RTPI response to MHCLG Call for Evidence on Local Authority Remote Meetings

June 2021

About the RTPI

This is the RTPI's response to the Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government's call for evidence on Local Authority Remote Meetings. This call for evidence seeks views on the use of the current arrangements, which have provided express provision for local authorities to hold meetings remotely or in a hybrid format during the coronavirus pandemic.

The RTPI champions the power of planning in creating sustainable, prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors. Using our expertise and research, we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates.

We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges. We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.

General comments

The RTPI welcomed the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the temporary regulations that shortly followed on 4 April 2020. These provided local authorities with the powers to hold public meetings including planning committees virtually. This provision has enabled the planning decision making process to continue through virtual local authority planning committees.

However, we called for the government to introduce primary legislation prior to the provisions allowing virtual local authority meetings expiring on 7 May 2021[1]. It is surprising that this legislation was not laid and the provisions for remote meetings bought to an abrupt end in England. This is particularly disappointing where legislation has been enacted in Wales and Scotland permitting the holding of remote meetings. Indeed, legislation in Scotland has allowed this since 2003[2] and the Welsh Government highlighted *"the opportunity to exploit the use of digital methods and tools to support greater engagement in democratic processes in terms of both democratic representation and citizen involvement"[3].* We therefore welcome the

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[1] RTPI (2021) Government action needed to ensure virtual planning meetings can continue, says RTPI
[2] Local Government in Scotland Act 2003
[3] Welsh Government (2021) Written Statement: Local Authority meetings and the Digital Democracy Fund

opportunity to respond to this call for evidence and to inform our response, surveyed our membership working in the planning system on this topic between 5 May – 21 May 2021, [receiving over 300 responses](#).

Hybrid approach: The RTPI recommends the government introduce primary legislation as a matter of urgency to reinstate the ability for virtual planning committee meetings to be held, while also exploring how a hybrid model could operate. We support the need for provisions to allow remote meetings to continue alongside in-person meetings combining the best outcomes to expand engagement in planning and democracy and maintaining the high level of development approvals.

A hybrid approach between remote participants and in person attendance would acknowledge the limitations to holding solely remote arrangements with it being more difficult to read body language for example. Having the provision for remote meetings is critical to allow planning decisions to be made and the planning system to continue to operate effectively in support of the green recovery and the level and impact of provision of housing in the event of future pandemics but also local travel disruptions which can adversely affect the running of in-person meetings.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: Holding remote meetings has increased the opportunities to hear from a more diverse group of participants and views with meetings being more accessible to a wider audience. Providing access to all including the media to view remote proceedings at a time convenient to the individual ensured that planning and the decision-making process reached a wider audience. RTPI research with Grayling[4] found that 53% of the public surveyed agreed that changes to local places, spaces and services will need to happen to adapt to life post pandemic – and that they want to be involved in these decisions. The research found that *"virtual planning committees have provided opportunities for greater engagement from members of the public".* However, the research also noted that *"where communities are experiencing digital poverty or illiteracy issues, virtual planning committees become a bigger challenge to navigate and there is a risk of excluding key groups."*

Our shared vision for digital planning with the Connected Places Catapult (CPC)[5] recommended the importance of being inclusive and diverse, considering everyone's needs and making services accessible to all, including those without the confidence or skills to use digital.

Convenience: Remote meetings provide the option for stakeholders to log in as and when required for their item rather than necessarily needing to attend the entire meeting.

Public health emergency: There remains an ongoing risk of Covid-19 particularly in the short to medium term. Therefore, where the technology exists such as with remote local authority meetings, it appears sensible to have the option to at least utilise remote arrangements where necessary.

Climate Change: Reducing the overall need to travel using remote and hybrid local authority meetings would contribute to reducing the number of trips and play a role in helping to achieve net zero targets.

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[4] Grayling Engage, RTPI (2020) [The Future of Engagement](#)
[5] RTPI & CPC: [A shared vision for the digital future of planning](#)

Questions

Q1. Generally speaking, how well do you feel the current remote meetings arrangements work?

Very Well.

Our survey of RTPI members showed that 88% of respondents thought the current arrangements were either working well or very well. The following list of reasons outline why we suggest that arrangements for remote meetings have worked very well:

Technology: Overall, this has been a success during what has been described as a 'year of learning' in enabling the planning decision making process to continue. However, there is an ongoing need to overcome technological issues, increase familiarity and confidence with processes such as screen sharing and muting when not speaking. The success of each meeting is always in part subject to internet connections. Echoing a theme highlighted in our survey of RTPI members in April 2020[6], the need for investment in IT software and hardware was again made in our latest survey of members.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: Holding remote meetings has increased the opportunities to hear from a more diverse group of participants and views with meetings being more accessible to a wider audience. This has principally been through removing the need to physically attend planning committee meetings.

The survey of RTPI members highlighted the following points regarding remote meetings:

- They could include the addition of subtitles to the video, which supported people with hearing difficulties to engage with the meetings more easily. Having the option to pause and replay or increasing the volume was another positive factor when watching recordings of planning committee meetings on YouTube or other platforms.
- They were more inclusive for disabled people particularly those disadvantaged by poor transport and inaccessible buildings; this is a particularly acute issue in rural areas where public transport is less frequent.
- Remote meetings help mitigate the fear of being at risk on the streets late at night. This has helped women feel more able to participate without the worry about leaving a planning committee meeting late and having to travel home.
- They were more convenient for those with caring responsibilities because there is no need to find additional care for dependents and cheaper without the costs of travel or finding care arrangements.

In addition, the public participation at meetings [by invitation only usually 3 minutes maximum] is arguably more diverse. Remote meetings mean that a greater variety of people can become councillors. They also increase the opportunities for a broader group of people to become planners. This can contribute towards delivering the RTPI's vision[7] "*To be, and promote the planning profession to be, as diverse as the communities it represents, to act inclusively,*

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[6] RTPI (2020) Pragmatic and prepared for the recovery: The planning profession's rapid response to Covid-19

[7] RTPI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

treating everyone fairly and seeking to provide a culture which delivers the best outcomes for the diverse society in which and for whom we work".

Climate change: Remote meetings can encourage a more efficient and sustainable system because they do not require officers, members, developers, agents or the public to travel to venues to engage in the planning process. RTPI research on net zero transport[8] outlined ways to reduce the overall need to travel and the use of remote and hybrid local authority meetings would contribute to reducing the number of trips.

Efficient and convenient: Meetings could be set up quicker and easier and costs were reduced for the local authorities through not needing to provide a venue, refreshments, or expenses. Presenting PowerPoint presentations and accessing electronic files (using two screens where available) could be easier when delivered remotely without the limitations on physical space that can exist in Committee meeting rooms. Remote meetings also provide the option for stakeholders to be more time efficient by logging in as and when required for their item rather than necessarily needing to attend the entire meeting.

Q2. 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.

We recommend a hybrid arrangement in the short to medium term but having the ability to meet remotely should be available to planning committees permanently. Our member survey found that 90% of our members thought local authorities should have the express ability to hold at least some meetings remotely. Local authorities should have discretion to meet in the way that best suits their community. Providing local authorities with the flexibility to choose what is most appropriate for their circumstances could avoid delays in situations where a suitable meeting room is unavailable or if key personnel are unable to travel or are self-isolating.

Factors for consideration on whether to hold a meeting remotely or use a hybrid format include the type of meeting and what time of day it is being held. Having the provision for remote meetings is critical in the event of future pandemics and to ensure that meetings can continue in poor weather where travel conditions are dangerous.

Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements? Please select all that apply.

- **More accessible for local authority members**
  The convenience factor of being able to participate remotely can help to increase the ability to participate. This links to a wider point about supporting a greater variety of people to become councillors in addition to existing councillors being able to attend.
- **Reduction in travel time for members**
  The time and cost savings gained can be particularly beneficial in remote geographically dispersed authorities.
- **Meetings more easily accessed by local residents**

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[8] RTPI (2021) [Net Zero Transport: the role of spatial planning and place-based solutions](#)

Increasing the options for the local community to participate in the planning process was an encouraging development. The format better accommodated those with work and or caring responsibilities by removing the need to physically attend planning committee meetings. Public interaction in the process also improved in some cases with the ability to display items such as plans on screen during meetings and to leave messages and ask questions using the 'chat' function.

- **Greater transparency for local authority meetings**
  Providing access to all including the media to view remote proceedings at a time convenient to the individual ensured that planning and the decision-making process reached a wider audience. This could either have been through live streaming or by watching recordings of meetings. There were multiple benefits to this such as increased transparency and visibility alongside promoting awareness and understanding in the planning system. More broadly, the recording of remote meetings brought the planning system into line with wider society through providing a catch-up option on demand. This increased flexibility by allowing anyone to watch anytime, on any device.

- **Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion**
  Robust, effective chairing of virtual meetings is necessary to ensure people do not talk over each other.

- **Other**
  Provides CPD opportunities for both planners in local authorities and indeed all planners not directly involved in the committee meeting to watch proceedings from their desk, observing what issues are raised and how they are responded to. It can also help planners to understand what issues are important to members providing the staff member with an opportunity to research the issues to prepare them for future committees that they might be presenting at.

Q4. (For local authorities only) Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?

We are not a local authority.

Q5. What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements, and do you have any suggestions for how they could be mitigated/overcome? Please select all that apply.

- **It is harder for members to talk to one another informally**
  Planning Committee meetings can benefit from informal discussions between officers and members, these can be easier to conduct in person and to build important networking between local authority staff and councillors. However, this is more difficult to accommodate in virtual meetings. Remote meetings also reduce the ability for councillors to have informal discussions between themselves prior to the meeting. Technology can help in some respects, for example use of the private chat function can facilitate informal discussions through pre meeting online before a planning committee meeting between Councillors and/or Officers. Additional screens/tablets and software/training could also be provided to help with viewing documents online.

- **Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection**
  Approximately 7% of homes in England and Wales do not have a decent fixed connection, while 5 million people across the UK do not use the internet at all[9].
- **Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology**
  Guidance notes can help people to gain access, holding short training sessions or help on the phone at the start of meetings. This does require increased IT officer resource.
  Always using a platform with a 'dial in' feature can ensure that people with a poor internet connection can dial in with a mobile phone or landline instead

Q6. What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

- **It can be easier able to read body language and get the attention of the Chair.**
  We recognise that interaction in meetings involves more than verbal communications and is a reason for maintaining face-to-face meetings alongside having the provision to hold remote meetings.
- **The opportunities to have the sporadic, informal discussions during a refreshments break.**
  Networking opportunities between stakeholders can be more difficult when not in person.
- **Not everyone will have an appropriate space in their home to hold a virtual meeting.**
- **The ability to gauge opinion around the room.**
- **Opportunities for the applicant and their agent to chat with their ward councillor before the meeting.**
- **Easier to signify acceptance or lack of acceptance of arguments put by others, without speaking.**
- **Greater ability to make better use of images/illustrations.**

Q7. 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?

We recommend that it should be down to the jurisdiction of the individual local authority as to whether they believe subject matters need to be discussed in person, can be handled remotely or would be best suited to a hybrid approach.

Q8. 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?

In any circumstances.

Q9. 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.

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[9] The University of Oxford. Covid-19 is increasing digital inequality: We need human connectivity to close the digital divide. 14 April 2020

Q10. If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome?

Not applicable.

Q11. 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?

Yes, having provisions for remote meetings can benefit individuals with protected characteristics, our answer to Q1 outlines some of the benefits for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion that remote meetings provided.

In addition to these points, remote meetings better enable disabled people to take part, for example, people can use software already on their aids on their home device(s) to hear and/or see meetings.