

Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence – BPF response



Introduction

1. The British Property Federation (BPF) represents the real estate sector – an industry which contributed more than £116bn to the economy in 2020 and supported more than 2.4 million jobs. We promote the interests of those with a stake in the UK built environment, and our membership comprises a broad range of owners, managers and developers of real estate as well as those who support them. Their investments help drive the UK's economic success; provide essential infrastructure and create great places where people can live, work and relax.
2. The BPF welcomes the opportunity to feedback on the effectiveness of remote council meetings. Our response focuses exclusively on our members' views of the effectiveness of remote/hybrid planning committee meetings and what elements of the temporary system (owing to the pandemic) should become permanent features of our planning system.
3. In general, BPF members are supportive of the move towards holding more planning committee meetings remotely albeit there will be scenarios where a physical meeting is more appropriate. As detailed below, local authorities should be empowered to judge the best meeting method in light of the matters to be discussed with input from all interested parties. National Guidance should also be produced on the types of reasoning that indicate decision making would be improved by a physical meeting and also for the scenarios when a virtual meeting is not appropriate.

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

- Very Well
 - **Well**
 - Neither well nor poorly
 - Poorly
 - Very Poorly
 - Unsure
4. BPF members noted that once those participating have the reliable technology, meetings have been run very efficiently with no material disadvantage to any party or to the quality of debate and decision making.
 5. There are also clear benefits in terms of engagement and democracy in that a broader range of people are able to attend and participate than would have been the case for physical meetings. There is also a huge benefit in saving time, money and carbon expended in avoidable travel.
 6. A further point is that remote planning committee meetings have shone a spotlight on those committees and members that are doing a good job and conversely where standards are short of the mark. The visibility and broadcast of member debates and decision making on the internet is also a huge step forward in opening up local authority activity to the wider public.
 7. We also received feedback that member 'behaviour' has improved as a result of a wider audience possibly owing to the fact that conduct is more visible for all to see, and in perpetuity. It has also forced members to

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be more specific on their reasons for and against an application and requires them to be more focused on planning grounds.

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
- No
- Unsure

8. Member feedback is that when managed effectively with clear protocols (just as for physical meetings) virtual meetings can work very well. One option going forward might be to introduce a presumption that matters will be dealt with remotely unless there is a clear reason to hold a physical meeting. Guidance could be produced on the types of reasoning that indicate decision making will be improved by an in-person meeting.

Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements?

9. Benefits include structure, wider engagement and participation by the public, managing participants (i.e. discouraging inappropriate interjection and interruptions), less need to travel, saving time, and financial savings (both public and private sector).

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?

10. Not all planning matters will be appropriate for virtual meetings but many will and hence local authorities should have the flexibility to use them when appropriate.

11. Disadvantages of virtual meetings could include for larger and more complex matters – for example where there is a lot of illustrative material to be presented/ and or where an interactive element is planned (e.g. member questions of presenters about the illustrated material or where a model is to be displayed).

12. Further complexities of remote meetings include varying I.T quality from the participant and the potential for alienation of council members who are less comfortable with technology. Lack of digital skills among participants is a particular challenge when this applies to the committee membership, the Chair or officers running the meeting. There are also inevitably a number of different IT systems used with no consistency on this front across local authorities.

13. Members also fed back that at times it a difficult to gauge the ‘mood’ in a remote meeting room and that committee members find it more challenging to have a discussion in a remote meeting. At times, it can feel like a collection of individual opinions.

14. Committee members would also sometimes ask the applicant for clarification on detailed points in physical meetings and there is a perception that this might not happen as often in remote planning committee meetings. We received feedback that it is also much harder to gauge the mood of objectors in a remote

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planning committee meeting and indeed some are reluctant to have their video on. This on occasion has facilitated unsupported criticism, possibly feeling less need to justify opinions.

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

15. As inferred above, one clear advantage is the ability to view large amounts of presentation material to better understand a scheme.
16. A further advantage is the right of the public to address decision-makers in person.

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?

- For all meetings
 - **For most meetings with a few exceptions (please specify)**
 - Only for some meetings (please specify)
 - I think local should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they should have the option to meet remotely
 - I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings for any meetings
 - Unsure
17. As noted above, our view is that LPAs should have the discretion to hold physical meetings for certain matters with clear guidance and transparency about why this is needed. Most matters can be dealt with effectively through virtual meetings.
 18. There may be some analogy with the approach the Planning Inspectorate takes to deciding the method for hearing an appeal – the local authority could invite views from interested parties on how they wish the matter to be heard and take this into account before deciding whether a physical or virtual event is most appropriate.

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
 - Only in extenuating circumstances where a meeting cannot be held face-to-face or some members would be unable to attend (e.g. severe weather events, coronavirus restrictions)
 - **I think local authorities should be able to decide for themselves which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely**
 - I do not think local authorities should have the option to hold remote meetings under any circumstances
 - Other (please specify)
19. Local Planning Authorities should be empowered to judge the best method in light of the matters to be decided potentially with input from interested parties as suggested above.

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- 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?**
20. There should be clear guidance at national level on when a virtual meeting is not appropriate. Any local variations should be subject to consultation (perhaps as part of a review of the Statements of Community Involvement) and published openly. There should also be transparency about the reasons for the approach and for any decision to hold a physical meeting.

For further information please contact:

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