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

Our Ref RR/AG/3004

30 April 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

Due to the recent Legal challenge on the subject brought by the Local Government Association, the Council opted to delay sending this letter pending a favourable outcome, however, this was not the case so I now write seeking your support on this matter.

At a recent meeting of South Hams District Council a motion was brought by Councillors Baldry and Thomas expressing their wish that following the success, on many levels, of remotely held committee meetings, the Council lobby the Government for the introduction of legislation which would permit Local Authorities and Town and Parish Council to continue holding such remote or hybrid meetings on a permanent basis

In introducing the motion, Cllr Baldry stated that:

- 'Many South Hams councillors live quite a distance from Totnes. For some it is an hour a round trip to attend meetings. It isn't always easy, particularly during wintertime to attend all the meetings because of inclement weather and work commitments;
- SHDC has declared a climate emergency and by attending meetings via Teams or Zoom we are not driving and using non-renewal resources but are cutting down on our carbon footprint – a priority of this council;
- Virtual meetings have saved the council a considerable amount of money;
- Councillors wish to attend SHDC meetings but are also keen to attend meetings of the Parish and Town Councils within their wards. Some are also County Councillors and there is often a clash of dates. This means that councillors have to choose which to attend. The result is less engagement with the District Council, or the County Council or the Parish Councils.

Having remote meetings means that councillors can more easily attend most of the meetings, to the advantage of all the councils;

- The engagement of the public and press has also generally increased. The level of reporting about council business has increased as physical meetings no longer attracted the local press due to cutbacks in their staff; and
- For some councillors who have work commitments, mobility issues or are carers remote meetings have been easier for them to attend. This may well help to attract a wider age range of potential councillors in future elections.

In debate there was wholehearted support for this proposal and as a result it was resolved that:

‘This Council would like to have the flexibility to hold remote and physical meetings. We recognise that some meetings are better dealt with physically and we also recognise that perhaps a hybrid model could also work successfully.

This Council resolves to

1. Write to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) urging that the temporary change to the meeting rules set out in the Local Government Act 1972 be made permanent so that after May we have the flexibility to hold meetings remotely or physically or by using a combination of the two;
2. Write to our MPs, the County Council and Town and Parish Councils asking for support for this flexible approach to council meetings; and
3. Once our request is successful to explore the use of technology to develop remote meetings.’

The Council would welcome your support and response on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Rosemary Rowe

Cllr Rosemary Rowe
Chairman
South Hams District Council