

# Councils given new powers to hold public meetings remotely

- Local Government Secretary confirms local authorities can hold public meetings remotely by video or telephone
- Government removes requirement for physical attendance at meetings
- Public will still have access to public meetings through remote means
- Change ensures effective local decision making and transparency during the national effort to fight the coronavirus pandemic

Local authorities in England have been handed new powers to hold public meetings virtually by using video or telephone conferencing technology from Saturday (4 April 2020).

The government has temporarily removed the legal requirement for local authorities to hold public meetings in person during the coronavirus pandemic. This will enable councils to make effective and transparent decisions on the delivery of services for residents and ensure that local democracy continues to thrive.

Meetings will remain accessible whilst ensuring that councillors, staff and the wider public are able to follow government advice by staying at home to stop the spread of coronavirus to protect the NHS and save lives.

Local Government Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Local authorities are the backbone of our democracy and they are playing a vital role in the national effort to keep people safe. This change will support them to do that while maintaining the transparency we expect in local decision making.

Councillors and staff are already doing the right thing by following our advice to stay home, protect the NHS and save lives. This includes working from home wherever possible, and the new powers to hold meetings virtually will make that easier.

It's critical that they continue to provide essential services and find innovative ways to maintain important economic functions they perform like the planning system and they will now be able to do so.

We've given local authorities across England an additional £1.6

billion to help their crucial work in the national effort against coronavirus, and we are continuing to ensure they get all of the support that they need at this time.

Local Government Association Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said:

Councils are working tirelessly to support their communities as they rise to the unprecedented challenge of the coronavirus crisis.

Giving councils powers to hold meetings remotely is important to maintaining local democracy and allowing critical decisions to be made during this public health crisis. Councils need to respond quickly and make very many key decisions. They can now do so while remaining open, transparent and accessible to the public.

Remote council meetings will crucially help ensure all those taking part stay at home, helping to prevent the coronavirus from spreading and save lives.

The change applies to all local authorities in England and covers all categories of public meetings including annual meetings, cabinet and committee meetings.

The requirement for public meetings to be made accessible to the public remains, but it will be up to each local authority to decide how they conduct meetings, how voting procedures work and how to ensure that the public has access.

The government is also working to bring in new law so that by-elections, local polls and referendums cannot be held before 6 May 2021. The Coronavirus Act 2020 has already postponed local and Police and Crime Commissioner elections scheduled in the UK for Thursday 7 May 2020 until 6 May 2021.

- The change applies to all local authorities in England, which includes county councils, district councils, combined authorities, parish councils, joint committees constituted to be a local planning authority, fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities. They apply to meetings of a local authority, an executive of a local authority, a joint committee of two or more local authorities, and a committee or sub-committee of any of those bodies.
- The regulations also enable Police and Crime Panels in England and Wales to take place remotely, so they can also continue their important work in local areas.
- Existing rules about the number of councillors or members of a group required to attend to make a meeting valid will remain, but virtual

attendance will count.

- We are working with the Local Government Association and other representative bodies who are considering developing guidance for local authorities about holding remote meetings.
- This announcement applies to England (and to Wales for Police and Crime Panels). Whilst local government is a devolved matter, the Department has been engaging closely with colleagues in the devolved administrations.
- Saturday 4 April 2020 is the day that the local authorities gain the power to hold remote meetings. However, for most local authorities the practical effect will be from the start of the working week when they hold most meetings.
- The Regulations were made in Parliament on 2 April 2020 and apply to meetings taking place before 7 May 2021. The government is able to legislate to bring forward this date if medical and scientific advice leads to the relaxation of social distancing rules.
- We've provided [local authorities with £1.6 billion](#) to help them respond to coronavirus pressures across all the services they deliver. This includes increasing support for the adult social care workforce and for services helping the most vulnerable, including homeless people.