



Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

Connecting Town Halls: consultation on allowing joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conference

Summary of consultation responses and the government response



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Ministerial foreword

The Government believes that, with appropriate safeguards to maintain town hall transparency, there are benefits to giving local authorities operating joint committees and combined authorities the ability to hold formal meetings by video conference in certain circumstances.

At present, Members of constituent councils and combined authorities are required to travel, at times, inconvenient distances to attend meetings. We recognise this may adversely affect Members' and public participation in these meetings, and this represents a challenge to local democracy.

By using video conferencing facilities in certain circumstances, joint committees and combined authorities have a great opportunity to hold their meetings in a way that best suit their local needs, recognising they best know their local circumstances. In doing so, they will enhance the scrutiny of decision-making processes and open up local democracy to a wider audience. However, we consider implementation of these proposals to be entirely a voluntary matter for local authorities and combined authorities.

The Government understands the views expressed in the consultation by rural authorities and is sympathetic to them. It recognises that the arguments in favour of enabling local authorities operating joint committees and combined authorities to hold formal meetings by video conference also apply to larger rural authorities. The Government therefore intends to speak with the sector, with a view to extending the use of video conferencing in formal meetings to other local authorities, before making a final decision on what to include in the legislation.

I am grateful to all those individuals, councils and organisations who took the time to respond to this consultation.

Rishi Sunak
Minister for Local Government

1. Introduction

The Government consulted 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. It also sought views on whether the following safeguards are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency if these meetings are held by video conference in the future:

- only meetings of joint committees and combined authorities (and not other types of council or partnership meetings) can be held by video conference;
- video conferencing means that not only can meeting participants see and hear one another, but members of the public can also see and hear all the participants, as if the meeting were taking place in a single meeting room with a public gallery;
- access to video conferencing facilities must be available at sites that are suitable for holding a meeting with public access, e.g. a local town hall of a constituent council of a combined authority or of a local authority operating a joint committee, and not from private premises; and
- the rules on local authorities or combined authorities publicising meetings, as well as the limited defined circumstances where national rules require or allow the meeting to be closed to the public, remain unchanged.

The Government believes that the use of video conferencing technology in this way presents an opportunity to both widen and deepen public scrutiny of elected Members, as well as provide an opportunity to increase participation in meetings from elected Members and interested members of the public. We consider these proposals will also provide added financial benefits, in the current economic climate, for any local authorities and combined authorities who choose to adopt them.

Whilst noting the practical concerns some respondents have raised, the Government believes that the safeguards identified in the consultation document are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when meetings are held in this way. The decision to use video conferencing technology will be entirely a voluntary matter for local authorities and combined authorities.

For the purposes of the consultation, the term ‘local authority member’ also extended to directly-elected mayors and co-opted members of authorities, and ‘local authority’ means:

- a unitary authority
- a county council
- a district council
- a city council
- a London Borough council
- a combined local authority
- a parish council.

2. Overview

Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972¹ 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.

However, the purpose of the consultation was to understand the appetite of respondents for giving local authorities operating joint committees and combined authorities, but not councils as a whole, the ability to hold formal meetings using video conferencing facilities. Making any changes to the rules on how council meetings are held in England will require changes to the Local Government Act 1972.

The consultation was published on 9 November 2016 and closed on 11 January 2017. Respondents were invited to reply by email or to post written responses to the Department for Communities and Local Government, now the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The consultation was open to everyone. We particularly sought the views of individual members of the public, of local authorities that operate joint committees, combined authorities; of those bodies that represent the interests of local authorities, and of local media who report on these specific types of meetings.

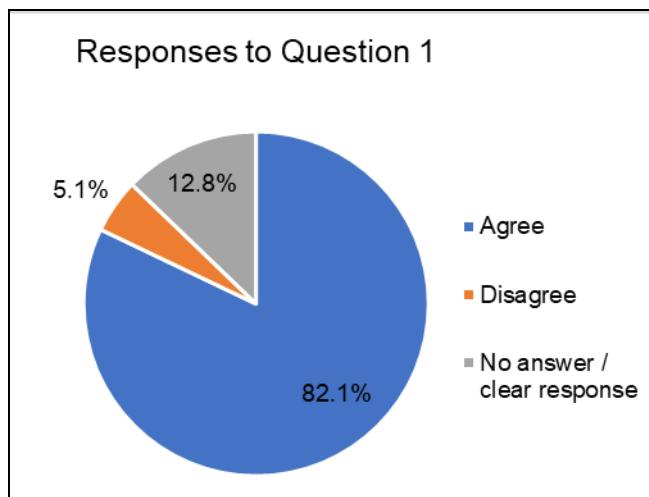
The consultation generated 39 responses, including from:

- Individuals (4)
- Combined authorities, joint committees and other partnerships (8)
- Unitary authorities (6)
- County councils (6)
- District councils (5)
- London councils (2)
- Parish and town councils (8).

¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/schedule/12>

3. Summary of consultation responses

Consultation Question 1: Do you agree that local authorities operating joint committees should have the ability to hold meetings via video conference?



A strong majority of respondents (82.1%, or 32 out of 39) felt that local authorities operating joint committees should have the ability to hold meetings via video conference. In contrast only two respondents (or 5.1%) were against the proposal, with a further five (or 12.8%) having no clear view. It is noteworthy that neither of the two respondents opposing the proposal were local authorities that operate joint committees.

Of those respondents in favour of the proposal, the most commonly cited reason was that in enabling meetings to be held on multiple sites, video conferencing would offer an opportunity for council members and members of the public wishing to attend meetings to save on both travel time and expenses. It would also help to reduce a council's carbon footprint.

Another important reason for support provided by respondents was that the use of video conferencing could improve meeting attendance, since individuals would no longer be discouraged from participating due to extensive travel. This in turn would enable greater public input into council decision-making and enhance local democracy.

At least three councils also stressed the importance of local government needing to "reflect modern life" and to "take advantage of the strides made in new technology" in order that local government becomes more accessible and transparent.

Of those respondents in favour of the proposal, at least six asked whether the scope of the consultation could be extended beyond meetings of joint committees and combined authorities to include all types of council meetings as well as other partnership arrangements, such as Police and Crime Panels. Large rural county

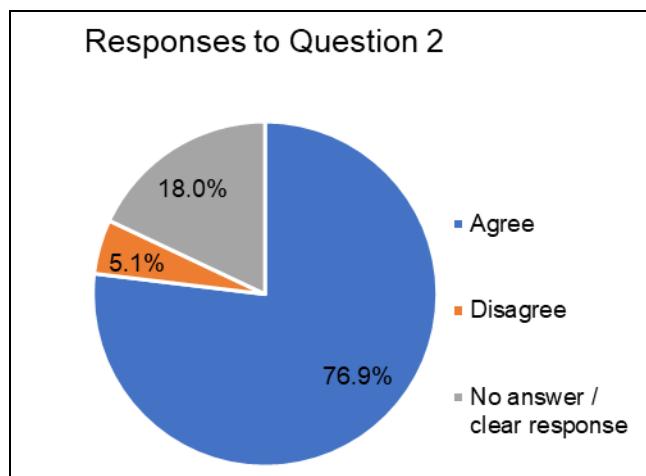
councils were particularly vocal on this point, noting that the distance some councillors must travel to attend regular council meetings can sometimes be significant.

In questioning the benefit of using video conferencing in meetings of joint committees, seven respondents raised concern over the cost of investment required in the necessary technology and pointed out that this may in fact exceed any savings in travelling expenses for elected Members. To address this issue, at least six respondents stressed the importance of ensuring that any use of video conferencing in joint committees meetings must be on a voluntary basis.

Other concerns voiced by respondents related to the practicalities of using video conferencing technology and of holding meetings in multiple locations. Examples included:

- where the physical meeting should be formally hosted, since that local authority would be responsible for chairing the meeting and for proving clerking support;
- the definition of a venue “suitable for holding a meeting with public access”, and whether this extended to facilities available in other public premises, e.g. a library, health centre or not-for-profit organisation;
- whether the public’s right to attend a meeting from a public building remotely extends only when a Member attends remotely from that building, or whether the proposals implicitly require each local authority to provide facilities for a member of the public to watch proceedings remotely in any event;
- practicalities relating to the governance of a meeting, such as quorum issues, ensuring all Members are given equal chance to speak, difficulties picking up visual cues, and for ensuring Members who may be required to leave the room due to disclosable pecuniary or other interests are no longer ‘present’ at the meeting;
- agreement on what to do when technology fails;
- data security requirements of the video conferencing link.

Consultation Question 2: Do you agree that combined authorities should have the ability to hold meetings by video conference?

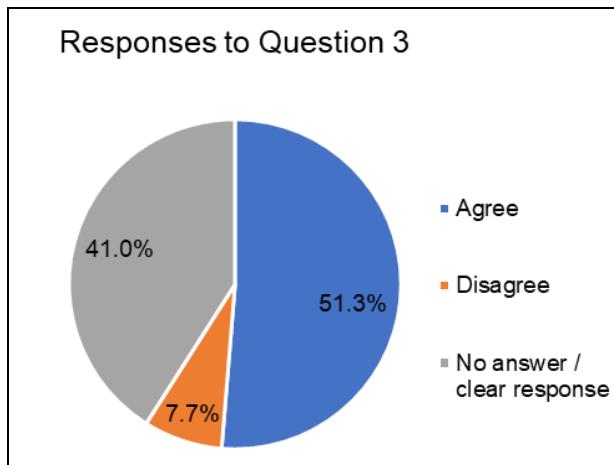


A clear majority of respondents (76.9%, or 30 out of 39) felt that combined authorities should have the ability to hold meetings via video conference. In contrast only two respondents (or 5.1%) were against the proposal, with a further seven (or 18.0%) having no clear view. As with the previous consultation question, the two respondents opposing the proposal were not members of a combined authority.

The reasons provided by respondents for supporting the use of video conferencing in meetings of combined authorities were similar to those cited for joint committees: savings on travel time and expense (nine respondents) and improved meeting attendance (six respondents). Respondents also stressed the importance of ensuring that any use of video conferencing by combined authorities be on a voluntary basis.

Respondents to this question echoed the practical challenges already raised under Question 1 with respect to the use of video conferencing technology and of holding meetings in multiple locations.

Consultation Question 3: Do you agree that the safeguards in paragraphs 14 to 20 [of the consultation document] are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when these meetings are held by video conference?



The Government identified the following safeguards which it believes are essential for ensuring transparency when certain types of meetings are held by video conference:

- only meetings of joint committees and combined authorities (and not other types of council or partnership meetings) can be held by video conference;
- video conferencing means that not only can participants see and hear one another, but members of the public can also see and hear all participants, as if the meeting were taking place in a single meeting room with a public gallery;
- access to video conferencing facilities must be available at sites that are suitable for holding a meeting with public access, e.g. a local town hall of a constituent council of a combined authority or of a local authority operating a joint committee, and not from private premises; and
- the rules on local authorities or combined authorities publicising meetings, as well as the limited defined circumstances where national rules require or allow the meeting to be closed to the public, remain unchanged.

Most respondents (51.3%, or 20 out of 39) agreed that these safeguards are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency. In contrast three respondents (or 7.7%) disagreed, while 16 respondents (or 41.0%) either did not know or did not answer the question.

Of those respondents that believed further safeguards may be necessary, most of their concerns related to the practicalities of using video conferencing technology and the governance of holding meetings in multiple locations (as discussed above). Many stressed the necessity for councils to set out in their own procedures what the process would be for dealing with potential practical challenges, e.g. the need to adjourn or reconvene a meeting in the event of losing the video conference connection. However, a few respondents called for Government to provide national guidance on the practical elements of conducting meetings through video-conferencing.

4. Government response

Having carefully considered the consultation responses received, the Government is satisfied that, with appropriate safeguards to maintain town hall transparency, there are clear benefits to giving local authorities operating joint committees and combined authorities the ability to hold formal meetings by video conference. Enabling joint committees and combined authorities to hold meetings by video conference will add to town hall transparency, and potentially encourage a greater degree of participation in these meetings which are the cornerstone of local democracy.

Use of video conferencing technology for this purpose will be on a voluntary basis and there will be no requirement upon constituent and combined authorities to do so.

The Government welcomes the consideration given to the transparency safeguards identified, noting that they were not challenged by respondents, and is content that they are sufficient to preserve town hall transparency when meetings are held by video conference. It is also of the view that councillors should not be able to take part in their own council's meetings from their own home, or from some other public or private premises, including those of not-for-profit organisations. Such changes would undermine visible democratic scrutiny and public debate. For the avoidance of doubt, it is the Government's view that only local authority premises suitable for holding meetings with public access, for example a local town hall, should be considered appropriate for holding meetings by video conference.

The Government notes the practical and governance concerns raised by respondents in relation to using video conferencing technology and of holding meetings in multiple locations. The Government considers that, should a local authority wish to take advantage of the freedom to hold meetings by video conference, these concerns would be a matter for local authority to address.

The Government understands the views expressed in the consultation by rural authorities and is sympathetic to them. It recognises that the arguments in favour of enabling local authorities operating joint committees and combined authorities to hold formal meetings by video conference also apply to larger rural authorities. The Government therefore intends to speak with the sector, with a view to extending the use of video conferencing in formal meetings to other local authorities, before making a final decision on what to include in the legislation.

5. Next steps

Making any change to the rules of how council meetings are held in England will require changes to the Local Government Act 1972. The Government will now speak with the sector, with a view to extending the use of video conferencing in formal meetings to other local authorities, before making a final decision on what to include in the legislation.

6. List of respondents

39 responses as of February 2017

4 Individuals (names withheld)

8 Organisations / Bodies

Anglia Revenues Partnership (joint committee)
Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) with Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) (joint committee)
Mid Kent Services (partnership between Maidstone, Swale, and Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils)
North East Combined Authority
PATROL (Parking And Traffic Regulations Outside London) Joint Committee
Suffolk Association of Local Councils with the Norfolk Association of Local Councils
West Yorkshire Combined Authority
West Yorkshire Police and Crime Panel (joint committee)

6 Unitary Authorities

Cornwall Council
Council of the Isle of Scilly
Herefordshire Council
Lancaster City Council with Preston City Council
Liverpool City Council

6 County Councils

Cambridgeshire County Council (2 x responses)
Hampshire County Council
North Yorkshire County Council
Suffolk County Council
Surrey County Council
West Sussex County Council

5 District Councils

North Kesteven District Council
South Bucks District Council
Wyre Forest District Council
St Edmundsbury Borough Council with Forest Heath District Council

2 London Councils

London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
Wandsworth London Borough Council (2 x responses)

8 Parish and Town Councils

Barnham Broom Parish Council
Cringleford Parish Council
Hardington Parish Council
Harlestone Parish Council
Kedington Parish Council
Locum Banwell Parish Council
South Wootton Parish Council
Yate Town Council