



Association of
Democratic Services
Officers



Across the country, most councils and councillors are gearing up for local elections on 5th May. As part of that, preparations are well underway for an intake of new councillors through defeats and those not standing again. Some councils are anticipating over 33% of new members, possibly more. Planning for new councillor induction and Annual Council will be at forefront of many Council Leaders and Chief Executives' minds. These are exciting times, when serving councillors return with renewed enthusiasm, and newly elected councillors begin their roles as representatives with energy and high expectations of what they will be able to achieve. Monitoring Officers and Governance professionals, have a responsibility to match that energy and meet those expectations head on. Otherwise, new members will quickly become disillusioned, isolated and at worse feel marginalised

It is therefore so disappointing that the Government has still not responded to the call for evidence on local authority remote meetings which was held from March to June 2021. The case for remote meetings has been made strongly by our two associations, Councils at all levels, local government bodies and organisations such as Mumsnet. Despite those efforts, councils will be welcoming a new cohort of ambitious and forward-thinking councillors who will want to be the most effective and productive representatives they can be, with the most modern facilities available to them. Imagine their confusion and frustration when they realise that, in a digital age, the opportunity to harness new technology to conduct meetings in a flexible and innovative way and to promote ease of public access and engagement is not an option as it is across almost every other sector of our society, including Parliament, and in Wales and Scotland.

Citizens expect their representatives to carry out their community leadership role as ward councillors as a priority. This involves being visible, accessible and present in their wards. We also know that members very often carry out a fine juggling act between being a councillor, holding down paid employment, having a family (and even) a social life. If we want to be inclusive and recruit and retain a diverse and effective cohort of councillors, plus ensure open local government democracy to all members of our communities, then every step should be taken to create the conditions for that to happen. Giving councils the choice to meet remotely allows our councillors to be modern and successful community leaders. We are advocating that local choice. We are not trying to force remote meetings

on everyone. Such meetings also have a positive environmental impact by limiting the need for costly and damaging travel across council boundaries, a real issue for large councils whose councillors are diversely spread or have difficulty travelling.

Just under 11,000 people signed our petition, and councils across the country approved our motion for remote meetings as an option. They, like us, believe in a strong and modern local democracy, accessible to all. It is what local government wants and deserves for their councillors and communities. But it is also in everybody's interest that these meetings are run properly. That is why we once again make a plea to government to pass the necessary legislation to make remote meetings an option and to engage with us to agree a robust governance framework within which those meetings can operate efficiently and effectively. It is after all what a modern local democracy should look like.

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27 April 2022