

Let in "town hall bloggers" and allow online filming, says minister



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The government has written to local authorities to urge them to open their public meetings to citizen journalists and routinely allow online filming.

A letter from Local Government Minister Bob Neill said credible community or 'hyper-local' bloggers and online broadcasters should be given the same routine access to council meetings as the mainstream media.

Neill reminded councils that local authority meetings were already open to the general public, and that this raised concerns "about why in some cases bloggers and press have been barred".

The Department for Communities and Local Government cited the case of Tameside Council, which has accredited professional journalists to report from meetings using Twitter. "The decision means local bloggers, the public and even councillors are not permitted to tweet because they are not considered members of the press," it said.

The Neill letter also sought to reassure councils that giving greater access would not contradict data protection law requirements. "In the majority of cases the citizen blogging about how they see the democratic process working is unlikely to breach the data protection principles," the DCLG added.

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles said: "More and more local news comes from bloggers or citizen journalists telling us what is happening at their local council.

"Many councils are internet-savvy and stream meetings online, but some don't seem to have caught up with the times and are refusing to let bloggers or hyper-local news sites in. With local authorities in the process of setting next year's budget this is more important than ever."

Pickles claimed that stronger local accountability was needed to counter-balance the greater powers and freedoms councils are being given.