

Virtual meetings – evidence case

Draft response using government's online questions

7. Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meeting arrangements work? (voting buttons: Very well, well, neither well nor poorly, poorly, very poorly or unsure)

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

Modern technology has allowed remote participation at meetings across the World. Modern business uses this as its preferred method. Councils should be able to do the same.

8. Generally speaking, do you think local authorities should have the express ability to hold at least some meetings remotely on a permanent basis?

Yes. Councils know which methods work best for different size meetings. They should have the ability to choose whether to hold meetings in person or remotely using the latest IT.

9. What are some of the benefits of remote meetings? Explain in detail

Accessibility - The use of virtual meetings has highlighted the interest of the public to have more involvement in local democracy. Participation by members of the public has increased since the availability of attending meetings virtually. Attendance at council meetings is normally highest when planning matters are being discussed. For example, the average number of people now watching our Planning Committee online is 140 per meeting, more than double the attendance of in person meetings. The most views of a virtual single meeting was 454; it would not have been possible to accommodate this audience in any meeting room in the district due to the size of the meeting rooms or community halls and their fire regulations. The broadcasting of virtual meetings has facilitated a greater audience.

No need to travel - South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse are rural districts. Meetings in person have previously been held in the larger halls in the district. Some smaller meetings were held at the council's offices at Milton Park. Not everyone has access to public or private transport to attend these in person meetings. Travelling to attend in person meetings across the district also takes time. Virtual meetings have overcome these issues, allowing the public to watch the meeting from home, and at a time to suit them, as the recordings are kept online for one year.

Environmental benefits - The reduction in travel costs has brought environmental benefits. Less traveling to meetings has reduced the councils' carbon footprint—a positive step towards the councils' corporate objectives in tackling the climate emergency.

Wider demographic of attendees and participants - The public attendees at council meetings tend to be adults in the age range of 40 to 70. Older age groups may not feel comfortable travelling to meeting venues in the evening. Virtual meetings have overcome this, allowing them to access these meetings remotely. The younger age groups have not often been involved in council meetings. Virtual meetings have allowed younger people access to local decision-making remotely. Were virtual meetings to continue then it would be far easier to engage younger or older people and hard to reach groups in local democracy. Virtual meetings have also allowed greater involvement from those who may not have previously had the confidence to speak at meetings in person.

Greater engagement in local democracy - Local government has tended to depend on non-employed or retired people to come forward as prospective councillors. Virtual meetings may attract a more diverse pool of engaged talent, including younger working professionals and single parents who may wish to be engaged in decision making in their area.

Virtual meetings will allow councillors to exercise their democratic right to take part in decisions, even if they are unable to attend a physical meeting, e.g. due to vulnerability, self-isolating, positive Covid test, or any other reason. This is a democratic right, not just a health issue.

Participants' behaviour - Virtual meetings have improved participants' behaviour, as the broadcasts of the meetings are shown 'live' and are available to watch on the councils' YouTube channel for one year. Learning from the early experiences of other councils, participants' behaviour has improved over that experienced at some previous in-person meetings. Those speaking at the meeting are sent an invitation to join the meeting; others can watch the meeting broadcast online, without joining the meeting. This has reduced the instances of the public interrupting meetings from the public gallery. We notice improved behaviour all-round, perhaps from the knowledge the meeting is being broadcast.

Transparent decision-making - Virtual meetings have enhanced the transparency of decision making. The broadcasting of meetings has allowed this to happen. The meetings are available to watch 'live' or later at a more convenient time. This allows the public and councillors to look back after the event to see how decisions were made.

Improved presentation at meetings - The use of Microsoft Teams software to conduct virtual meetings has allowed easy viewing of officers' presentations, such as detailed plans relating to planning applications. In a large in person meeting, these presentations are not so easy to see for those at the back of the meeting room.

Health and safety - Covid-19 presents a continuing threat, irrespective of the national vaccination programme. The re-introduction of meetings with everyone present in person in May 2021 has presented health and safety challenges. The councils have sought the largest available space for meetings in person to maintaining social distancing for councillors, officers and the public. None of the large meeting venues in the district have been available for such meetings as they are being used in the local effort to combat Covid-19, e.g. as vaccine or testing centres.

The council has decided to use its open plan office space at Milton Park for meetings in person. This is cheaper than hiring large venues or marquees, plus audio-visual

equipment. All attendees are required to follow Covid-safe procedures such as two metre social distancing and seat spacing, and wearing masks until seated in the meeting room. This has required additional staff resource to provide Covid marshalling. Other measures include limiting the number of attendees required in the meeting room (some join remotely) and holding some informal meetings remotely when formal decisions are not needed. With virtual meetings, there were no such health and safety concerns as there was no person to person contact.

The council is continuing to broadcast in person meetings that are open to the public. This reduces the need for the public to attend the meetings to watch and listen to the debate, thereby reduces the health and safety risks for all.

Harm to Democracy - In order to overcome concerns regarding in person meetings, an alternative is to reduce the number of meetings by significantly increasing the amount of delegations, to reduce member involvement. The perpetuation of individual Cabinet member decisions or officer decisions will reduce debate. The extended use of such delegations will mean the public will not see the decision-making process, only the outcome. An alternative is to reduce the number of members on each committee and/or reduce the number of committees. Another option is to hold meetings in person with a reduced number of councillors in attendance, while still achieving a quorum. Officers believe that this should only be used as the last resort, when all other options are unachievable. Councillors without a role may become disaffected if these alternatives are pursued. We believe that these measures harm democracy.

10. Have you seen a reduction in cost since implementing remote meetings?

Yes. Virtual meetings have reduced costs. The table below shows the budget outturn at the end of 2019/20, ending on 31 March 2020, just after the first Covid-19 lockdown. Meetings in person were held until mid-March 2020. Compare this to the costs of running virtual meetings in the 2020/21 financial year (1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021). The savings in room booking costs and travel costs are shown in the table.

Cost of holding meetings			
	Cost in 2019/20 With meetings in person	Costs in 2020/21 With virtual meetings	Savings with virtual meetings
Room bookings			
South	£7,726	£90	£7,636
Vale	£5,437	£0	£5,437
Total			£13,073
Travel costs			
South	£11,688	£1,747	£9,941
Vale	£8,017	£270	£7,747
Total			£17,688

11. What do you think are the disadvantages of remote meetings? Please explain in detail, together with the mitigations to overcome them

People with no access to the internet or devices may not have access to remote meetings, although participants can dial in by telephone.

It is more difficult for officers to advise the chair in private during the meeting.

12. What are the advantages of face-to-face meetings?

We still allow the public to attend in person, if they wish. Face-to-face meetings give the opportunity to network with councillors or officers before and after the meetings. There is no worry of the technology not working.

13. Which meetings should be held virtually?

The council should be able to choose the best method for any of its meetings.

14. In which circumstances should councils have the option to hold virtual meetings?

The council should have a choice over which of its meetings should be held virtually.

15. Do you have any concerns if councils were given the option to hold virtual meetings?

No

16. If yes to 15, what mitigations should be in place?

Not applicable.

17. Would the ability of councils to meet remotely benefit or disadvantage any individuals with protected characteristics eg those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

We have undertaken an equalities impact assessment on virtual meetings. It saves people travelling, and benefits those with disabilities.