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Debate: Virtual committee meetings can offer governance advantages beyond just convenience and accessibility

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Virtual committee meetings became a necessity for national and local government during the global pandemic of 2020. While this enforced experiment brought to the fore the advantages of meeting online, the assumption that in-person meetings should be the default for good governance remained in place. In UK parliamentary debates on this issue, for example, virtual meetings were seen as second best, muting body language and hampering communication (Stirrup, 2021). However, virtual meetings have value beyond reducing the need for travel and making attendance easier. Indeed, virtual meetings can play a distinct and important role in governance. As with any communications medium, the question is not ‘how closely does this resemble meeting in-person?’ but ‘what needs can be met?’ (Hollan & Stornetta, 1992; Stokoe et al., 2021).

Survey

Our argument draws on an online survey of UK local government practitioners. In 2022 we asked elected and appointed officials to compare pre-pandemic (in-person) and during the pandemic (virtual) versions of the same committee meetings. A total of 164 responses were received from respondents based across 91 different local authorities in England and Wales.

A striking finding from our survey is that, when asked to rate ‘the overall governance quality of virtual meetings of the committee during the pandemic compared with in-person meetings of the committee before the pandemic’, the majority of respondents either preferred virtual meetings (56.5%) or rated them the same (27.3%) as in-person meetings. Only 16.2% of respondents rated virtual meetings as being worse than in-person meetings overall.

To further test the perceptions of respondents, and their ability to distinguish potential trade-offs between different aspects of governance, we asked them to make the same comparison against five sub elements of governance that follow the TAPIC framework (Greer et al., 2016). Rather than producing trade-offs across these elements, virtual meetings were rated higher across the board, albeit with some variation. The average difference in scores between virtual and in-person meetings (on a scale of -5 to +5) for each element of this framework was as follows: transparency (+1.8), public participation (+1.2), accountability (+0.9), confidence in the system (+0.6), discussion and debate (+0.4).

Drawing on the reasoning of survey respondents via their qualitative responses, we offer here three qualities of virtual meetings that can contribute to good governance and complement in-person meetings. These are viewability, welcomeness and speech quality.

Viewability

Our survey respondents rated virtual meetings significantly above in-person meetings for transparency, public participation, and accountability and, for many respondents, the increase in viewership and online access for the public was an important factor. Beyond access to meetings online (in-person meetings may also be streamed), it was the viewability of these meetings, in other words, the ease of the viewing experience, that stood out.

We consider the ‘shape’ of the virtual meeting to be of benefit in this regard. As we have argued elsewhere (Farrell et al., 2022), to best promote transparency, members of committees should be facing forward to the public gallery. In contrast, watching an in-person meeting will typically involve a restricted view, with some meeting participants only being visible from behind. In contrast, virtual meetings allow viewers to experience the meeting ‘face-to-face’ with the members of the committee, as if they are being spoken to directly. We note that television news channels increasingly use the ‘boxed’ presenter format, so that, even when presenters and guests are sat around a table, the viewer is presented with them in separate boxes, all facing forward towards them.

Welcomeness

One aspect of virtual meetings highlighted by survey respondents was the way in which they are less intimidating, both for committee members and for the public participating in meetings. Respondents highlighted that virtual meetings were more ‘relaxed’, ‘courteous’ and ‘less confrontational’ with the chair being ‘more considered’. One noted that there was ‘more participation; some councillors spoke up more and felt more comfortable’, another mentioned ‘tolerance, members hearing each other out’. Another said, ‘some people who say little are often more inclined to speak because they appear as the same size block as everybody else’. Similarly, in the context of public participation, survey respondents

pointed to how the 'lesser degree of formality' for virtual meetings 'puts people at ease' and how public speaking and asking questions is 'less intimidating from home'.

This 'welcomeness' of virtual meetings is largely explained by the absence of the formality associated with in-person meetings. As one respondent put it, the '[council] chamber can be very forbidding', others referred to 'over formal meeting rooms', 'room domination' by groups and factions and the 'confrontational space' associated with in-person meetings and the 'layouts of rooms where people face each other directly'. The physical setting of the town hall and the formal behaviours it encourages contrast with the experience of virtual meetings, which may feel more familiar to citizens who use them in other aspects of their lives.

Speech quality

Our findings also suggest that virtual meetings promote speech quality better than in-person meetings. Respondents, while less sure that 'discussion and debate' were improved by virtual meetings compared with other aspects of governance, highlighted that 'debates were more to the point', that contributions were 'more focused' and that there was 'less showboating' and that 'people were more considered with what they said'. Hence the management and quality of individual contributions was improved even if many also preferred the 'back-and-forth' exchanges and better access to body language afforded by in-person meetings.

Speech quality is better afforded in virtual meetings through technology, in particular, the chair's definitive power to mute interrupting individuals and therefore protect contributions. Survey respondents pointed to better management of turn-taking so that there was 'more control of interjections' and noted that a 'good meeting protocol is easier to maintain virtually'. One observed that: 'if you are having a discussion type meeting, then I think the virtual setting helped to structure debate better. People were less likely to talk over each other, and the chair seemed to find it easier to bring everyone in on their turn'.

Conclusion

There are, of course, aspects of governance that are better afforded by in-person meetings, such as productive dialogue and creativity. Hence, neither virtual nor in-person meetings are definitively better. Either choice involves

trade-offs. We suggest, therefore, that policy-makers and practitioners adopt a more nuanced approach than 'in-person only' or 'in-person by default' and consider a 'mixed meeting economy' with different meeting formats adopted for different governance needs. While in-person meetings might be preferred for activities requiring dialogue and challenge, such as policy development and scrutiny, so virtual meetings might be preferred for activities that provide explanation to citizens and the presentation of different viewpoints.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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