



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Council Leaders
Principal Councils in England

Luke Hall MP

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Dear Colleague,

LOCAL AUTHORITY MEETINGS

It is just over a year to the day since the Prime Minister asked us all to stay at home, and local authorities across England have risen magnificently to the challenges of this period. There has been a dramatic shift in your day-to-day operations, alongside new difficulties and demands, and I commend the efforts of all councillors and officers in supporting your communities and ensuring vital business continues during these unprecedented times.

As you will be aware, The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 do not apply to meetings on or after 7 May 2021.

Extending the regulations to meetings beyond May 7 would require primary legislation. The Government has considered the case for legislation very carefully, including the significant impact it would have on the Government's legislative programme which is already under severe pressure in these unprecedented times. We are also mindful of the excellent progress that has been made on our vaccination programme and the announcement of the Government's roadmap for lifting Covid-19 restrictions. Given this context, the Government has concluded that it is not possible to bring forward emergency legislation on this issue at this time.

As outlined in the Government's Spring 2021 Covid-19 Response, our aim is for everyone aged 50 and over and people with underlying health conditions to have been offered a first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine by 15 April, and a second dose by mid-July. While local authorities have been able to hold meetings in person at any time during the pandemic with appropriate measures in place, the successful rollout of the vaccine and the reduction in cases of Covid-19 should result in a significant reduction in risk for local authority members meeting in person from May 7, as reflected in the Government's plan to ease Covid-19 restrictions over the coming months.

I recognise there may be concerns about holding face-to-face meetings. Ultimately it is for local authorities to apply the Covid-19 guidance to ensure meetings take place safely, but we have updated our guidance on the safe use of council buildings to highlight ways in which you can, if necessary, minimise the risk of face-to-face meetings, and we will work with

sector representative bodies to ensure that local authorities understand the guidance and are aware of the full range of options available to them.

You can find the updated guidance here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-council-buildings/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-council-buildings.

These options would include use of your existing powers to delegate decision making to key individuals such as the Head of Paid Service, as these could be used these to minimise the number of meetings you need to hold if deemed necessary. Additionally, some of you will be able to rely on single member decision making without the need for cabinet meetings if your constitution allows.

While I appreciate that a greater number of authorities will be subject to elections this year due to the postponement of the 2020 elections, those councils who are not subject to elections could also consider conducting their annual meetings prior to 7 May, and therefore do so remotely while the express provision in current regulations apply. As you will know, councils who are subject to elections are statutorily required to hold their annual meeting within 21 days of the elections. The Government's roadmap proposes that organised indoor meetings (e.g. performances, conferences) are permitted from 17 May, subject to Covid secure guidelines and capacity rules. On this basis, councils should consider the extent to which their annual meetings (and any other meetings) can operate on the same basis as other local institutions in their area, taking into account their individual circumstances and requirements.

If your council is concerned about holding physical meetings you may want to consider resuming these after 17 May, at which point it is anticipated that a much greater range of indoor activity can resume in line with the Roadmap, such as allowing up to 1,000 people to attend performances or sporting events in indoor venues, or up to half-capacity (whichever is lower).

Finally, while you do have a legal obligation to ensure that the members of the public can access most of your meetings, I would encourage you to continue to provide remote access to minimise the need for the public to attend meetings physically until at least 21 June, at which point it is anticipated that all restrictions on indoor gatherings will have been lifted in line with the Roadmap. However, it is for individual local authorities to satisfy themselves that they have met the requirements for public access.

I am grateful for the efforts that local authorities have made to allow remote meetings in their area and recognise that there has been a considerable investment of time, training and technology to enable these meetings to take place, and I am aware that some authorities, though by no means all, have made calls for the Government to make express provision for remote meetings beyond the scope of the pandemic. I am today launching a call for evidence on the use of current arrangements and to gather views on the question of whether there should be permanent arrangements and if so, for which meetings. There are many issues to consider and opinions on the detailed questions vary considerably. This will establish a clearer evidence base of opinion and enable all the areas to be considered before further decisions are made. The Government will consider all responses carefully before deciding to how to proceed on this issue.

I am copying this letter to the Mayor of London, the chairs of the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils, as well as the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in respect of other authorities covered by the current meetings regulations, including fire and rescue authorities, police and crime panels, national park authorities, the Broads Authority, and conservation boards.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Luke Hall', is centered below the closing. The signature is fluid and cursive.

LUKE HALL MP

Cc. Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary
Rt. Hon. George Eustice MP, Environment Secretary
Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London
Cllr. James Jamieson, LGA Chairman
Cllr. Sue Baxter, NALC Chairman