

# Response ID ANON-N2UZ-45ZA-K

Submitted to **Local Authority Remote Meetings - Call for Evidence**  
Submitted on **2021-06-17 18:31:40**

## Your personal data

### 1 Are you happy to continue?

Please tick this box if you are happy to continue:

Yes

## Introduction

### 2 What is your name?

Name:

Cassie Pinnells

### 3 What is your email address?

Email:

cassie.pinnells@thametowncouncil.gov.uk

### 4 What is your organisation?

Organisation:

Thame Town Council

### 5 Where in the UK is your organisation based?

England

### 6 What type of organisation are you responding on behalf of?

Please select an option from the drop-down list below:

Parish/Town Council

If you selected other, please specify:

## Scope of this Call for Evidence

## Purpose of this Call for Evidence

## Terminology

## Background

## The Current Arrangements

### 7 Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meetings arrangements work?

Very Well

Please explain your answer in more detail, though note you will be asked about specific advantages and disadvantages of remote meetings in further questions:

## Permanent Arrangements

### 8 Generally speaking, do you think local authorities in England should have the express ability to hold at least some meetings remotely on a permanent basis?

Yes

Please explain your answer in more detail.:

## Benefits of Remote Meetings

## 9 What do you think are some of the benefits of remote meetings?

More accessible for local authority members, Meetings more easily accessed by local residents, Greater transparency for meetings

**For each benefit you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:**

- Greater attendance and engagement from the public – and not restricted by capacity limits of usual venue, and easier for those who don't live in the parish (e.g. agents of planning applications) or working professionals / external representatives to provide representation / present at meetings
- Generally, a greater attendance rate from Councillors
- Debate tended to be more concise
- Improved facilities at meetings – in terms of presentation / screen sharing, management of attendees (e.g. moving public to virtual waiting room during confidential items), quality of recording (which gave an audio and visual recording of the meeting)
- Ability to broadcast the meeting to social media platforms
- Reduced commuting, particularly for Officers who are not based in the parish where face-to-face meetings are held.
- The remote meetings worked particularly well for our Planning Committee meetings
- Working Groups with have benefitted from meeting at a set time. Councillors and community representatives working together and sharing documents and presenting reports.

**Please upload a file using this link:**

No file uploaded

## Cost of remote meetings

### 10 [For local authorities only] Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

Unsure

**Please explain your answer in more detail.:**

Cost neutral as the outlay of the monthly Zoom cost would out weigh the cost of printing, heating/lighting, and caretaking costs at the Town Hall.

**Please upload a file using this link:**

No file uploaded

## Disadvantages of Remote Meetings

### 11 What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements?

It is harder for members to talk to one another informally, Meetings are less accessible for local authority members of local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection, It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format, It is more difficult to chair meetings in an orderly fashion, Virtual meetings can be more easily dominated by individual speakers

**For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain each of your answers in more detail:**

- It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format (I have highlighted this one as some Cllrs were having to use the same device for the call as well as viewing committee papers which may have affected their ability to scrutinise)

**For each disadvantage you have selected, please explain any suggestions you have to mitigate/overcome them.:**

## Advantages of Physical Meetings

### 12 What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

**Please provide your answer in the box below:**

- Avoids issues with Councillors losing connectivity during the meeting and possibly missing debate / voting
- Easier for the Chairman to manage the debate/discussions, and also easier for Officers to assist them with this
- Easier to ensure everyone who wants to speak, does, and isn't missed with their hand raised (which did happen on some of our remote meetings).
- Enables a more natural discussion, where Councillors can take cues from body language etc.
- Avoids excluding public / Councillors who cannot access remote meetings (although our council did not encounter this issue and received no complaints from the public)

## Constraints on Remote Meetings

### 13 If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, for which meetings do you think they should have the option to hold remote meetings?

For most meetings with a few exceptions (please specify)

**Please explain your answer in more detail.:**

Except Annual Meeting in May.

Or perhaps all Full Council meetings should be in person to ensure that the Council does still meet in person, particularly for important decision-making, with the option for committees and working groups to meet virtually.

**14 If permanent arrangements were to be made for local authorities in England, in which circumstances do you think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings?**

Other (please specify)

**Please explain your answer in more detail.:**

Local authorities should be able to decide on the circumstances, however the Annual Meeting should be in person unless there are extenuating circumstances (e.g. coronavirus restrictions). Local authorities should be encouraged to be as consistent with their choices though.

**15 Would you have any concerns if local authorities in England were given the power to decide for themselves which meetings, and in what circumstances, they have the option to hold remote meetings?**

No

**Please explain your answer in more detail.:**

As long as local authorities ensure their meetings comply with the existing legislation in terms of transparency and accountability (which local authorities successfully adapted to doing remotely from April 2020 to May 2021), then local authorities should be able to decide the arrangements for their meetings which are best suited to their council and community.

**16 If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome?**

**Please provide your answer in the box below:**

**Public Sector Equality Duty**

**17 In your view, would making express provision for English local authorities to meet remotely particularly benefit or disadvantage any individuals with protected characteristics e.g. those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?**

No

**Please explain your answer in more detail.:**

By allowing local authorities to meet remotely on a permanent basis, it would encourage them to improve their facilities to cater for those with protected characteristics. The emergency covid legislation was time-limited and there was uncertainty over the pandemic more broadly, so there was little incentive for councils to invest in this technology. It could be a beneficial opportunity for local authorities to catch-up with other sectors that have embraced remote technology.