



Association of
Democratic Services
Officers



Rt Hon Alison McGovern MP

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Dear Minister,

**Remote and hybrid council meetings – a missed opportunity in the English
Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill**

Congratulations on your appointment as the Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness.

We are writing on behalf of the National Digital Democracy Partnership to express our concern that the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill makes no provision for councils to hold remote or hybrid meetings. We believe this omission represents a serious missed opportunity to strengthen local democracy, improve accessibility, and future-proof local governance.

As you know, our organisations – including the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO), Local Government Association (LGA), Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), Society of Innovation Technology & Modernisation (Socitm) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) – have consistently set out the strong case for enabling councils to meet remotely or in a hybrid way where they choose to do so. Our previous letters and supporting compendium of evidence demonstrated overwhelming sector-wide consensus that councils should have the flexibility to decide how best to conduct their meetings in the interests of their communities. The recent Government consultation on this topic showed the same enthusiasm and wide support across all tiers of local government.

The arguments for change remain as strong as ever. Remote and hybrid meetings:

- Increase democratic participation by allowing a wider range of people to serve as councillors, including those with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or employment constraints.
- Support transparency and engagement by making it easier for the public to observe and participate in council business.
- Improve efficiency and reduce costs through more flexible use of staff time and meeting resources.

However, recent developments make this issue even more pressing.

- **Local government reorganisation** means that new local and strategic authorities are being established will be making decisions now about their governance and meeting arrangements – including investment in technology, staff development, and accommodation strategies. Without the option of remote or hybrid meetings, they risk locking in outdated and less flexible systems for years to come, or significantly increased costs in having to adapt those systems.
- **Local government reorganisation** also presents the challenge for Councillors who will need to decide whether to stand for election for new created authorities without knowing if they would be able to join meetings remotely or not. We know that for local authorities who cover larger geographic areas that the ability to attend meetings remotely would make the role more accessible to wider range of people. This challenge is particularly pronounced for combined and strategic authorities which cover very large geographic areas.
- There is a **growing concern about councillor safety**, with an increasing number of reported incidents of threats, violence and intimidation. Providing the choice to attend meetings remotely offers a practical, immediate way to help protect councillors and ensure they can continue to participate safely and confidently.

In light of these factors, we urge the Government to use the Bill as a vehicle to introduce enabling powers for remote and hybrid meetings.

Council meetings are a vital part of local governance processes and provide important mechanisms for decision-making, scrutiny and accountability, as well as a forum for resident engagement. Each councillor is elected to represent their residents' views and to act in their interest; much of this activity will take place in public council meetings, which must allow for transparent and high-quality debate and engagement. Attending these meetings is a key part of councillors' roles, and many we anticipate will continue to fulfil this role in person as often as possible. However, in some circumstances this is not possible, and councils should be able to reduce this democratic deficit by allowing remote attendance in these circumstances.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you or your officials to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Louise Gittins, Chair, Local Government Association

Charlotte Eisenhart, Chief Executive, and Peter Sass, Chair,
Association of Democratic Services Officers

Robert Smith, Chief Executive Officer, and Adam Keppel-Green, Chair,
Society of Local Council Clerks

Mel Stevens, Chief Executive, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

Jonathan Owen, Chief Executive, The National Association of Local Councils

Deborah Evans, Chief Executive, and Helen Bennett, Director of Policy & Governance,
Lawyers in Local Government

Nadira Hussain, Chief Executive, and Kurt Frary, President, Socitm