

**Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees****Report by Gary Fairley, Chief Officer Corporate Solutions****Report for Decision****1 Recommendations**

- a) To note the work undertaken to date and indicative costs of facilitating hybrid meetings of Council and its Committees and that work continues to develop a fully costed proposal.
- b) Agree that the fully costed proposal for hybrid meetings be considered at the start of the next term of Council, after the May 2022 Local Government elections.

**2 Purpose of Report/Executive Summary**

A hybrid meeting is one where a portion of the participants joins from a designated meeting room and another portion joins remotely, enabled by audio and video conferencing technology. Often participants will also use online content sharing solutions to support collaboration with the option to also use technology to facilitate a vote to be taken where the business under consideration requires one.

This report provides an update on the work to date to investigate the provision of hybrid meetings and indicative costs of implementing this approach for Council and its Committees.

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### **3 Background**

At the Business Transformation Steering Group on 18 October 2021 members in attendance asked that further investigation be carried out regarding the implications of holding hybrid meetings, a combination of physical attendance and participating remotely.

Arising from that officers have examined similar considerations by other Local Authorities and have reviewed the existing available systems. The aim of this work was to identify a technical solution to support hybrid meetings whilst also allowing for live video broadcast to members of the public. At this point indicative costings have been prepared.

From June 2020 meetings of Council and its Committees have been held virtually using the MS teams platform. Prior to the Pandemic such meetings were held in the Council chamber with the ability to webcast the meetings. Whist arrangements had previously been put in place to allow very limited virtual attendance these were very much ad hoc and could not be scaled up for multiple remote attendees. As a consequence of the budget decisions taken on 12 February 2019 full Council agreed not to renew the contract arrangements that facilitated the recording and webcasting of meetings held in the Council chamber. Due to the age and type of technology there are no options to reuse or upgrade the extant system to allow for interaction with newer digital platforms, such as Microsoft Teams or indeed any external conferencing system. Accordingly there are no current facilities to support the recording and webcasting of meetings held in the Council chamber.

### **4 Future Options**

The principal options for future meeting arrangements are:

- A continuation of fully remote access meetings under arrangements broadly similar to the present arrangements. There would be no new investment or costs to be incurred. Both participation and public access would continue to be secured through MS teams.
- Only when deemed safe to do so, a return to physical meetings with no recording or webcasting. There would be no new investment or costs to be incurred. Public access would be limited to those able and willing to attend the meeting in person.
- The introduction of hybrid arrangements, whereby some members or officers could be physically present in the meeting venue and others taking part by remote access. Significant new investment would be required. Public access would be secured through physical access to the meeting venue where appropriate and also by the live video webcasting and recording of meetings.

Returning to fully physical meetings without any technological and systems changes would rule out even one member or officer being able to take part remotely on a sustainable and effective basis. It would limit public access to those willing and able to physically attend the meeting venue.

## **5 Hybrid Meetings & Broadcasting**

A number of Local Authorities are exploring technology to produce live virtual meetings and video broadcasts of committee meetings, with a mixture of different technologies and software platforms being considered across the local authorities. At the time of writing most local authorities are only performing fully virtual meetings, although they have plans to review hybrid meeting arrangements and the required technology to facilitate this new environment.

Should the use of new video recording and webcasting be pursued, it is recommended that the Council introduce the following components to enable hybrid meetings and live video broadcasting within the meeting venue:

- Replacement of existing system with new digital conferencing system including speaker tracking camera technology
- Installation of HD Pan, Tilt & Zoom Cameras
- Installation of room kit pro Video integrator codec to allow MS Teams integration and other conference platforms
- Installation of 16" desktop display on all desks within the meeting venue to allow for visual display of remote participants and presentations.

In addition to the core components above, the replacement system should also offer additional functionality such as, small LCD screen to display current agenda item, electronic voting, and badge reader slot for attendee identification.

On review of the functionality above and the direction being taken by other Council's in this field the Televic Confidea Flex system was identified. The Televic system is currently in use across UK local authorities, various current Hearing Panels and the European Parliament and can deliver all of the functionality listed above. Electronic voting whilst running hybrid meetings is challenging when utilising multiple platforms. Televic have developed the ability to have remote secure rooms which facilitates electronic voting from outwith the meeting venue to all participants in the hybrid meeting from a single platform. (This functionality is used by NATO, WHO and European Parliament).

The above solution would also provide the ability for the council to video broadcast live meetings to members of the public utilising both MS Teams and the Televic software. The broadcast would also utilise speech technology to allow captions to appear within the broadcast for accessibility.

It was identified during research for this report that broadcasting of audio visual meetings involves additional pre/post meeting activities to set up and produce the broadcasts, whilst managing issues during the live meeting/broadcast. The Council would require to recruit 1 FTE Technician to support the solution on an ongoing basis.

## 6 Financial Summary

The indicative investment required to transform meetings within a defined meeting venue requires to be met from both capital and revenue resources. All installation project costs will be met by capital investment and ongoing costs from revenue.

The council has identified the Scottish Procurement, IT Peripheral Framework, to ensure a compliant route to market. Engagement with the market indicated that there is likely to be extended lead times to secure and implement a hybrid solution.

The initial project costs and ongoing costs are estimated as follows.

### Capital:

- 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 - £150,000
- Related cabling and costs once site survey completed - £30,000
- Implementation costs and contingency - £20,000

### Revenue:

- Annual support and maintenance - £2,000
- 1 x FTE (Technician) – £45,000

Additional Revenue Costs (optional):

- Secure Remote Room Gateway & Electronic Voting - £4,000

## 7 Report Implications (Resource, Digital, Risk and Equalities)

### 7.1 Resource

The indicative capital costs of the identified hybrid meeting solution are currently estimated at £200,000. Given the relatively limited useful life expectancy of such technology those cost would be repaid from the revenue account over an estimated life of five years and as such result in an annual increase in Revenue Budget through Loan Charges of circa £45,000 per annum.

The annual impact on the revenue budget is therefore estimated at £96,000 as follows;

Loan Charges	£45,000
Staffing	£45,000
Other costs	£6,000
<b>Additional revenue costs per annum</b>	<b>£96,000</b>

This would require an additional provision to be included in the revenue budget and so add to the underlying budget gap for future years.

## **7.2 Digital**

The report sets out the digital implications associated with implementing hybrid meeting technology.

## **7.3 Risk**

Systems are in place to support virtual meetings of Council and its Committees. The existing infrastructure in Midlothian House does not support hybrid meetings or support webcasting of physical meetings.

There remains a duty on the Council and other public bodies to ensure staff and customers are safe. The Scottish Government continues to encourage working from home where possible in recognition of the current level of COVID infections and new variants.

## **7.4 Ensuring Equalities**

Since the BTSG meeting on 18 October 2021 the focus has been on identifying technical solutions and developing indicative costings in respect of hybrid meetings. An assessment of the Equality implications and any mitigations necessary would be carried out as part of the work to develop a fully costed proposal and to support decision-making.

## **7.5 Additional Report Implications**

**See Appendix A**

## APPENDIX A – Additional Report Implications

### A.1 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

The route map through and out of the crisis approved in June 2020 outlines the phases of service recovery and transformation which underpin delivery of the Single Midlothian Plan.

### 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

The report aims to deliver best value.

### A.5 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

The focus to date has been on identifying a technical solution including consultation with other Councils. No wider consultation has been undertaken at this point.

### A.6 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

The arrangements for meetings of Council and its Committees facilitates the governance to determine outcomes and policies and also the scrutiny of performance and the delivery of outcomes.

### A.7 Adopting a Preventative Approach

The report considers the facilitation of meetings of Council and its Committees the business of which encompasses the adoption of preventative approaches.

### A.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

New systems can be assessed to consider energy management and utility consumption alongside consideration of the wider building ownership implications.