

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 13 November 2024

By: Deputy Chief Executive

Title: Consultation response on remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings.

Purpose: To consider the Council's response to the Government consultation to enable remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Committee is recommended to agree the Council's response to the Government consultation on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings.

1 Background Information

1.1 The Government is consulting on introducing powers for local authority members to apply for a dispensation to attend formal council meetings remotely. This is in recognition that there are circumstances in which it may not always be possible for members to attend council meetings in person.

1.2 The consultation is also seeking views on the potential implementation of proxy voting provisions, which would allow councillors to designate another member of the Council to vote on their behalf when they are unable to attend a meeting in person or remotely.

1.3 The consultation is seeking the views of local authorities, as well as individual members of the public, and prospective and current local authority members. The consultation opened on 24 October, and is open for 8 weeks, closing on 19 December.

1.4 A copy of the consultation document is attached at appendix 1.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Government introduced temporary national regulations enabling Council meetings to be conducted virtually, safeguarding public health while ensuring local governance could continue. Under these regulations, the Council conducted its meetings remotely via Microsoft Teams until the regulations were repealed in May 2021.

2.2 In October 2020, the Council formally approved a Notice of Motion, urging the County Council to request that the Government grant local authorities the autonomy to determine their own policies regarding virtual meetings beyond May 2021:

Since lockdown remote working has been shown to be a very effective way for the Council to conduct its business. Without specific permission from the Government to continue in this way we shall have to revert to face to face meetings after the next County Council elections.

This Council resolves to ask Central Government to change the rules to enable Local Authorities to make their own decisions as to whether to hold virtual and/or physical meetings from May 2021.

This motion reflected the Council's recognition of the value that virtual meetings brought to its members and the community.

2.3 During the Pandemic the Council quickly adapted to the virtual format, demonstrating flexibility and resilience, learning new technologies and adopting modified procedures required for effective remote

participation. Holding meetings remotely led to several significant benefits, including reduced travel time, lower costs, and decreased carbon emissions due to the minimised need for travel. Additionally, virtual meetings offered Council members greater flexibility in managing their schedules, allowing them to balance council responsibilities with other commitments more effectively.

2.4 Since the repeal of the temporary regulations, the Council has sought to adopt a model which maximises the use of remote or hybrid meetings where legally permissible. This approach offers flexibility, allowing councillors who may face travel constraints or have other commitments to engage fully without needing to be physically present. By combining in-person and remote attendance, the hybrid model seeks to retain the benefits of virtual participation—such as reduced travel time and increased accessibility—while fostering an environment that encourages direct collaboration and interaction among key decision-makers. Notwithstanding this there is a legal requirement for members who wish to participate in meetings of Full Council and its Committees to physically attend.

2.5 A proxy vote is a vote cast by one person, on behalf of another, and is used when a person is unable to attend a meeting to cast their vote. Proxy voting could support members who encounter personal circumstances that temporarily prevent them from participating in meetings, even when remote attendance options are available. In such cases, introducing provisions for proxy voting could offer flexibility, particularly for those facing health issues, family emergencies, or other unexpected challenges. This system would allow these members, on a time-limited basis, to fulfil their democratic responsibilities indirectly by appointing a trusted colleague to vote on their behalf. Through proxy voting, affected members could continue to engage with their local authority's decision-making processes, ensuring that their perspectives and the interests of their constituents are represented, even during times when direct participation isn't feasible.

2.6 Whilst voting by proxy can be convenient, there are some risks associated with it. For example, discussions and debates play a key role in decision making, and there is a risk that an absent member who votes by proxy misses new perspectives raised during the meeting, which could impact on how they would vote if they were present for the debate. Additionally, proxy voting could reduce engagement and participation if Members are able to vote in absence.

3. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

3.1 The Committee is recommended to consider and comment on the draft consultation response attached at appendix 2. The proposals set out in the consultation increase the flexibility afforded to the Council and its members in terms of meeting attendance and proxy voting. As set out above the Council has previously set out its support for granting local authorities' powers to allow remote attendance at formal meetings. This approach acknowledges the benefits outlined in this report, including improved accessibility, and reduced travel related costs. The draft consultation response reflects this view.

3.2 The Council has previously acknowledged that offering greater flexibility in meeting attendance and participation could make the role of a councillor more attractive to prospective candidates considering standing in the 2025 local elections. Adapting to more flexible, inclusive approaches, such as hybrid and remote meetings, may encourage greater participation from individuals with diverse backgrounds, professional commitments, or personal responsibilities, who may otherwise not have considered a role in Local Government.

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