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FC114i: To consider the Public Consultation for Remote Meetings and Proxy Voting

Introduction

After many years of pressure since the temporary power to hold council and committee meetings online during COVID expired, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has launched a short consultation to seek views on the details and practical implications of allowing remote and hybrid attendance at local authority meetings in England. Additionally, part of this consultation is the introduction of proxy voting.

Any changes to legislation which are made as a result of this consultation would apply to all English local authorities, so would include Horsted Keynes Parish Council.

This consultation opened on 24th October and will run for 8 weeks, so a response will be required before the 19th December 2024. The response can be submitted online.

Rationale

Potential benefits of allowing remote attendance at council meetings:

- Modernise the methods of democratic engagement
- Widen the range of potential candidates standing for council by removing barriers
- Increase attendance at meetings
- Maintain the balance between in-person and online attendance
- Widen diversity of councillor candidates through more accessible and inclusive meeting conditions

The consultation also covers the possible introduction of proxy voting, for those occasions when an elected member may not be able to attend remotely due to personal circumstances, eg during maternity, paternity or adoption leave.

Consultees

Responses are invited from individual councillors, the Parish Council and members of the public.

Key Proposals

Summarised below are the key concepts being proposed. There are opportunities for free comments to be included for each question.

- Should remote attendance be limited to exceptional circumstances?
- Should full remote attendance be possible, or should there be a minimum number of attendees present in person for every meeting?
- Should there be a limit to the number of meetings held fully remotely per year?

- Should councils be allowed to change a meeting from in-person to online, or vice versa, in exceptional circumstances?
- Are there any procedural considerations to be managed, e.g. publishing a notice of those who will be attending remotely, ensuring standard constitutional arrangements can be followed whether the meeting is hybrid or fully remote, ensuring confidential matters can be managed appropriately.

The consultation is also seeking the following opinions:

- What would be the estimated frequency an individual would choose to attend meetings remotely?
- Reasons for considering or not considering the legislation change:

Should be considered because	Should not be considered because
It is a positive modernising measure.	Councillors should be physically present at all formal meetings.
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.	It could lead to a significant number of councillors habitually attending remotely and ultimately reduce the effectiveness of councils.
Councils would be more resilient in the event of local or national emergencies which prevent in-person attendance.	It would be more difficult for councillors to build personal working relationships with colleagues, and engage with members of the public in attendance at meetings.
Free text box – please state any other reasons	Free text box – please state any other reasons

- Would online meetings benefit councillors with protected characteristics.

Proxy Voting

In addition to remote meetings, proxy voting is being considered with feedback sought as to whether or not this would be appropriate and if so, under what circumstances, and if there should be any limitations.

Points for Consideration

Councils in Wales have maintained the legal ability to hold online and hybrid meetings over the past several years. A couple of key learnings from these councils are:

- Wales did not retain the power to hold in person meetings only, they must provide the ability for a hybrid meeting at all times.

- WIFI provision is not good in rural areas meaning hybrid meetings are not possible due to inadequate infrastructure, so all meetings under these circumstances are held online only.

Costings should be considered as there will be infrastructure required to enable hybrid meetings including a speaker and IT equipment. Equipment storage will need to be considered, as well as set up times.

Meeting dynamics may be impacted by hybrid meetings, eg how the meeting would be chaired successfully if the chair was attending remotely, especially if there were any technical issues.

There must be secure and verifiable proxy voting methods should this be introduced, especially around confidentiality and prevention of vote tampering.

Enhanced transparency and public access to decision making.

Councils should be able to choose how they wish their meetings to be held, whether online, hybrid or face to face. Retaining the ability for in person only meetings is highly recommended.