



AN UPDATE

Remote Access to Public Meetings: A Review of Rhode Island City and Town Councils and School Committees

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ACLU

**AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION**

Rhode Island

Remote Access to Public Meetings:

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AN UPDATE

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Rhode Island

Introduction

Remote access by the public to state and local government meetings became essential during the COVID pandemic. For the first two years of the disease's presence, gubernatorial executive orders required public bodies to arrange to have their meetings livestreamed and to provide for remote public participation for any instance when in-person testimony would have been heard. In 2026, remote access remains an extremely valuable vehicle to ensure that public bodies are including as many people as possible in the oversight of their government. But since mid-2022, after those executive orders expired, public bodies have been left on their own to determine the extent to which they will make their meetings open virtually.

In May 2023, in recognition of that discretion, the ACLU of Rhode Island released a report reviewing the post-COVID remote meeting practices of two of the most important public bodies in every Rhode Island municipality — city and town councils and school committees. We looked at four particular aspects of their public meeting practices in this regard:

- **Did they livestream their meetings?**
- **Did they record their meetings and provide a video archive of them for future reference?**
- **Did they provide links to agenda item documents online?**
- **Did they allow remote participation by the public?**

The results were encouraging in some respects, but they also demonstrated significant room for improvement. In 2023, the report found that the vast majority of city and town councils and school committees were livestreaming and archiving their meetings. Most municipal councils were also posting their agenda packets online. But fewer than half of the state's school committees were providing online links to their agenda documents, and few public bodies were continuing to allow for remote public participation. Altogether, only eleven city/town councils and one school committee employed all four of the constituent-friendly practices noted above. Three councils and four school committees engaged in none of those practices.

In mid-2026, we decided to reexamine those practices to see whether, and how, public bodies had improved the public's ability to watch and participate in their meetings remotely since our first report.¹ This report is the result of that reexamination.

While a few city and town councils saw improvement, none joined the 11 from 2023 in meeting all four criteria examined in our report. After reexamining our labeling of one of its practices as "unclear" in 2023, only one school district — East Greenwich — has joined Barrington as a school committee that meets all four standards.

While a handful of public bodies have improved their practices to ensure better public access, some of the least transparent public bodies have remained that way.

All told, only four city and town councils have improved their accessibility since 2023, while eight school committees have done so. Two councils and three school committees continue to provide no accessibility under the four standards noted above, and three other school committees appear to have reduced their accessibility. In short, there has been some improvement, but this analysis reflects the reality that there has been less progress since mid-2023 in making meetings more accessible to the public than we would have hoped for. In short, while a handful of public bodies have improved their

¹ The determinations of their policies were made by examining each public body's website, posted agendas, and related documents. Prior to publishing, we sent a draft version of the report's appendices to all the surveyed public bodies with time for feedback and corrections. As with our last report, we welcome updates to the information provided.

practices to ensure better public access, some of the least transparent public bodies have remained that way. However, we believe that 2026 provides an opportunity for progress.

As elections approach this year, likely leading to changes in the membership of many of these public bodies, we believe it presents an opportune time for those entities to reexamine their remote access policies. Our hope is that the councils and school committees that are not currently providing the public with maximum access to their meetings in the four ways noted above will take steps forward this year to join the 13 public bodies that now do so. That list of standard-bearers includes public bodies large and small, urban and rural, and thus clearly demonstrates that this goal is within the reach of every city and town council and school committee.

As we noted in our 2023 report, the meeting practices adopted during the pandemic greatly expanded the opportunity for civic engagement by removing longstanding barriers to monitoring, and involvement in, public meetings for residents with disabilities, seniors, and people with limited access to transportation. It was also an important tool for individuals who had work or family obligations that otherwise prevented them from attending meetings in person or that made it extremely burdensome to do so. That opportunity remains as important as ever in promoting greater transparency and accountability.

The following pages provide an update to our 2023 report and note the changes that a dozen public bodies have made in the last three years to better promote remote public access to their meetings. We encourage those public bodies that are lagging to follow the lead of the communities that engage in best practices governing remote access, and we urge residents of those lagging communities to press their public officials to do the right thing.

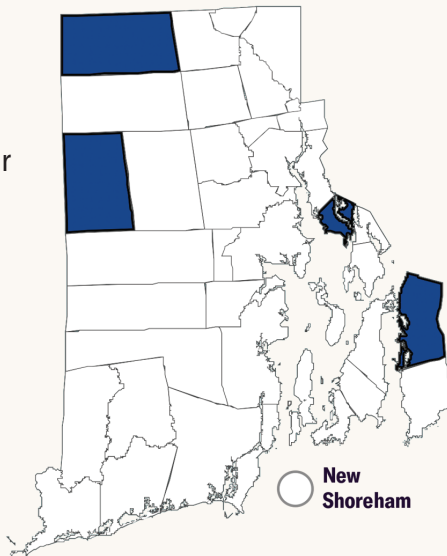
Quick-Glance Charts: Updates to Open Meeting Policies in Rhode Island

Public meeting accessibility map – update since 2023

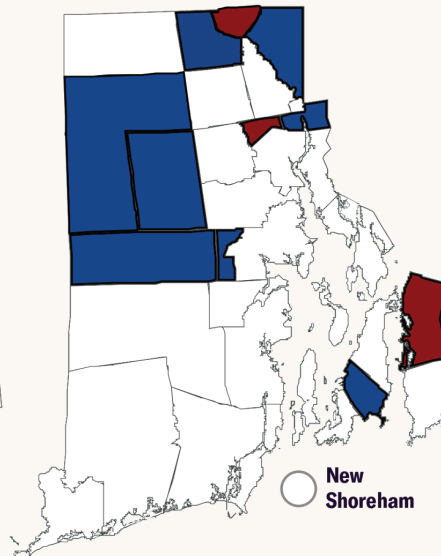
- Blue = Expansion of access since 2023
- Red = Reduction in access since 2023

City and Town Councils that **improved** their accessibility:

- Barrington
- Burrillville
- Foster
- Tiverton



City and Town Councils



School Committees

School Committees that **improved** their accessibility:

- Coventry
- Cumberland
- Foster-Glocester
- Middletown
- North Smithfield
- Pawtucket
- Scituate
- West Warwick

School Committees that **reduced** their accessibility:

- North Providence
- Tiverton
- Woonsocket

Best: Fully Remotely Accessible

City and Town Councils

Coventry
Cranston
Cumberland
East Greenwich
Lincoln
Middletown
Pawtucket
Portsmouth
Richmond
Scituate
West Warwick

School Committees

Barrington
East Greenwich*

Worst: Not At All Remotely Accessible

City and Town Councils

Exeter
West Greenwich

School Committees

Exeter-West Greenwich**
Johnston
New Shoreham

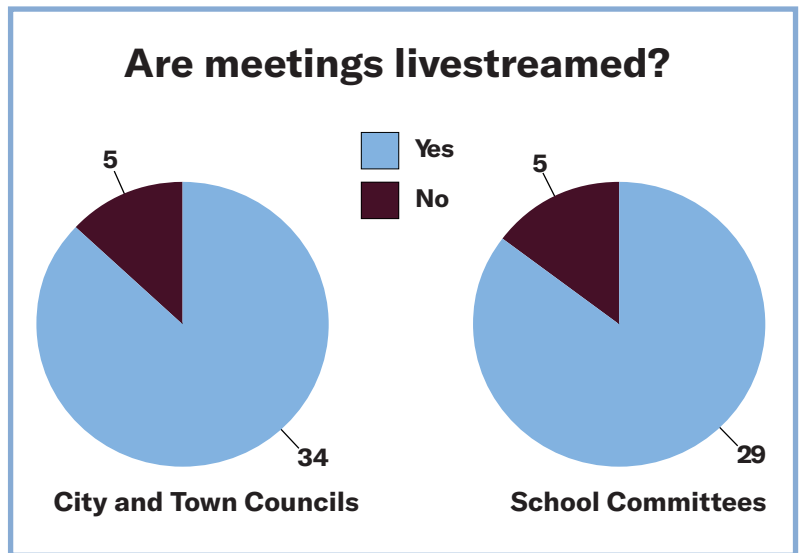
* It was unclear in 2023 that the East Greenwich school committee allowed for remote participation, so we did not list that committee as fully remote in the 2023 report.

** This school committee does livestream and archive videos of meetings, but requires the disclosure of personal information to receive a password to access them. We do not consider this as providing access.

Livestreaming

One of the simplest ways for public bodies to promote greater accessibility is to livestream their meetings as they did during the pandemic.

In 2023, we found that 32 of the 39 city and town councils continued to livestream their meetings through Zoom, YouTube, Clerkbase, or public access channels, and sometimes through more than one method. Since that report, only two municipalities — Barrington and Foster — have been added to that list. The five municipalities that still do not appear to allow their constituents to watch their council meetings remotely in real time are: Burrillville, Central Falls,² Exeter, Johnston, and West Greenwich.

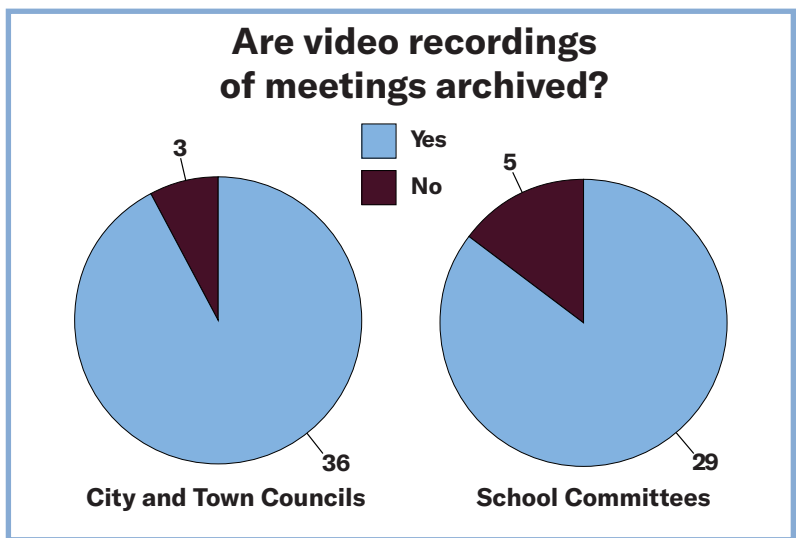


Presently, 29 of the 34 school committees livestream their meetings through one or more methods cited above. This includes three school committees — Foster-Glocester, Middletown, and Scituate — that had not been offering this opportunity in 2023.³ The five school committees that fail to provide an opportunity for their constituents to watch their meetings remotely in real time are: Exeter-West Greenwich,⁴ Johnston, New Shoreham, Smithfield, and West Warwick.

Video Archives

With so many public bodies livestreaming their meetings, it is only a short step to recording them and maintaining them online so the public can view them after the fact. This is a straightforward way of not only preserving a record of meetings for future reference, but of accommodating members of the public who, for many understandable reasons, may not be able to view a meeting at the time it takes place.

Our 2023 review found that 35 of 39 city and town councils had easily accessible archive links to watch previously recorded meetings.



² Misleadingly, there is a link on the Central Falls City Council website that says “LIVE STREAM City Council Meetings,” but it redirects to an error page.

³ Our 2023 report labeled the Newport School Committee’s practice as “unclear,” but it has since been determined that the Committee does livestream meetings.

⁴ As we noted in our 2023 report, while the Exeter-West Greenwich School Committee does livestream meeting and upload videos, it requires individuals to obtain a password from the school district to view them. To do so, one must complete a form requesting the person’s name, email, zip code, and relation to the school committee. We consider this to be antithetical to the letter and spirit of the Open Meetings Act and not a legitimately accessible practice.

That number has only improved by one, as Foster has begun archiving videos on its YouTube channel. The three municipalities that continue to resist recording and archiving their meetings are Exeter, Johnston, and West Greenwich.⁵

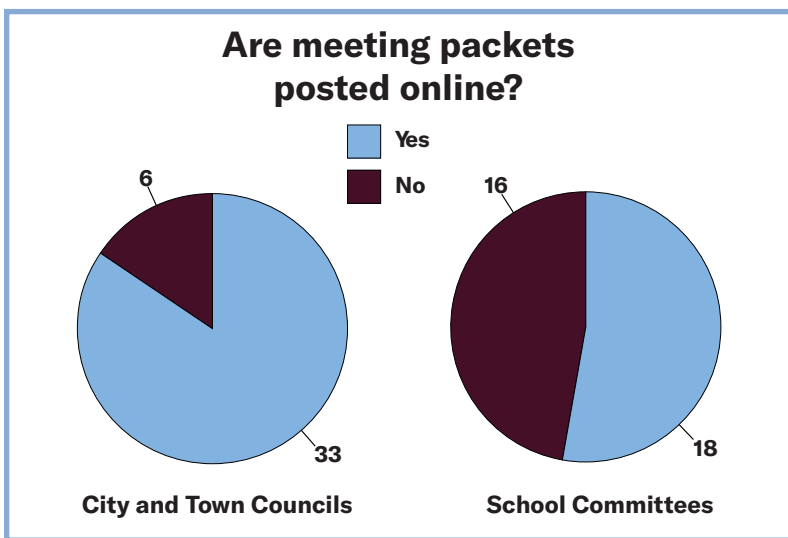
On the school committee side, there have been only two changes in recording practices since our last study. Altogether in 2023, 27 of 34 school districts had easily accessible archive links to watch previously recorded meetings. Foster-Glocester and Middletown have now joined those school districts. Like its practice on access to view livestreamed meetings, Exeter-West Greenwich requires that a form be filled out and submitted prior to receiving a password to view recorded videos, so we do not consider it an accessible public body.⁶ The four other school districts that continue not to make meetings accessible for later viewing are Cranston, Johnston, New Shoreham, and West Warwick.

Agenda Packets

As we pointed out in our 2023 report, an extremely frustrating aspect of remote viewing is when the public body fails to make accessible to the public the documents that form the basis for its agenda discussions. Providing links to agenda papers directly from the online published agenda ensures that the public — whether watching in person or remotely — can meaningfully follow the public body’s discussion and debate. The availability of central document housing platforms, such as BoardDocs or Clerkbase, makes it extremely easy for public bodies to post and share their meeting documents.

While Burrillville and Tiverton have begun posting agenda packets since our 2023 report, six city and town councils still fail to include with their posted notices an online link to an agenda packet or to the documents being discussed at the meeting. Those councils are: Central Falls, Exeter, Foster, Glocester, Hopkinton, and West Greenwich.⁷

It appears that three school committees that had been posting their agenda packets online in 2023 — North Providence, Tiverton, and Woonsocket — have taken a step backward and either make it more difficult to access or no longer do so.



Unfortunately, while a significant majority of city and town councils make their agenda packets available online, the same cannot be said about school committees, where only slightly over half of them regularly include a link to their agenda packet or documents. Those school committees that do routinely offer the public this information online are: Barrington, Bristol-Warren, Chariho, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Little Compton, Middletown, Narragansett, Newport, North Kingstown, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, Providence, Scituate, South Kingstown, Warwick, West Warwick,

⁵ For unknown reasons, it appears that both the Burrillville Town Council and, on the school side, the Smithfield School Committee record their meetings for future viewing but do not livestream them.

⁶ See footnote 4 for details.

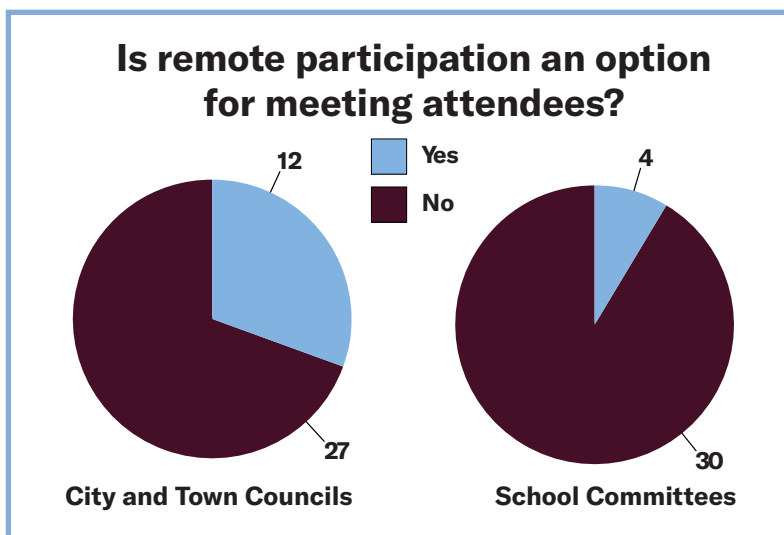
⁷ The only changes from 2023 are that Tiverton now posts its agenda packets; the Burrillville Town Council now posts the three most recent agenda packets; and the North Smithfield Town Council, which was posting its packets in 2023, makes them available only at 10 AM the day of the meeting.

and Westerly.⁸ Notably, Narragansett provides much more limited access, explained in the footnote below.⁹

On the other hand, it appears that three school committees that we had listed as posting their agenda packets online in 2023 — North Providence, Tiverton, and Woonsocket — have taken a step backward and either make it more difficult to access or no longer do so.¹⁰

Remote Participation

A major benefit of the pandemic protocol was that many public bodies had to find ways to allow the public to not only view meetings remotely, but also to participate in them. As we acknowledged in our 2023 report, that is admittedly done more easily when both the public and the public body are meeting virtually, but any technological issues are easily overcome in creating hybrid meetings where the public can participate both in-person and remotely, as demonstrated by the geographically diverse public bodies that still do so.



That being said, only a small subset of public bodies continues to provide for remote public participation. As in 2023, only 12 of the 39 municipal councils allow for some kind of hybrid participation option with either a Zoom link or telephone call-in information. The only municipalities authorizing public participation are: Coventry, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Hopkinton, Lincoln,¹¹ Middletown, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Richmond, Scituate, and West Warwick.

Presently, only four school committees offer a hybrid participation option via Zoom or phone: Barrington, Coventry, East Greenwich, and Portsmouth. In 2023, only the Barrington School Committee had been allowing regular public participation, so there has been only a little improvement by school districts in the past three years in providing this opportunity.¹²

Only a small subset of public bodies continues to provide for remote participation, including just four school committees that offer a hybrid participation option.

⁸ The four school committees that have begun including their packet online since the 2023 report are Cumberland, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, and West Warwick. However, Cumberland does not post the packet online until noon on the day of the meeting.

⁹ The Narragansett School Committee makes agenda packets available only for their current/upcoming meetings “as soon as available on day of next scheduled meeting,” with past meetings containing just the agenda for review.

¹⁰ North Providence agenda is only available on the Secretary of State’s website, and the link to “revised and new policies” listed on the agenda appears to be removed after the meeting, making them inaccessible.

¹¹ Lincoln holds hybrid meetings where the public can watch a livestream and contemporaneously email comments to the Town Council for consideration.

¹² Our 2023 report labeled the practices of Central Falls, Cranston, and North Smithfield School Committees as “unclear,” but it has since been determined that those school committees do not provide for remote participation. On the other hand, we have clarified that East Greenwich and Portsmouth *do* allow for such participation.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The importance of remote access to the meetings of major public bodies like city and town councils and school committees cannot be overstated. As our 2023 report pointed out:

As a result of the open meetings lessons spurred by the pandemic, more parents were able to monitor school board meetings without having to find childcare; elderly residents could watch evening town council meetings without having to drive in the dark; and harried individuals with two jobs often had an opportunity to watch an important governmental meeting on their own schedule.

The ACLU of Rhode Island strongly supports the passage of legislation that would require city and town councils and school committees to provide for remote viewing by the public; the recording and prompt posting online of meetings; the electronic posting of agenda packets with their agendas; and remote participation to the extent that in-person participation is allowed. The fact that thirteen of the public bodies surveyed — large and small — currently engage in all of these practices demonstrates that these are very feasible goals. Although legislation to codify some of these requirements has been introduced in the past, those bills have not passed.¹³

In the meantime, however, nothing prevents public bodies from voluntarily adopting these best practices in order to promote more meaningful transparency and accountability in their deliberations. We call upon every city and town council and school committee that has not yet implemented these four practices to begin doing so.¹⁴

Our 2023 report concluded by noting:

Access to the democratic process should no longer hinge on a person's physical mobility or their ability to afford a car, get time off work, or find a childcare provider. If municipal councils and school committees positively address the access issues analyzed in this report, they will be taking important steps in further promoting the Open Meetings Act's goal of having "public business be performed in an open and public manner."

We recognize that providing for remote participation is the most challenging aspect of promoting remote public access to meetings, but if public bodies as diverse as Coventry, Cranston, Lincoln, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, and Richmond can do it, any council or school committee can do it. Even leaving any difficulties of hybrid participation to the side, there is simply no excuse in 2026 for major public bodies to fail to livestream and archive their meetings or provide their agenda packets online.

We hope that this updated review — and the evidence it presents on the reasonableness and feasibility of greater remote public access to meetings — will encourage public bodies to move fully into the post-COVID 21st century and adopt these important features promoting greater transparency.¹⁵

¹³ See, e.g., 23-S 815; 24-S 2256/24-H 7181; 25-S 909/H 6273; and 26-S 2389/H 7305 (requiring posting of agenda packets).

¹⁴ Another very simple step a handful of these public bodies could and should take is to make clear to the public exactly what their practices are. In at least a few instances — the East Greenwich Town Council and the Coventry School Committee are two examples — public bodies provide for remote participation but do not specify it on their agendas or website.

¹⁵ This report was prepared by ACLU of RI staff members Zoe Chakoian and Megan Khatchadourian.

Appendices

Appendix A – City and Town Councils

City/Town Council	Watch Livestream	Video Archived	Packet Online	Remote Participation	Notes
Barrington	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Bristol	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Burrillville	No	Yes	Yes*	No	* Packets are only available online for the three most recent meetings.
Central Falls	No	Yes*	No	No	* Only some of the council meetings are audio or video recorded for later review.
Charlestown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*	* Agenda notes that no comments from the public will be accepted virtually during the meeting, but the Town of Charlestown website inaccurately suggests that the public can participate virtually.
Coventry	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cranston	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cumberland	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
East Greenwich	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	* Town clerk's office contacted us to say remote participation is allowed, but the agenda only states, "click to join web" and does not explicitly state virtual participation is possible.
East Providence	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Exeter	No	No	No	No	
Foster	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Glocester	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Hopkinton	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
Jamestown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Johnston	No	No	Yes	No	
Lincoln	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	* Individuals watching by livestream can email comments to meeting@lincolnri.org while the meeting is taking place.
Little Compton	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Middletown	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

City/Town Council	Watch Livestream	Video Archived	Packet Online	Remote Participation	Notes
Narragansett	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
New Shoreham	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Newport	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
North Kingstown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
North Providence	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
North Smithfield	Yes	Yes	Yes*	No	* Meeting packet is now only made available at 10am on the day of the meeting.
Pawtucket	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Portsmouth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Providence	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Richmond	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Scituate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	* People watching via livestream can offer public comment remotely on non-agenda items, but not for public hearings.
Smithfield	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
South Kingstown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Tiverton	Yes	Yes	Yes*	No	* Most recent two meeting packets are available under "Town Council Agenda"; the rest of the agendas are found under "Agenda Archive."
Warren	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Warwick	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
West Greenwich	No	No	No	No	
West Warwick	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Westerly	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Woonsocket	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	

A total of 11 municipalities offer all four aspects of remote public meeting access and participation: Coventry, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Lincoln, Middletown, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Richmond, Scituate, and West Warwick.

Two municipalities offer no remote public meeting access in any capacity: Exeter and West Greenwich.

Yellow highlighted cells indicate a change in council or committee practice since 2023.
Orange highlighted cells reflect an updated clarification to how we reported the practices in 2023.

Appendix B – School Committees

School Committee	Watch Livestream	Video Archived	Packet Online	Remote Participation	Notes
Barrington	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Bristol-Warren	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Burrillville	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Central Falls	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Chariho	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Coventry	Yes	Yes	No	Yes*	* We were informed by the Superintendent that remote participation is possible via Zoom, although it is not indicated on the agenda.
Cranston	Yes	No	No	No	
Cumberland	Yes	Yes	Yes*	No	* Meeting packet is only made available at 12pm on the day of the meeting.
East Greenwich	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
East Providence	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Exeter-West Greenwich	No*	No*	No	No	* Everyone must complete a form and provide personal information to obtain a password to view the livestream and archived videos. We do not consider this as being accessible.
Foster-Glocester	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Jamestown	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Johnston	No	No	No	No	
Lincoln	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Little Compton	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Middletown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Narragansett	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
New Shoreham	No	No	No	No	

School Committee	Watch Livestream	Video Archived	Packet Online	Remote Participation	Notes
Newport	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
North Kingstown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
North Providence	Yes	Yes	No*	No	* Agendas appear only on the RI Secretary of State's website, and include a link to "revised and new policies" that are listed on the agenda for "discussion and/or approval"; however the link to this documentation appears to be removed after the meeting.
North Smithfield	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Pawtucket	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Portsmouth	Yes	Yes	No	Yes*	* Both a livestream and Zoom link are included on the agenda, but the agenda does not specify that remote participation is allowed.
Providence	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Scituate	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Smithfield	No	Yes	No	No	
South Kingstown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Tiverton	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Warwick	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
West Warwick	No	No	Yes	No	
Westerly	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Woonsocket	Yes	Yes	No	No	

Barrington and East Greenwich are the only school committees that offer all four aspects of remote public meeting access and participation.

Three school committees offer no remote public meeting access in any capacity: Exeter-West Greenwich, Johnston, and New Shoreham. We are treating Exeter-West Greenwich as completely inaccessible because they require everyone to submit their name, email, zip code, and relation to the committee to get access to livestream or recording; we consider this to be a practice completely antithetical to the open meetings law and notions of accessibility.

Yellow highlighted cells indicate a change in council or committee practice since 2023. Orange highlighted cell reflect an updated clarification to how we reported the practices in 2023.



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