**Great Waltham Parish Council – Meeting 17th May 2021**

Proposed Responses to Questions in the MHCLG's consultation 'Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence’[[1]](#footnote-1)

As discussed at the meeting on 26th April 2021 (under item 21/708), the following table includes suggested responses to the questions posed by this consultation.

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| 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 |
| 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 |
| Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements? Please select all that apply.   * More accessible for local authority members **√** * Reduction in travel time for councillors **√** * Meetings more easily accessed by local residents **√** * Greater transparency for local authority meetings **√** * Documents (e.g. minutes, agendas, supporting papers) are more accessible to local residents and others online * Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion **√** * A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings **√** * I do not think there are any benefits to remote meetings * Other (please specify) * **The functionality to record meetings, if desired, is more easily accomplished.** * **The format is more convenient for members of the public who wish to attend for just part of the meeting (typically for the discussions on specific planning applications).** * **Offers greater access to those unable or disinclined to travel.** * **Zoom functionality demands an etiquette which requires contributors to avoid talking over one another – this offers the opportunity for more disciplined, shared discussions.** * **Remote meetings tend to demand overt responses which may not be given or can be overlooked in a face-to-face environment.** * **There is an argument that attendees are less likely to be aggressive and/or unreasonable knowing they are in an environment where the chair/administrator can mute or exclude their participation.** * **The coronavirus pandemic has made many people fearful of meeting face-to-face, and even when current restrictions are lifted, their reluctance is likely to continue for some considerable time. To ensure their future participation is not diminished or even excluded, adopting a ‘hybrid’ system where councils are free to choose arrangements which best fit local circumstances (as endorsed elsewhere in this response) would be a welcome compromise.** |

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| Q4. (For local authorities only) Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your authority?   * Yes * No **√** * Unsure |
| 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? Please select all that apply.   * It is harder for members to talk to one another informally **√** * Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection **√** * Meetings are less accessible for local authority members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology **√** * There is less opportunity for local residents to speak or ask questions * Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format * Debate is restricted by the remote format * It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format * It is more difficult to chair meetings in an orderly fashion * Virtual meetings can be more easily dominated by individual speakers * It might enable democratically elected members to live and perform their duties outside their local area on a permanent basis, therefore detaching them from the communities they serve **√** * It may create too substantial a division between the way national democracy (e.g. in the House of Commons) and local democracy is conducted * I do not think there are any disadvantages to remote meetings * Other (please specify)   **The comments below mainly relate to the specific bullet points chosen from the list available:**   * **Our understanding is that whether remote or face to face, council meetings are formal meetings and any informal discussions would continue to be held outside the meeting. Nevertheless, the virtual meeting format does not prevent informal but useful remarks during a meeting, which can assist a debate.** * **If poor-quality internet connection is an issue, this should be addressed more generally by speeding-up the delivery of superfast broadband functionality to everyone.** * **Overall, the point has probably been reached where technology-savvy citizens who cannot or are disinclined to travel for face-to-face meetings (F2F) now significantly outnumber those unfamiliar with video conferencing/technology, so insisting on F2F (without facilities for remote attendance at the same time) will adversely affect many more people.** * **Our understanding of The Electoral Commission guidance in relation to parish councils is that the qualifying criteria for a councillor’s residency/place of work are such that, while remote meetings may cause detachment from communities in other circumstances where such rules do not apply, this is unlikely to be a material issue at parish council level.** * **Perhaps the way debates are conducted in the House of Commons should not always be taken as an exemplar for local democracy bodies.** |
| Q6. What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?   * **There is an argument that any explanations or clarifications are made more promptly in a face-to-face environment. Conversely though, while remote meetings’ etiquette may make for marginally slower progress, it may force more precise/exact explanations.** |
| 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 |
| 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) * Unsure |
| 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?   * Yes * No **√** * Unsure |
| Q10. If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/overcome? |
| Q11. In your view, would making express provision for English local authorities to meet remotely particularly benefit or disadvantage any individuals with protected characteristics e.g. those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?   * Yes * No **√** * Unsure |

1. More background and additional information on the reasons for the questions being posed is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-authority-remote-meetings-call-for-evidence/local-authority-remote-meetings-call-for-evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)