

28<sup>th</sup> January 2022

Kemi Badenoch MP  
Minister for Levelling Up and Communities  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

Dear Kemi,

## **Local Authority Remote Meetings**

I am writing as Chair of the County APPG, which works to provide a voice for counties in parliament, following the publication of answers to questions I had tabled about allowing councils to hold meetings remotely.

During the height of the pandemic, councils were pleased to be given the power to hold meetings remotely, as this meant that they could continue to transact key council business whilst ensuring that councillors, officers, and the public were prevented from being exposed to Covid-19.

The regulations permitting this have now lapsed, meaning that councils are now required to transact business in person. Whilst councils have been able to continue to do this safely, even during the recent spike in cases, I understand that a significant number of local authorities would have liked to have retained option to continue to hold meetings remotely. This is principally because this will allow them to continue to protect officers and councillors in the future who may not be able to attend meetings either through a need to self-isolate from Covid-19, or because of other illnesses or vulnerabilities that require them to remain at home.

Councils have also reported an increased public attendance and engagement at meetings as a result of being able to hold them virtually. At a time when many public bodies and businesses are taking stock of the positive impacts of changes in working practices that were necessary during the past two years, it would be disappointing if this innovation, which has led to the welcome outcome greater engagement and dialogue between councils and the public, were not able to continued.

Ultimately, many feel that as a point of principle local government should have the power to do this as they see fit, especially given that the government is looking at how it can devolve further powers and responsibilities to local government through the Levelling Up White Paper.

In my own area, a number of local authority bodies have detailed their desire for remote meetings. The Town Clerk of Lowestoft Town Council, Ms Shona Bendix, informs me that the continued risk to public health from coronavirus cases necessitates remote and hybrid meetings. Without this, she notes that it is very difficult for the Town Council to set an example to the public, with officials and civilians crowded into meeting rooms. Meanwhile, at Beccles Town Council I am informed that many councillors with concerns about the virus are not attending council meetings, potentially allowing the minority to control the Council. They feel that without legislation that allows councils to be more flexible, or regulations that permit

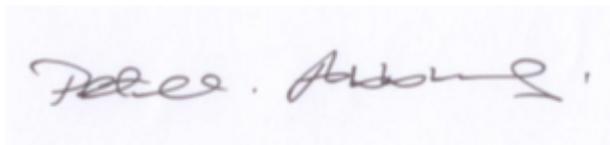
chairs to enforce sensible measures like lateral flow testing and masks, the unavoidable outcome will be cancelled meetings

Bungay Town Council have also outlined their support for giving councils the flexibility to decide how best to conduct their meetings, which they is more democratic, accessible and efficient for councillors, officers and the public. They add that virtual meeting options can help disabled people, carers, parents and workers to engage more freely and frequently with council meetings, resulting in better attendance by councillors and members of the public, and a reduction in travel time, cost and carbon emissions associated with council business. The Broads Authority has also reported that the requirement to hold in-person meetings poses a health risk, decreases attendance at meetings and results in increased costs and carbon emissions.

I note in the answers that you have committed to both publish the outcome of the call for evidence and that permitting councils to hold meetings virtually will require parliamentary time to secure the necessary legislative changes. I hope that you will be able to publish the outcome of the call for evidence swiftly, given that it concluded last June, and that this will help to move towards the securing of parliamentary time to be able to secure these powers for local government.

I thank you in advance for giving this matter your consideration.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Aldous", is centered on a light-colored rectangular background.

Peter Aldous MP

Chair, County APPG