

FULL COUNCIL - 13 DECEMBER 2021

VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Model letter for councillor/council to local MP

This model letter is a template that councillors and/or councils may use to highlight their support for legislation enabling the use of virtual and hybrid council meetings to their local MP.

Dear Sir Gary,

We are writing to you to seek your help in promoting the case for councils to have the flexibility to decide how best to conduct their local meetings. We welcome the return to in-person meetings where they can safely and efficiently take place, but also recognise the benefits of providing flexible meeting options, including opening up local democratic decision-making and creating a more accessible experience for councillors and the public.

Every week in local communities up and down the country, councillors are taking part in meetings as part of their responsibilities to represent their residents and make decisions about local issues. Councillors are proud to do this work and ensure that their residents voices are heard as part of this fundamental exercise of local democracy.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, council meetings took place in person with elected members, officers and the public present in one place. The contagious nature of the pandemic made this impossible and appropriate provision was made for councils to meet virtually under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020. During this period of crisis, virtual council meetings allowed councillors to continue to meet and make democratic decisions safely and without delay or relying on delegating decisions to officers.

The relevant provision for council meetings ceased to have effect from 7 May 2021 and in-person public meetings resumed from this date. Councils are known for making things work in difficult circumstances and democratic services, monitoring officers and directors of public health have worked hard to ensure that council meetings go ahead as safely as possible. Despite this, in-person council meetings are not and cannot be fully accessible, without more flexibility as to how people can attend them.

For people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 and people who care for them, attending council meetings presents very real risks. As a consequence, councillors are being forced to decide between representing their residents in council meetings and protecting themselves or their loved ones. The combination of vulnerable councillors, self-isolation and children being sent home from school to isolate can mean it is difficult to get full attendance at council meetings. In most cases, the ability to attend meetings virtually would enable councillors who are unable to attend a meeting in person to attend and represent their communities from another location.

The requirement to always attend meetings in person can be a significant barrier for disabled councillors and councillors with children, caring responsibilities, and work commitments. For elected councillors, this can mean they are not able to attend as many

meetings as their peers, missing relevant discussions and being deprived of their democratic right to vote on, decisions about key local issues. For prospective councillors, knowing that there will be the option to join meetings virtually can make the difference between them pursuing elected office or not. Local parties already find it difficult to encourage people to stand for election and this is particularly the case for young people, parents and disabled people.

Offering a range of ways to engage with council meetings, including virtual options, is more democratic, accessible and efficient for councillors, officers and the public. Virtual meeting options can help disabled people, carers, parents and workers to engage more freely and frequently with council meetings resulting in better attendance by councillors and members of the public, and a reduction in travel time, cost and carbon emissions associated with council business.

Councillors are glad to meet in-person where it is safe to do so, but this past 18 months demonstrated how inclusive councils could become. Returning to in-person only meetings is a missed opportunity to open up local democracy and create a 'new normal' where anyone interested in local democracy can participate, particularly people who are underrepresented or currently denied access due to their personal circumstances preventing them from attending meetings in person.

For these reasons and in the interest of local democracy, we implore you to support our call for the Government to amend legislation to provide councils with the flexibility to use virtual meeting options for council meetings.

Yours sincerely,

*Mayor Cllr Sara Hladkij
on behalf of Ivybridge Town Council*

Model councillor/council to Kemi Badenoch, Minister for Levelling Up Communities

This model letter is a template that councillors and/or councils may use to highlight their support for legalising of virtual and hybrid council meetings to the relevant Government minister.

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you to ask you to consider the case for councils to have the flexibility to decide how best to conduct their local meetings, including virtual, hybrid and in-person meeting options. We welcome the return to in-person meetings where they can safely and efficiently take place, but also recognise the benefits of providing flexible meeting options, including opening up local democratic decision-making and creating a more accessible experience for councillors and the public.

Every week in local communities up and down the country, councillors are taking part in meetings as part of their responsibilities to represent their residents and make decisions about local issues. Councillors are proud to do this work and ensure that their residents voices are heard as part of this fundamental exercise of local democracy.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, council meetings took place in person with elected members, officers and the public present in one place. The contagious nature of the pandemic made this impossible and appropriate provision was made for councils to meet virtually under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020. During this period of crisis, virtual council meetings allowed councillors to continue to meet and make democratic decisions safely and without delay or relying on delegating decisions to officers.

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For people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 and people who care for them, attending council meetings presents very real risks. As a consequence, councillors are being forced to decide between representing their residents in council meetings and protecting themselves or their loved ones. The combination of vulnerable councillors, self-isolation and children being sent home from school to isolate can mean it is difficult to get full attendance at council meetings. In most cases, the ability to attend meetings virtually would enable councillors who are unable to attend a meeting in person to attend and represent their communities from another location.

The requirement to always attend meetings in person can be a significant barrier for disabled councillors and councillors with children, caring responsibilities, and work commitments. For elected councillors, this can mean they are not able to attend as many meetings as their peers, missing relevant discussions and being deprived of their democratic right to vote on, decisions about key local issues. For prospective councillors, knowing that there will be the option to join meetings virtually can make the difference between them pursuing elected office or not. Local parties already find it difficult to

encourage people to stand for election and this is particularly the case for young people, parents and disabled people.

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Councillors are glad to meet in-person where it is safe to do so, but this past 18 months demonstrated how inclusive councils could become. Returning to in-person only meetings is a missed opportunity to open up local democracy and create a 'new normal' where anyone interested in local democracy can participate, particularly people who are underrepresented or currently denied access due to their personal circumstances preventing them from attending meetings in person.

For these reasons and in the interest of local democracy, we ask you to prioritise your Department's response to the Call for evidence: Remote meetings and bring forward legislation to allow councils the flexibility to use virtual meeting options for council meetings.

Yours sincerely,

*Mayor Cllr Sara Hladkij
on behalf of Ivybridge Town Council*

If the Council are still supportive of the option to hold virtual meetings, then the Mayor and Town Clerk can arrange for the above letters to be sent.

Jonathan Parsons
Town Clerk