



Association of
Democratic Services
Officers



To national and local media
(by e mail)

19 January 2022

Dear Sir/Madam,

Lack of remote meeting provision for councils wreaking havoc on local democracy

This is an 'open' letter to national and local media highlighting the issue of local authority remote meetings and the recent petition launched by Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) and the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) to lobby the Government to change the law to allow such meetings to take place in England.

We are all national organisations representing and/or supporting council staff in principal councils or local (parish and town) councils. Please see attached for more information.

Since Covid lockdown in March 2020, and the temporary introduction of remote meetings for councils in all tiers of local government, we have been lobbying Government to make the provision permanent and to give local authorities the choice in how they run their meetings. The temporary provision ceased in April 2021 meaning that councils at all levels had to revert to physical meetings from that date. LLG and ADSO instituted High Court proceedings last year at considerable cost to both organisations to argue that the current legislation (the Local Government Act 1972) allowed for remote meetings. They were ably supported in the Court by the Local Government Association (LGA), the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and belatedly by the former Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Unfortunately, we were not successful in that submission. The Court stated that it was for Parliament to change laws (as has happened in Scotland and Wales), not the courts.

The Government has consistently argued that primary legislation is required to change the law and have cited a lack of parliamentary time as a reason for not bringing forward the necessary legislation. We feel this matter is so important that the required Parliamentary time should be found, not only because the current Omnicon variant is wreaking havoc on the democratic process, but also because there are positive and wider reasons for remote provision.

For example, such meetings have shown:

- Increased attendances at remote council meetings by both councillors and the public
- Significant cost savings for some authorities arising from much less travel to meetings
- The environmental benefits of less travel, particularly in the large county authorities
- A better work/life balance for councillors
- Improved equality of access to meetings for all and opening up opportunities for more people to stand for election as councillors
- More transparency and openness for the public to see and engage in council meetings
- An option to move council meetings online when there are constraints or emergencies, for example bad weather such as snow or flooding.

We know that many councils and their members wish to attend meetings in-person. We understand the reasons for that and agree that many such meetings (for example full Council) work better when people are together in the room. Our campaign is about giving councils the local choice to decide what works best for them. Remote meetings have been integrated into business and society throughout the world, including the House of Commons. We want local government to have that same level playing field. Scotland and Wales have had the choice to operate remote meetings for some time, without any issues. So why can't England do the same?

All our organisations promote good governance as a cornerstone of our existence. We fully understand the risks associated with remote Council meetings in matters such as compliance and integrity of voting and we worked hard during lockdown to ensure that those risks were minimised and managed. In the main, Councils in England responded positively, and problems were few and far between. We accept therefore that any future arrangements for remote meetings should operate within appropriate governance guidelines and rules.

During the lockdown period when remote meetings could take place, Councils did everything possible to ensure that local democracy continued. But they are now at the stage where councillors (particularly those who are vulnerable or have vulnerable family members) are being excluded from participating in meetings and carrying out roles for which they were elected. Members of the public (who found accessing remote meetings more convenient) are also being disadvantaged. Because of the age of many Council buildings or venues used for meetings such as village halls, ensuring councillors' and the public's safety through social distancing etc is proving difficult if not impossible and in some cases more costly. Local democracy is suffering as a result.

The LGA and NALC have also been pressing the Government but has received the same response. There is significant support within local government and beyond for the option of remote meetings. Councils want the ability to decide what works best for them. ADSO and LLG launched a petition last week to request the change in legislation and to keep the pressure on Government. At the time of writing, we have over 7000 signatures and this is increasing by the day. See the link <https://chnng.it/G6v8hgLVbW>.

We ask that you support us in our campaign.

We are available to discuss this with you at your convenience. Please contact John Austin (ADSO) (john.austin@adso.co.uk) or Helen McGrath (LLG) (Helen@LLG.org.uk).

Yours faithfully



ADSO



LLG



CfGS



NALC



SLCC

More about our organisations

Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO)

Formed in 2009, ADSO is the professional body for Governance and Democratic Services Officers in principal local authorities. We provide professional services, training and qualifications to our members as well as representing them in national and local issues. We also support local authorities in developing best practice in governance and related matters.

Lawyers in Local Government (LLG)

LLG was formed in April 2013 by the merger of the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSeS) and Solicitors in Local Government (SLG). It's primary purpose is to represent, promote and support the interests of its members.

Membership is open to local government legal or governance officers working within a local authority, including Monitoring Officers and their deputies, solicitors, barristers, legal executives, licenced conveyancers and trainees.

Lawyers in Local Government is a limited company registered in England and Wales. Registered Number: 8379439. Registered Office: Sycamore House, Sutton Quays Business Park, Sutton Weaver, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 3EH.

Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CfGS)

CfGS exists to promote better governance and scrutiny, both in policy and in practice. We support local government, the public, corporate and voluntary sectors in ensuring transparency, accountability and greater involvement in their governance processes. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) is social purpose consultancy and national centre of expertise. Our purpose is to help organisations achieve their outcomes through improved governance and scrutiny.

National Association of Local Councils (NALC)

Established in 1947, the National Association of Local Councils is the national body that represents the interests of 10,000 local (parish and town) councils in England. NALC works in partnership with county associations to support, promote and improve local councils.

Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)

Founded in 1972, SLCC represents clerks in over 5,000 parish and town councils in England and Wales.

As the professional body for local council clerks and senior council employees, it ensures that its members are equipped with the necessary knowledge, training and skills to thrive within their role and best support their council and community.