

## Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees

### Report by Gary Fairley, Chief Officer Corporate Solutions

#### Report for Decision

#### 1 Recommendation

That Council advise on their preference of fully remote, hybrid or in person meetings of Council and its Committees and approve the budget revisions necessary to reflect the agreed option.

#### 2 Purpose of Report/Executive Summary

At its meeting on 14 December 2021 Council considered a report on Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees and agreed:-

- 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."*

This report provides an update on the work to investigate the provision of hybrid meetings and updated costs of implementing this approach and is presented to Council to allow consideration of the arrangements for meetings of 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.

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.

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

From June 2020 meetings of Council and its Committees had 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. Whilst 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.

At its meeting on 14 December 2021 Council considered a report on Hybrid Meetings of Council and its Committees and agreed:-

- 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.”*

Due to the age and type of technology there are limited 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 additional investment or additional costs incurred above those currently deployed to support the current arrangements. Both participation and public access would continue to be secured through MS teams.
- A return to fully 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. New investment would be required. Public access would be secured through both 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 only those willing and able to physically attend the meeting venue.

## 5 Hybrid Meetings & Broadcasting

A number of Local Authorities have explored 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 a number of local authorities have or are in the process of implementing hybrid meeting arrangements together with the required technology to facilitate these.

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:

- A 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 could 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 has been identified as the preferred option. The Televic system is currently in use across UK local authorities, various 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 could also utilise speech technology to allow captions to appear within the broadcast for accessibility. However, the costings are based on a single fixed location. We have not explored portability for rotating venues as an option, but that option will likely increase any capital expenditure and also staffing costs to facilitate operations.

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 and that this would benefit from a dedicated support resource. Accordingly to facilitate the effectiveness of the hybrid meeting platform it is anticipated that the Council would require to recruit up to 1 FTE technician to provide ongoing support.

The council has identified the Scottish Procurement, IT Peripheral Framework, to ensure a compliant route to market. Continued engagement with the market indicates that there will be extended lead times to secure and implement a hybrid solution. It will only be possible to provide a definitive implementation timeline once a supplier has been procured.

## **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 current 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

Given the relatively short useful life of such technology the costings provide for current equipment to be replaced. However where it is prudent to do so the current equipment would be retained and so costs may reduce. In addition while the costings provide for 1 fte Technician engagement will continue with other Councils to assess the optimum level of support required.

## 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 costs 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;

	2022/23 Financial Year	Future Financial Years
Loan Charges	£0	£45,000
Staffing ( part year cost 2022/23)	£20,000	£45,000
Other costs	£1,500	£6,000
<b>Additional revenue costs per annum</b>	<b>£21,500</b>	<b>£96,000</b>

This would require an additional provision of £21,500 to be included in the current year's revenue budget and additional provision of £96,500 made in future year's budgets.

In contrast the previous webcasting contract had an annual operating cost of circa £11,000.

## **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 fully virtual meetings of Council and its Committees. The existing infrastructure in Midlothian House does not support hybrid meetings or support webcasting of physical meetings.

## **7.4 Ensuring Equalities**

Since the BTSG meeting on 18 October 2021 the focus has been on identifying technical solutions and developing costings in respect of hybrid meetings. An initial assessment of the Equality implications had been prepared and identifies that remote and hybrid meeting arrangements would provide greater access to meetings of Council and its committees than would fully physical meetings. Equality Implications would continue to be assessed as part of the implementation and any mitigations necessary would be carried out as part of the detailed work to design the implementation of the systems layout.

## **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.

### **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.