

Question from Member of the Public pursuant to Standing Order No 7

Question from Councillor Jewkes:

This evening I'm here to ask North Warwickshire Borough Council to take advantage of a hugely important and game-changing idea put forward by the government. As you will be aware from past appearances before you, I spend a lot of my time discussing accessibility and inclusion issues surrounding the disabled and carers community throughout North Warwickshire and Bedworth.

I would like to ask that you as an important tier of local government please place a positive view into the 'Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings' consultation.

It seeks views on allowing remote and hybrid attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings in England.

It proposes introducing powers for local authority members to attend meetings remotely and vote by proxy in certain circumstances.

The government intends to legislate to give local authorities the flexibility to allow elected members to attend formal council meetings remotely.

Government are inviting Responses from local authority elected members, all types and tiers of authorities, local authority sector representative organisations, and members of the public interested in local democracy.

I have discussed this with quite a few of our community, both with disabilities and without, carers and various other different demographics in our communities.

On a personal level the current state of public transport and the expanse of our county has kyboshed any chance of me standing for the county council elections this year, in order to attend since I am a non-driver I would have needed to take 4 busses or 3 trains in order to attend meetings in Warwick, along with the fact that none of the public transport would accommodate my mobility scooter thus adding a hell of a lot of excess stress and pain to my journey.

I've spoken to single parents who have a huge interest in local politics and would love to have more involvement BUT their current position precludes them even remotely from taking up the opportunity to sit in one of those seats you are currently sitting there.

This can't be right in the 21st century, in an age where inclusion and accessibility are 2 words with the utmost importance in a constantly evolving demographic, As local councillors and Politicians we all believe that opportunity is the key to success and every member of our community should FEEL they are valued and that THEY can come here and serve their communities.

We feel therefore that this could be one of the biggest most inclusive modernisations of local politics in decades, It would mean that many disabled people who find public transport inaccessible could stand for local government roles. It would mean that local carers could get involved in making some of those all-important decisions that can affect their responsibilities locally the opportunity to get involved, It could help single parents to be able to get involved by allowing them to fulfil their obligations to the council whilst also being able to fulfil their family obligations. So many of these people have so much to give and currently, they have no avenue into local politics. WE NEED THESE PEOPLE INVOLVED HELP THEM TO ENGAGE POSITIVELY AND WATCH HOW MUCH THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IMPROVE when those who live their day-to-day lives with issues we make decisions on can also put their experiences into our local decision-making processes.

Response from David Wright – Leader of the Council:

I'd like to thank Councillor Jewkes for his question.

The Government's consultation on Remote Attendance at meetings and Proxy votes was considered by this Council's Executive Board last Monday, the 25th November.

Whilst the Board acknowledged the points raised in the consultation and I appreciate the points raised by Cllr Jewkes, the Board unanimously agreed that remote attendance should only be allowed in certain exceptional or emergency circumstances and that proxy voting could not be supported. Concerns were raised across the Chamber about hybrid meetings not working very well (particularly when the technology is not available or fails), that debate can be stifled and that the public would expect their elected representative to physically attend meetings. There were no circumstances in which the Board could see proxy voting to be acceptable. The Council's response to the consultation therefore has been submitted on that basis.

I would suggest however that Cllr Jewkes contacts Warwickshire County Council Officers to discuss what support they would be able to offer so that he could consider standing for election.