

**Leader of the Council**

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Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP  
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities  
& Local Government  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF  
United Kingdom

8<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

**Remote Council Meetings**

The Local Government Association, with support from the Association of Democratic Services Officers and Lawyers in Local Government, has been lobbying the Government for an extension of the regulations under the Coronavirus Act 2020 Section 78(3) that enable local authorities to meet remotely, or in hybrid form. The current regulations have a sunset date of 7 May 2021 which is now only 2 months away.

All responses from the Government to date reiterate their position: that the current legislation cannot be extended beyond the May deadline as it would require primary legislation which cannot be passed in time for May.

The ability to facilitate council decision making by remote means during the pandemic has brought numerous advantages to Chesterfield Borough Council, most importantly it has enabled us to put the safety of our elected members and staff first whilst ensuring that decision making continues in an open and transparent manner. As we are now in a third national lockdown with the deadline of 7 May 2021 fast approaching, we would encourage you to reconsider your response for the following reasons:

- Safety must come first. As will be the case at other local authorities, many of Chesterfield Borough Council's elected members are elderly and clinically vulnerable. Whilst this means they will be prioritised for vaccination our sense is that most will wish to continue connecting to meetings virtually from home until the threat from coronavirus is at a lower level.
- Time is already short to make the necessary arrangements to enable physical meetings to take place from 7 May 2021. As again will be the case at other local authorities, officers within Chesterfield Borough Council's Democratic Services team continue to be redeployed to ensure priority services, such as the crematorium, are able to remain operational. Facilitating a return to physical meetings will require extensive risk assessments and safety procedures to be put in place, placing an unnecessary strain on the staff that have been retained within the Democratic Services team.
- We have every expectation that the risk assessments will place limitations on the numbers of members attending meetings in order to comply with social distancing; this does not support democracy. It is also the case that Chesterfield's larger venues, which we would routinely have looked at as alternative meeting locations have been re-designated as vaccination sites and mass testing centres.
- It is also important not to under-estimate the benefits of virtual meetings; the ability to convene all of the council's member-level bodies remotely has enabled robust decision making to continue, increased transparency by enabling the public to access council meetings safely from home and supported our elected members to continue to be visible in the performance of their duties which has been particularly helpful to those who have been required to shield. The quantitative data we have gathered also shows that the numbers of members of the public viewing council meetings has also significantly increased during the period post the introduction of remote meetings.

We therefore believe it is vital to allow council meetings to continue to be held remotely for the immediate future for the reasons identified above, however we also believe there are long-term benefits in allowing remote attendance at council meetings on a permanent basis.

- In February 2020, Chesterfield Borough Council approved a Climate Change Action Plan with the target of achieving net zero carbon emissions from council activities by 2030, and across Chesterfield borough by 2050, supporting your own Government's target of zero-emissions by 2050. The ability to meet virtually has significantly reduced the need to travel to meetings by car, contributing directly to a reduction in carbon emissions, as well as reducing the amount of paperwork required for meetings by encouraging and maximising the use of digital alternatives. Retaining the ability to hold council meetings remotely or on a hybrid basis would not only make more efficient use of member's and officer's

time but also contribute towards helping the council to meet its climate change targets.

- We also believe that the move to more adaptable working arrangements would also help attract more people to put themselves forward for election, particularly those who have children or caring responsibilities. Residents would, in turn, benefit from having an elected membership which more accurately reflects the borough's demography and one that is also more representative of the borough's communities.

We would therefore respectfully ask that you give serious consideration as a matter of priority to making the necessary provisions for extending the remote meeting regulations for the immediate future and also to establishing the legal framework for allowing elected members to continue to connect remotely to council meetings in the long term.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Tricia Gilby  
Leader of Chesterfield Borough Council and Chair  
of the Chesterfield & Staveley HS2 Delivery Board



Dr Huw Bowen  
Chief Executive  
Chesterfield Borough Council