

Circular Details	21-02 / 1 April 2021 / A765862
Previous Circular	21-01 <i>Transitioning back to in-person council and committee meetings and consultation on proposed changes allowing remote attendance at meetings</i>
Who should read this	Councillors / General Managers / All council staff
Contact	Council Governance / 02 4428 4100 / olg@olg.nsw.gov.au
Action required	Information / Council to Implement

Temporary exemption from the requirement for councillors to attend meetings in person

What's new or changing

- The Office of Local Government (OLG) is currently consulting with councils and others on proposed amendments to the *Model Code of Meeting Practice for Local Councils in NSW* (Model Meeting Code) allowing councillors to attend meetings remotely using audio-visual links. A [discussion paper](#) has been issued and submissions are due on **3 May 2021**.
- The *Local Government (General) Regulation 2005* (the Regulation) has been amended to temporarily exempt councils from complying with the requirement under their codes of meeting practice for councillors to be personally present at meetings to participate in them. The exemption expires on **31 December 2021**.
- The Regulation amendment will operate to allow councils to permit councillors to attend meetings remotely by audio-visual link while OLG consults on the new provisions of the Model Meeting Code and until such time as councils are able to adopt them.

What this will mean for your council

- As of **26 March 2021**, councils are now required under section 10 of the *Local Government Act 1993* to hold meetings of the council and committees comprising only of councillors in physical venues and to permit members of the public to attend meetings in person, subject to the requirements of any Public Health Order in force at the time and social distancing requirements.
- The Regulation amendment operates to exempt councils from the requirement under clause 5.2 of the Model Meeting Code for councillors to be personally present at a meeting in order to participate in it.
- For the period in which the Regulation amendment is in force, councils have the option to permit councillors to attend and participate in meetings remotely by audio-visual link should councils choose to do so.
- Councils are not required to amend their codes of meeting practice to allow councillors to attend meetings remotely by audio-visual link while the Regulation amendment is in force but should adopt procedures governing attendance by councillors at meetings by audio-visual link to supplement their codes of meeting practice. Suggested procedures are attached to this circular.

- The Regulation amendment does not apply to joint organisations of councils or county councils. The regulation making power under which the Regulation has been amended only allows exemptions to be made for “areas” constituted under Part 1 of Chapter 9 of the Act. These provisions do not apply to joint organisations of councils or county councils.
- Joint organisations are already permitted to meet by telephone or other electronic means under clause 397G of the Regulation and the Model Meeting Code. However, it is not possible to exempt county councils by regulation and members of county councils will need to continue to attend meetings in person to participate in them until amendments are made to the Model Meeting Code permitting attendance at meetings by audio-visual link.
- In dealing with requests by councillors to attend meetings by audio-visual link on grounds of illness, disability or caring responsibilities, councils must ensure they comply with the Health Privacy Principles prescribed under the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002*.

Where to go for further information

- Suggested procedures for attendance by councillors at meetings using audio-visual link are attached to this circular.
- The *Remote Attendance by Councillors at Council Meetings* consultation paper is available on OLG’s website [here](#).
- Guidance on the Health Privacy Principles is available [here](#).
- For further information please contact the Council Governance Team on 02 4428 4100 or by email at olg@olg.nsw.gov.au.



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ATTACHMENT

Procedures for attendance by councillors at meetings by audio-visual link

What is an “audio visual link”

- For the purposes of these procedures, an audio-visual link is a facility that enables audio and visual communication between persons at different places.

Approval for councillors to attend meetings by audio visual link

- The council and committees of the council comprising wholly of councillors may, in response to a request made by a councillor, resolve to permit the councillor to attend one or more meetings of the council or committee remotely by audio visual link where it is satisfied that the councillor will be prevented from attending the meeting/s in person because of illness, disability, caring responsibilities, or such other reason that is acceptable to the council or committee.
- Requests by councillors to attend meetings remotely by audio-visual link must be made in writing to the General Manager at least *[council to specify a timeframe that is consistent with the timeframe for lodging notices of motion]* business days before a meeting, and must provide information about the meetings the councillor will be prevented from attending in person and the reason why the councillor will be prevented from attending the meeting/s in person.
- A resolution by the council or a committee of the council permitting a councillor to attend one or more meetings by audio-visual link must provide the following information:
 - the grounds on which the councillor is being permitted to attend meetings remotely by audio visual link, but not where those grounds relate to illness, disability or caring responsibilities, and
 - details of the meetings the resolution applies to.
- The council or committee of the council may permit more than one councillor to attend a meeting by audio-visual link but must not permit all councillors to attend a meeting by audio-visual link.
- A decision to permit a councillor to attend a meeting remotely by audio-visual link is at the council’s or the committee’s discretion. The council and its committees must act reasonably when considering requests by councillors to attend meetings remotely by audio-visual link.
- The council and its committees are under no obligation to permit a councillor to attend a meeting remotely by audio-visual link where the technical capacity does not exist to allow the councillor to attend a meeting by these means.
- The council and its committees may refuse a councillor’s request to attend a meeting remotely by audio-visual link where the councillor has failed to appropriately declare and manage conflicts of interest, observe confidentiality or comply with the council’s code of meeting practice on one or more previous occasions when they have attended a meeting of the council or its committees by audio-visual link.

Attendance by councillors at meetings by audio visual link

- Where a councillor attends a meeting by audio-visual link with the approval of the council or a committee of the council they are to be taken as attending the meeting in person for the purposes of the council's code of meeting practice and will have the same voting rights as if they were attending the meeting in person.
- The council's code of meeting practice will apply to a councillor attending a meeting remotely by audio-visual link, in the same way it would if the councillor was attending the meeting in person.
- Councillors must give their full attention to the business and proceedings of the meeting when attending a meeting by audio-visual link.
- Councillors must be appropriately dressed when attending meetings by audio-visual link and must ensure that no items are within sight of the meeting that are inconsistent with the maintenance of order at the meeting or that are likely to bring the council or the committee into disrepute.
- Where a councillor attends a meeting of the council or a committee of the council by audio-visual link, the minutes of the meeting must record that they attended the meeting by audio-visual link.

Conflicts of interest

- Councillors attending a meeting by audio-visual link must declare and manage any conflicts of interest they may have in matters being considered at the meeting in accordance with the council's code of conduct.
- Where a councillor has declared a pecuniary or significant non-pecuniary conflict of interest in a matter being discussed at the meeting, the councillor's audio-visual link to the meeting must be terminated and the councillor must not be in sight or hearing of the meeting at any time during which the matter is being considered or discussed by the council or committee, or at any time during which the council or committee is voting on the matter.

Confidentiality

- Councillors attending a meeting by audio-visual link must ensure that no other person is within sight or hearing of the meeting at any time that the meeting has been closed to the public under section 10A of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

Maintenance of order

- Where a councillor is attending a meeting by audio-visual link, the chairperson or a person authorised by the chairperson may mute the councillor's audio link to the meeting for the purposes of enforcing compliance with the council's code of meeting practice.
- If a councillor attending a meeting by audio-visual link is expelled from a meeting for an act of disorder, the chairperson of the meeting or a person authorised by the chairperson, may terminate the councillor's audio-visual link to the meeting.

Compliance with the Health Privacy Principles

- The council must comply with the Health Privacy Principles prescribed under the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002* when collecting, holding, using and disclosing health information in connection with a request by a councillor to attend a meeting remotely by audio-visual link.