

Virtual Council Meeting Survey – 2023

Research Report

May – June 2023



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Summary

Background

Between May and June 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a survey to capture data on the current appetite for virtual meeting options at statutory council meetings and understand the positive and negative effects of returning to in person only council meetings in England. The survey asked about a range of topics including attendance at council meetings, impact on local decision-making and accountability, requests for virtual meeting options by councillors for a variety of reasons and how a council would use virtual meeting options if they were permitted.

Monitoring officers in all principal councils in England were sent the survey, including district, county, unitary, metropolitan district, and London borough. The final overall response rate was 35 per cent (110 councils).

Key findings

Demand for legislative change

- Consistently, councils which responded to this survey made it clear there was a demand for the powers to use virtual meeting technology
- Nearly all (95 per cent) of the councils who responded have indicated they wanted the power to re-introduce virtual meeting technology at statutory meetings
- The vast majority (85 per cent) of councils would use virtual meeting technologies at statutory council meetings
- Nine in 10 (90 per cent) councils answered that their councillors would make use of virtual attendance options to attend council meetings as a reasonable adjustment
- Seven in 10 (70 per cent) of councils reported that at least one councillor has enquired about using virtual meeting technology for a reason other than a reasonable adjustment
- The three most common reasons given for this demand were work commitments, excessive travel times, and childcare commitments

Impact of returning to in person only meetings

- Nearly one in 10 councils stated that at least one councillor had voluntarily

stepped down entirely or partly due to the requirement to meet in person

- The data provided by councils on the impacts of the return to in person meetings presents more of a mixed picture, when compared to the demand
- A quarter (26 per cent) of councils have reported a drop in attendance to meetings but the majority (63 per cent) have said there was no change
- One fifth (22 per cent) of councils claimed that the end of virtual meetings had a negative effect on local decision making in comparison to the more than one tenth (13 per cent) which said it was positive. The majority (65 per cent) have said there was no change
- A very similar percentage stated the impact of the return to in person council meetings on the accountability of elected members was positive (15 per cent) or negative (11 per cent)

Councils were asked to give examples of when the return to face-to-face meetings had a positive or negative impact.

Positive impacts

- Improved internal communication such as informal communication and networking between councillors
- Better outward facing communication with the public as people could see councillor meetings in person
- Meeting in person negated the negative effects of virtual meeting technology such as WI-FI issues
- Debate between councillors is of a higher standard

Negative impacts

- Some councils mentioned that traveling in for the meetings had made it more difficult to attend. This issue was felt acutely by those with outside obligations such as work or caring responsibilities, and those in rural areas
- Poor attendance due to logistical issues such as travel
- Individual councillors who have experienced health issues or disabled councillors also found in person meetings more difficult to attend
- Another negative impact was the quality of the meetings such as in person

debate becoming more combative in person than online

Mixed impacts

- There was some difference in opinion regarding councillor conduct during in person meetings. Some councils thought that behaviour was better during when meeting face-to-face. In contrast other councils stated that it can lead to more negative conduct

Introduction

The survey aimed to help the LGA to gauge the current demand for legislative change to allow councils the flexibility to use virtual meeting technologies for statutory council meetings. Moreover, one goal of the survey was to help the LGA understand how councils might use virtual meeting technologies if they were permitted to do so and assess the perceived benefits and challenges of in person, virtual and hybrid council meetings.

Methodology

The research project was conducted by the LGA's Research and Information Team using an online survey. On the 17 May 2023, an email containing a unique link was sent to monitoring officers across all councils in England (317). In total 110 complete responses had been submitted when the survey closed on 2 June 2023.

Response rate

The total response rate was 110 complete responses out of 317 (35 per cent). Table 1 shows the response rate by type of council. County councils had the highest return rate (52 per cent) whilst metropolitan district councils had the lowest (28 per cent).

Type of council	Total number	Number of responses	Response rate Per cent
County	21	11	52
Unitary authority	63	25	40
London borough ¹	33	11	33
Shire district	164	53	32
Metropolitan district	36	10	28

Base: All responding English councils (110)

¹ For the purposes of this report the City of London Corporation has been categorised as a London Borough

Table 2 shows response rate by region. The response rate was highest from Yorkshire and the Humber (60 per cent). The lowest rate of response was from councils in the West Midlands (27 per cent).

Table 2: Response rate by region			
Region	Total number	Number of responses	Response rate Per cent
Yorkshire and the Humber	15	9	60
South West	29	15	52
North East	12	6	50
East Midlands	39	15	38
Greater London	33	11	33
North West	36	11	31
South East	70	20	29
East	50	14	28
West Midlands	33	9	27

Base: All responding English councils (110)

Notes

In addition, the following points should be noted about the research methodology. Some respondents did not answer all questions in the survey, so within this report findings are based on different numbers of responses. This number (the base) is shown below all tables. Please note that bases vary throughout the survey. Throughout the report, percentages in figures and tables may add to more or less than 100 per cent due to rounding. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole per cent. The data presented is not weighted meaning these results should strictly be taken as a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents/councils, rather than representative of all councils in England; this level of response means that the results are likely to provide a reasonable indication of the position of the sector more widely.

LGA Virtual Council Meeting Survey 2023

This section contains analysis of results from the survey. It is split into two sections. The first section covers to what extent there is demand for legislative change to allow councils to use virtual meeting technology for statutory council meetings and how councils might use virtual meeting options if they were permitted. The second section examines the impacts, both positive and negative, of in person-only council meetings.

Demand for legislative change

Demand for virtual council meeting options

Respondents were asked whether they think the power to allow councils to use virtual and hybrid technology for statutory council meetings should be re-introduced. The vast majority of councils indicated they want the power to use virtual meeting technology at statutory meetings (95 per cent). Only five of the 110 councils which responded to the survey did not indicate they wanted this power.

Table 3: Do you think powers to allow councils to use virtual and hybrid technology for statutory council meetings should be re-introduced?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	105	95
No	4	4
Don't know	1	1

Base: All responding English councils (110)

The percentage of councils which would use virtual meeting technology at statutory council meetings if it was allowed is high (85 per cent). Only one council (one per cent) stated they would not use virtual meeting technologies at council meetings if it were permitted.

Table 4: Would your council use virtual meeting technologies at statutory council meetings if it were allowed?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	94	85
No	1	1
Don't know	15	14

Base: All responding English councils (110)

Why there is demand for virtual meeting options

Almost nine in 10 (88 per cent) councils stated that, if permitted, councillors at their council would make use of virtual attendance options to attend council meetings as a reasonable adjustment, i.e., because they are disabled under the Equalities Act 2010. Only one percent was sure that there were no councillors who would use virtual attendance as a reasonable adjustment and 11 per cent didn't know.

Table 5: As far as you are aware, would any councillors at your authority make use of virtual attendance options to attend council meetings as a reasonable adjustment, if this were permitted?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	97	88
No	1	1
Don't know	12	11

Base: All responding English councils (110)

Seven in 10 (70 per cent) authorities report that at least one councillor has enquired about using virtual meeting technology for a reason other than a reasonable adjustment. While far fewer (15 per cent) said this had not happened.

Table 6: As far as you are aware, has any councillor at your authority asked about virtual attendance of council meetings for reason other than for reasonable adjustment?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	77	70
No	17	15
Don't know	16	15

Base: All responding English councils (110)

The table below shows the reasons councillors gave when they requested to attend a meeting virtually. Two of the three most common reasons were related to outside commitments including work (84 per cent) and childcare (64 per cent). While excessive travel times was the second most common issue (65 per cent). Sickness was another common issue with three in five (60 per cent) selecting short term and just over a third (36 per cent) long term.

Table 7: What were the reasons why they wanted to attend virtually? Please select all that apply.

	Number	Per cent
Work commitments	65	84
Excessive travel times	50	65
Childcare commitments	49	64
Short term sickness	46	60
Being on holiday	37	48
Other care commitments	36	47
Long term sickness	28	36
Other, please specify	16	21
Don't know	1	1

Base: Responding English councils which have been asked about virtual attendance of council meetings for a reason other than for reasonable adjustment (77)

How virtual meeting technology would be used

The following table demonstrates in which circumstances councils would deploy virtual meeting technology, if given the power to do so. The most common response given was that 'All council meetings would be hybrid and councillors could decide whether to attend in person or virtually' (46 per cent). While no council indicated that all statutory council meetings would be fully virtual, around a quarter (26 per cent) of councils selected 'Other, please specify'. Of those, many indicated that they would use multiple approaches. For example, one of the responses was as follows, 'I think we'd do a bit of a mix on a case by case - some hybrid, some virtual, some in person'.

Table 8: How do you think your council would use the flexibility of virtual meeting technologies at statutory council meetings?

	Number	Per cent
All council meetings would be fully virtual and all councillors would attend virtually	0	0
All council meetings would be hybrid and councillors could decide whether to attend in person or virtually	43	46
All council meetings would be in person with the option to request a virtual attendance as a reasonable adjustment	12	13
Councillors would have to attend some, but not all, meetings in person	12	13
Other, please specify	24	26
Don't know	3	3

Base: Responding English councils which would use virtual meeting technology if permitted (94)

Impact of returning to in person only meetings

The following table shows that, in the previous 24 months, it was more likely that councils reported a decrease (26 per cent) in councillor attendance to statutory council meetings than increase (three per cent) due to virtual attendance no longer being allowed. However, the majority (63 per cent) reported that attendance of councillors to statutory meetings was roughly the same since May 2021.

Table 9: Thinking about the attendance of councillors at statutory council meetings over the previous 24 months, since May 2021, how does this compare to the period when virtual council meetings were permitted (April 2020 to May 2021)?

	Number	Per cent
Councillor attendance has been higher in the previous 24 months	3	3
Councillor attendance has been about the same in the previous 24 months	69	63
Councillor attendance has been lower in the previous 24 months	29	26
Don't know	9	8

Base: All responding English councils (110)

Opinion on the impact of the return to in person statutory council meetings was mixed. More than one in 10 (13 per cent) stated it had a positive effect on local decision making in comparison to over two in 10 (22 per cent) of councils which reported a negative effect. The majority (65 per cent) of councils said it had neither a positive nor negative effect.

Table 10: In your opinion, what has been the impact, if any, on local decision making of the return to in person council meetings?

	Number	Per cent
Positive	14	13
Neither positive nor negative	72	65
Negative	24	22
Don't know	0	0

Base: All responding English councils (110)

A very similar percentage report the impact of the return to in person council meetings on the accountability of elected members has been positive (15 per cent) or negative (11 per cent). But the majority stated it was neither positive nor negative (71 per cent).

Table 11: In your opinion, what has been the impact, if any, on the accountability of elected members in your authority of returning to in person council meetings?

	Number	Per cent
Positive	17	15
Neither positive nor negative	78	71
Negative	12	11
Don't know	3	3

Base: All responding English councils (110)

One in 10 (nine per cent) of the councils reported that at least one elected member has voluntarily stepped down from their position either partly or entirely because of the requirement to attend meetings in person.

Table 12: As far as you are aware, have any councillors at your authority voluntarily stepped down since May 2021 as a result, either partly or entirely, of the requirement for them to attend council meetings in person?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	10	9
No	74	67
Don't know	26	24

Base: All responding English councils (110)

Impacts of the return of in person statutory council meetings

The councils responding to this survey were asked to provide a maximum of two examples of positive or negative impacts of councillors being required to meet in person for council meetings. Zero councils only identified only one positive effects of the requirement to meet face-to-face, while 18 councils identified only negative effect. However, most councils gave at least one positive and negative impact. In total the number of positive impacts of in person meetings is 143 versus 172 negative.

Table 13: Please use the space below to give up to two examples of the positive/negative aspects of councillors being required to meet in person for council meetings. If you don't know of any examples, please leave the space blank.²

	Number
Positive response only ³	0
Negative response only	18
Both positive and negative responses	81
Total number of positive responses	
	143
Total number of negative responses	
	172

Base: All responding English councils which gave at least one response to the questions in the table above (79 and 96)

Below are some key themes taken from the impacts of in person meetings identified by councils.

Positive impacts

Councillor relationships – Arguably the most common positive theme that emerged from the open text questions was the quality of communication between councillors. Many councils made general points about face-to-face communication just being “easier” and that “members engage with each other in a more meaningful way in person”. There were also some more specific observations, for example, in person meetings resulting in better “quality of debate”. This is because councillors were less “distracted by other things going on” and some commented that the discussion is more “free flowing”. Another positive of the return of in person meetings that has been observed was “building and maintaining relationships” between councillors and officers. Councillors also have “opportunities to have informal discussions” and “build relationships outside the formality of meetings”.

Public engagement – Another key theme was how councillors engaged with the public and how there is greater visibility of what councillors do and “their actual contribution to meetings” by the public. The return of face-to-face meetings made for “easier engagement with residents” and gives the opportunity for “members to interact with any members of the public”. This openness to the public had further positive effects. One council has stated in person meetings help councillors be “more accountable to the public in attendance”.

Technology – The move from meeting online to in person has changed the way meetings operate. Naturally, since the return to in person meetings “there isn’t the same risk that there is with remote meetings that a councillor’s Wi-Fi could go down, thereby losing connection to the meeting”. Moreover, no longer using this technology may be more inclusive to the councillors who are “less confident using virtual/hybrid meeting facilities”. There is also the impression that some members appeared “more engaged at in person meetings than on a screen perhaps with their camera off”.

Negative impacts

Attendance – Councils have reported that attendance has been “lower” or more “difficult” when required to meet in person. Issues relating to travel have negatively impacted on attendance. One council stated that they “are a large geographical area so the time and travel needed to attend can make attendance lower”. Furthermore, multiple councils have raised that the extra travel has an “impact on the environment” which is contrary to net zero and other environmental aims. This extra travel has also led to “increased expenditure related to travel expenses”.

Issues relating to attendance are not just related to the logistics, for some, having to meet in person is not as inclusive as meeting online. For some elected members meeting face-to-face has resulted in a “lack of flexibility for those with caring responsibilities”. Similarly, “the inflexibility means members that work for example cannot attend in person meetings”. The return to meeting in person has also had negative effects on councillors who are experiencing ill health or disabled councillors, and their ability to attend. Or, as one council has highlighted, some disabled councillors “find attendance in person more challenging, compared to remote attendance”.

Management of meetings – While some councils mentioned that meeting in person has had a positive effect on the quality of the meetings, through improved debate, engagement, etc., others gave examples of the negative consequences. One issue was how effectively the meetings were chaired when meeting in person. A council has stated that “meetings can be harder to chair as debate leads to members talking over one another at in person meetings”. The length of time meetings can take is more of an issue now. Multiple councils have raised the issue that “meetings tend to be longer and go off-piste”.

Mixed impacts

Councillor conduct – There was some difference in opinion regarding councillor conduct during in person meetings. For example, several councils said that behaviour in council meetings was better in person. One council said specifically that councillors were ‘less likely to say ill thought-out things in in person meetings’. In contrast other councils stated that in person meetings actually facilitated worse behaviour, for example being more combative or disrespectful and talking over each other. Some commented that councillors “tend to be more professional when in a virtual environment”.

Annex A: Questionnaire

Virtual council meetings survey 2023

Do you think powers to allow councils to use virtual and hybrid technology for statutory council meetings should be re-introduced?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

Thinking about the attendance of councillors at statutory council meetings over the previous 24 months, since May 2021, how does this compare to the period when virtual council meetings were permitted (April 2020 to May 2021)?

- Councillor attendance has been higher in the previous 24 months (1)
- Councillor attendance has been about the same in the previous 24 months (2)
- Councillor attendance has been lower in the previous 24 months (3)
- Don't know (4)

In your opinion, what has been the impact, if any, on local decision making of the return to in person council meetings?

- Positive (1)
- Neither positive nor negative (2)
- Negative (3)
- Don't know (4)

In your opinion, what has been the impact, if any, on the accountability of elected members in your authority of returning to in person council meetings?

- Positive (1)
- Neither positive nor negative (2)
- Negative (3)
- Don't know (4)

Please use the space below to give up to two examples of the positive aspects of councillors being required to meet in person for council meetings.

If you don't know of any examples, please leave the space blank.

- Example 1
- Example 2

Please use the space below to give up to two examples of the negative aspects of councillors being required to meet in person for council meetings.

If you don't know of any examples, please leave the space blank.

- Example 1
- Example 2

Would your council use virtual meeting technologies at statutory council meetings if it were allowed?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

How do you think your council would use the flexibility of virtual meeting technologies at statutory council meetings?

- All council meetings would be fully virtual and all councillors would attend virtually (1)
- All council meetings would be hybrid and councillors could decide whether to attend in person or virtually (2)
- All council meetings would be in person with the option to request a virtual attendance as a reasonable adjustment (3)
- Councillors would have to attend some, but not all, meetings in person (4)
- Other, please specify (5)
- Don't know (6)

As far as you are aware, have any councillors at your authority voluntarily stepped down since May 2021 as a result, either partly or entirely, of the requirement for them to attend council meetings in person?

- Yes (1)

- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

As far as you are aware, would any councillors at your authority make use of virtual attendance options to attend council meetings as a reasonable adjustment, if this were permitted?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

As far as you are aware, has any councillor at your authority asked about virtual attendance of council meetings for reason other than for reasonable adjustment?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Don't know (3)

What were the reasons why they wanted to attend virtually? Please select all that apply.

- Work commitments (1)
- Childcare commitments (2)
- Other care commitments (3)
- Excessive travel times (4)
- Being on holiday (5)
- Short term sickness (6)
- Long term sickness (7)
- Other, please specify (8)
- Don't know (9)

If you have further comments to add on the issues covered in this survey please do so using the space below:



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