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Thursday, 30 September 2021

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities  
2 Marsham Street  
London, SW1P 4DF

Dear Secretary of State

### **Permanent enablement of virtual local authority meetings**

I am writing on behalf of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (formerly the Oxfordshire Growth Board). The Partnership is a joint committee of the six Oxfordshire councils with key strategic partners including Oxford's universities, the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Oxfordshire Skills Board, Homes England, the Environment Agency and the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group. I firstly wanted to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary for State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Partnership looks forward to working with the Department and HM Government for the benefit of all of Oxfordshire's communities and residents.

The call for evidence earlier this year by the Department concerning virtual meetings was an important step towards advancing the use of virtual and hybrid local authority meetings. We would wish to offer our strong support for the continuation of regulations that allow local authorities to operate virtual and hybrid meeting arrangements, and this should be considered a legislative priority. The Partnership is concerned that the results of the recent consultation are not yet available.

Industry experts and representative bodies are clear that there are a wide range of benefits that can be realised through virtual meetings which have been expressed robustly and in detail by a range of organisations including the Local Government Association<sup>1</sup>, Lawyers in Local Government<sup>2</sup>, and the Association of Democratic Services Officers, which include:

- Increased accessibility for local authority members and partners
- Reduction in travel time for member and partners with a positive impact on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions related to each meeting and more efficient use of member time

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<sup>1</sup> LGA 2021: LGA response to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government remote meetings call for evidence, 10 June 2021

<sup>2</sup> LLG 2021: LLG response to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government remote meetings call for evidence, 17 June 2021

- Meetings are more accessible for residents
- Greater openness and transparency of meetings

For the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, addressing environmental improvements and tackling climate change sits at the heart of our Strategic Vision. The Vision seeks to leave Oxfordshire's environment in a better state than it currently is, including supporting HM Government's aim of achieving net zero carbon. As a joint committee of all the principal local authorities in Oxfordshire and key stakeholders, we have a diverse membership based in all parts of Oxfordshire and beyond. Allowing for virtual attendance would reduce the need for members to undertake round trips of up to approximately 80 miles across the county, reducing emissions, travel time and costs. These are objectives which I know HM Government share in the context of the urgent need to address climate change. We also firmly believe virtual meetings have delivered more accessibility for local authority members and partners, easier access for residents, greater transparency of the Partnership's work and facilitated greater democratic participation.

In conclusion, the Future Oxfordshire Partnership believes that the advantages of enabling virtual and hybrid meetings, as a matter of choice for local authorities, far outweigh any potential disadvantages.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Michele Mead'.

**Councillor Michele Mead, Chair of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership**