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Dear Lee,

Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill – House of Lords Report Stage (Amendment 158, after Clause 70)

On behalf of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), the professional membership body open to clerks to circa 10,000 town and parish councils across the England and Wales, I am writing to urge the government to now support an amendment at the House of Lords Report Stage and put forward by Baroness McIntosh of Pickering. This suggests the reinstatement of virtual attendance options at local government statutory meetings (Amendment 158, after Clause 70 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill).

The Local Government Association (LGA) has recently published a report following an extensive survey of principal councils where 95% of those responding indicated that they wanted to re-introduce virtual meeting technology as an option at statutory meetings. Findings also point to anomalies where some council committee meetings can go ahead, such as licensing hearings, leading to a confusing two-tier system. Since the temporary power to hold virtual meetings, introduced during the pandemic but withdrawn in May 2021, survey feedback shows that there has been an impact on the recruitment and retention of councillors, and barriers created particularly where there are work, caring commitments, health or disability issues.

As you'll remember when you came along to our Practitioners' Conference in Kenilworth in February, these latest survey findings very much reflect the situation in the town and parish council sector too. On the government's call for evidence in March 2021 (to which, more than two years on, there has still been no government response), town and parish councils were among the more than 4,300 submitting responses indicating the benefits of remote meetings.

It remains frustrating that whilst partner organisations and businesses use hybrid meeting technologies to ensure the smooth and efficient day to day running of

their services, our local councillors and their clerks cannot show the same sensible, modern and effective approach.

Our sector has a diverse landscape, from rural parish councils in villages with circa 200 residents to large town and city councils with upwards of 70,000 residents. All offer a range of different services and facilities, including devolved services from their principal councils. All would benefit from the option of being able to hold hybrid statutory meetings.

Evidence shows that, during the pandemic when legislation allowing remote meetings was tested, there was increased local community engagement. It opened up the sector to those who would not normally have come along to meetings. There's a danger that access to civic participation is being closed off by not enabling remote attendance, almost barring those from more diverse backgrounds to stand as local leaders because of, for example, work patterns, or the commitments of parents of young children, just the people we try to encourage to take part in local democracy.

We support the Local Government Association in its request for legislative change with the limited reinstatement of virtual attendance options and for it to apply to all levels of local authority and hope the government can too.

Yours sincerely,



Robert Smith, CEO

cc: Baroness Scott of Bybrook, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Baroness McIntosh of Pickering, House of Lords