

Are we losing the AGM, and does it matter?

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Across Europe, annual general meetings are becoming less accessible. In Italy, 67% of AGMs in 2025 are being held behind closed doors, with no in-person or virtual access for shareholders.¹ In Germany, 65% of DAX 40 companies held virtual-only AGMs in 2024, removing the option to attend in person.² In the UK, the government has signalled that it may amend the Companies Act to allow virtual-only AGMs through its Modernisation of Corporate Reporting programme.³ The direction of travel is clear. The question is whether anything important is being lost - and whether there is a better way forward.

Who is the AGM really for?

Public company AGMs are unusual events. They are attended mainly by retail shareholders, while most institutional investors stay away, vote by proxy, and engage privately with management throughout the year.

Companies argue that technology, dispersed shareholder bases, and safety concerns all support a move online. In some cases, there is also a more practical benefit: virtual meetings make it easier to avoid disruption from protesters, the “disturbatori”, who might otherwise interrupt proceedings in person. The latter can be addressed for the better of all participants, by agreeing a basic set of behaviours and agreeing limits on speaking time.

Yet AGMs have a democratic value that is easy to overlook. They allow ordinary shareholders—many of them retired, long-term investors—to question senior leaders directly. That matters. In the UK, a FTSE 100 chief executive is paid on average more than 100 times the average salary.⁴ The AGM is one of the few moments when that distance narrows and senior executives must answer, publicly and directly, to even the smallest shareholder.

Technology can broaden participation, but only if it is used to add access rather than remove it. Spain offers a useful example: 88% of AGMs were held in hybrid form, combining in-person and online attendance.⁵ That model expands access without giving up the benefits of meeting physically.

Safety should be taken seriously, and no company should dismiss genuine risks. But safety alone cannot settle the question. Companies routinely manage far greater operational risks in other parts of their business. The real issue is whether the convenience of virtual-only meetings justifies the loss of accountability and connection that in-person attendance provides.

Why this still matters for institutions

Many institutional investors have accepted these changes with little resistance, in part because they already have direct access to boards and management. For them, the AGM may seem unnecessary. That is short-sighted, in our view. Attending an AGM shows how important this channel remains—not only for small shareholders, but also for other stakeholders. A mining company AGM can give affected communities a direct route to the board. A bank AGM can provide a forum to challenge branch closures or poor disability access. These exchanges carry a different weight in person. Seeing someone

¹ ISS Stoxx, 2025 Stewardship Briefing, September 2025

² [Glass Lewis, March 2025](#)

³ [UK Parliament, May 2026](#)

⁴ [High Pay Centre, January 2025](#)

⁵ Sodali & Co, Proxy Season Review, November 2025

travel long distances to raise a broken promise, and watching how directors respond in the room, gives context that is easily lost online. Body language, atmosphere, and public accountability all matter. The AGM is a public forum to air an issue, an issue that may not be newsworthy for the national media. If companies weaken this connection with retail shareholders and wider stakeholders, the consequences may eventually reach the company and its institutional investors too. We should not underestimate the long-run impact on shareholder value of a loss of public accountability.

Designing the modern AGM

There is, however, a better path. Well-designed hybrid AGMs can combine broader access with the discipline and visibility of a physical meeting. Emerging guidance in markets such as the Netherlands shows that hybrid meetings can be run in ways that preserve shareholder rights, allow meaningful questioning, and avoid turning participation into a managed online exercise.⁶ That should be the goal: not nostalgia for the old AGM, but a modern format that keeps its essential function intact.

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⁶ [Bird & Bird, February 2024](#)

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