



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt. Hon. Robert Jenrick
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Friday 30 April 2021

Dear Robert,

RE: Local Authority Meetings

Following the Government's announcement on 25 March that the current virtual and hybrid arrangements for local authority meetings will not be extended beyond 7 May, I wrote to each of my Parish, Town, District, and County Councils to seek their views. Of the 17 responses I received, which included the leaders of both County and District councils, only one wanted to revert to physical meetings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a terrible impact across the county in multiple ways. The active take-up of local representation via the new-found flexibility of online meetings, however, is one of the positive consequences. The feedback I have received from my councils demonstrates that these arrangements have made it easier for both councillors and the public to engage with the local democratic process, has helped to improve transparency, as well as offering certain environmental benefits.

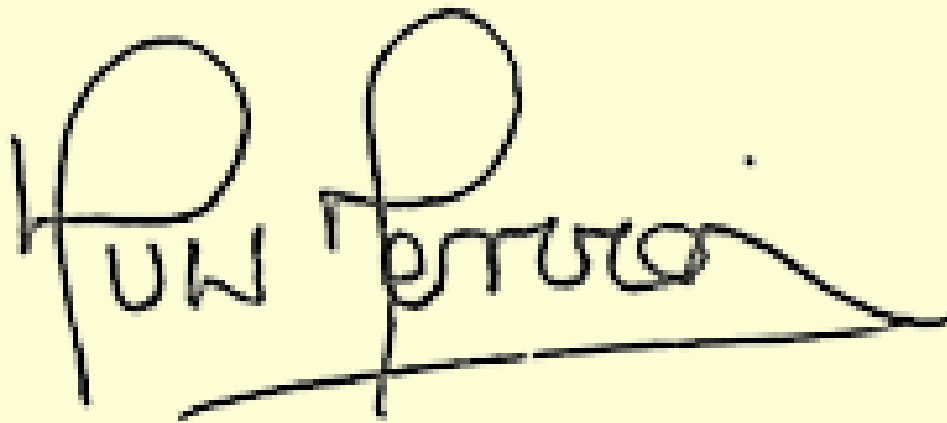
The Government has rightly been extolling the virtues of taking positives about how the pandemic has changed certain operating practices. The manner in which GPs are now increasingly using virtual meeting space is one such example. By allowing local authorities to continue with the present arrangements as we come out of lockdown, it would further make the case for other groups and organisations whom the Government may wish to embrace such practices to do so.

I am keen for Parliament to return to normality, and have myself remained working in Parliament for much of the lockdown period. I do not believe, however, that allowing local authorities to continue using virtual meetings would set a precedent for the way in which Parliament works. Indeed, it is important that MPs set an example and examine if there are certain changes that would make for better decision-making and encourage a more diverse representation.

I believe it is vital that the Government responds positively to the clear appetite for local authorities to have the ability to continue using virtual meetings. I understand that you have opened a consultation with a view to reviewing the current rules, and I very much hope that this will lead to modernisation and flexibility. I will be submitting this letter as my own views and will encourage those who serve their Parish, Town, District and County to do likewise.

I look forward to hearing from you. With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Merriman'. The signature is stylized with large, rounded letters and a long, sweeping horizontal line at the bottom.

Huw Merriman MP
Member of Parliament for Bexhill and Battle