

THE ROLE OF VIDEO CONFERENCING IN SUPPORTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SURVEY REPORT
NOVEMBER 2021



PREPARED BY

THE ASSOCIATION OF IRISH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

IN COLLABORATION WITH

ZOOM



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) in collaboration with Zoom invited the 949 democratically elected members of Ireland's 31 county and city councils to respond to a survey on their experience of using video conferencing as part of council engagements. This report is an overview of the survey findings and outlines how video conferencing has supported the continuation of council work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges faced in adapting to an online model and the desire to retain a hybrid model for conducting future council business.

The survey responses received demonstrated a significant shift since March 2020, when most councils conducted no meetings or engagements online, to a point now where half of councillors are spending six to ten hours a week on video calls as part of their council business. While councils were generally proactive in moving business online, this took time to bed in with initial resistance from some council members as well as the challenge of overcoming technical barriers.

However, the survey showed a clear desire was expressed by respondents for the future retention of a hybrid model by their councils allowing for meetings to be conducted in a physical setting, but where members also have the option to join online. The vast majority agreed that a hybrid model facilitates better balance between family, personal, work and/or study life and that it opens opportunities to ensure more diversity and gender balance for our local authorities.

There was a clear emphasis on the differentiation of face-to-face engagement including the importance of maintaining this type of communication as part of the role of a councillor. However, the majority demonstrated a strong acceptance that a blended approach must be taken going forward to make participation in local government more accessible. Respondents noted that this is of particular importance to both current councillors and those considering running for council who are parents, carers, a person with a disability, or who are in full / part time employment. Over half of councillors agreed that a hybrid environment will encourage more participation in local government from underrepresented groups.



CLLR NICHOLAS CROSSAN
PRESIDENT OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF IRISH LOCAL
GOVERNMENT

I sincerely commend our elected councillors and local authority staff across the country on the efforts they took to ensure the continuation of their front-line council work; looking after our communities' needs throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The ability to smoothly transition engagements to an online environment through the use of video conferencing has played a significant role in this.

Listening to feedback from councillors on their use of video conferencing for local council engagements evidently demonstrates several positive learnings we can take from this process, including the desire to retain a hybrid model for conducting future council business.

While AILG hold the view that physical in-person meetings of the council should always be the default and preferred option, we fully support a hybrid model that creates a council environment which is accessible for all 949 elected members across Ireland and which promotes inclusivity and diversity in politics and local government.

Local government will continue to play a vital role in providing a forum for the democratic representation of communities as well as promoting the well-being and quality of life of citizens and communities through the efficient performance of functions and delivery of good-value services at local level.

As the direct link to the electorate, councillors are the backbone to delivering this message. AILG is committed to ensuring that local councillors have the necessary tools and knowledge to fully fulfil their role in community and engagement. It is therefore vital that councillors are equipped with the appropriate technologies to assist them with this work.

As a national representative body that represents and supports the role of our elected councillors it is vital that we listen to our members. While there is a clear call for a future hybrid model, it is important that we achieve balance by creating a council environment that supports both digital and traditional communication options for engagement, that work for them.



CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY
ZOOM GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS DIRECTOR FOR
IRELAND

Zoom was delighted to partner with ALLG to gain an understanding of the challenges and learnings local authority members encountered when transitioning council business to an online environment throughout Covid-19. As the 'go to' video conferencing provider in Ireland and the most downloaded app in 2020, we were keen to hear where the use of video conferencing for local council engagements could be improved to help make remote working work for councillors into the future.

We believe there is a significant opportunity for local government to lead from the forefront in terms of demonstrating how the National Remote Working Strategy can be implemented effectively. In line with the Strategy, councillors should also have the option to engage with local authority business through both digital and traditional channels. This would allow councillors to become trusted and informed champions of remote working among businesses (the employers) and individuals (the employees) whom they represent at a local level.

Working in partnership with Government and businesses to help achieve the successful implementation of the Remote Working Strategy is a key priority for Zoom in Ireland. In this regard, we are committed to supporting local authorities to ensure they can facilitate the option of a hybrid model for conducting council business that works for all council members and which exemplifies the Strategy in action.

It was particularly encouraging to see survey respondents outline the positive role video conferencing has had in terms of generating balance between their council responsibilities and their work / personal lives. Based on survey feedback, we are confident that a hybrid model of work can maximise efficiency for councils, while also supporting the individual circumstances of councillors beyond their local authority remit.



PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

BELOW IS A PROFILE OVERVIEW OF THE 139 OUT OF THE 949 LOCAL COUNCILLORS ACROSS IRELAND WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY

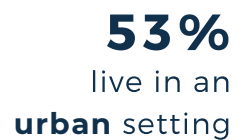
GENDER



AGE



LOCATION



PARENTAL & CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

32% are parents to a child / children aged 12 or under
21% are parents to a child / children aged between 13 - 18
8% are a full or part-time carer



LENGTH OF TIME AS A COUNCILLOR

0 - 2 years: 35%
3 - 7 years: 22%
8 -12 years: 14%
13+ years: 29%

HOURS PER WEEK CURRENTLY SPENT ON COUNCIL RELATED VIDEO CALLS

0 - 5 hours: 17%
6 - 10 hours: 50%
11 - 15 hours: 21%
15+ hours: 12%



EMPLOYMENT

Part-time employed: 23%
Full-time employed: 35%
Self-employed: 26%





MOVING COUNCIL MEETINGS ONLINE DURING COVID-19

94%

of respondents said that **no council meetings or engagements** were conducted online pre Covid-19. The same percentage said that their council has been **proactive in moving meetings online** since the start of the pandemic.

“

"THERE WERE SEVERAL CALLS FOR ONLINE ACCESS TO MEETINGS ESPECIALLY FOR DISABLED PEOPLE, THOSE IN RURAL AREAS AND OLDER PEOPLE."

"OUR MEETINGS AT FIRST WERE OVER THE PHONE, WHICH WAS DREADFUL. BUT VERY SOON AFTER WE WERE DOING ONLINE MEETINGS WHICH WAS A GREAT IMPROVEMENT."

"SLOW TO BEGIN, HUGE RESISTANCE TO IT."

"VERY PROACTIVE DUE TO THE LAPTOPS BEING PROVIDED TO COUNCILLORS AT THE START OF THE 2019 MANDATE."

”

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

While the majority of councils had not facilitated meetings and engagements via video conferencing other than for international webinars prior to Covid-19, there was a broad willingness to make a switch once restrictions were implemented. Some councillors cited that the switch to online was slow to get up and running initially, taking a number of months in some cases. Resistance to change was also referenced as a barrier and some councils were not initially equipped to facilitate meetings online. Others noted that their councils were very quick and proactive in making the switch.

HOW COUNCILLORS SUPPORT A FUTURE HYBRID MODEL FOR CONDUCTING LOCAL AUTHORITY BUSINESS POST COVID-19

A HYBRID MODEL REFERS TO A COMBINATION OF ONLINE AND IN-PERSON MEETINGS



85%

of councillors **have given consideration to a future hybrid model**

58%

believe a future hybrid model **has been given consideration by their local council**

A clear majority of councillors indicated that they would like to maintain the option of a hybrid model for future council business. While some councils are already operating a hybrid model, not all appear to have made a decision on maintaining this way of working despite the wishes of councillors.

Several councillors cited divided opinion among colleagues on the option of a future hybrid model. Others noted that their councils would need to upgrade technology to facilitate a hybrid option but where hybrid options are in place, meeting attendances have increased.

“ *I BELIEVE HYBRID MEETINGS WOULD ALLOW ME - WORKING ALMOST FULL TIME AND WITH A YOUNG CHILD - TO PARTICIPATE IN COUNCIL MEETINGS WHICH WOULD OTHERWISE BE A STRUGGLE TO GET TO.* ”

WORK LIFE BALANCE



81%

of respondents **believe a hybrid environment facilitates better family, personal, work or study balance** for them within their role as an elected representative

Some respondents expressed concern as to whether they will be able to continue their councillor role if a future hybrid model is not facilitated. One councillor noted that they missed meetings pre-Covid due to childcare commitments.

A large majority agree that a hybrid option allows for improved work life balance. Some suggested that the removal of this option puts the diversity and gender balance of councils at risk and would discourage women from entering politics.

“ *I WOULD SUPPORT A HYBRID MODEL FOR THOSE THAT CANNOT TRAVEL TO A PHYSICAL MEETING FOR VARIOUS REASONS. MAYBE HEALTH ISSUES AND OTHER DEFINED REASONS.* ”

Others made the point that a hybrid model could lead to a demarcation between work and home life with the expectation of being on call 24/7.

KEY BENEFITS OF A HYBRID MODEL

WHEN ASKED TO SELECT THREE KEY BENEFITS TO CONDUCTING STATUTORY COUNCIL MEETINGS AND COUNCIL RELATED MEETINGS WITH A HYBRID OPTION, RESPONDENTS CITED THE FOLLOWING



64%

Improves time efficiency

55%

Helps achieve balance with work life / personal life



37%

Helps maintain public health measures

35%

Provides flexibility to engage with additional council related meetings



26%

Better for environment / sustainability

17%

Saves costs



15%

Aligns with the Government's Remote Working Strategy

9%

Helps encourage new talent into politics



8%

See no benefits

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The leading benefits cited for maintaining a hybrid model include the opportunity to improve time efficiency and generate better balance between work, political, and personal life. Others emphasised that a hybrid model will help build greater diversification in local politics and achieve better gender balance. However, some councillors expressed concern that a hybrid model could make councillors impersonal, noting the importance of ensuring a face-to-face element is blended into the future model for conducting council related meetings.



ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON KEY BENEFITS OF A HYBRID MODEL

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"I WOULD PREFER HYBRID MEETINGS FOR THE FUTURE. USING THE HYBRID FORMAT DURING COVID, WE HAD A MUCH BETTER ATTENDANCE RECORD BOTH FOR PLENARY MEETINGS AND STRATEGIC POLICY COMMITTEE MEETINGS. THERE ARE SO MANY DEMANDS ON COUNCILLORS' TIME THAT IT MAKES IT EASIER TO TUNE INTO ZOOM AND ATTEND THESE MEETINGS."

"PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO ENCOURAGE WOMEN TO ENTER POLITICS AND RETAIN THOSE OF US WHO ARE IN POLITICS. WOMEN ARE OFTEN THE PRIME CARER OF ELDERLY PARENTS AND/OR CHILDREN. I MISSED AN IMPORTANT VOTE DUE TO HAVING TO STAY AT HOME WITH A SICK CHILD. IF HYBRID MEETINGS HAD EXISTED, THEN I COULD HAVE REGISTERED MY VOTE."

"WHEN I WAS ELECTED AS A COUNCILLOR IN 2019, IT WAS EVIDENT THAT MANY WERE STRUGGLING AND LATE ARRIVALS TO MEETINGS WERE COMMON, WITH DEMANDS OF DAY-JOBS AND FAMILY COMMITMENTS. SEVERAL RESIGNED DUE TO TRYING TO JUGGLE. WOULD THAT HAVE HAPPENED IF THERE WAS A HYBRID MODEL?"

"HUGE BENEFIT IN BEING ABLE TO ATTEND COUNCIL MEETINGS. MY MOTHER WAS ILL IN 2020 AND SUBSEQUENTLY PASSED AWAY. DURING HER ILLNESS I WAS STILL ABLE TO ATTEND TO COUNCIL DUTIES AND CONTINUE DOING SO AS I AM NOW A PART TIME CARER TO MY DAD WHO LIVES A TWO-HOUR DRIVE AWAY. I WOULD HAVE TO HAD RESIGN IF ONLINE MEETINGS WERE NOT IN PLACE AND THIS MAY STILL HAPPEN IF A HYBRID OPTION ISN'T PUT IN PLACE."

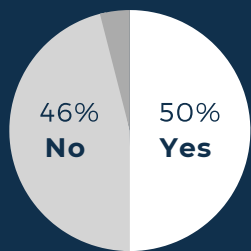
"I AM VERY WORRIED HOW I WILL BE ABLE TO CONTINUE AS A COUNCILLOR IF I DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO ONLINE MEETINGS AND WITH SEVERE SHORTAGE TO CHILDCARE SINCE COVID IT WILL BE VERY DIFFICULT IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO ATTEND MEETINGS. I MAY HAVE TO REDUCE MY FULL-TIME WORK WHICH I CANNOT AFFORD AT THIS TIME."

"IF WE WANT TO ENCOURAGE NEW PEOPLE INTO POLITICS OR MEMBERS TO REMAIN IN POLITICS, WE NEED TO BE OFFERING A HYBRID OPTION TO ALLOW INCREASED FLEXIBILITY FOR MEMBERS AND OFFICIALS ALIKE."

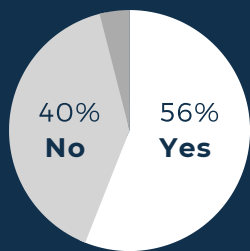
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HOW VIDEO COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BOOSTED COUNCILLORS ENGAGEMENT WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS

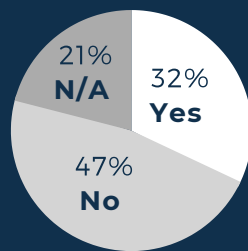
COUNCILLORS RESPONSE WHEN ASKED IF VIDEO CONFERENCING HAS INCREASED THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH THE FOLLOWING STAKEHOLDER GROUPS



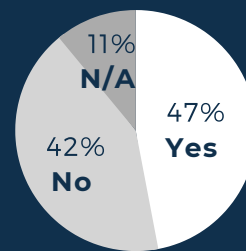
Statutory council meetings



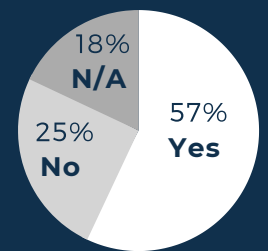
Other council meetings



Constituents



Community groups



Political party

While opinion was balanced on whether video conferencing alone helped councillors increase engagement with key stakeholder groups, there is clear agreement that video should continue to be used a part of a hybrid model for future council meetings.



77%

of respondents believe future statutory council meetings and council related **meetings should be conducted as physical meetings with the option to access by video conferencing** - a hybrid model

“ IF WE WANT TO ENCOURAGE NEW PEOPLE INTO POLITICS OR MEMBERS TO REMAIN IN POLITICS, WE NEED TO BE OFFERING A HYBRID OPTION TO ALLOW INCREASED FLEXIBILITY FOR MEMBERS AND OFFICIALS ALIKE. ”

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The majority of respondents are in favour of a hybrid model for future council meetings, however there is a cohort who would like to revert to physical in person meetings only. Many noted that having a hybrid model makes meetings easier to attend and encourages greater democratic participation, suggesting that this is the best use of technology to support their work.

Those who expressed a preference for face-to-face meetings said they can be more productive and allow for better quality engagement. But most agreed that councillors should have the option to join online and understood the need for a hybrid model. Others flagged that they were less likely to meet with constituents online.



REMOTE WORKING STRATEGY



58%

agree that video conferencing **will help sustain local employment** and **encourage future job creation** as set out in the Government's Remote Working Strategy and in the context of their local authorities' role in driving economic development

PARTICIPATION BY UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS



51%

believe that a **hybrid environment will encourage more participation in Local Government from underrepresented groups** (women / under 35's / self-employed / full time carers etc)

“ HUGELY IMPORTANT FOR INCREASING THE DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE WHO MAY WISH TO RUN. ”

VOTING PROCESSES



92%

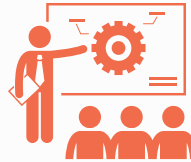
of respondents **confirmed their council have engaged in a voting process** during a statutory meeting held via video conference

RESOURCES & TRAINING REQUIRED TO MAKE A HYBRID MODEL WORK



73%

of councillors are **satisfied that they are adequately resourced** to use video conferencing in their role



56%

believe **additional training on functionality** would help improve the experience of using video conferencing in their role. **31% disagreed** and **13% don't know**.

IMPROVING VIDEO CONFERENCING SKILLS

WHEN ASKED TO CHOOSE THREE SKILLS WHICH THEY FEEL COULD BE MOST IMPROVED AMONG COUNCILLORS TO MAKE A HYBRID MODEL WORK, RESPONDENTS SELECTED THE FOLLOWING

60%

Navigating platform functionality

60%

Technical set-up (i.e. connection / audio / video)

40%

On screen ethics

37%

Maintaining privacy & confidentiality

24%

Eliminating distractions

22%

Establishing an appropriate background / room set-up

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The majority of respondents feel that they are adequately resourced to engage with video conferencing but believe additional training for some councillors would be beneficial, particularly for older members who might need more help. It was flagged that the inability to use platforms can delay meetings at times.

Specific areas referenced where technical support could be provided include when / how to use the mute function, how to raise a hand, and how to share a screen and present a webinar.

Poor broadband was cited by several councillors as major challenge to making a hybrid model work efficiently. Others suggested better facilities are required in council buildings.

“ WE CAN AND SHOULD LOOK TO THOSE COUNCILS THAT HAVE MANAGED TO TRANSITION SUCCESSFULLY AND ENSURE WE ALL BENEFIT FROM THOSE LEARNINGS. ”

On Monday, 6th September 2021, the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) in collaboration with Zoom issued a survey to the 949 elected members of Ireland's 31 County and City Councils on their experience of the use of video conferencing for council engagements.

Councillors were given until Friday, 24th September to respond. A total of 139 complete responses were returned by the closing date representing a 15% response rate.

Responses were returned on an anonymous basis and councillors were not asked to identify themselves, their council or the area they represent.



