

A Hybrid Future

Experiences from remote meetings during the pandemic in county authorities

zoom

CCN

COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

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Executive Summary

In February 2022, the County Councils Network (CCN) and Zoom invited councillors from across England's 23 county councils and 13 county unitary authorities to share their reflections on the benefits and challenges they encountered when council engagements moved online during the pandemic. This report is an overview of our survey, which was answered by 479 councillors – around a fifth of all councillors in CCN members, and reveals a significant desire for councils to adopt a hybrid model for conducting council business in the future – to benefit councils, councillors and their local communities.

The report begins by highlighting that the transition to virtual council business during the pandemic was swift and widespread, with 83% of councillors spending at least six hours each week on video calls for council business during England's national lockdowns. Here, we set out that a clear majority of councillors believe that this shift helped to improve the quality of their communications, with hybrid technologies thought to be especially effective in helping councillors to engage with local people and groups, their political parties and in overview and scrutiny meetings.

We then demonstrate that, after experiencing virtual meetings during the pandemic, there is strong support among councillors for adopting a hybrid approach to how they conduct official council business, including official council meetings, moving forward – something which is currently prohibited in legislation. While there is significant support for shifting to a hybrid approach from councillors of all backgrounds, we find remarkable levels of enthusiasm for hybrid meetings from groups traditionally underrepresented in local government – including women, those with caring responsibilities and younger people.

We also explore how a future shift to a hybrid model can benefit councillors, councils, and the communities they represent, and how the benefits cited vary by different groups, such as councillors representing rural areas and councillors with portfolio responsibilities.

Being able to reduce their travel time and expenses, as well as their carbon footprint, was more important for rural councillors, for example. And younger councillors were considerably more likely than their older colleagues to believe that shifting to a hybrid model could help attract a wider range of people into local government, including parents and people with caring responsibilities, helping boost the diversity of councils.

With these findings in mind, we conclude by calling on the Government to maintain its commitment to finding the necessary time to legislate to allow councils to hold statutory meetings in a hybrid format, giving councillors the flexibility to officially participate in-person or virtually. While Michael Gove, the Levelling Up Secretary, told Parliament recently that 'there is a case for saying that certain significant local authority meetings should occur with all councillors present,' we argue that any legislation should not be prescriptive, since councils and councillors are best equipped to decide how and when to use different meeting formats.[1]

Headline Survey Findings




88%

of councillors said that **no council meetings or engagements** were conducted online prior to the pandemic.



83%

of councillors reported that they **spent six hours or more each week engaged in video conferencing** calls in their capacity as a councillor.



71%

of councillors **expected their authority to adopt a hybrid working model** for most or all staff in the future.



87%

of councillors either **agreed or strongly agreed** that they would like to adopt a hybrid model for statutory council business.

Foreword from Zoom

Charlotte Holloway - UK & Ireland Government Relations Director, Zoom

Over the past two years there has been widespread adoption of new technologies across local government, as councils have successfully adopted new and innovative ways of working and delivering services to residents in exceptional circumstances. Looking to the future, this report demonstrates that for councillors the genie is out of the bottle when it comes to their use of video conferencing tools such as Zoom, with a clear majority of councillors expressing a desire to have the option of using hybrid technologies for both their day-to-day work and holding statutory council meetings.

Although councillors have been unable to hold statutory meetings remotely following the expiry of the relevant powers in the *Coronavirus Act 2020* last year, it is clear that their many benefits are still appreciated. We are particularly encouraged that the councillors we surveyed identified how hybrid meetings can reduce carbon emissions, improve public transparency and accountability in local government, and increase flexibility and accessibility for councillors. These views go beyond council halls to Whitehall, as the Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove MP told the Local Government Association recently that hybrid meetings are 'definitely a way for improving participation.'^[2]

As this report sets out, the local government community is hopeful that the Government will legislate to allow decision-making meetings to once again take place in a hybrid format. Doing so will not only make councils more resilient, but ensure local authorities in England have the same resources and capabilities as those in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland where councils can meet virtually and are seeing many of the benefits explored in this report.

Zoom was the most downloaded app in the UK during the pandemic and we are proud of the role we played keeping local authorities, schools and businesses connected during 2020 and 2021 and passionate about driving forward digital adoption. We were therefore delighted to partner with the County Councils Network on this report and would like to express our thanks to its members for sharing their views on how the use of video conferencing at local authority level could be improved to make hybrid councils work for all.

[2] Gove wants to 'keep capacity for hybrid meetings', Local Government Chronicle, 22 October 2021 [link](#)



Foreword from CCN

Simon Edwards, CCN Chief Executive

The recent pandemic saw councils step up to contribute to the national effort in keeping local communities safe, providing new support to vulnerable residents and adapting existing services that people relied on. These changes were made at pace, with council officers working hard – predominately remotely – to put changes in place across a wide variety of services.

One example of where systems had to change was moving formal council meetings to virtual platforms. This was essential to ensure that councillors could continue to discharge their democratic duty and residents' needs could be represented. Equally, vital council business could continue to be transacted and council leaders could continue to be held to account through overview and scrutiny committees so that service delivery remained as strong as possible.

Councils and councillors adapted to this new way of working exceptionally quickly, alongside the wider use of remote working. During the pandemic it became clear that there were other benefits of holding council meetings remotely, with anecdotal evidence of reductions in travel time and carbon emissions and increased engagement with residents.

After being at home for much of the past two years, few people want to maintain a system whereby meetings only take place on-line, or keep a world where engagement with council officers, residents or party activists can only be done on-screen. Councillors will always need – and want – to conduct face to face meetings.

However, CCN members were disappointed that the regulations allowing councils to hold remote meetings lapsed. Our councils want to retain the flexibility to be able to hold hybrid council meetings, alongside using remote working to help drive productivity and maximise efficiency across their organisations. This report shows there are many benefits that councils and councillors experienced as a result of being forced to hold meetings on-line. We hope it provides further valuable insights to encourage the government to bring forward legislation to enable councils to take their own decisions on how to conduct meetings.



Who we spoke to

A total of 479 councillors responded to this survey. Each provided an insight into their experiences of using video conferencing for council engagements over the last two years and preferences for conducting future council business. This represents around one fifth of all councillors in the 23 county councils and 13 unitary authorities across England represented by CCN.



GENDER

Male - 55%
Female - 45%



AGE

18-30 - 3%
31-44 - 8%
45-64 - 45%
65 and over - 44%



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Parent to child/ children under 12 - 9%
Parent to a child/ children over 12 - 26%
Full or part-time carer - 13%



LOCATION

40% - Urban
60% - Rural



LENGTH OF TIME SERVED

Less than a year - 18%
Between 1 & 5 years - 19%
Between 5 & 9 years - 18%
Between 9 & 13 years - 12%
Over 13 years - 34%



EMPLOYMENT

Employed part-time - 24%
Employed full-time - 15%
Self-employed - 30%
Full-time councillor - 31%

2 How councils adapted to hybrid technologies during the pandemic

88%

of councillors said that no council meetings or engagements were conducted online prior to the pandemic.



12%

of councillors said that they had participated in online council meetings or engagements prior to the pandemic.



Moving Online

In March 2020, when the Prime Minister asked the country to stay at home to limit the spread of COVID-19, the Government brought forward the Coronavirus Act 2020. This put in place a host of new powers, one of which was to allow all local authority meetings to be held remotely until 7 May 2021 when the emergency provisions expired.

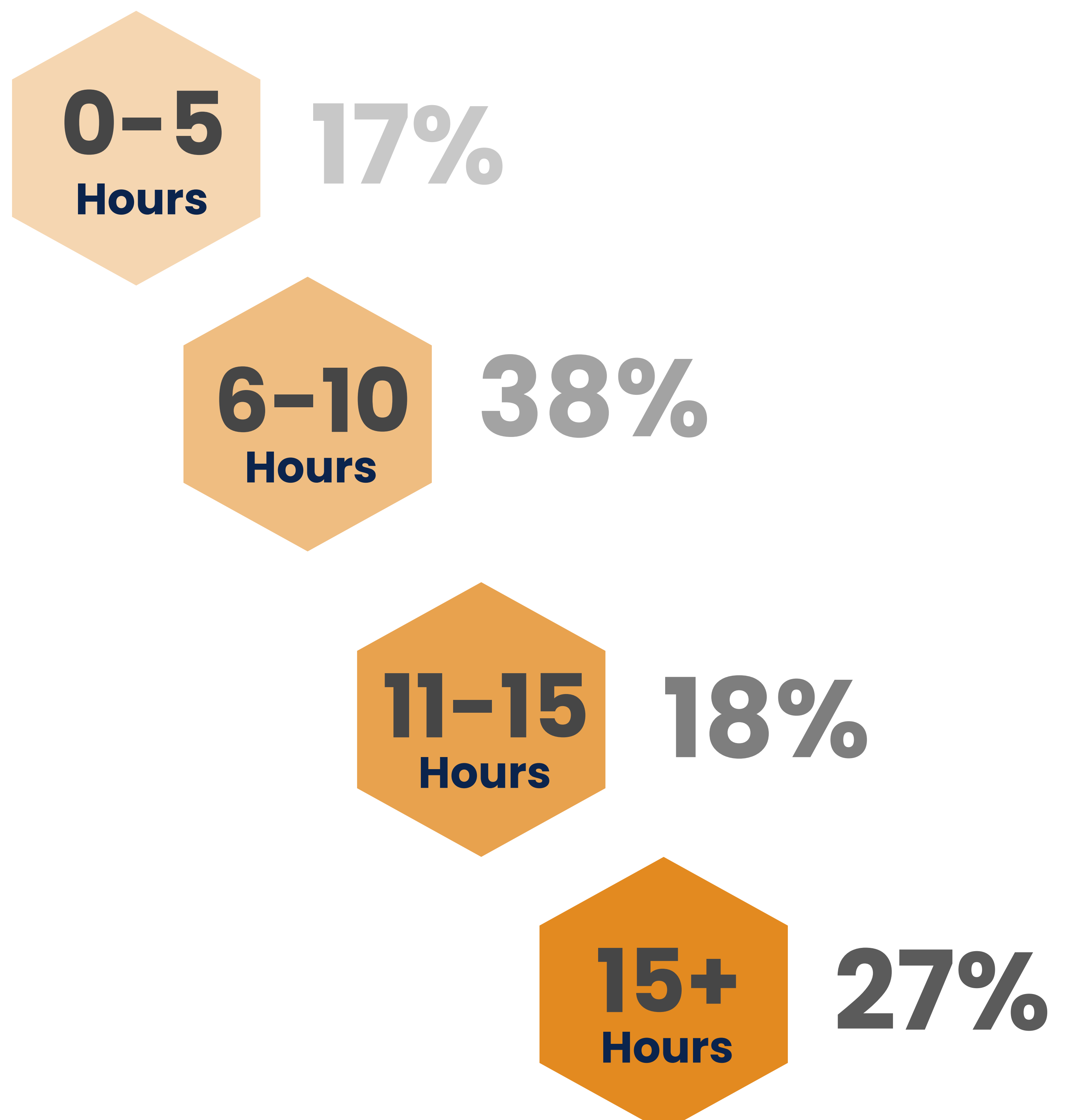
In this context, as the then Local Government Minister Luke Hall MP noted last year, councils across England 'rose magnificently' to new difficulties and demands by using hybrid technologies to continue their vital work.[3]

[3] Letter from Luke Hall MP to English Council Leaders on Local Authority Meetings, 25 March 2021, [link](#)

The transition to using technology to facilitate the on-line delivery of democracy at a local level was swift and widespread. Prior to the pandemic, 88% of councillors said they did not conduct any council meetings or engagements online, and many of those that had told us that they had only used hybrid technologies for smaller scale meetings, for example to receive a briefing or presentation. This changed dramatically with the onset of lockdown restrictions, with 83% of councillors reporting that they spent six hours or more each week engaged in video conferencing calls in their capacity as a councillor.



How many hours each week did you spend on video conferencing calls while national lockdown restrictions were in place?



Communicating during a pandemic

On the whole, councillors told us that the shift to using hybrid technologies during the pandemic helped improve how they communicated and engaged with important stakeholders, such as their constituents, local parties and other councillors.

80%

of councillors said that video conferencing has helped them to **engage more with their political party and activists.**

69%

councillors said that video conferencing has helped them to **engage more with community groups.**

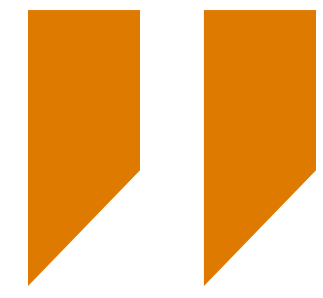
65%

councillors said that video conferencing has helped them to **engage more in overview and scrutiny meetings.**

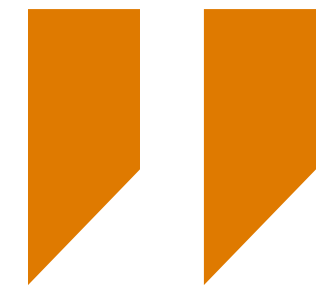
Several councillors also referenced how using video tools like Zoom enabled them to do more work and access additional resources that supported them in their roles, like council training sessions. For many, it had previously been more difficult to access these additional resources while balancing other commitments.

I attended heaps more briefing & training sessions, I could rarely justify travelling for hours to go to briefing or training sessions, often held in the middle of the day. I also attended a few more committees that I'm not on, just because they were discussing something interesting, and it was easy to join.

On the whole, councillors told us that the shift to using hybrid technologies during the pandemic helped improve how they communicated and engaged with important stakeholders, such as their constituents, local parties and other councillors.



Video conferencing enables council training sessions to be more intensive, particularly since they can be recorded and watched back.



If there is an item of interest on the agenda of a committee of which I am not a member, it's great to be able to participate online as I can just pop in for a few minutes, listen to the relevant item, ask a question. I would not have driven the 50-mile round trip to County Hall to do this in person.



3 Councillors' support for a future hybrid model for council business

In March 2021, ministers confirmed they would not bring forward the primary legislation needed to allow English councils to continue meeting remotely. The success of the Government's COVID-19 vaccination programme, the progress in lifting COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, and time pressures on the Government's existing legislative programme, were cited as the reasons for the decision.[4]

Consequently, since the emergency provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 expired in May 2021, statutory council meetings have been required to take place in-person and at a single, specified geographical location. [5]

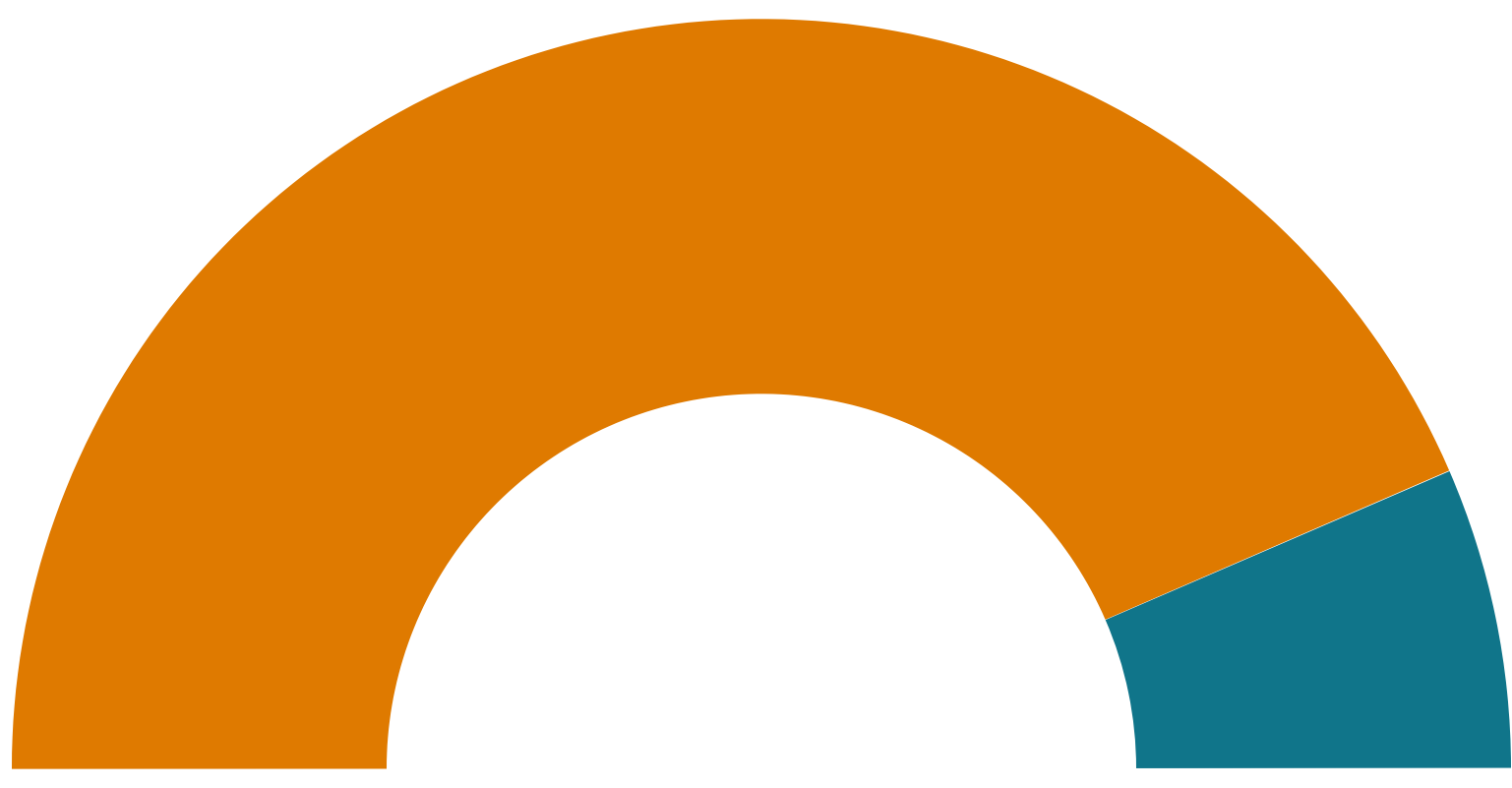
A hybrid model is defined as one where councillors have the choice of participating in council business in-person or virtually. Since the relevant powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020 expired, councillors have had to be physically present for statutory council meetings, but councils up and down the country continue to adopt a hybrid model for non-statutory meetings.

Based on their experience of using hybrid technologies during the pandemic, 87% of councillors said that they wanted their council to retain the ability to conduct official council business in a hybrid format going forward. Given that 71% of councillors told us that their authority is considering or has already begun implementing hybrid working arrangements, including for council officers and staff, there is clearly a strong appetite across county and unitary authorities to retain some of the hybrid practices that were born out of necessity during the pandemic.

[4] Letter from Luke Hall MP to English Council Leaders on Local Authority Meetings, 25 March 2021, [link](#)

[5] Letter from Luke Hall MP to English Council Leaders on Local Authority Meetings - High Court Judgement, 29 April 2021, [link](#)

87%

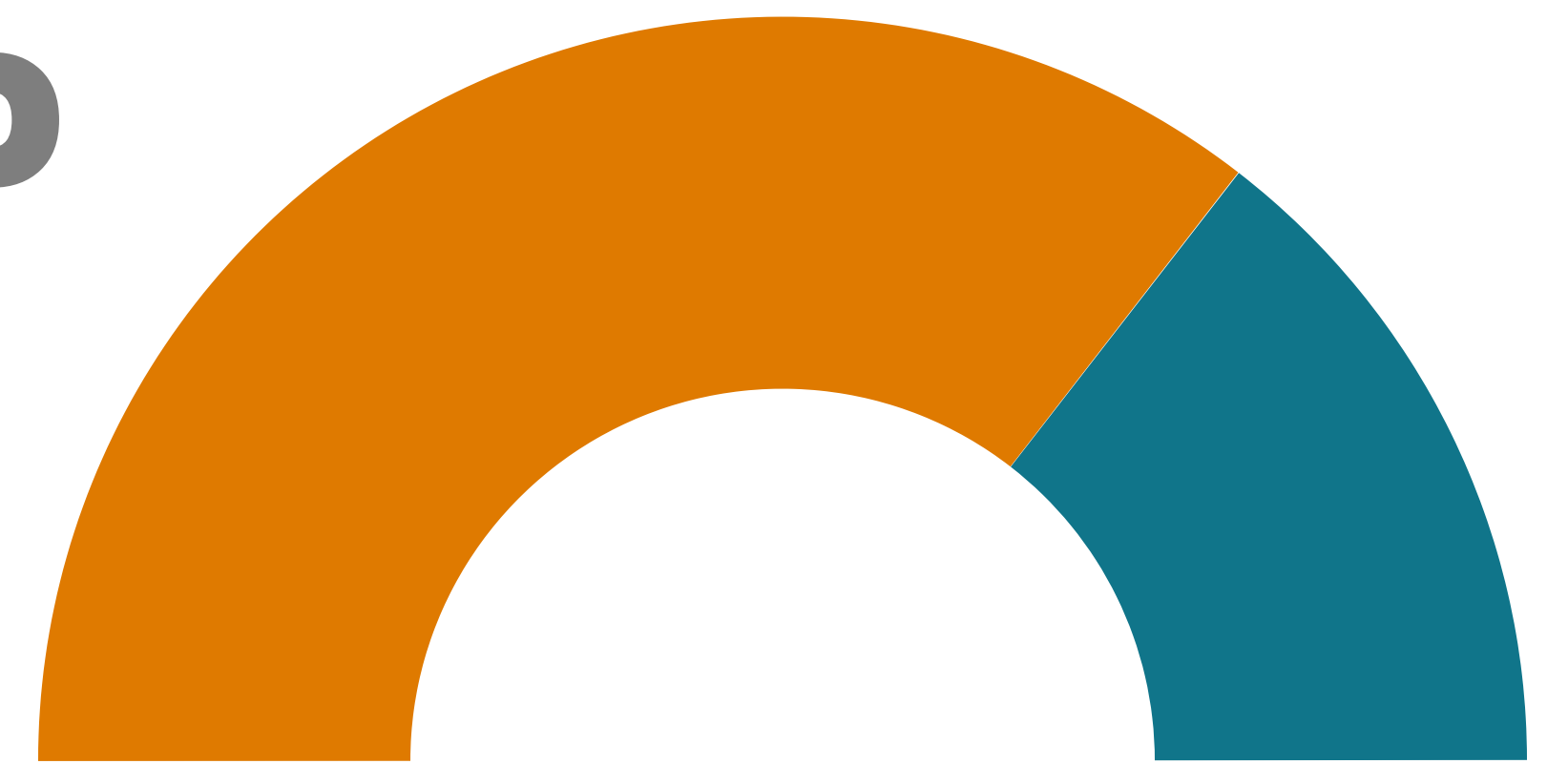


of councillors either **agreed or strongly agreed** that they would like to adopt a hybrid model for statutory council business.

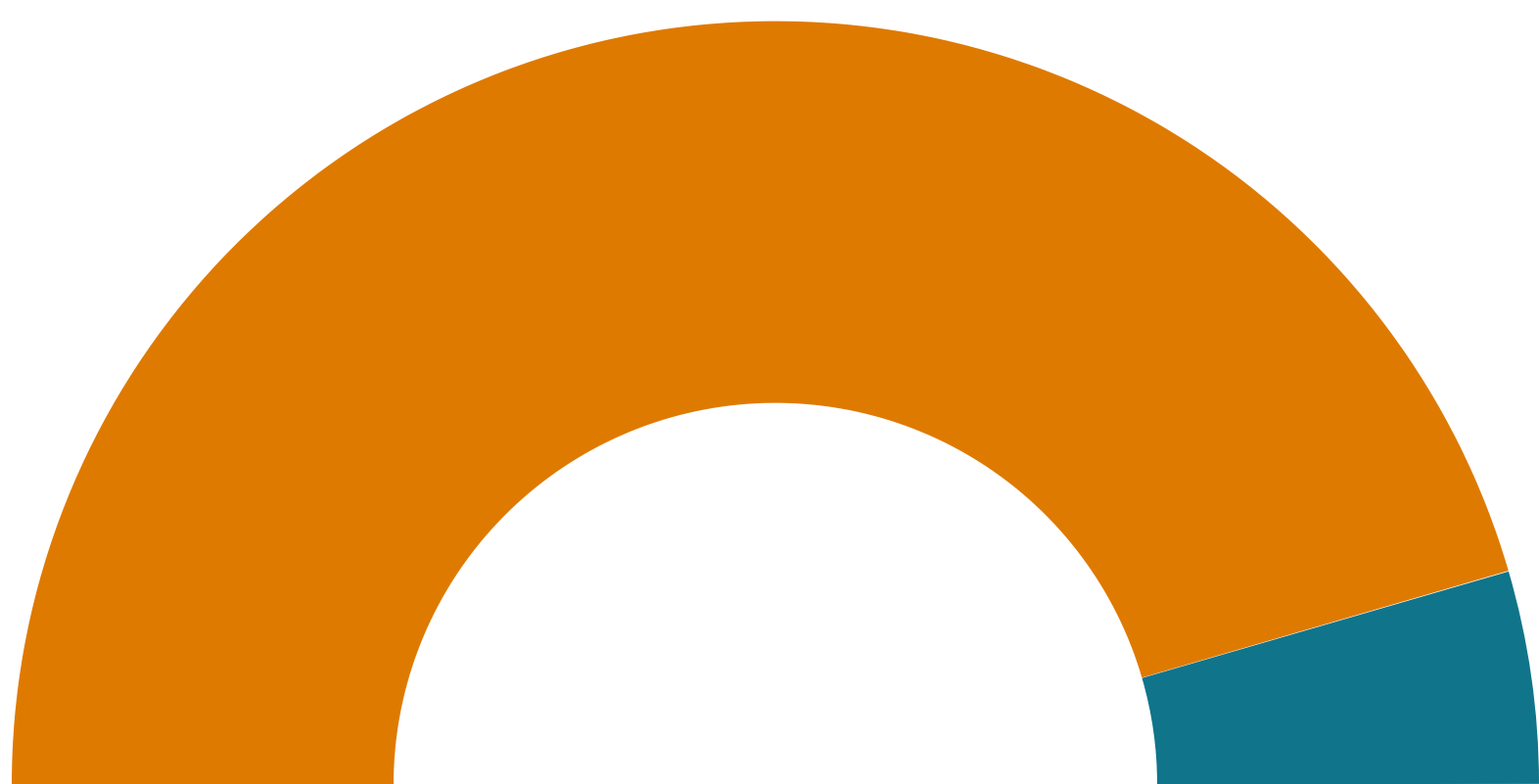


71%

of councillors **expected their authority to adopt a hybrid working model** for most or all staff in the future.



91%



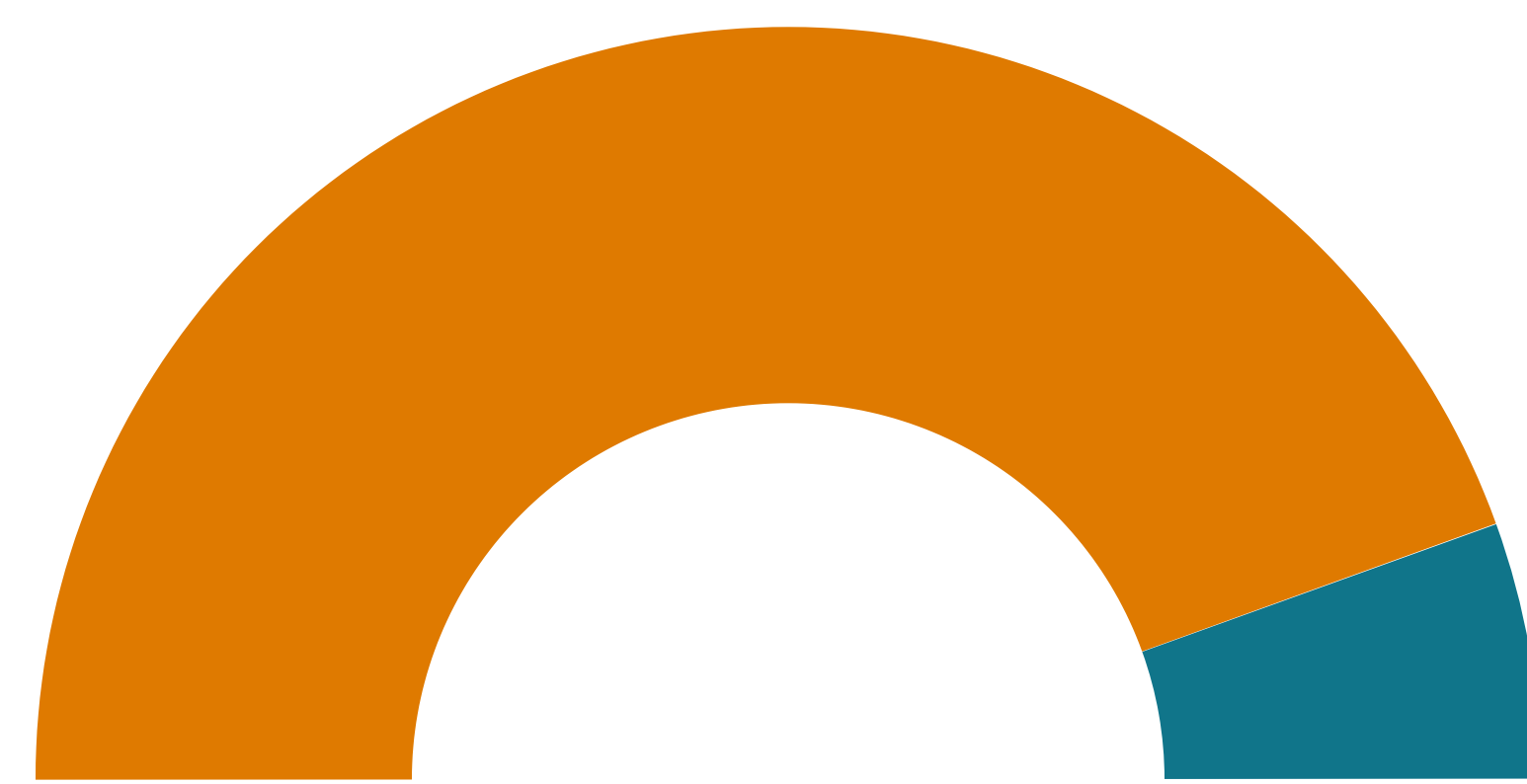
of **female councillors** either **agreed or strongly agreed** that they would like to adopt a hybrid model for statutory council business, compared to 83% of male councillors.

It is noteworthy that while there is strong support among councillors from all backgrounds for retaining a hybrid model for council business, support is even higher amongst groups traditionally underrepresented in local government - including women, those with caring responsibilities and younger people.

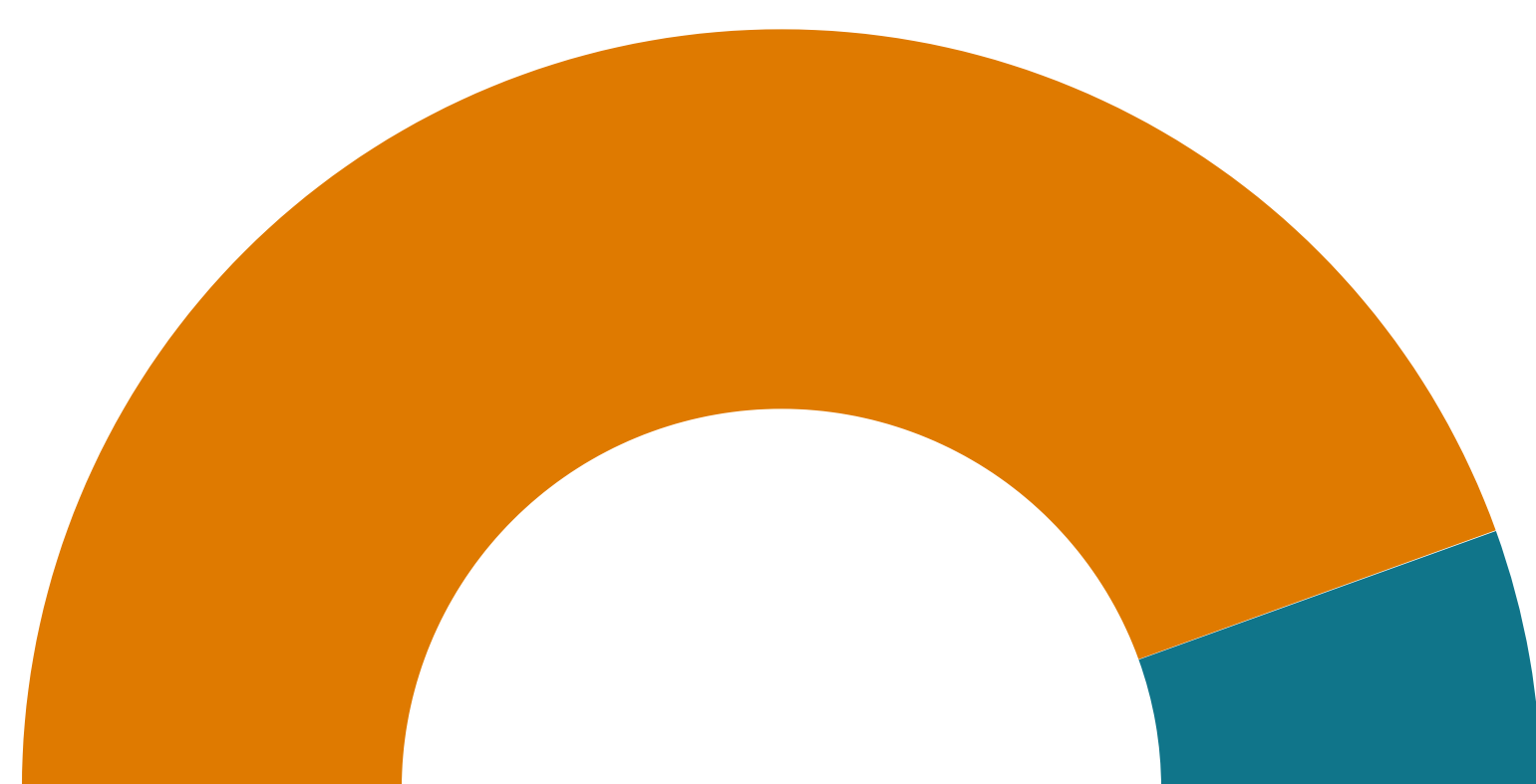




89%

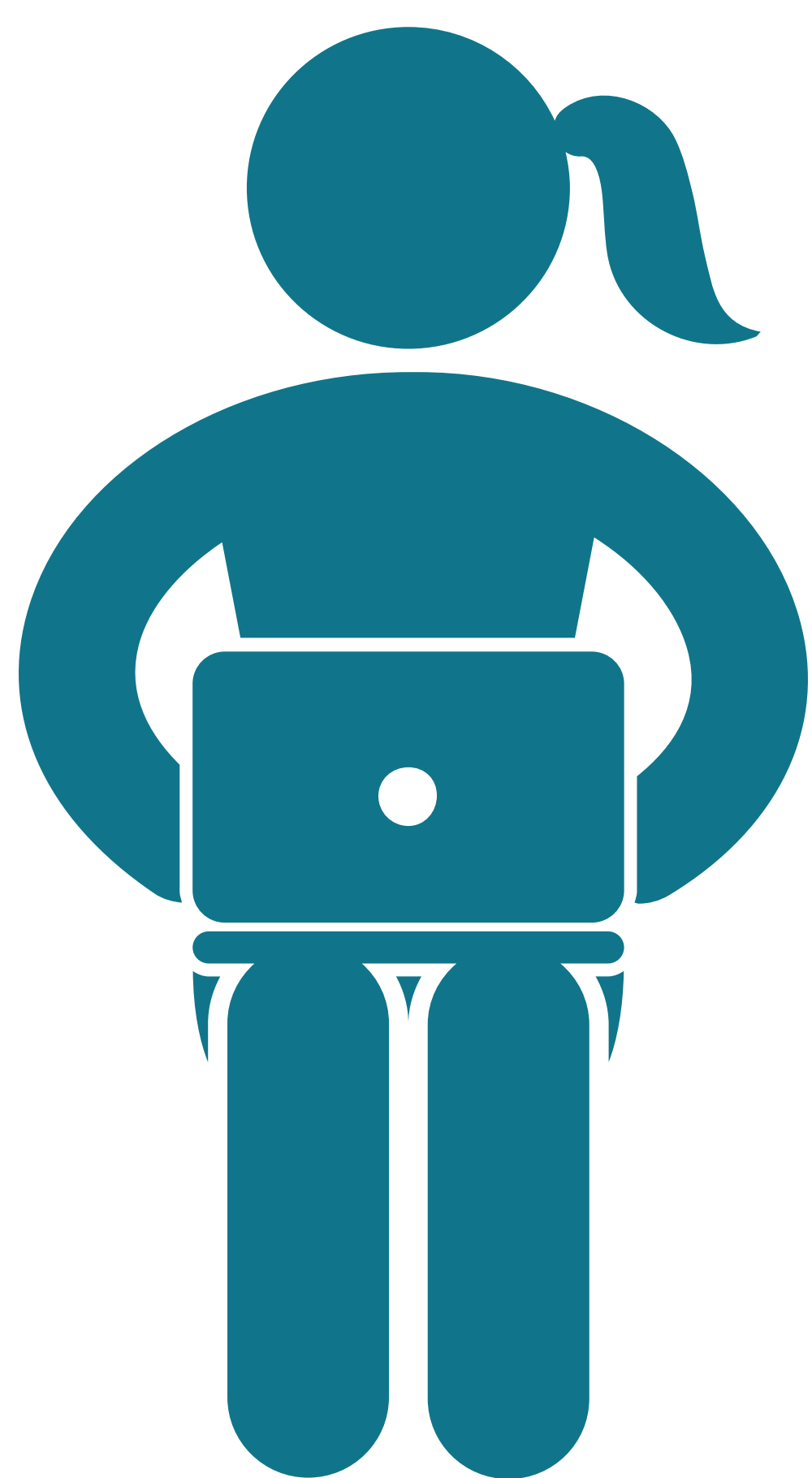


of councillors **with caring responsibilities** either **agreed or strongly agreed** that they would like to adopt a hybrid model for statutory council business, compared to 83% of those without caring responsibilities.



89%

89% of councillors **aged 44 and under agreed or strongly agreed** that they would like to adopt a hybrid model for statutory council business, compared to 82% of councillors over 65.



Following the 2019 local elections, women made up just 35% of all councillors in England.[6] When exploring the reasons why women are underrepresented to such an extent, the Local Government Commission published a study in 2017 which found that 47% of female councillors felt caring responsibilities held them back in discharging their duties.[7]

Because of these barriers, groups like the Fawcett Society, which campaigns for greater equality of gender representation in public life, have called for councillors to be allowed to attend meetings virtually to improve the diversity of councils. Our findings support this, suggesting that a hybrid model would attract more women, parents and carers, people with disabilities and younger people to stand for election, which would make councils more diverse and representative of their communities.

[6] Women's representation in local government at a standstill, Fawcett Society, 2 July 2019, [link](#)

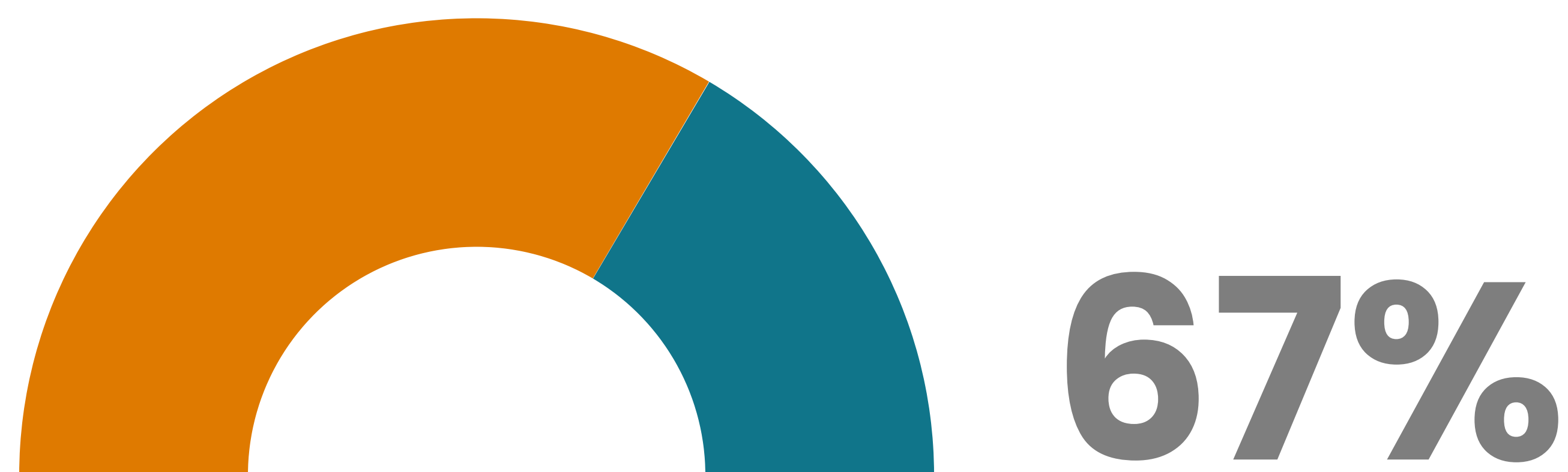
[7] Does Local Government Work for Women, the Local Government Commission, 13 July 2017, [link](#)

4 The benefits of adopting a hybrid model for future council business

Councillors who responded to the survey identified several noteworthy advantages of adopting a hybrid model for statutory council meetings and non-statutory engagements for both their councils and councillors as individuals.

Benefits to councillors

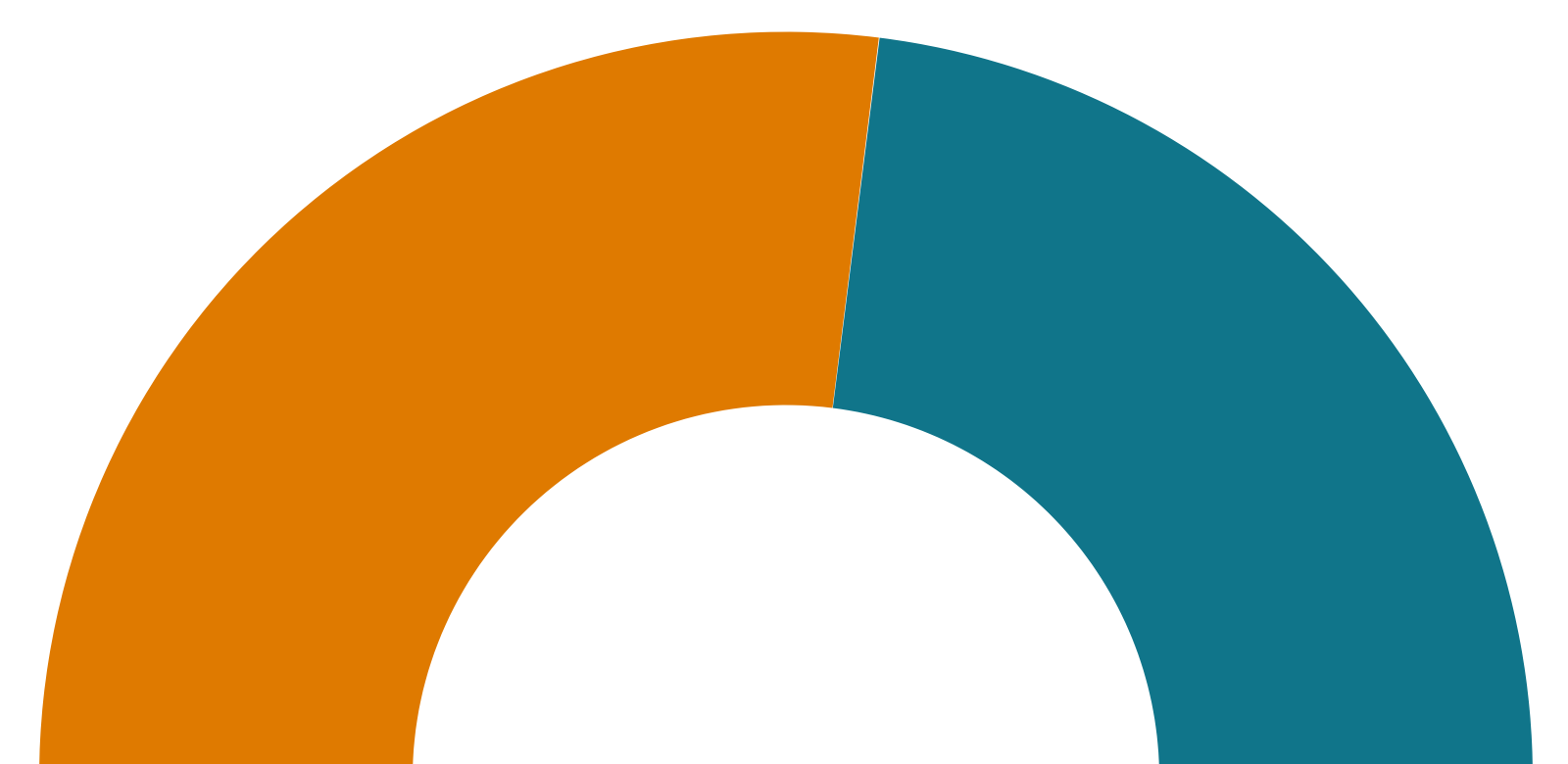
Our survey revealed that the number of councillors who use video conferencing tools in their role at least six hours per week increased by a multiple of seven during the pandemic. Despite the extraordinary circumstances, many felt that this ended up helping them discharge their duties and manage their workload, freeing them up to do more on the council or in their non-council lives.



of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would help them manage their time more effectively.**

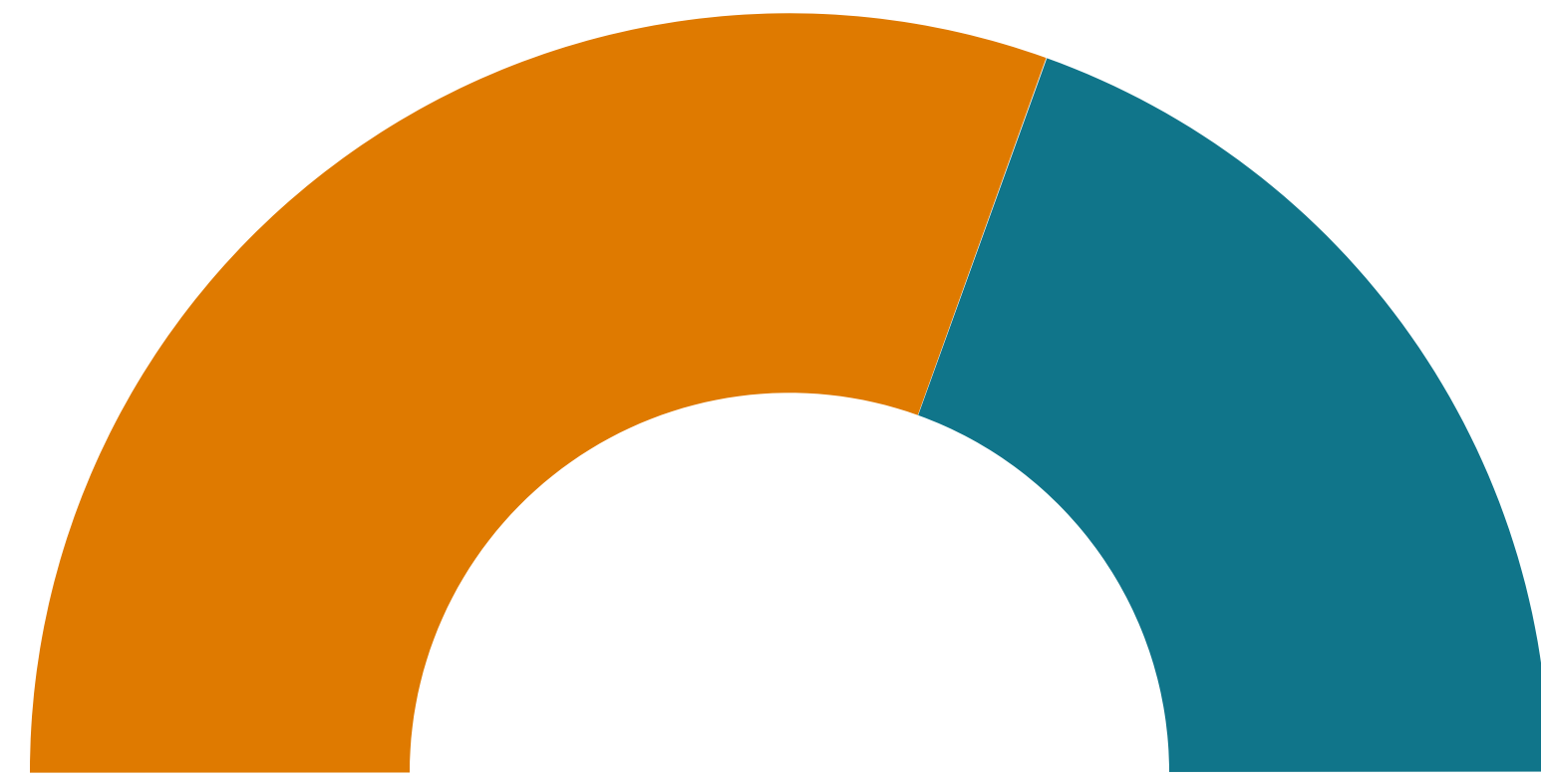
54%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would make it easier for them to attend a wider range of meetings.**



61%

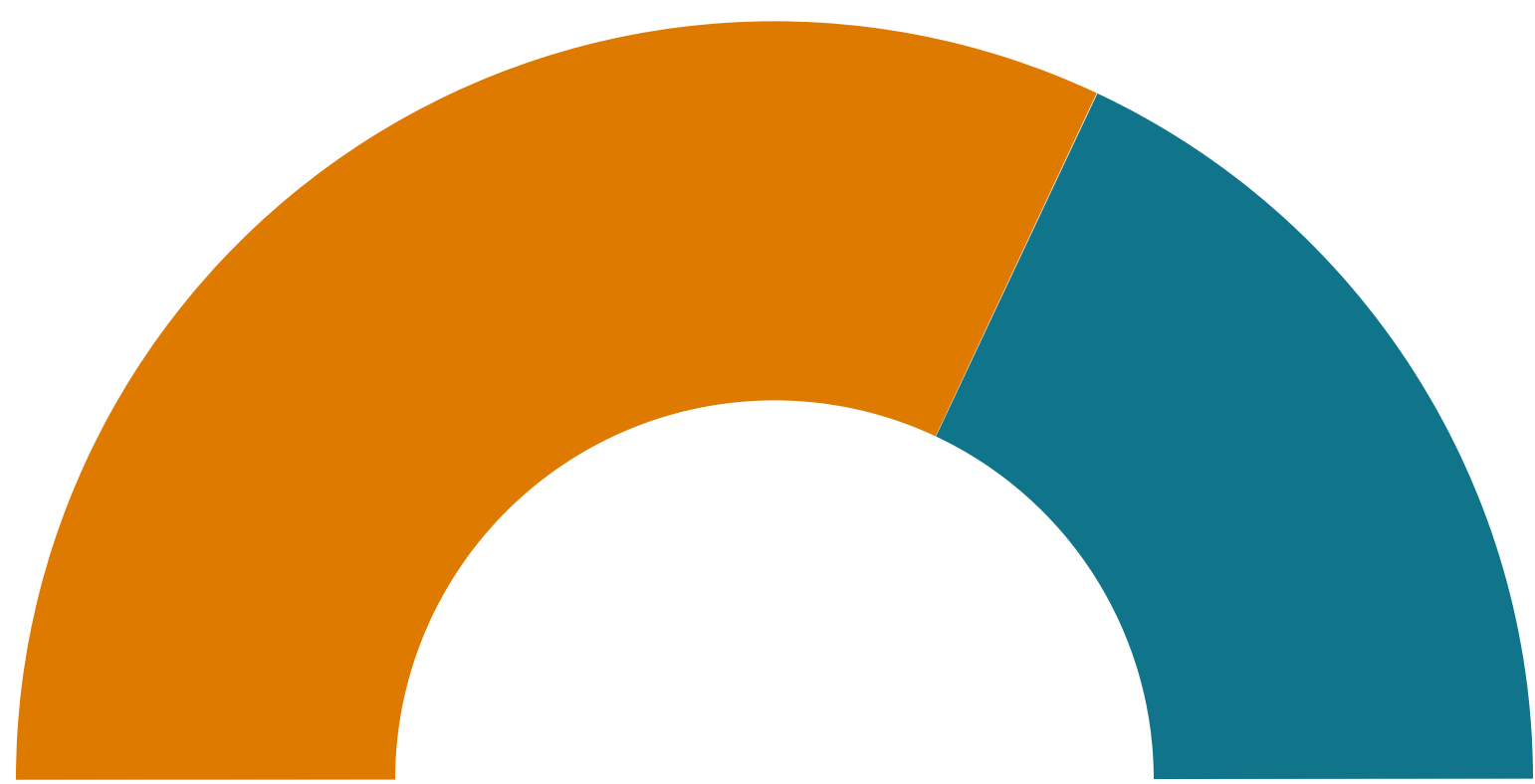
said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would help them reduce their commuting time.**



It is a huge struggle to get to meetings 30 miles away. Taxi companies in this rural town charge £100 return.



Given the need to cut carbon emissions, hybrid is the way.



64%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would help them reduce their carbon footprint as a councillor.**

Some councillors also suggested that adopting hybrid meetings would better enable people with disabilities to participate as councillors, who, despite making up 20% of the UK population, remain underrepresented in local government. Respondents felt that having the option to join meetings virtually would lower barriers that might deter some individuals with disabilities from running for office and participating in local government.



We must move in this direction. It has huge potential to increase democracy by making it possible for carers, parents, people working, the disabled etc to be councillors!



I noticed a significant difference in the quality of participation in remote meetings from members during the pandemic, who were very aware of the fact that residents were watching. This better engagement and transparency is of the highest importance



It may be the difference between people becoming and staying councillors. Councils need people with experience of working in covid recovery settings and who are carers of children or people with disabilities or the elderly. All these work demands have increased as have the demands on local councils and on councillors.



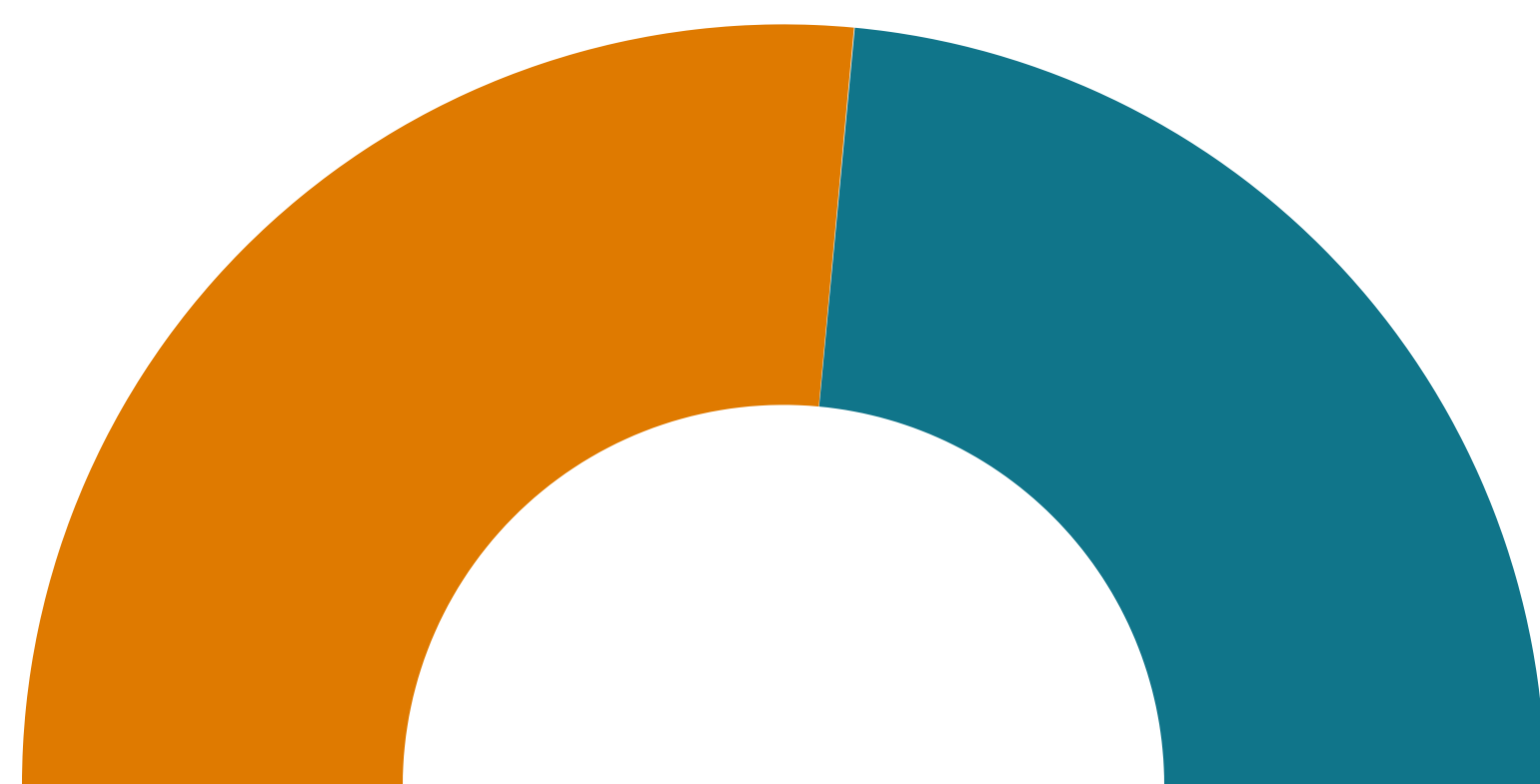
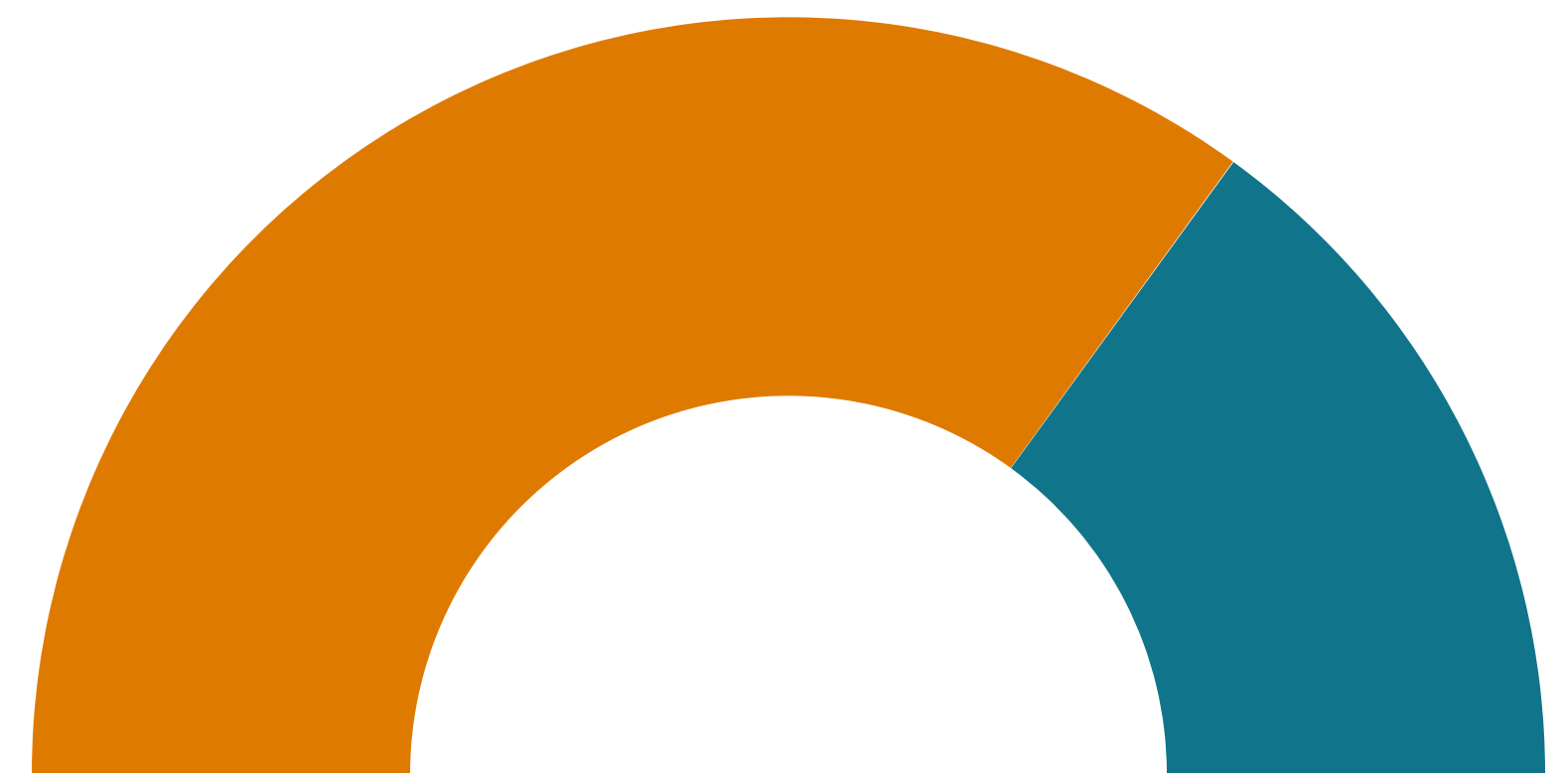
As my grandmother gets more ill, I dread the day I will have to choose between my duties to my family and my duties as a public servant. It does not have to be this way, which makes the struggle even harder."

Benefits to councils

As well as helping them in their roles, councillors also identified several ways in which they felt their council stood to benefit. For example, a majority of councillors felt that hybrid proceedings would make the council more accountable to local residents. Interestingly, this was a view more commonly held by councillors with portfolio responsibilities than those without.

70%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would save the council money on travel allowances.**

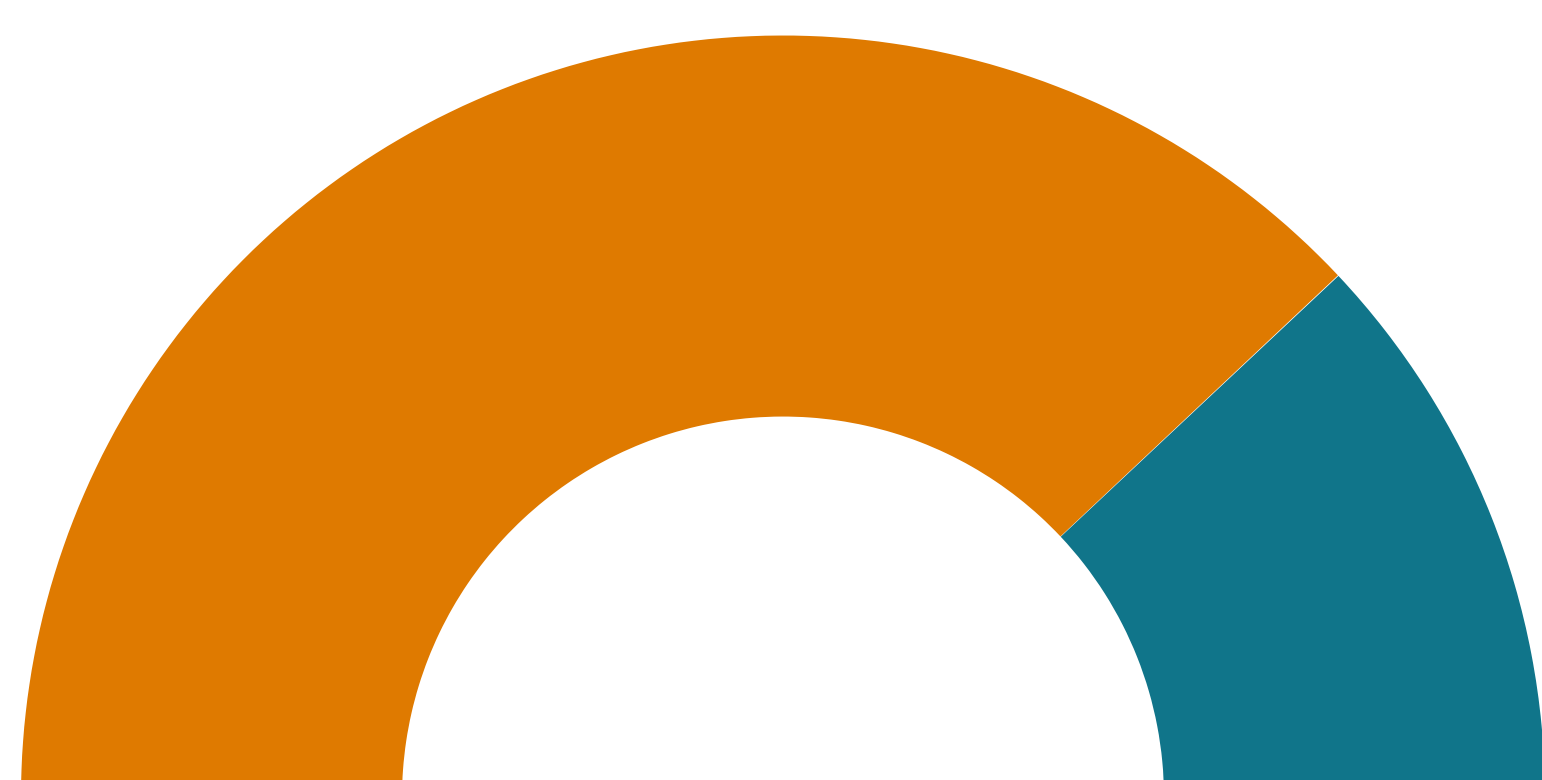
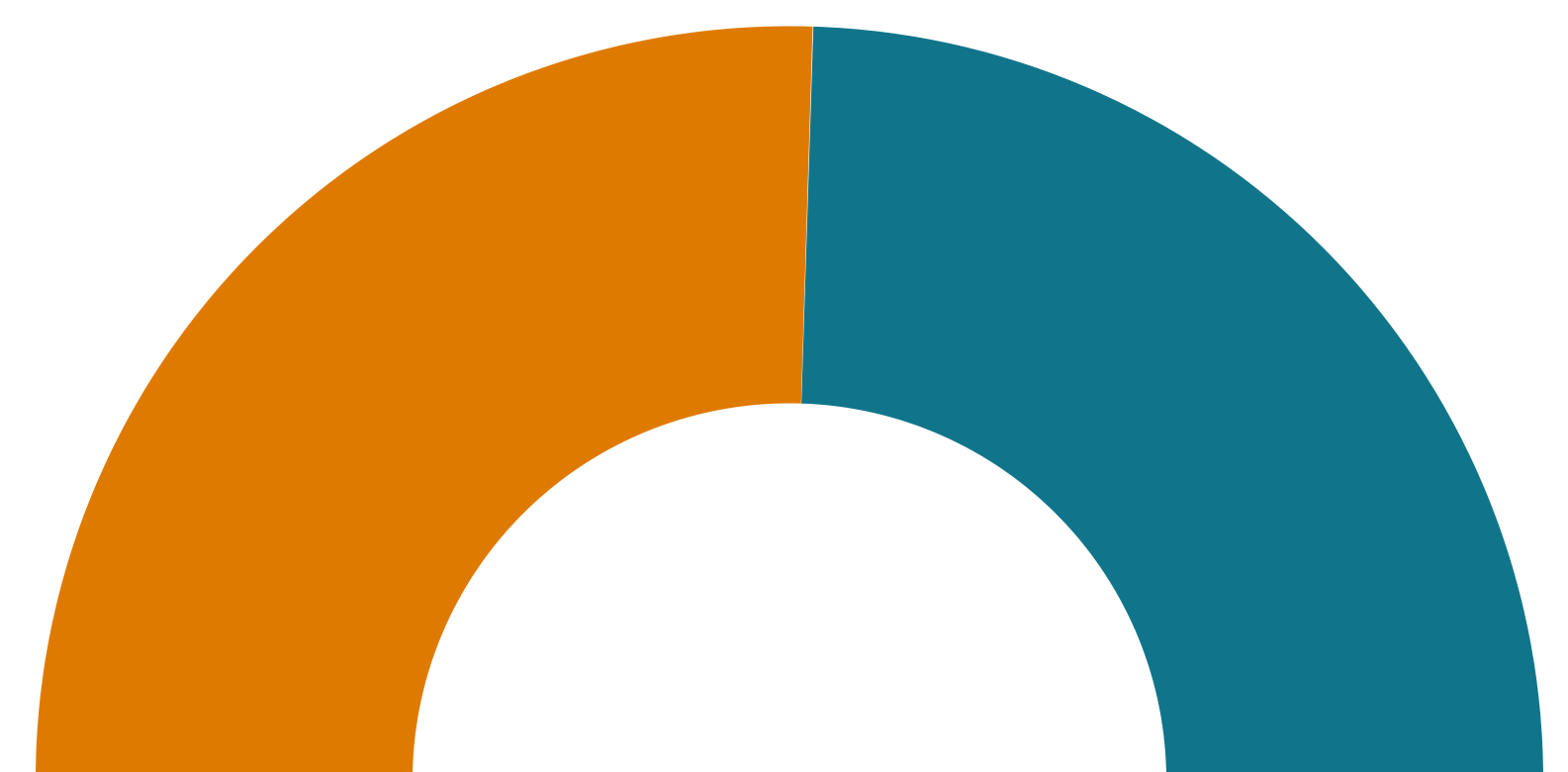


53%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would open up being a councillor to a wider range of people.**

51%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would make their council more accessible to and accountable to residents.**



76%

of councillors said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would reduce their council's carbon footprint.**

How perceptions of the benefits of hybrid meetings vary between profile of councillor

Underrepresented groups in local government

As detailed above, support for a hybrid approach to local government is higher in groups traditionally underrepresented, such as women, people with caring responsibilities and councillors under the age of 45.

The key benefits identified by members of these groups also stood out. For example, they were more likely to say that having the option of joining some meetings virtually would help improve councillors' work-life balance and help attract a wider and more diverse group of people to local politics.

85%

female councillors said that adopting a hybrid model **would facilitate a better family, personal, work or study balance** for councillors, compared to 77% of male respondents.

90%

of councillors **with caring responsibilities** said that adopting a hybrid model **would support them to balance being a councillor with other aspects of their life**, compared to 82% for those without caring responsibilities.

92%

of councillors **aged 44 and under** said that adopting a hybrid model **would help to improve the diversity of councils**, compared to just 61% for those aged 65 and over.



We need more women on councils and if there was an option to join meetings by video conferencing it would attract more women who are carers or mothers.



I strongly feel that Hybrid and online meeting have definitely helped me, given that both my wife and I have a range of disabilities which impact on our daily lives and activities, the option to continue with Hybrid meetings would benefit many Cllrs such as myself and also enable us to attend meetings which we would otherwise be unable to do so.

Location

Councillors on the whole felt that being able to attend some meetings virtually was a good thing as it would mean they could reduce their travel expenses, time spent travelling and their council's carbon emissions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these were more likely to be identified as key benefits by councillors representing rural areas.

These findings support the conclusion reached by the largely rural North Yorkshire County Council which in 2021 estimated that allowing councillors to attend meetings remotely during the pandemic had saved nearly 37 tonnes of CO2 emissions due to the reduction in travel.[8]

They also echo a 2021 report from the TaxPayers' Alliance which estimated that holding regular hybrid meetings could save England's county councils and unitary authorities around £6 million per year in travel expenses claimed by members.[9]

of councillors **in rural areas** said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would reduce their council's travel expenses**, compared to 65% of those in urban areas.

72%

councillors **in rural areas** said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would reduce the time they spend commuting**, compared to 57% for those in urban areas.

65%

of councillors **in rural areas** said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would reduce their carbon footprint as a councillor**, compared to 59% for those in urban areas.

68%



I represent Devon, which is a large county. Video conferencing can reduce my car mileage by over 1000 miles each year.



For a rural County like ours it makes tremendous sense to enable far flung councillors to come together in the most efficient, effective and least stressful manner.

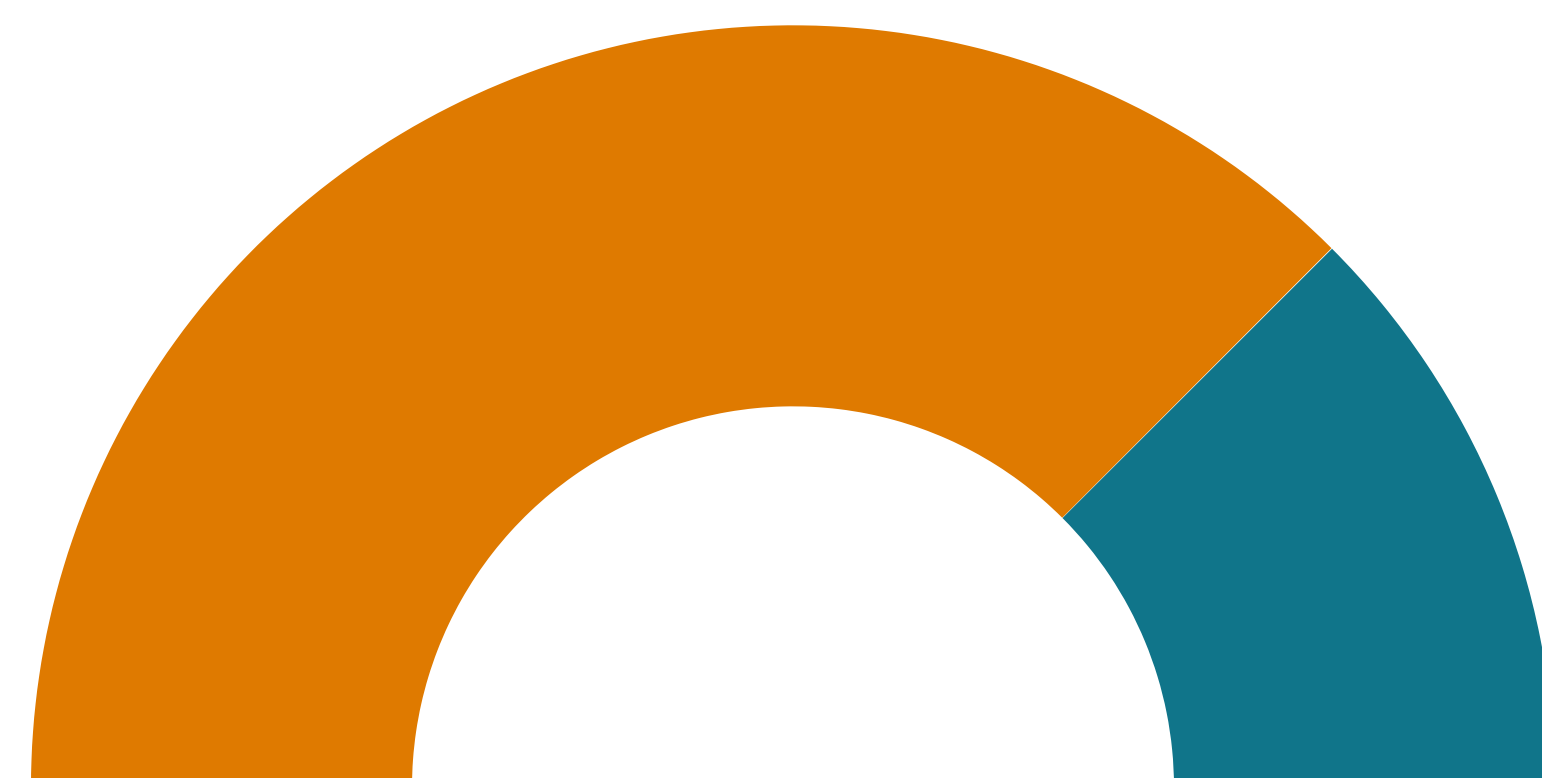
[8] North Yorkshire County Council considers future of meetings after huge savings, Richmondshire Today, 8 October 2021 [link](#)

[9] Holding council meetings online can save millions in travel expenses, Conservative Home, 11 February 2021 [link](#)

Conversely, councillors in urban areas were more likely on the whole to say that if their council adopted a hybrid model it would help to attract a wider and more diverse range of people to becoming a councillor.

75%

of councillors in **urban areas** said that adopting a hybrid model for future council business **would improve the diversity of councils.**



Position within the council

Elsewhere, non-portfolio holders were more concerned about improving their work-life balance than their more senior colleagues.



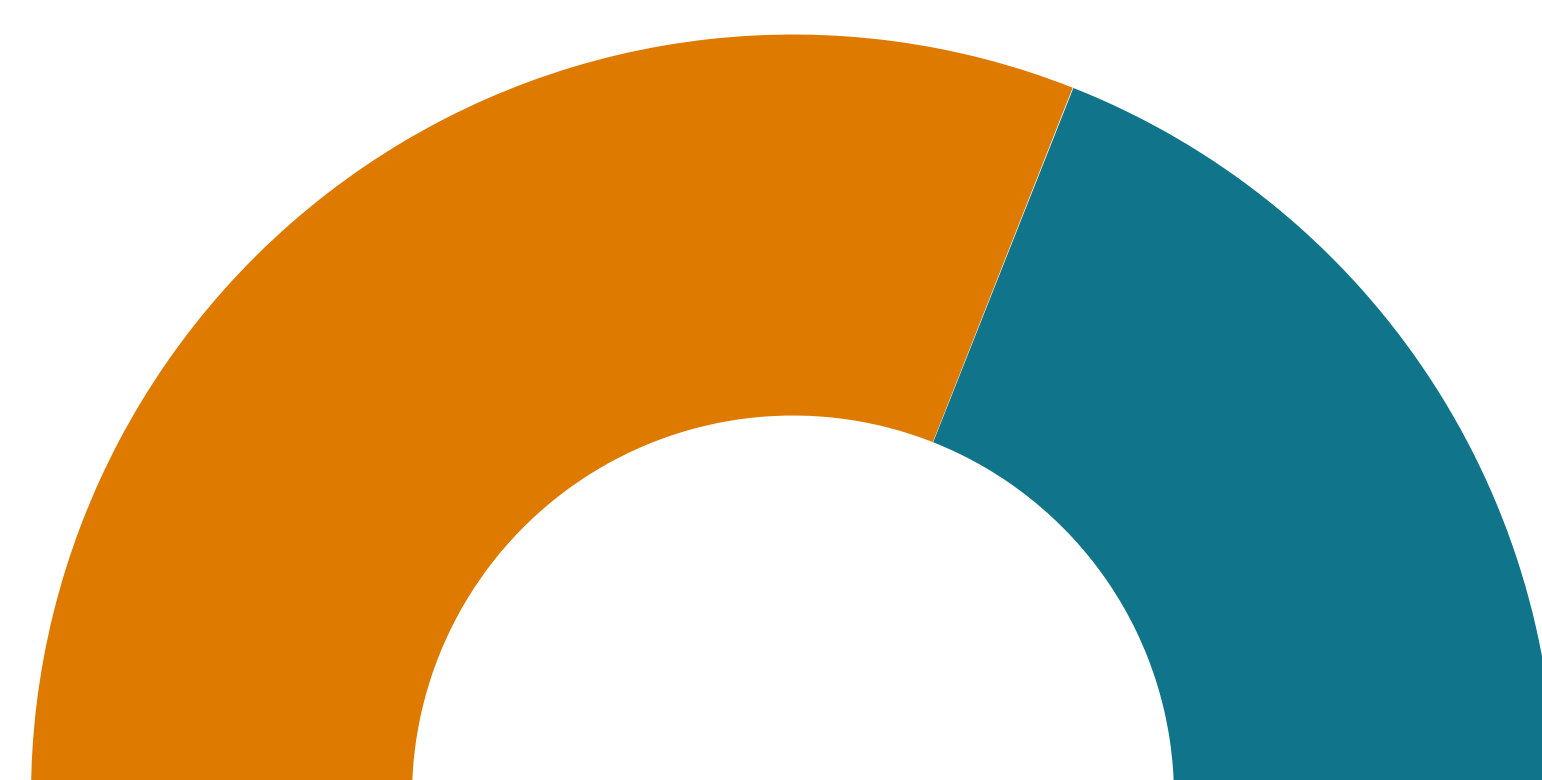
85%

of **non-portfolio holders** said that adopting a hybrid model **can facilitate a better family, personal, work or study balance**, compared to 74% of portfolio holders.

However, portfolio holders were considerably more likely than their more junior colleagues to say that shifting to a hybrid model can improve the accessibility of accountability of local government.

62%

of portfolio holders said that adopting a hybrid model **would make the council more accountable and accessible to residents**, compared to 50% of non-portfolio holders.



Our findings clearly show that there is a strong desire for councils to adopt a hybrid model in the future. However, this can present some challenges for councils, with several respondents expressing concerns about the cost of rolling out the hardware to support it, such as IT equipment in council buildings.

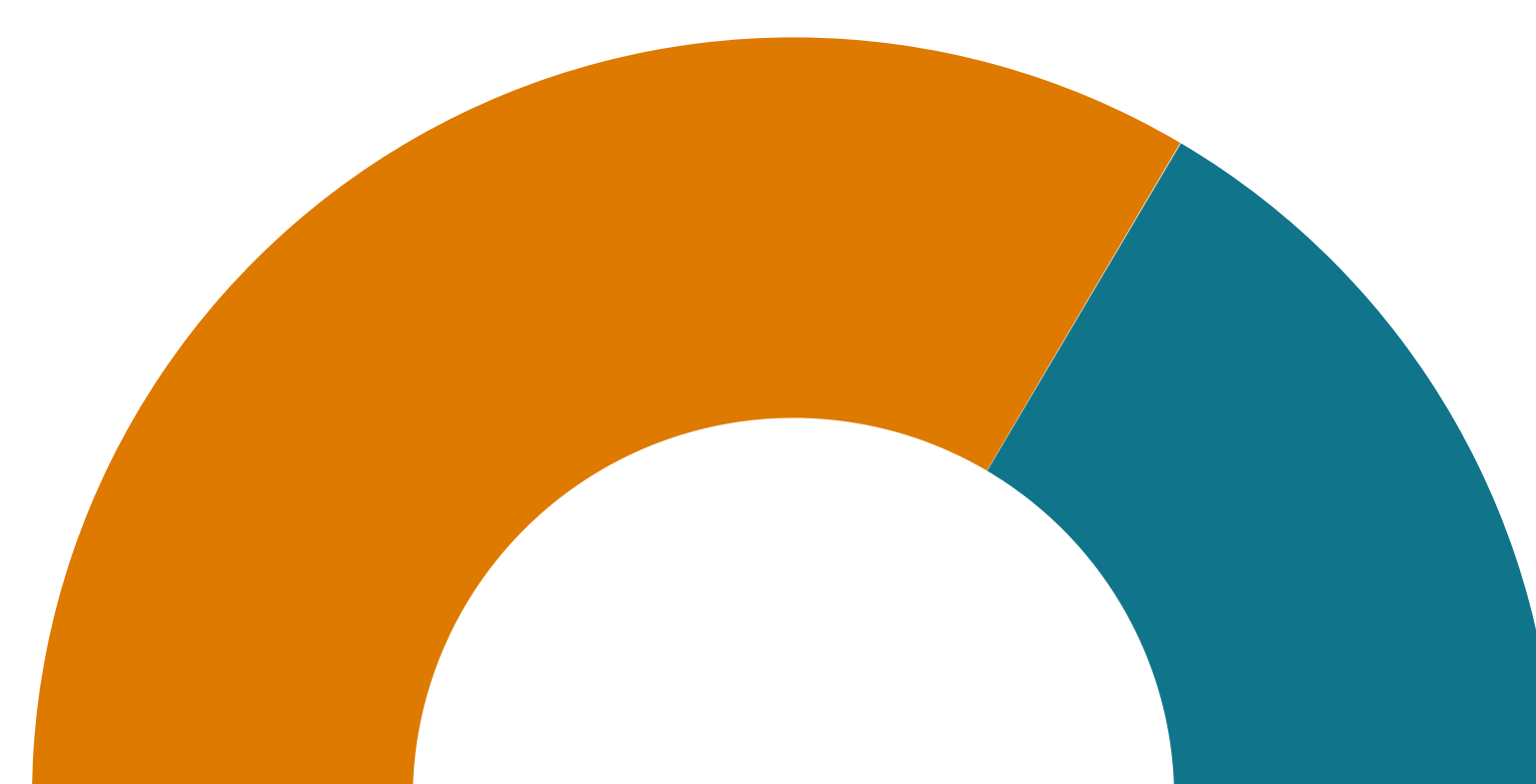
The cost of hybrid IT can be very expensive.

Others pointed out that some additional training would be needed for those not as familiar with hybrid technologies, including older councillors.

There is an assumption that everyone knows how to use technology, which discriminates against some people.

Overall, however, a clear majority of councillors are satisfied that they are adequately equipped to use hybrid technologies in their role in the future.

67%



of councillors **feel confident using video conferencing services and a range of inbuilt features in the future.**



5 Conclusions & Recommendations

In responding to this survey, councillors were able to identify a number of benefits that had emerged during the pandemic from their authority being able to hold meetings on-line. These included reductions in travel time, an ability to attend more meetings and better engagement with the public. This had a particularly positive impact on specific groups of councillors – most notably those with caring responsibilities and those who lived in more rural areas – to be able to secure a better work like balance for them and their families.

Councillors were also able to identify some longer term benefits that this could bring, with many respondents feeling it would help reduce carbon emissions and improve the diversity of those standing for election as councillors. Councils will want to look at the findings on these benefits and think about how they could alter or update some of their practices to ensure that they are kept in the coming years.

Most councillors will have welcomed the chance to return to physical council meetings. However, the research shows that there is support for councils to be given the flexibility by government to hold meetings in a hybrid form, and many in the local government sector are hopeful that the government will seek to act on this in the coming months.

Recommendations

- **Government should legislate to ensure that councils have the option to be able to hold formal meetings in a hybrid form so that councils have flexibility over how they conduct their proceedings.**
- **Councils should consider how to build on the potential benefits of hybrid or remote meetings where it is appropriate to do so for more informal meetings, such as committees or engagement with residents and community groups.**

CCN

COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

Founded in 1997, the County Councils Network is the voice of England's counties. A cross-party organisation, CCN develops policy, commissions research, and presents evidence-based solutions nationally on behalf of the largest grouping of local authorities in England.

In total, the 23 county councils and 13 unitary councils that make up the CCN represent 26 million residents, account for 39% of England's GVA, and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities

The network is a cross-party organisation, expressing the views of member councils to the government and within the Local Government Association.

zoom

Zoom brings people together to get more done in a frictionless and secure video environment.

Founded in 2011, Zoom's easy, reliable, and innovative communications platform provides video meetings, voice, large-scale events, and chat across devices and spaces, powering the hybrid workforces of tomorrow, as well as solutions for developers to build apps and integrations on top of the Zoom platform.

