box if you are happy to continue:

Yes

Introduction

2 What is your name?

Name:

Georgia Raeburn

3 What is your email address?

Email:

georgia.raeburn@seafordtowncouncil.gov.uk

4 What is your organisation?

Organisation:

Seaford Town Council

5 Where in the UK is your organisation based?

England

6 What type of organisation are you responding on behalf of?

Please select an option from the drop-down list below:

Parish/Town Council

If you selected other, please specify:

Scope of this Call for Evidence

Purpose of this Call for Evidence

Terminology

Background

The Current Arrangements

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

Very Well

Please explain your answer in more detail, though note you will be asked about specific advantages and disadvantages of remote meetings in further questions:

There were initial challenges with getting set up for remote meetings, largely due to the short notice in which to do this, but remote meetings quickly became a very efficient and effective way for Seaford Town Council to hold its public meetings and make its necessary decisions in an open and transparent manner. Remote meetings have seen an increase in number and diversity of public both attending and participating in meetings, which the Town Council has welcomed. Remote meetings have also hugely improved the quality of meeting recordings which are then shared on the Town Council's YouTube channel and have attracted an increased number of watchers than the recordings of physical meetings. The Town Council believes remote meetings have definitely enabled a greater level of public understanding and involvement in its activities.

Permanent Arrangements

8 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?

Yes

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

Remote meetings have seen an increase in number and diversity of public both attending and participating in meetings, which the Town Council has welcomed. Remote meetings have also hugely improved the quality of meeting recordings which are then shared on the Town Council's YouTube channel and have attracted an increased number of watchers than the recordings of physical meetings. The Town Council believes remote meetings have definitely enabled a greater level of public understanding and involvement in its activities.

Benefits of Remote Meetings

9 What do you think are some of the benefits of remote meetings?

More accessible for local authority members, Reduction in travel time for members, Meetings more easily accessed by local residents, Greater transparency for meetings, Documents (e.g. minutes, agendas, supporting papers) are more accessible, Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion, A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings, Other (please specify below)

For each benefit you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:

- Encourages a better work-life balance for councillors and officers with meetings often held in the evening and able to be carried out from home
- Creates a more accessible meeting format where attending a physical meeting may have been hard; such as for participants with health problems, mobility issues or caring responsibilities, for example.
- Has further encouraged and made provision for one of the key factors of democracy; the active participation of people in politics and civic life. Importantly has not restricted certain people from being able to partake in this democratic process, which will be the case with physical meetings.
- Has brought more local authorities online, with a virtual presence, meaning as a town council we are able to view other town council meetings and gain useful insights from these
- Broken down the distance barrier, enabling councillors to attend meetings if they are out of town (for business or holidaying, for example) and indeed members of the public and officers too
- A safer working/meeting environment for all involved as meetings are usually held in the evening, which would result in people travelling home or potentially lone working after dark

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Cost of remote meetings

10 [For local authorities only] Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

Unsure

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

This has not been quantified. Seaford Town Councillors do not claim travel expenses for travel to meetings so this was not a cost to save on. Paid officer time is reduced though, as is the volume of paper used and printing costs for meeting paperwork.

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Disadvantages of Remote Meetings

11 What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements?

Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection, Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format, Other (please specify)

For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:

- Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology – the Town Council has produced guidance to try and assist with the use of this technology, in order to try and help those less comfortable with the process. The Town Council has received no complaints or comments regarding not being able to attend remote meetings.
- Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format – the Town Council has returned to providing paper copies of documents for those councillors that require it, in order to directly tackle this disadvantage.
- Other (please specify)
- Remote meetings remove the social interactions and therefore peer relationship reinforcement that occurs from physical meetings, helping foster the 'team' environment for councillors – This is a real concern for some of the Town Councillors and the informal can often aid the formal. To try and address this the Town Councillors have had to look at other ways in which to foster and reinforce these relations already, steered by the 2020/21 Mayor. If remote meetings were enabled to continue, the Town Council would look at implementing permanent features to encourage these more social interactions such as informal Zoom meetings, 'on site' socially distanced meetings in the town at places of interest to the Town Council at that point, continued use of the Town Councillors messaging groups and others.

For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain any suggestions you have to mitigate/overcome them.:

As above.

Advantages of Physical Meetings

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

Please provide your answer in the box below:

- There is no reliance on technology for the meeting to take place and the removal of any risks that could pose.
- For individuals that find it hard to communicate via video meetings, face-to-face meetings remove that hurdle and may encourage easy flow of discussion and add greater opportunities for informal communication (as per answer 5 above).

Constraints on Remote Meetings

13 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?

I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they should have the option to hold remotely

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

The local authorities themselves are in the best position to assess which methods work best within their locality and also with their differing types of meetings. Importantly, as public bodies, decisions to hold meetings remotely or physically will still be open for public consultation or scrutiny as with any decision made - meaning that the local electorate can also be involved in determining the local meeting arrangements. All meetings regardless of whether remote, hybrid or physical, would still also be subject to the usual governance processes and legislation requirements to ensure openness and transparency.

14 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

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

As per answer 13 -The local authorities themselves are in the best position to assess which methods work best within their locality and also with their differing types of meetings. Importantly, as public bodies, decisions to hold meetings remotely or physically will still be open for public consultation or scrutiny as with any decision made - meaning that the local electorate can also be involved in determining the local meeting arrangements. All meetings regardless of whether remote, hybrid or physical, would still also be subject to the usual governance processes and legislation requirements to ensure openness and transparency.

15 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?

No

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

As per answers 13 & 14 - The local authorities themselves are in the best position to assess which methods work best within their locality and also with their differing types of meetings. Importantly, as public bodies, decisions to hold meetings remotely or physically will still be open for public consultation or scrutiny as with any decision made - meaning that the local electorate can also be involved in determining the local meeting arrangements. All meetings regardless of whether remote, hybrid or physical, would still also be subject to the usual governance processes and legislation requirements to ensure openness and transparency.

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

Please provide your answer in the box below:

n/a

Public Sector Equality Duty

17 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?

Unsure

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

The Town Council has no data or evidence upon which to confidently agree a yes or no response to this question.

However, based on the Town Council's experience, individuals who are experiencing ongoing health issues have been able to continue attendance at remote

meetings, where they would not have been attending physical meetings. Individuals with caring responsibilities have to make less time to attend meetings (with the removal of travel, set up, tidy away time etc) and therefore have found it easier to strike a balance with their responsibilities. Furthermore, due to not being able to vote remotely, this is discriminatory to those councillors with health issues or that are classed as vulnerable. The Town Council would like to see legislation changed to be permitted to vote remotely again, at a minimum if a valid reason exists for not being able to attend physically.