CYNGOR CAERDYDD
CARDIFF COUNCIL

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE   **28 November 2022**

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

MULTI-LOCATION MEETING CONFERENCING SYSTEM UPDATE

Reason for this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Democratic Services Committee with an update on the use of the Council's multi-location meeting arrangements and the performance of the Council's conferencing system.

Background

2. Arrangements were first made in legislation to allow for "remote meetings" in section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Welsh Government produced the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020. These established a framework within which the Council convened meetings by remote means throughout 2020 and part of 2021.

3. Experience of operating meetings under these Regulations has provided the Council with expertise in understanding and managing multi-location meetings, now they have been placed on a new statutory footing under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act'). The provisions in the 2021 Act can be seen as an evolution of these prior arrangements. Interim statutory guidance for Multi-Location Meetings was issued in May 2021

4. Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, local authorities were required to put in place, and publish, arrangements for multi-location meetings, that is, formal meetings where meeting participants may not all be in the same physical place. The legislation makes it clear that it is the choice of each member whether or not they attend remotely or in person. The Council's Multi-Location Meetings policy was developed in consultation with all meeting participants, including the public. Following the consultation the Council's Multi-Location Meetings Policy shown at **Appendix A** was approved by Cabinet on 10 March 2022 and was implemented on 5 May 2022.

5. The conferencing facilities (including the microphone system) used by the Council prior to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 was then approximately ten years old and was not able to support the needs of the Council or meet the requirements of the developing legislation for Multi-Location meetings. A replacement conferencing system was needed which would replace outdated equipment and meet the requirements of the forthcoming legislation that had been identified in the initial

guidance. This requirement was included on the Council's Corporate Risk Register and capital funding was allocated for the procurement of a new system.

Issues

6. Prior to 2020, there was little or no technology other than basic video conferencing and webcasting. The rapid development of remote working technology during the coronavirus pandemic made basic remote meetings possible. The complexity of equipment and software necessary to deliver public multi-location meetings required a significant further step-change in technology.

<u>Suitable technology</u>

7. In June 2021 the Council began its procurement of a new conference system which was planned to better meet the requirements of multi-location meetings. The system was intended to provide a robust wireless network which would support the requirements of a public meeting which included the provision of:

a) Wireless Microphones and associated meetings control system software to facilitate:
    • meeting management to support dual language meetings including but not limited to electronic voting, speaker list, speaker timings, chairperson and single operator control facilities
    • Integration with Microsoft (MS) Teams/Zoom or other software to support for simultaneous Welsh language translation during "meetings in multiple locations"
    • Provide audio enhancement and support for meeting participants and attendees (general public) with hearing impairments.

b) Integration with existing webcast / hybrid meeting provider services and facilities (Public-i)
c) Provide a "meetings in Multiple locations capability" in addition to the facilities provided by Public-i
d) Provide additional equipment upgrades to any existing meeting equipment to enhance the performance of the systems.

8. The initial plan was for system to be capable of being used in two primary venues, City Hall Council Chamber and Committee Room 4 in County Hall. However, having separate systems in each venue would require significant duplication of equipment and result in substantial periods of inactivity for one of the systems. To deliver "value for money" it was considered that the necessary infrastructure, i.e. cameras and displays could be installed in each location with a "plug and play" facility for the portable control system, microphones and audio enhancement facilities.

<u>Procurement</u>

9. Initial expressions of interest from contractors identified that this requirement could be met with the allocated budget of £200,000. The plans for the procurement were discussed with the Cabinet Members and Committee Chairs who identified that the Council Chamber in County Hall also needed to be installed with the system

infrastructure as a possible reserve venue. Additional funding of £50,000 was allocated to cover this revised requirement.

10. A select list of 4 providers was identified who were considered as being capable of delivering the requirement for a conferencing system and multi-location meetings. On receipt of the formal tender documentation which also identified the necessary timescales, two of the contractors withdrew from the procurement due to being unable to meet with requirements for at least a further year. The remaining two contractors submitted suitable tenders and were invited to demonstrate their solution. A panel comprising representatives from Democratic Services, ICT and Bi-lingual Cardiff assessed the bids on the range of the essential requirements.

Multi-Location Meeting software

11. To enable the conferencing system to deliver multi-location meetings suitable software was needed to support remote attendance. At the time of the procurement only remote conferencing software was available. This software could not support the full requirements of a bi-lingual multi-location meeting and other requirements as outlined below:

a. MS Teams
This is a remote conferencing software provided as part of the Council's Microsoft User Agreement for its wider use of Microsoft software. Microsoft had advised that a software upgrade to enable simultaneous translation was in development. The provision of simultaneous translation is required by legislation for all public meetings. Numerous planned delivery dates had not been achieved and was unlikely to be introduced before the legislative requirement for multi-location meetings was implemented.

This software does not have a suitable voting facility which could be used at formal meetings to support the essential requirement for an accurate and accountable voting process.

Although this software works reasonably well for fully remote meetings it was unproven to support multi-location meetings with some participants present in a meeting room. Its rapid updates and unannounced software changes also make it difficult to ensure that any changes do not impact the ability to consistently deliver the necessary governance requirements and meeting processes.

b. Zoom
This is a remote conferencing software provided by an American company which supports multi language options. Initial security issues were identified with Zoom which prevented its consideration for implementation with the conferencing system although these have subsequently been addressed.

The Welsh Government provided some funding to trial Zoom but its ongoing use for all Council meetings would incur significant additional costs and changes to the ICT support arrangements.

Like MS Teams this software works reasonably well for remote meetings but does not have a robust voting facility. This software is being used by RCT Council for its formal meetings. Colleagues from RCT have advised that although they have had no issues with the use of Zoom, they still undertake voting using a roll-call procedure. To alleviate the time implications of roll-call voting they are procuring the Modern.Gov Voting App to improve their voting process.

   c. <u>Bespoke software</u>
With no off the shelf software able to provide the full requirements of the procurement each contractor provided their own bespoke software to support the requirements of multi-location meetings.

<u>Award and Implementation</u>

12. The tender was won by VP-AV Ltd who have experience in providing a range of audio-visual facilities to judicial, education and governance organisations. They also have experience of undertaking installations in historic and listed buildings. They have installed conferencing and audio visual system in a range of other councils including Suffolk, Mid Sussex and West Northampton.

12. A pre-contract start meeting was held to confirm that the installation plan would dovetail with the implementation of the multi-location meetings policy and the member induction taking place after the local elections earlier this year.

13. The software solution chosen for multi-location meetings was Easy Conference Connect (EC Connect). This software enables remote attendees to use the software installed on their device to provide the remote participant with:

     i. secure access to join the multi-location meeting via a link sent by email.
    ii. access to bi-lingual simultaneous translation when using the software
   iii. a virtual microphone button, similar to the microphones in the physical part of the meeting to integrate their voice to become part of the conference system audio for everyone to hear.
   iv. integration with their webcam when speaking with their video image becoming visible as the "live speaker" for everyone to see.
    v. a voting facility enabling their vote to be registered and recorded for everyone to see.

14. The other council identified in paragraph 12 as using the EC Connect facilities have not experienced the issues that we are having. There are no other Councils in Wales using Easy Conf but Carmarthenshire Council was impressed with the system demonstration and are considering using it.

15. This software was added to the software centre on the Council's ICT network for downloading to council provided devices. A short video was made to assist Elected members and Officers complete the installation of the EC Connect software to their council devices. The public can download the software from the Microsoft Store for Windows devices, the App Store for Apple devices or the Play Store for android devices.

16. This software is different to MS Teams which has been used for remote meetings of the Authority. Differences include:

a. Remote users' camera is always on:

Current Position	Concerns
When in a meeting the remote attendee is able to be seen taking an active part in the meeting. The camera view is only seen when a speaker is active or when a mosaic display is used for the meeting	If the remote attend requires a period of privacy during a meeting the only way to achieve this is by covering the camera. This should not be the default position for the whole meeting

b. No "Background" available for remote users:

Current Position	Concerns
A background which would mask the venue of the remote attendee is not currently available. This has been requested as a future software upgrade	Without a background the location of the remote attendee may be seen during a public meeting when they are speaking.

c. No Chat facility:

Current Position	Concerns
The Chat facility enables interaction with the meeting when attendees are not speaking at the meeting. This was requested for inclusion in a future software iteration	Chat can often be used to share personal views or opinions which may compromise the effective governance arrangements of a meeting. The chat could be also used to raise points of order or personal explanation

d. No separate "hands up" facility:

Current Position	Concerns
The "hands up" facility is effectively replaced on the EC-Connect system by an integrated speaker queue.	Remote attendees are unable to raise any issue discreetly in the meeting increasing their awareness of being remote from the meeting.

e. Minimal user displays:

Current Position	Concerns
Other than their own preview the only view of the meeting seen by the remote attendee is the one	The ability to only see the active speaker increases the remote

Current Position	Concerns
being used by the meeting which usually only reflects the active speaker increasing the focus on the meeting debate.	attendee's awareness of being remote from the meetings.

17. The installation was completed in April 2022 and a simplified installation diagram is shown at **Appendix B.** Unlike MS Teams which works at a single level of operation with everyone being connected remotely, the multi-location meetings conferencing system has to integrate not only the remote users but individuals attending in-person, in large rooms requiring multiple independent cameras, microphones, translation facilities, webcasts and audio assistance.

18. Officers from Democratic Services undertook testing of the conferencing system and the EC Connect software with only minor issues being identified and which were quickly resolved by the contractor and ICT colleagues.

Training

19. Training on the new conferencing system and the EC Connect software was included as part of the induction programme for Elected Members in readiness for the Annual Meeting in May. This training covered the use of the microphones and in-person meeting arrangements and also confirmed the installation and use of the EC Connect software.

20. A number of training sessions were provided to Elected Members and key officers which were well attended but attendance was not universal. Additional one to one sessions continue to be provided by Democratic Services for those who were unable to attend the original sessions.

ICT Equipment

21. Following the Local Government Elections in 2022 the ICT equipment provided to Elected Members supported their access remote multi-location meetings. All newly Elected Members have been provided with new ICT equipment and a majority of returning Elected Members have been offered to have their existing ICT equipment replaced. Some returning Members had their equipment upgraded shortly before the election or preferred to retained their existing ICT equipment with which they were familiar.

Live Multi-location meetings

22. The Council's first multi-location meeting was held in City Hall Council Chamber on 26 May 2022. This meeting had a number of remote attendees with at least one speaking during the meeting. Although this meeting was considered a success it did not fully utilise the full requirements of a multi-location meeting as it did not use the electronic voting systems nor the translation system

23. During the subsequent months more multi-location committee meetings were successfully held and webcast. As expected, there were a few minor teething

issues with the committee meetings which will be covered in more detail later in this report.

24. A number of remote attendees joined the Council meeting on 30th June and initially the meeting progressed well. During the meeting delays in the audio and video streams were experienced by all attendees. The meeting was temporarily adjourned to address the issues, but this was unsuccessful. The meeting was quorate with physical attendees and the meeting resumed as an in-person meeting. Although remote attendees were able to view the meeting, and could all hear other remote attendees speak, they were unable maintain their connection or effectively interact with the physical meeting in a timely manner.

25. It was subsequently identified that part of the ICT infrastructure of City Hall, a switch, had failed which reduced the network speed from 100 Mbps (mega bits per second) to 4 Mbps. This was insufficient to effectively connect the remote attendees to the meeting room. The switch could not have been repaired during the meeting and was later replaced by the ICT department to enable a further test of the remote systems in City Hall to take place on 15 July 2022. This test was attended by over 50 officers all joining remotely who were all able to join, interact and vote during the test meeting.

26. The Council meeting on 21st July was the first occasion where many elected members had the opportunity to use the electronic voting system during a multi-location meeting. The instructions for undertaking an electronic vote were not as clear as they could have been, which resulted in some members using their "press to talk" buttons rather than their voting buttons. This created an overload in the wireless access point (WAP) which controls the wireless microphones and prevented any use of them.   The meeting was temporarily adjourned to allow the system to be rebooted to clear the overload. The instructions for voting were reworded and all subsequent voting at the meeting was carried out successfully.

27. Some Committee meetings have experienced issues where the remote attendees and connections to the webcast have been lost. An example of this occurred during a meeting of the Planning Committee where the Council's network was affected by a significant Microsoft Update which in simple terms "clogged" the network and prevented any internet activity.

28. The ICT department identified the issue and undertook remedial action to prevent this from recurring. However, the need for further remedial work was identified following the Constitution Committee on 9 November 2022 where an update briefly limited the available connection speed and created stuttering audio and video feeds which then subsequently appeared to fast forward itself to catch up to real time.

29. Other meetings have experienced connection issues with the Democratic Services Team, the ICT department and VP-AV all working together to identify the cause of the issues,

30. There have also been issues arising from the developing experience of the Committees Team. The operation of this complex system particularly shortly before a Council meeting is a highly intense period for the operator and some minor oversights have an impact in the meeting i.e. microphones not being switched on before the meeting starts which prevent the system from allocating voting rights to that microphone preventing the user from voting.

31. The conference system and the use of multi-location meetings is very complex with many interdependencies to ensure effective operation. Identifying the cause of any issues requires all aspects of the system to be considered and even something as simple as a minor setting on a remote users laptop can prevent them from joining a meeting even with all the other systems working correctly. Meeting these challenges is not limited to the EC Connect Software but will apply to any software being used for hybrid meetings.

Issues experienced by remote attendees

32. Some remote attendees continued to experience issues during Council and other meetings and these have been categorised as follows:

    a. Unfamiliarity with the software

       The promotion and training of Elected Members and officers in the use of the new conferencing system and EC Connect software was not fully effective.

       (i)   Many Members and Officers were unaware of the new software and how to join remote meetings. Many did not the install the software on their devices.
       (ii)   Not all Elected Members and officers attended the full training session to gain a good understanding of the systems and the differences between MS Teams which had been used previously for fully remote meetings.
       (iii) Some remote attendees have tried to share the unique links to meetings which unlike MS Teams cannot be shared and prevents more than one remote attendee from using the link. This was covered in the training sessions and was considered as an additional security function.
       (iv)   The unfamiliarity of how the remote software operates often results in lack of confidence in the use of the system by the user who may think that it is not working correctly.

    b. Device issues

       Cardiff Council primarily supports Microsoft and Android ICT systems. The council networks configuration of EC Connect was established using these systems with the newly issued Members ICT package as the baseline for suitable devices.

i.   Although the EC Connect software supports other software providers i.e. Apple and IOS, these devices could not be fully tested during the implementation phase. However, a majority of Members and officers attending the training with their other devices were able to test them and adjust their settings as necessary.

ii.   Remote attendees are provided with an opportunity to undertake a test meeting prior to joining the actual meeting to ensure their device is working correctly. This offer is not always accepted resulting in some remote attendees struggling to join the meeting.

iii.   Older devices are not always suitable for remote attendance. The capability of devices to manage the camera, microphone and video requirements of the EC Connect software cannot always be met by all devices. The Council devices issued since the Local Government Elections in 2022 are more suitable for remote attendance.

c. Inability to establish or maintain a connection to the meeting
The primary requirement for remotely joining a multi-location meeting is a good internet connection. Although some locations in Cardiff may struggle to get a good internet signal the majority of Cardiff locations have access to a good internet facilities.

i.   A good internet connection is not always available in other locations across the UK, in Europe or globally. Many remote attendees have joined from various locations, however connection to remote meetings have been achieved from distant locations but this is not always possible without prior preparation.

ii.   Remote attendees are provided with an opportunity to undertake a test meeting prior to joining the actual meeting to ensure their device is working from the location where they intend to remotely join the meeting. This also provides an opportunity to confirm that the parameters for supporting a remote attendee are working.

iii.   Any local internet connection being used to join the council's network for remote meetings must also be consistent. Other internet users on the same internet connection may reduce the available bandwidth and the connection to the multi-location meeting may be lost.

iv.   Consistent performance of the Council's network which links remote users to the conferencing is a key requirement which is being monitored to ensure the required performance is being met.

v.   Some of the issues experienced do relate to issues with the Conferencing system or the EC Connect software. These issues are logged and reported to both the ICT department and to VP-AV to investigate and address.

vi.   Identifying and addressing connectivity and software issues for those members using their own personal devices is significantly more difficult to identify and address. Options to provide Council issued devices, improve internet connectivity and undertake a

physical check of the equipment in County Hall are recommended to minimise any issues that may arise.

33.   VP-AV, the ICT Department and Democratic Services are monitoring networks and system software to identify any issues and when any issues are found they are working together to address them. All users are requested to support the work of these teams to ensure the effective delivery of Multi-location meetings.

Implementing the legislative requirement for multi-location meetings

34.   Many Elected Members have made a direct comparison between MS Teams and the conferencing system with EC Connect which is not wholly accurate. MS Teams is a fully remote system which has been used for a significant period of time and regularly experiences issues which are often ignored. MS Teams does not have the functionality to facilitate the complex integration necessary to deliver multi-location meetings.

35.   A majority of multi-location meetings held since May 2022 have progressed without any problems but understandably there are frustrations when meetings don't go to plan. As with any new system which is delivering new capabilities it will take time to embed and become the new standard. There is a perception that the system does not work effectively but there are so many other factors which can influence a meeting's success which are not directly related to the conferencing system and EC Connect.

Delivering improvements

36.   To address the issues that are being experienced, an action plan is being developed to improve the consistency of multi-location meetings. The action plan includes:

a. An upgrade to the Conferencing system server which should improve connectivity and consistency.

b. An equipment upgrade to enable the use of MS Teams Rooms as a back-up which will integrate with the hybrid technology.

c. An EC Connect software upgrade to provide:

i.   a chat facility from remote users to the chair and operator
ii. a browser facility so that devices do not need to download the software to join a meeting
iii. remotely shared presentations

d. Provision of new software to all Elected, Independent and Co-opted members and those officers regularly attending committee meetings using a "push" facility rather than everyone independently downloading the software update.

e. In-person training for all Elected, Independent and Co-opted members to ensure the software is working effectively, the new functionality is

explained and how it is to be used. This will also provide the opportunity to confirm the use of any personal devices that councillors wish to use to remotely join meetings.

    f. Committee Chair training will be provided to familiarise them with the displays and operation of the electronic systems used during meetings. This will also cover the options for the use of the conferencing equipment and the adaptation of the electronic procedures used for their committee meetings.

    g. A period of testing of MS Teams with the conferencing system to identify the limitations and impact that using MS Teams would incur. It is already understood that if MS Teams were used:

        i. The voting processes for remote and in-person attendees would have to carried out separately and roll-call voting would have to be used.
        ii. The speaker queues would not be integrated, and the Chairperson would have to be mindful of separate in-person and remote speaker queues. This would be particularly difficult as large meetings such as Council
        iii. The use of the translation facilities in MS Teams would have to be integrated into the conferencing audio systems which would require significant development and testing and would require significant resource implication.

37.   The planned upgrade is currently scheduled for 30 November with the training for all Elected Members and officers being undertaken early in the New Year.

38.   Given the imminent equipment upgrades to the conferencing system which are expected to address some of the technical issues, the planned roll-out of new software and the provision of training for all Elected, Independent and Co-opted members and those officers regularly attending committee meetings it is anticipated that will reduce the likelihood of issues occurring during Multi-location meetings.

39.   The performance of the system will be monitored for 3-6 months following the provision of training whilst the use of the MS Teams with the conferencing is developed. After that time if the conferencing system performance has not improved the option to switch to MS Teams will be considered.

Legal Implications

40.   The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act'), Part 3, Chapter 4, requires local authorities to broadcast full Council meetings and to make and publish arrangements to ensure that all Council, Committee and Cabinet meetings may be attended remotely (ie. enabling persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting) – also referred to as 'multilocation meetings'.

41.   Meetings must be capable of being held virtually, but individual authorities must decide whether their meetings will be held fully virtually, partially virtually (where

some participants are in the same physical location, whilst others join the meeting virtually, referred to as 'hybrid meetings') or as physical meetings (although authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings).

42. Meeting participants must be able to speak to and hear each other; and for meetings which are required to be broadcast (ie. full Council meetings), participants must also be able to see and be seen by each other.

43. The 2021 Act also introduces a new duty on local authorities, with effect from 5th May 2022, to encourage local people to participate in their decision making and to prepare and publish a public participation strategy detailing how it will meet this duty.

44. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers: Local authority multi location meetings: interim guidance | GOV.WALES

45. The statutory guidance sets out a number of general principles to guide authorities when developing their meeting arrangements, namely, transparency, accessibility, good conduct, Welsh language, local needs and future generations – as detailed in section 2 of the guidance. This sets the framework within which authorities must consider options and decide the meeting arrangements which best suit the authority and the communities it serves.

46. As noted in the body of the report, the Council has, in accordance with the statutory guidance, adopted a Multi-Location Meetings Policy, **Appendix A** to the report, setting out the detailed arrangements made for the operation of its multi-location meetings. This Policy is due to be reviewed in or around May 2023.

47. In considering this matter, the Council must have regard to its public sector equality duties under the Equality Act 2010 (including specific Welsh public sector duties). Pursuant to these legal duties, Councils must in making decisions have due regard to the need to (1) eliminate unlawful discrimination, (2) advance equality of opportunity and (3) foster good relations on the basis of protected characteristics. The Protected characteristics are: age, gender reassignment, sex, race – including ethnic or national origin, colour or nationality, disability, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, sexual orientation, religion or belief – including lack of belief. When taking strategic decisions, the Council also has a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic disadvantage ('the Socio-Economic Duty' imposed under section 1 of the Equality Act 2010). In considering this, the Council must take into account the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers and must be able to demonstrate how it has discharged its duty.

48. The Council must also be mindful of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Welsh Language Standards and consider the impact of its arrangements upon the Welsh language.

49. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires the Council to consider how its proposals will contribute towards meeting its well being objectives (set out in the Corporate Plan). Members must also be satisfied that the proposals comply with the sustainable development principle, which requires that the needs

of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

50. Other relevant legal implications are set out in the body of the report.

Financial Implications

51. As set out in the report, the budgeted capital allocation for the Multi-Location Conferencing System was spent in full in 2022/23. Any further expenditure on the Conferencing System would occur only after confirmation that sufficient budget provisions are in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

52. The Democratic Services Committee is recommended to note the content of the report and the actions that are being taken to improve the use of the council's multi-location meetings.

GARY JONES
Head of Democratic Services
22 November 2022

Appendix A   Multi-Location Meetings Policy - Cardiff Council 2022
Appendix B   Conferencing System Diagram

Background Papers:

Decision - Multi-Location Meetings Policy reports to Cabinet dated 10 March 2022