



**DORSET & WILTSHIRE
FIRE AND RESCUE
AUTHORITY**

Item 24/58

MEETING	Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority
DATE OF MEETING	10 December 2024
SUBJECT OF THE REPORT	Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings - Government Consultation
STATUS OF REPORT	For open publication
PURPOSE OF REPORT	To discuss and agree
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	This paper is concerned with a Government consultation seeking views and the potential implications for remote attendance and proxy voting for Members. If enacted, the changes would apply to a wide range of local authority arrangements (in England only) including Combined Fire Authorities such as our own. A suggested response from the Authority is provided as Appendix A.
RISK ASSESSMENT	None for the purposes of this report
COMMUNITY IMPACT	None for the purposes of this report
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT	None for the purposes of this report
BUDGET IMPLICATIONS	None for the purposes of this report
RECOMMENDATION	Members are asked to discuss and agree the response as detailed in Appendix A.
BACKGROUND PAPERS	Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings. Government consultation. Published 24 October 2024. Deadline 19 December 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/enabling-remote-attendance-and-proxy-voting-at-local-authority-meetings

APPENDIX	A: Suggested consultation response from the Authority.
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Government has stated its intention to modernise democratic engagement and remove unnecessary barriers. Currently Members are required to physically attend the Authority and its sub-committees.
- 1.2 The intent of this consultation is to seek views on increasing flexibility to allow Members to attend meetings and vote remotely. If any changes to legislation are made as a result of this consultation, they would only apply to local authorities in England. This would include a fire and rescue authority constituted by a scheme under section 2 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act such as our own.
- 1.3 In addition to remote attendance, views are also being sought on the possible introduction of proxy voting for those occasions when an elected Member, due to personal circumstances, may be unable to attend even remotely, for example during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.
- 1.4 Clearly, there are a wide range of issues associated with this consultation and Government would like the views on the detail and practical implications of this proposition to inform their policy in this area.
- 1.5 As the proposition is broad in nature, it is difficult to definitively comment upon the proposals. However, a proposed collective response to the consultation is thought helpful and is included at Appendix A.
- 1.6 If and when enacted, a further discussion and paper will be needed to set out any local arrangements associated with this potential change to attendance and proxy voting.

APPENDIX A: PROPOSED RESPONSE FROM THE AUTHORITY

Q1. WHO IS RESPONDING.

Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority

(a) REMOTE ATTENDANCE

The proposal for remote attendance

From the consultation document: The government intends to legislate to give local authorities the flexibility to allow elected members to attend formal council meetings remotely. We believe that this modernising measure of providing broad flexibility to enable remote attendance will have the dual positive impacts of diversifying the representation of those willing and able to stand for elected office and enhance the resilience of local authorities in the face of local or national emergencies. The intent is that this legislative change would give local authorities the flexibility to allow members to attend remotely.

Q2. DO YOU AGREE WITH THE BROAD PRINCIPLE OF GRANTING LOCAL AUTHORITIES POWERS TO ALLOW REMOTE ATTENDANCE AT FORMAL MEETINGS?

Yes

If you answered No to the above question, please go directly to question 4.

Q3. IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO THE ABOVE QUESTION, DO YOU THINK THAT THERE SHOULD BE SPECIFIC LIMITATIONS ON REMOTE ATTENDANCE?

Please tick all the options below that correspond with your view and use the free text box for any other comments.

	a) Any formal meeting allowing remote attendance should have at least two thirds of members in physical attendance.
	b) Members should only be able to attend council meetings remotely in exceptional circumstances, such as those who are medically or physically able to attend, or for reasons of local or national emergencies.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	c) There should be no limitations placed upon councils with regard to setting arrangements for remote attendance of council meetings, up to and including full remote attendance.

Comments. Authorities should have the flexibility to determine which meetings are held in-person, remotely or using a hybrid approach. This flexibility would enable fire and rescue authorities to develop their own protocols, taking account of legislative requirements, to determine the 'best fit' for its own efficiency and effectiveness. Such protocols would need to be mindful of the potential investment of technology to support remote public attendance; the advantages of physical attendance to develop and maintain relationships of elected officials from the unitary councils making up the Authority.

Q4: IF YOU ARE AN ELECTED MEMBER, CAN YOU ANTICIPATE THAT YOU PERSONALLY MAY SEEK TO ATTEND SOME OF YOUR COUNCIL MEETINGS REMOTELY?

This response is from the Authority. Individual views from Members and Councils may be separately expressed.

Q5. IF YOU ARE RESPONDING TO THIS CONSULTATION ON BEHALF OF A COUNCIL AS A WHOLE, WHAT PROPORTION OF THE COUNCIL'S CURRENT ELECTED MEMBERS ARE LIKELY TO SEEK TO ATTEND COUNCIL MEETINGS REMOTELY OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR?

	a) less than 10%
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	b) more than 10% but less than 50%
	c) more than 50% but less than 90%
	d) most of them 90% to 100%

Comments. It is difficult to respond to this question with any certainty. The figures will differ depending on an individual's personal circumstances which may change from day-to-day, particularly if they have work or caring responsibilities, and it may also be dependent on factors outside of the fire and rescue authority's or Member's control such as adverse weather conditions. Councillors with caring responsibilities for both children and elderly relatives, and their individual circumstances are changing throughout their term so the ability to access remote meetings would help with their other responsibilities.

Q6: THE GOVERNMENT RECOGNISES THAT THERE MAY BE CASES IN WHICH IT IS NECESSARY FOR COUNCILS TO HOLD MEETINGS FULLY REMOTELY. DO YOU THINK THERE SHOULD BE LIMITATIONS PLACED ON THE NUMBER OF FULLY REMOTE MEETINGS COUNCILS SHOULD BE ABLE TO HOLD?

	a) Councils should be able to allow full remote attendance at up to half of council meetings within a twelve-month calendar period
<input checked="checked" type="checkbox"/>	b) Councils should only have the flexibility to change a meeting from in-person to online, or vice versa, due to unforeseen and exceptional circumstances
	c) Councils should not have the flexibility to conduct fully remote meetings to ensure there is always an in-person presence
<p>Comments. Authorities should have the flexibility to determine whether full remote attendance is appropriate. The requirements for full remote attendance or full in person attendance may differ from committee to committee and there should be flexibility to allow meetings to change from in-person to online in unforeseen/exceptional circumstances e.g. adverse weather. The flexibility should be given to fire and rescue authorities to develop their own protocols.</p>	

Q7. DO YOU THINK THERE ARE THERE ANY NECESSARY PROCEDURAL MEASURES THAT WOULD HELP TO ENSURE A REMOTE OR HYBRID ATTENDANCE POLICY IS WORKABLE AND EFFICIENT?

Please tick all the options that correspond with your view and use the free text box for any other comments.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	a) Councils should be required to publish a list of attendees joining the meeting remotely and give notice if a meeting is being held with full remote attendance
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	b) Councils should be required to ensure that standard constitutional arrangements are followed for hybrid and fully remote meetings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	c) Councils should be required to make arrangements to ensure restricted items (where a council decision is taken in private to protect confidentiality) are managed appropriately and to require remotely attending members to join from a private location
Comments. Fire and rescue authorities should be able to develop their own protocols based on legislation and local circumstances to ensure a remote or hybrid attendance policy is workable and efficient.	

Q8: DO YOU THINK LEGISLATIVE CHANGE TO ALLOW COUNCILLORS TO ATTEND LOCAL AUTHORITY MEETINGS REMOTELY SHOULD OR SHOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS?

Tick all the statements below that apply to your point of view.

	Should be considered because		Should not be considered because
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	It is a positive modernising measure.		Councillors should be physically present at all formal meetings.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	It would likely increase the diversity of people willing and able to stand for election in their local area, making councils more representative of the communities they serve.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	It could lead to a significant number of councillors habitually attending remotely and ultimately reduce the effectiveness of councils.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Councils would be more resilient in the event of local or national	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	It would be more difficult for councillors to build personal working relationships

	Should be considered because		Should not be considered because
	emergencies which prevent in-person attendance.		with colleagues and engage with members of the public in attendance at meetings.
Comments: Fire and rescue authorities should have the ability to establish their own local protocols regarding remote attendance at meetings.			

Question 9

In your view, would allowing councillors to attend formal local authority meetings remotely according to their needs particularly benefit or disadvantage individuals with protected characteristics, for example those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

Please tick an option below:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	it would benefit members
<input type="checkbox"/>	it would disadvantage members
<input type="checkbox"/>	neither

Comments: The Authority would welcome the flexibility to set and develop its own protocols. A hybrid model would also have the benefit of reduced travel accruing a helpful contribution towards the Authority's climate change strategy. It would help Members with work or caring responsibilities and those that have a temporary or permanent disability who may also benefit from being able to attend committee meetings remotely.

The ability to attend meeting remotely may increase the committees that some Members can sit on i.e. if they have previously been unable to sit on a particular committee because it sits at a time of day when they do not have sufficient time to drive to the meeting venue, attend the meeting and then drive back to their work/caring commitments.

Proxy voting

From the consultation document: Proxy voting is a form of voting whereby a member of a decision-making body may delegate their voting power to another representative to enable a vote in their absence.

It is possible some Members may find that, due to their personal circumstances, they are temporarily unable to participate in meetings even if remote attendance provisions are in place. Provisions for proxy voting could provide additional flexibility to those who really need it on a time-limited basis, allowing affected members to indirectly exercise their democratic duty, participate in their local authority's governance, and ensure that their views are taken into consideration. In the context of local authorities, the representative would have to be another elected member of the local authority.

Q10. IN ADDITION TO PROVISIONS ALLOWING FOR REMOTE ATTENDANCE, DO YOU CONSIDER THAT IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO INTRODUCE PROXY VOTING?

	yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	no
	unsure

Q 11. If yes, for which of the following reasons which may prohibit a member's participation in council meetings do you consider it would be appropriate?

Please select all that apply:

- physical or medical conditions
- caring responsibilities
- parental leave or other responsibilities
- other [Free text box]

QUESTION 12. ARE THERE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH YOU FEEL PROXY VOTING WOULD NOT BE APPROPRIATE?

The Authority does not support the introduction of proxy voting. A Member in attendance at a meeting, either in person or remotely, will have the benefit of listening to any officer presentation and will be able to consider any information that arises as a result of the debate and take all this information into account before exercising their right to vote. Anyone who is voting by proxy would be forming a view without the benefit

of all the information heard by Members attending a meeting, and there may also be issues arising in respect of potential predetermination or if amendments are proposed and agreed during the debate.

In addition to this, it is unclear how proxy votes may affect or bring into doubt if the meeting is officially quorate. For example, a quorum of 7, may have 5 people attending but they hold 10 votes between them. Is the meeting quorate or not?

Q13. IF YOU THINK PROXY VOTING IS APPROPRIATE, ARE THERE ANY LIMITATIONS YOU THINK SHOULD BE PLACED UPON IT?

N/A