



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Connecting Town Halls

Consultation on allowing joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conference



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Department for Communities and Local Government
Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF
Telephone: 030 3444 0000

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1. Scope of the consultation

A consultation paper issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government on behalf of the Secretary of State

Topic of this consultation:	This consultation paper sets out the Government's proposals for giving local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, the ability to hold meetings by video conference.
Scope of this consultation:	<p>The Department for Communities and Local Government is consulting on proposals to give local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, but not councils as a whole, the ability to hold formal meetings using video conferencing facilities.</p> <p>Making any change to the rules on how these meetings are held in England will require changes to the Local Government Act 1972.</p>
Geographical scope:	The proposals in this consultation paper apply to local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, in England only.
Impact Assessment:	No impact assessment has been produced for this consultation. The proposals would give local authorities and combined authorities the ability to hold these meetings by video conference should they so wish, rather than placing any requirement upon them to do so.

Basic Information

To:	This consultation is open to everyone. We particularly seek the views of individual members of the public, of local authorities that operate joint committees, of combined authorities, of those bodies that represent the interests of local authorities, and of the local media who report on these types of specific meeting.
Body responsible for the consultation:	The Conduct and Council Constitutions Team in the Department for Communities and Local Government is responsible for conducting the consultation.
Duration:	The consultation will begin on 9 November 2016. The consultation will run for 9 weeks and will close on 11 January 2017. All responses should be received by no later than 11 January 2017.

<p>Enquiries:</p>	<p>During the consultation, if you have any enquiries, please contact:</p> <p>Stuart Young email: stuart.young@communities.gsi.gov.uk TEL: 0303 44 42005</p> <p>How to respond: Please respond by email to:</p> <p>videoconferencingconsultation@communities.gsi.gov.uk</p> <p>Alternatively, please send postal responses to:</p> <p>Stuart Young Department for Communities and Local Government 2nd Floor, NE, Fry Building 2 Marsham Street London SW1P 4DF</p> <p>Responses should be received by close on 11 January 2017.</p>
<p>How to respond:</p>	<p>You can respond by email or by post.</p> <p>When responding, please make it clear which questions you are responding to.</p> <p>When you reply it would be very useful if you could confirm whether you are replying as an individual or submitting an official response on behalf of an organisation and include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - your name - your position (if applicable) - the name and address of your organisation (if applicable) - an address, and - an e mail address (if you have one)

2. Introduction

1. The Department for Communities and Local Government is consulting on proposals to give local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, but not councils as a whole, the ability to hold formal meetings using video conferencing facilities.

The Rules about Council Meetings

2. Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 sets out the rules for holding council meetings. The legislation is clear that all those taking part in a council meeting should be physically present in the place where the meeting is taking place. The Government considers that these rules still remain appropriate for council meetings that do not involve the meetings of a joint committee, or a combined authority. However, given the quality of video conferencing facilities available today it is right that local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, be given the ability to hold meetings on multiple sites.

3. Making any change to the rules on how council meetings are held in England will require changes to the Local Government Act 1972.

Joint Committees and Combined Authorities

4. Joint committees and combined authorities present particular geographical challenges when holding meetings.

5. Joint committees are committees formed by two or more local authorities to discharge certain functions of those local authorities jointly. They allow strategic decisions to be taken over a greater area than a single local authority. Each constituent local authority is represented on the joint committee by a councillor from that constituent local authority.

6. A combined authority is a legal structure that can be established by the Secretary of State at the request of two or more county councils or district councils. Combined authorities can discharge statutory functions, such as transport and economic development functions, for the area of the combined authority, which comprises the area of the constituent local authorities of the combined authority. Combined authority members can be members of constituent councils as well as representatives from other organisations.

7. The Government's proposals to give local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, the ability to hold meetings by video conference maintain the town hall transparency that the Government considers essential to help ensure that the public can hold their authority to account.

3. Proposals on allowing joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conference

Video Conferencing

8. The Government considers that, with appropriate safeguards to maintain town hall transparency, there could be benefits to giving local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, the ability to hold formal meetings by video conference in certain circumstances.
9. For the purposes of these proposals, a meeting is any meeting of a joint committee, or any meeting of a combined authority, including a meeting where a vote might be called to decide a matter.
10. The Government understands that where a joint committee has been established or where a combined authority exists, the area covered by the joint committee or the combined authority can be considerable. As a result, meeting venues for joint committees or combined authorities may be an inconvenient distance away from the homes of some councillors taking part in the meeting and the public who wish to attend the meeting. Such councillors were not directly elected to combined authorities or joint committees, and therefore, travelling such a geographic distance was not a reasonable expectation when standing for election as a councillor.
11. The use of video conferencing to hold meetings could remove those barriers of time and distance that might arise where a meeting of a joint committee or combined authority is held at a location far from the home of a councillor or member of the public. Not only could this lead to a potential saving in travel expenses, but it could help ensure that people are not discouraged from participating in these types of pan-local authority meeting, and would encourage more joint-working in local government.
12. The Government is committed to continuing to ensure that authorities are provided with the tools and freedoms they need to make the best use of taxpayers' money and public resources. These proposals will enable local authorities operating joint committees, and combined authorities, to use video conferencing facilities to hold their meetings, making it easier for those who are participating in those meetings to attend the meetings, and making it easier for the public who wish to attend or observe meetings to do so.
13. Video conferencing enables people at different sites to both see and hear one another. Video conferencing of meetings must mean that not only can the participants of the meeting see and hear one another, but members of the public can see and hear all the participants, just as if the meeting were taking place in a single meeting room with a public gallery.

14. To ensure that participants and the public can take part in and observe a meeting happening in more than one location, we propose that the access to video conferencing facilities to hold council meetings be available at local authority or combined authority sites that are suitable for holding a meeting with public access.

15. This would include, for instance, a local town hall of a constituent council of a combined authority or of a local authority operating a joint committee with other local authorities. A constituent council or local authority member would **not** be able to participate in a meeting held by video conference from their home, or from a private premises.

16. This will ensure that a constituent council or local authority member, or a member of the public attending a meeting at any site where a local authority member is attending the meeting, would also be able to see and hear simultaneously the activities of the local authority members attending the meeting at the other sites in use.

17. If the meeting is also being streamed on the internet then it may, of course, be observed by anyone, anywhere, with an internet connection and the facility to stream video.

Preserving Town Hall Transparency

18. Transparency is the foundation of local accountability, the key that gives people the tools they need to hold their authorities to account. Since 2010, town hall transparency has improved greatly, including changes to the rules about attending council meetings to allow the public to tweet, blog and film the proceedings of council meetings.

19. The Government's proposals preserve town hall transparency and, further, provide the opportunity for enhanced scrutiny of decision making by enabling local authorities to take advantage of, for instance, live streaming meetings held by video conference.

20. The proposals will not change the rules on local authorities or combined authorities publicising meetings, other than that the meeting will now take place on two or more sites. There will also still be limited defined circumstances where the national rules require or allow the meeting to be closed to the public, meaning that only those members participating in the meeting will have access to the video conferencing facilities.

21. Whilst the Government is aware that "remote attendance" was floated by then (Labour) Government in 2008, this Government does **not** support councillors being able to take part in their own council's meetings from their own home, or from some other private premises; the Government believes that such changes would undermine visible democracy scrutiny and public debate. Other than for joint committees and combined authorities which cover more than one local authority area, all council meetings should continue to take place, in person, in the public premises designated for that council meeting.

Questions

Q1: Do you agree that local authorities operating joint committees should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

Q2: Do you agree that combined authorities should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

Q3: Do you agree that the safeguards outlined in paragraphs 14 to 20 above are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when these meetings are held by video conference?

About this consultation

This consultation document and consultation process have been planned to adhere to the Consultation Principles issued by the Cabinet Office.

Representative groups are asked to give a summary of the people and organisations they represent, and where relevant who else they have consulted in reaching their conclusions when they respond.

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice with which public authorities must comply and which deals, amongst other things, with obligations of confidence. In view of this it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

The Department for Communities and Local Government will process your personal data in accordance with DPA and in the majority of circumstances this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.
Individual responses will not be acknowledged unless specifically requested.

Your opinions are valuable to us. Thank you for taking the time to read this document and respond.

Are you satisfied that this consultation has followed the Consultation Principles? If not or you have any other observations about how we can improve the process please contact DCLG Consultation Co-ordinator.

Department for Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

or by email to: consultationcoordinator@communities.gsi.gov.uk