



AN UPDATE

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

February 2025

ACLU

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Rhode Island

Remote Access to Public Meetings Post-Covid:

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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 2025, 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, 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, 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 late 2024, 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 handful of public bodies have improved their practices to ensure better public access, some of the least transparent public bodies have remained that way.

On the positive side, one town council – Charlestown – has now joined 11 other municipal councils in meeting all four criteria examined in our report. Three school committees – East Greenwich, Little Compton, and Scituate – have joined Barrington as school committees that meet all four standards.

But the fact that only four school committees have reached that threshold, and fewer than half the municipal councils have done so, reflect 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. Our latest analysis has found that 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. However, we believe that 2025 provides an opportunity for progress.

As a result of elections in November 2024, there have been changes in the membership of many of these public bodies, and 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 17 public bodies that now do so.

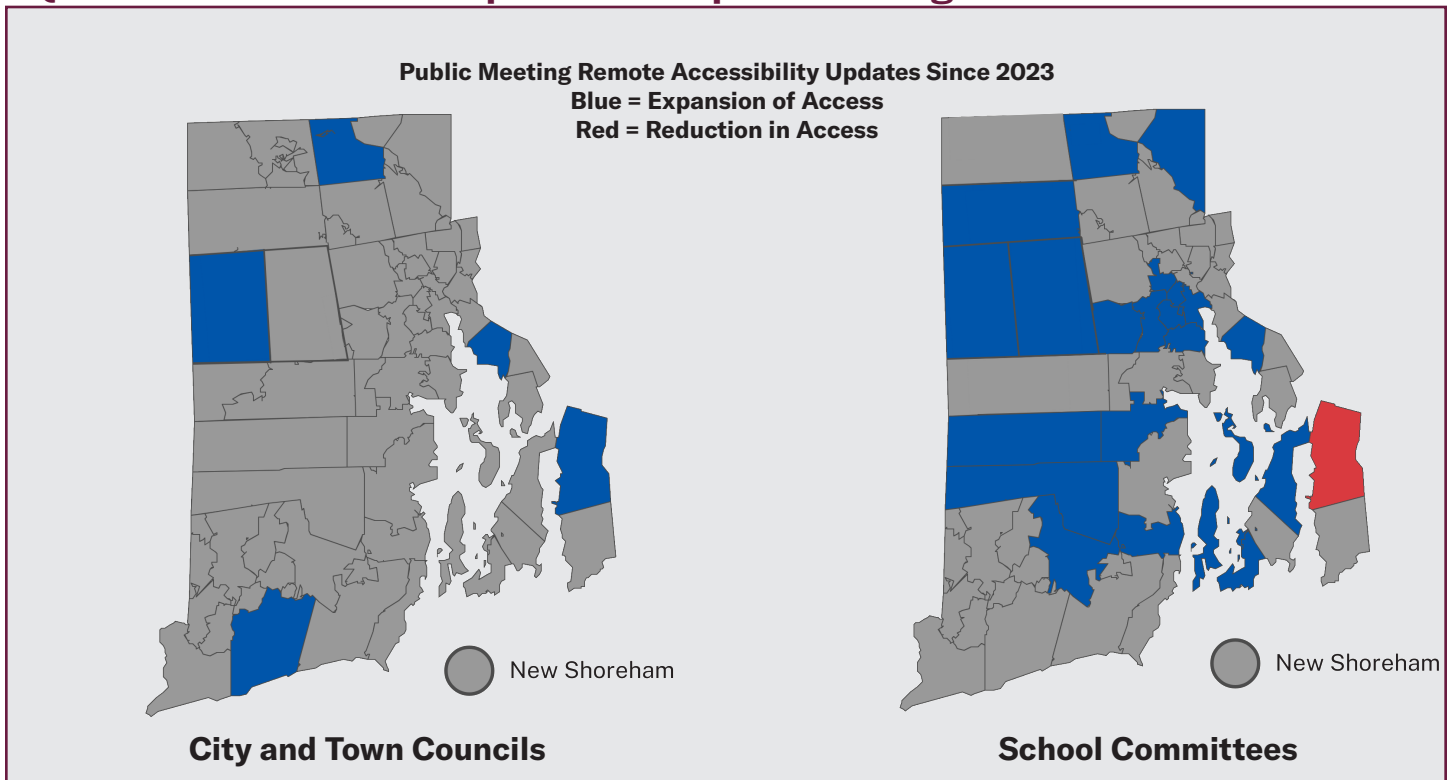
¹ The determinations of their policies were made by examining each public body's website, posted agendas, and related documents. When a practice was unclear, we sought clarifying information from municipal clerks. As with our last report, we welcome updates and corrections to the information provided.

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 municipal 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 more than a dozen public bodies have made in the last year-and-a-half 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



Best: Fully Remotely Accessible

City and Town Councils
Charlestown*
Coventry
Cranston
Cumberland
East Greenwich
Lincoln
Middletown
Pawtucket
Portsmouth
Richmond
Scituate
West Warwick

School Committees
Barrington
East Greenwich*
Little Compton*
North Smithfield*
Scituate*

Worst: Not At All Remotely Accessible

City and Town Councils
Exeter
West Greenwich

School Committees
Johnston
New Shoreham

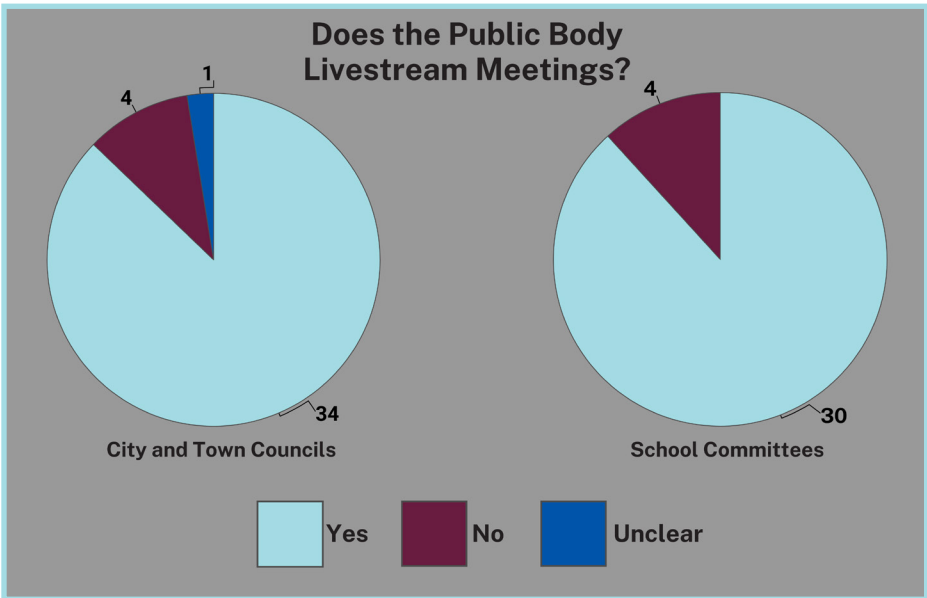
** indicates new fully accessible councils or committees, as compared to the 2023 report.*

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 meetings remotely in real time are: Burrillville, Central Falls,² Exeter, Johnston, and West Greenwich.

Presently, 30 of the 34 school committees livestream their meetings through one or more methods cited above. This includes five school committees – Exeter-West Greenwich, Foster-Glocester, Middletown, Newport, and Scituate – that had not been offering this opportunity in 2023. The four school committees that still fail to provide an opportunity for their constituents to watch their meetings remotely in real time are: Johnston, New Shoreham, Smithfield, and West Warwick.



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, 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 public bodies that do so.

That being said, only a small subset of public bodies continues to provide for remote public participation. In 2023, only 12 of the 39 municipal councils allowed for some kind of hybrid participation option with either a Zoom link or telephone call-in information, and only one council – Charlestown – has since joined them. Besides Charlestown, the other municipalities authorizing public participation are: Cranston, Coventry, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Hopkinton, Lincoln,³ Middletown, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Richmond, Scituate, and West Warwick.

In 2023, only the Barrington school committee had been allowing regular public participation remotely, so there has been relatively considerable improvement by school districts in the past year.

² Videos of Central Falls’ City Council meetings are available on YouTube and indicate that they have been streamed, but links on the meeting agenda only take one to a recording of a since-concluded meeting. It is not terribly useful if one has to navigate on one’s own to YouTube on the meeting date in order to be able to watch it live.

³ Lincoln holds hybrid meetings where the public can watch a livestream and contemporaneously email comments to the Town Council for consideration.

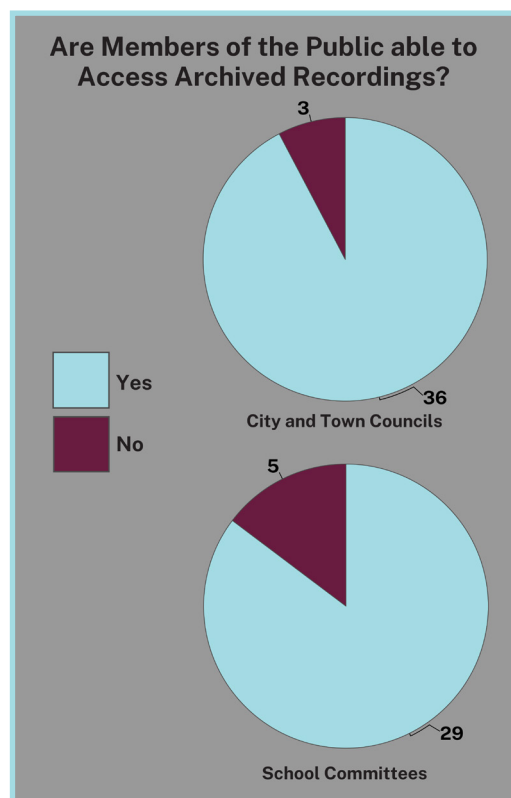
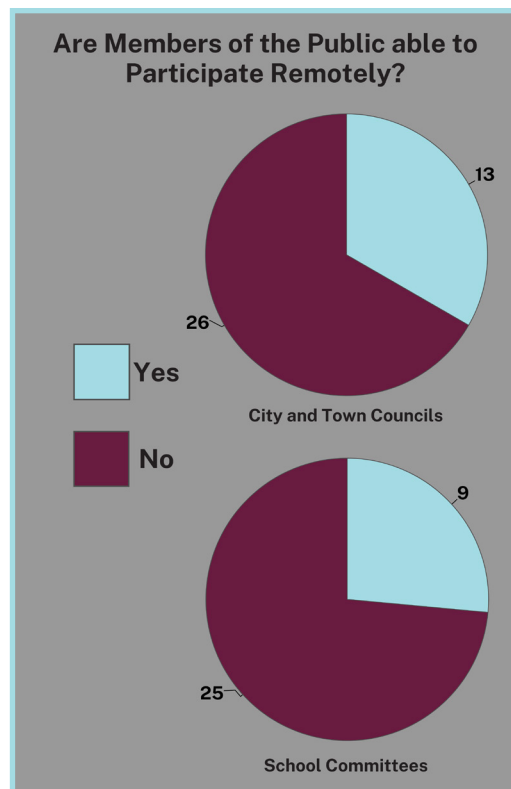
Presently, nine school committees offer a hybrid participation option via Zoom or phone: Barrington, Cranston, Coventry, East Greenwich, Jamestown, Little Compton, North Smithfield, Portsmouth, and Scituate. As meager as this list is, in 2023 only the Barrington school committee had been allowing regular public participation, so there has been relatively considerable improvement by school districts in the past year in providing this opportunity.⁴

Meeting 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. 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. Concerningly, Exeter-West Greenwich does archive and host videos for viewing, but requires that a form be filled out and submitted prior to receiving a password to view the livestream or recorded videos.⁶ The four school districts that continue nor ro make meetings accessible at all for later viewing are Cranston, Johnston, New Shoreham, and West Warwick. While the Smithfield school committee records its meetings, it does not livestream them, and a link to that town’s Vimeo account indicates that videos are available for viewing within three days after the meeting.



⁴ Our 2023 report labeled Central Falls’ practice as “unclear,” but it has since been determined that the school committee does not provide for remote participation.

⁵ For unknown reasons, it appears that the Burrillville Town Council records meetings for future viewing but does not livestream them.

⁶ As we noted in our 2023 report, Exeter-West Greenwich requires individuals to obtain a password from the school district to view recently uploaded videos. The form, which includes requesting name, email, zip code, and relation to the school committee, is antithetical to open meeting practices, and raises concerns for government transparency.

Agenda Packets

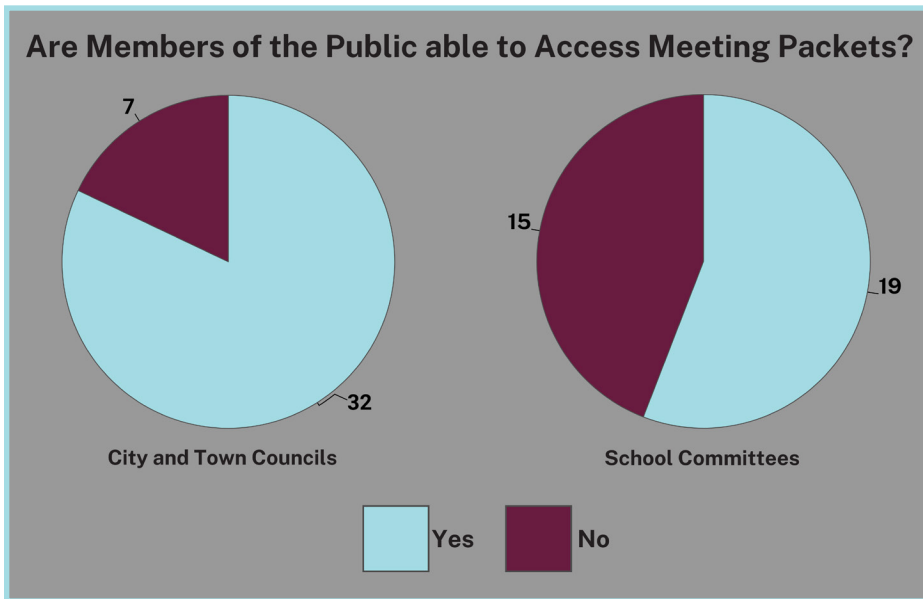
As we pointed out in our 2023 report, an extremely frustrating aspect of remote viewing is when the public body fails to make accessible to the public the documents that form the basis for its agenda discussions. Providing links to agenda papers directly from the online published agenda ensures that 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.

However, seven 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 town councils are: Burrillville, Central Falls, Exeter, Foster, Glocester, Hopkinton, and West Greenwich.⁷

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 about half of them regularly include a link to their agenda packet or documents. Those school committees routinely offering the public this information online are: Barrington, Bristol-Warren, Chariho, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Little Compton, Middletown, Newport, North Kingstown, North Smithfield, Providence, Scituate, South Kingstown, Warwick, West Warwick, Westerly, and Woonsocket.⁸ Two more – Narragansett and North Providence – provide more limited access, explained in the footnote below.⁹ On the other hand, it appears that

It appears that one school committee that had been posting its agenda packet online in 2023 – Tiverton – has taken a step backward and no longer does so.

one school committee that had been posting its agenda packet online in 2023 – Tiverton – has taken a step backward and no longer does so.



⁷The only change from 2023 is that the North Smithfield Town Council has begun making its agenda packet available, although it is posted only at 10 AM the day of the meeting.

⁸ The three school committees that have begun including their packet online since the 2023 report are Cumberland, North Smithfield, 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. North Providence includes a link under “District Policies” to find policies currently being written and worked on at the next meeting, but there is no direct link in the agenda packet to documents being considered.

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 attendance by the public; remote participation to the extent that in-person participation is allowed; the recording and prompt posting online of meetings; and the electronic posting of agenda packets with their agendas. The fact that sixteen of these public bodies currently engage in all of these practices demonstrates that these are very feasible goals. Although legislation to codify these requirements has been introduced in the past, those bills have not passed.¹⁰

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.

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 hope that this updated review – and the evidence it presents on the reasonableness and practicability 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.¹¹

¹⁰ See, e.g., 23-S 815 and 24-S 2256/24-H 7181.

¹¹ This report was prepared by ACLU of Rhode Island staff members Megan Khatchadourian and Zoe Chakoian.

Appendices

Appendix A – City and Town Councils

City/Town Council	Watch Livestream	Remote Participation	Video Archived	Packet Online	Notes
Barrington	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Bristol	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Burrillville	No	No	Yes	No	
Central Falls	Unclear*	No	Yes	No	* Videos of recent meetings are available, but it is unclear if they are livestreamed or posted after conclusion of the meeting.
Charlestown	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Coventry	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cranston	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cumberland	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
East Greenwich	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
East Providence	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Exeter	No	No	No	No	
Foster	Yes	No*	Yes**	No	* The Town Council has recently held occasional meetings with public participation. * Livestream available on YouTube, but that is not indicated on the Council's website or meeting agendas.
Gloicester	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Hopkinton	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Jamestown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Johnston	No	No	No	Yes	
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	No	Yes	Yes	
Middletown	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Narragansett	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
New Shoreham	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Newport	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
North Kingstown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	

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

A total of 12 municipalities offer all four aspects of remote public meeting access and participation: Charlestown, Coventry, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Lincoln, Middletown, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Richmond, Scituate, and West Warwick.

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

Yellow highlighted cells indicate a change in practice as compared to our review in 2023.

Appendix B – School Committees

School Committee	Watch Livestream	Remote Participation	Video Archived	Packet Online	Notes
Barrington	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Bristol-Warren	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Burrillville	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Central Falls	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Chariho	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Coventry	Yes	Yes*	Yes	No	* We were informed by the Superintendent that remote participation is possible via Zoom, although it is not indicated on the agenda.
Cranston	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Cumberland	Yes	No	Yes	Yes*	* Meeting packet is now only made available 12pm on the day of meeting.
East Greenwich	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
East Providence	Yes	No*	Yes	No	* The agenda specifies that a provided link allows individuals to “attend” the meeting. There is no reference to participation.
Exeter-West Greenwich	Yes	No*	No*	No	* Must complete form to obtain a password to view the livestream and archived videos.
Foster-Glocester	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Jamestown	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Johnston	No	No	No	No	
Lincoln	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Little Compton	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes	* When available, public comment will be held via Zoom at a link in meeting agendas.
Middletown	Yes*	No	Yes	Yes**	* Livestream available on YouTube, but it is not indicated on the website or documents that the meeting is livestreamed. ** Supporting documents are not available from the school committee website, but can only be found through the Town Council website after clicking on some non-obvious links there.

School Committee	Watch Livestream	Remote Participation	Video Archived	Packet Online	Notes
Narragansett	Yes	No	Yes	Yes*	* It appears that the packet is only available on the day of the meeting. The documents are then removed, and only the agenda is linked.
New Shoreham	No	No	No	No	
Newport	Yes*	No	Yes	Yes	* Livestream available on YouTube, linked only on a Newport Public School page, and not indicated on the school committee's Board Docs website, meeting agendas, or other documents.
North Kingstown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
North Providence	Yes	No	Yes	Yes*	* Agendas have a link to "view revised and new policies" that are listed on the agenda for "discussion and/or approval."
North Smithfield	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Pawtucket	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Portsmouth	Yes	Yes*	Yes	No	* Participation is only available for people who join via Zoom; participation not possible through Youtube livestream.
Providence	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Scituate	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes	* Only available if individuals log in on Zoom.
Smithfield	No	No	Yes*	No	* A link to the Town's Vimeo account indicates that videos are available for viewing within 3 days after the meeting.
South Kingstown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Tiverton	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Warwick	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
West Warwick	No	No	No	Yes	
Westerly	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Woonsocket	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	

Barrington, East Greenwich, Little Compton, North Smithfield, and Scituate are the only school committees that offer all four aspects of remote public meeting access and participation.

Two school committees offer no remote public meeting access in any capacity: Johnston and New Shoreham.

Yellow highlighted cells indicate a change in practice as compared to our review in 2023.

ACLU

**AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION**

Rhode Island

American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island

128 Dorrance St., Suite 400

Providence, RI 02903

P: (401) 831-7171

F: (401) 831-7171

info@riaclu.org

www.riaclu.org

Social media platforms: [@riaclu](#)

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