Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees

Report by Kevin Anderson, Executive Director - Place

Report for Decision

1   Recommendations

Council is recommended to consider the four options presented in the report at paragraphs 3.10 and 3.11 and direct officers to implement their preferred option.

2   Purpose of Report/Executive Summary

Following on from prior reports in this matter to the Council meetings on Tuesday 14 December 2021, Tuesday 24 May 2022 and Tuesday 27 September 2022, this report outlines the options and associated costs for implementing hybrid meetings of Council and its Committees.

30 November 2022

Report Contact:

Saty Kaur, Chief Officer Corporate Solutions (Acting)
saty.kaur@midlothian.gov.uk

Marco Reece-Heal, Technical Service Delivery Manager (Acting)
Marco.reece-heal@midlothian.gov.uk

3 Background

3.1 A hybrid meeting is one where a portion of the participants join from a designated meeting room and another portion joins remotely, enabled by audio and video conferencing technology. This approach also facilitates online content sharing to support collaboration.

3.2 From June 2020 to October 2022, meetings of the Council and its Committees have been held virtually using the MS Teams platform. At the Business Transformation Steering Group on 18 October 2021, members in attendance instructed officers to investigate the implications of hybrid working, and findings were reported to Council at its meetings of Tuesday 14 December 2021 and Tuesday 24 May 2022.

3.3 At both meetings officers presented an option to members that totalled circa 200k, which was a mix of revenue and capital costs, for the adoption of technology and infrastructure to implement hybrid meetings. The decision of Council on Tuesday 24 May 2022 was to remit this to a Cross-Party Working Group for further deliberation.

3.4 The Cross-Party Working Group has representation from all three political parties. It met on Wednesday 31 August 2022 to consider three options:
- Option 1: Return to in-person only meetings
- Option 2: Virtual only meetings
- Option 3: Hybrid meetings combining in-person and virtual participants

The decision of members was to endorse Option 3, on the basis that the associated implementation costs were significantly lower than reported to previous Council meetings (circa £70,000 – £85,000). The Cross-Party Working Group noted that the implementation may take until March 2023, and therefore in the interim alternative arrangements for in-person meetings should be made.

3.5 The decision of the Cross-Party Working Group was reported to Council at its meeting on Tuesday 27 September 2022. Council agreed to hold its meetings of Council and Committees in-person (with the exception of Police & Fire Rescue Board and Integrated Joint Board) until hybrid working could be implemented. From 4 October 2022, in-person meetings have resumed.

Financial implications

3.6 The Council currently has no technical solution in place that would enable hybrid meetings. Pre-pandemic the Council made use of webcasting technology to stream a limited number of governance meetings, however a decision was taken on 12 February 2019 to not renew the webcasting contract that was in place.

It should be noted that there is a separate paper on today's agenda where options for interim webcasting arrangements are to be considered.

3.7 In the absence of any technical solution, as well as the age of the current equipment in the Council Chamber, there are no options to facilitate hybrid meetings without financial investment to upgrade.

It should also be noted at this point that due to the condition of the current equipment and infrastructure (cabling and microphones) that are required for in-person meetings and the natural life cycle of these, that upgrading will be required in the near future to facilitate in-person meetings to continue in the Council Chamber (this is estimated to be circa £10,000).

3.8 The financial implications for hybrid meetings was reported as circa £200,000 to Council in December 201 and May 2022. This is made up as follows:

Description	Capital £000's	Revenue £000's
Installation and configuration of Televic system, including conference management software, speaker tracking camera technology, installation of HD Pan, Tilt & Zoom cameras, video integrator codec, appropriate power supply and 16" desktop display on all desks	150	
Related cabling and costs once site survey completed	30	
Implementation costs and contingency	20	
Annual support and maintenance		2
Technician (1 FTE)		45
Total	**200**	**47**
Secure Remote Room Gateway & Electronic Voting (optional)		4
Total (including optional voting function)	**200**	**51**

3.9 Following further investigation as instructed by Council at its meeting of 24 May 2022, officers have revised the proposed costs. These were reported to the Cross-Party Working Group at its meeting of 31 August 2022 and are as follows:

Description	Capital £000's	Revenue £000's
Combined annual service and lease cost which includes 125 hours of streaming, lease of 4 new cameras and the lease of hybrid webcasting hardware		17
Installation (including training)	10	
Cabling costs	2	
Power sources, docking stations and networking	10	
Screens (2-3)	30-45	
Total	**52-67**	**17**

Options appraisal

3.10 Members are asked to consider the following options for hybrid meetings of Council and its Committees:
- Option 1: hybrid meetings with costs as outlined in 3.9
- Option 2: in-person meetings only with no provision to webcast or record (with predicted near future capital investment costs of £10,000 as explained in 3.7)
- Option 3: in-person meetings with webcasting provision at an annual revenue cost of £17,000 with £10,000 of capital installation costs
- Option 4: virtual meetings via Teams with no webcasting

3.11 A SWOT analysis of all 4 options has been carried out as follows:

Option 1: Hybrid meetings with costs as outlined in 3.9

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Allows members and officers to dial in if unable to attend in person - Allows for face to face which can lead to more detailed discussions to inform decision making for those attendees in the Council Chamber - Promotes flexible working as per Council policy for employees - Promotes efficiencies for Council officers who can 'dial in' to present their item enabling them to use their time more effectively - Allows external presenters, speakers etc. (i.e. for Planning Committee) to 'dial in' for single items, negating travel costs and reducing carbon emissions - Aligns with the Council's drivers for change of digital by default - Reduced energy/fuel costs for members and employees travelling to Midlothian House for in-person meetings - Aligns to the Council's ambition of being carbon neutral by 2030 with no fuel emissions by reducing travel - Webcasting function costed into the proposal which allows members of the public to view meetings in real time or after, promoting transparency in decision making - Negates the requirement for members of the public to travel to Midlothian House for in-person meetings - Promotes accessibility and inclusivity and transparency through ease of access i.e. community members who have transport costs or live in rural areas where transport isn't as frequent to get to Midlothian House, or those that are physically impaired	- Requires new/upgraded technology and infrastructure at a cost of circa 69k-84k - Does not allow for face to face which can lead to more detailed discussions to inform decision making for those attendees that are not in the Council Chamber - Reliance on technology working when required
Threats	**Opportunities**
- Annual revenue cost to be built into the ongoing budget which is challenging in the current financial climate - If a future decision is made to withdraw from Midlothian House then a valuation of the assets would be factored into any sale price but would be subject to depreciation	- Can be used for other meetings such as partnership meetings, national and regional meetings and for community engagement sessions - This provision would be advantageous for other organisations/local authorities etc. and could provide an income generation stream through the hire of the Chamber when not in use for Council meetings and Committees

Option 2: In-person meetings only with no provision to webcast/record

Strengths	Weaknesses
• No additional revenue cost to the Council • Allows for face to face which can lead to more detailed discussions to inform decision making • Does not rely on technology working when required	• Excludes participation from members that are unable to attend a meeting • Requires all attendees to present in-person to participate and does not promote flexibility or efficiencies • Does not align with the Council's drivers for change of digital by default • Promotes increased travel to access Midlothian House for members, officers, external presenters which does not contribute to the Council's commitment to carbon neutral by 2030 • No webcasting function does not allow for members of the public to access/view meetings unless they are present in the Council Chamber
Threats	**Opportunities**
• Excludes members that are unable to attend a meeting • May have a negative reaction from the public who deem that Council decision making is not transparent or accessible • Likely in the near future to require investment to upgrade the existing equipment and infrastructure due to natural life cycle (circa 10k)	None currently identified

Option 3: In-person meetings only with webcasting provision

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Allows for face to face which can lead to more detailed discussions to inform decision making • Webcasting function costed into the proposal which allows members of the public to view meetings in real time or after, promoting transparency in decision making • Negates the requirement for members of the public to travel to Midlothian House for in-person meetings • Webcasting promotes accessibility and inclusivity and transparency through ease of access i.e. community members who have transport costs or live in rural areas where transport isn't as frequent to get to Midlothian House, or those that are physically impaired	• Requires a revenue contract to be in place at circa 17k/year and approx. 10k of capital costs • Excludes participation from members that are unable to physically attend a meeting • Requires all attendees to present in-person to participate and does not promote flexibility or efficiencies • Does not align with the Council's drivers for change of digital by default • Promotes increased travel to access Midlothian House for members, officers, external presenters which does not contribute to the Council's commitment to carbon neutral by 2030
Threats	**Opportunities**
• Excludes members that are unable to attend a meeting	

Option 4: Virtual meeting via Teams with no webcasting function

Strengths	Weaknesses
• No additional cost to the Council • Allows members, officers and external presenters to all attend from a remote location • Promotes flexible working as per Council policy for employees • Promotes efficiencies for Council officers who can 'dial in' to present their item enabling them to use their time more effectively • Allows external presenters, speakers etc. (i.e. for Planning Committee) to 'dial in' for single items, negating travel costs and reducing carbon emissions • Aligns with the Council's drivers for change of digital by default • Reduced energy/fuel costs for members and employees travelling to Midlothian House for in-person meetings • Aligns to the Council's ambition of being carbon neutral by 2030 with no fuel emissions by reducing travel • Teams allows for recording of meetings to then be archived for future viewing	• Does not allow for face to face which can lead to more detailed discussions to inform decision making • No webcasting functionality does not allow members of the public to watch the meeting live • Reliant on technology always working for meetings
Threats	**Opportunities**
• Does not maximise the use of the current building provision at Midlothian House	• Reduces the occupancy rate of Midlothian House which contributes further to the estate rationalisation

4   Report Implications (Resource, Digital and Risk)

4.1   Resource

Capital
The capital expenditure cost for the chosen option would require to be added to the General Services capital plan, fully phased in 2022/23 and funded by prudential borrowing

		Capital
		£000's
1 a)	Hybrid meetings (2 screens)	52
1 b)	Hybrid meetings (3 screens)	67
2	In person	10
3	In person with webcasting	10
4	Virtual via Teams	0

Revenue

The revenue implications along with the loan charges associated with borrowing the capital costs above are as outlined in the table below. The cost of any option selected would require to be incorporated in to the 2023/24 base budget.

			Revenue		
			Loan Charges	Other	Total Revenue
			£000's	£000's	£000's
1a)	Hybrid meetings (2 screens)		11	17	28
1b)	Hybrid meetings (3 screens)		15	17	32
2	In person		4	0	4
3	In person with webcasting		4	17	21
4	Virtual via Teams		0		0

4.2 Digital

Digital Services have led the scoping exercise and are fully engaged in the process. The implications are identified above in the SWOT analysis.

4.3 Risk

There are different risks associated with the options above and these are listed in the SWOT analysis. One further risk is if Council wish to progress with option 1, then there are lead in times for Procurement and installation, those are to be determined and can only be confirmed if officers are directed to progress this option, and at that point further dialogue can be entered into with providers to agree a delivery plan. This is estimated to be circa 3 months.

4.4 Ensuring Equalities (if required a separate IIA must be completed)

An IIA was previously undertaken for hybrid working. Accessibility impacts are detailed in the above SWOT analysis. Upon agreeing an option, the IIA will be reviewed to ensure it is reflective of the final decision.

4.4 Additional Report Implications (See Appendix A)

See Appendix A

Appendices

Appendix A – Additional Report Implications
Appendix B – Background information/Links

APPENDIX A – Report Implications

A.1   Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

The principles of the Single Midlothian Plan is to ensure communities are able to influence how the Council directs its resources and makes decisions. In the above SWOT analysis, where relevant, the options detail the impact on communities.

One of the key priorities of the Single Midlothian Plan is to reduce carbon and negate climate change. The above SWOT analysis identifies, where appropriate, the positive and negative carbon impacts.

A.2   Key Drivers for Change

Key drivers addressed in this report:

☐ Holistic Working
☐ Hub and Spoke
☒ Modern
☒ Sustainable
☒ Transformational
☐ Preventative
☐ Asset-based
☒ Continuous Improvement
☐ One size fits one
☐ None of the above

A.3   Key Delivery Streams

Key delivery streams addressed in this report:

☐ One Council Working with you, for you
☐ Preventative and Sustainable
☒ Efficient and Modern
☒ Innovative and Ambitious
☐ None of the above

A.4   Delivering Best Value

None identified

A.5   Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

The SWOT analysis identifies positive and negative impacts on communities and other stakeholders.

A.6   Impact on Performance and Outcomes

None identified

A.7   Adopting a Preventative Approach

None identified

A.8   Supporting Sustainable Development

The above SWOT analysis, where appropriate, identifies sustainability impacts.

APPENDIX B

Background Papers/Resource Links (insert applicable papers/links)

[Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees – report to Council, 14 December 2021](#)

[Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees – report to Council, 24 May 2022](#)

[Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees – report to Council, 27 September 2022](#)