
REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

MULTI-LOCATION MEETING 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. Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, local authorities are 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 and associated statutory guidance [<https://www.gov.wales/statutory-and-non-statutory-guidance-democracy-within-principal-councils-governance-and-scrutiny#127808>] makes it clear that it is the choice of each member whether or not they attend remotely or in person.
3. The Council's arrangements are set out in the Multi-Location Meetings Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution and the Multi-Location Meeting Policy, which was approved by Cabinet on 10 March 2022 and is shown at Appendix A.
4. At its meeting on 28 November 2022 the Committee considered a report which provided an update on the use of the Council's multi-location meeting arrangements and the performance of the Council's conferencing system. This report identified the rationale for the procurement of the conferencing system and to address the initial concerns of Members regarding the use of the system.

Issues

Council Meeting - 20 July 2023

5. Prior to the Council meeting scheduled on 20 July 2023 in City Hall, the conference system was successfully tested by the Democratic Services team to ensure its effective operation. However, shortly after the start of the meeting the Chamber and Elected Members who were attending remotely experienced loss of sound and vision. Following unsuccessful efforts by the Democratic Services team to resolve the issue, representatives from VP-AV, the conferencing system provider, logged into the system remotely to ascertain the reasons for the malfunction. No immediate fault could be identified and with the agreement of the Group Leaders

the meeting was adjourned and the business of the meeting was deferred to the meeting scheduled for September.

6. The following morning, a representative of VP-AV arrived at the City Hall Chamber to undertake a further investigation into the malfunction. It was identified that a cable connecting the Lord Mayor's screen had been damaged and its connection to the system had been dislodged. The disrupted communication between the main system and the display screen generated internal error detection and correction system messages which were not visible to the operator. The connection issues could not be identified at the time and the high-speed connection between the two devices continued to generate more and more error detection and correction messages between the devices which then overloaded the main computer causing the failures.
7. Following the removal of the damaged cable from the screen the connection to one of the Lord Mayor's screens was lost but the remainder of the system immediately began to operate as normal. If this cable fault had been identified as the issue and disconnected at the meeting, the Council meeting would have been able to continue as normal with only the loss of one of the Lord Mayor's screens. The cable has been repaired and the system was successfully tested prior to its move to County Hall.

Move to County Hall

8. The replacement of the heating system in City Hall requires the temporary closure of the building and the transfer of Council meetings from City Hall to the County Hall Chamber. VP-AV were contracted to move the existing conferencing system and infrastructure to County Hall with the intention of holding Council meetings in the County Hall Chamber from September 2023. The secondary aims of this move included maximising the use of existing equipment and optimising the seating available for a Council meeting.
9. The existing equipment in the City Hall Chamber was removed and either placed in safe storage or installed in County Hall. Additional infrastructure was needed in County Hall Chamber to provide mountings, connectivity and cabling for the four 65" screens from City Hall. The installation has undergone initial testing but further testing is being planned to ensure that a full complement of attendees will be able to participate effectively at future Council Meetings.
10. Further preparation for holding Council meetings in County Hall is being undertaken with Political Group Whips to ensure a smooth transition between venues and the effective delivery of Council meetings in County Hall.

Return to City Hall

11. The work in City Hall is due to be completed in in 6-12 months when the equipment will be re-installed into City Hall Chamber to enable Council Meetings to return. During the installation it is being planned that the connections to the Lord Mayor's screens be reinforced to prevent any subsequent damage to the screen cables. This will also include a full testing plan prior to the first Council meeting in City Hall to ensure that the system is functioning effectively.

12. The total cost of £26,470 has been incurred for the removal of the conferencing system from City Hall, its installation into County Hall and its subsequent return to City Hall. These costs have been funded as part of the Core Office project.

Enhancement of the Conferencing facilities in County Hall.

13. During the consultation with Elected Members about the schedule of meeting timings it was identified that several committees wanted to hold their meetings at the same time as other meetings. This was particularly evident during Scrutiny Committee budget meetings which could not be effectively scheduled to meet the needs of the Members or to maximise the benefits of scrutiny. Due to the unavailability of equipment and resources to support simultaneous meeting a compromise solution was agreed for committee meetings until December 2023 this included meetings of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny committee being scheduled on Wednesdays the day before Cabinet.
14. A number of alternative solutions including the use of hybrid Teams meetings have been attempted but proved to be ineffective. The lone camera and microphone MS Teams system used with meetings of more than 5 physical attendees was inconsistent. This resulted in the microphone picking up the loudest noise and focussing the camera on that noise rather than remaining focussed on the speaker. A change to a fully remote MS Teams meeting was not suitable for the majority of committee meetings. The provision of simultaneous translation on MS Teams has not been fully tested and further work is ongoing with Bilingual Cardiff to develop its possible future use for fully remote regional meetings e.g. Glamorgan Archives Joint Committee.
15. The provision of a second conferencing system was identified as the preferred method for delivering either overlapping or simultaneous committee meetings with Committee Room 1 being identified as the alternative venue for Committee meetings. A second system would also have the benefit of minimising any cable or other issues from the regular movement of the conferencing system between meeting venues.
16. Additional resources were provided to Democratic Services to enable the recruitment of additional staff to meet requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 which would also enable some committee meetings to be held simultaneously. The recruitment of two additional Committee and Members Services officers has been completed and further recruitments are planned during this financial year.
17. Committee Room 4 is the primary venue for committee meetings which works well but some minor enhancement of the sound particularly for smaller meetings was needed. To optimise the equipment and resources for committee meetings, the existing portable conferencing system would be upgraded and used for meetings in the Council Chambers and Committee Room 1, with a new fixed system being installed in Committee Room 4.
18. The allocation of Committee Room 1 has now been prioritised for Democratic Services use from October when any existing bookings for the use of the room will have been completed.

19. A procurement exercise was undertaken which would provide the fixed conferencing system and enhanced audio capability in Committee room 4 and additional infrastructure in Committee Room 1 to provide camera and display facilities. This procurement was funded with £120,000 identified from the corporate reserves.
20. The installations have been completed and have been proof tested with further technical and load testing continuing to be undertaken. Following successful testing of simultaneous meetings in Committee room 4 and Committee Room 1, work will be undertaken to review the existing calendar of meetings and a revised schedule will be developed.

Software and Testing

21. The roll out of upgraded Easy Conf Connect app has been implemented on the corporate network and was made available to Members in early October. This will further improve the audio and video facilities of the conferencing systems as well as increasing the total number of remote attendees.
22. Testing with officers in October has:
 - a. proved that over 50 attendees can join a meeting remotely. This number will be increased a total of 100 if all remote attendees use the EasyConf Connect APP.
 - b. addressed issues with an echo that was experienced at the September Council meeting when remote attendees were active.

Review of the Multi-Location Meetings Policy

23. The Council's Multi-Location Meetings Policy is scheduled to be reviewed in the new year. The views of Elected Members will be sought and considered as part of this review.

Financial Implications

24. As set out in the report, the move of the conferencing systems from City Hall Chamber to County Hall Chamber, and return, is funded by £26,470 from the Core Office project.
25. The cost for the provision of an additional system, the enhancement of the Committee Room 4 system, and the provision of additional infrastructure in Committee Room 1, is funded by a £120,000 corporate reserve.

Legal Implications

26. 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'.

27. 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).
28. 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.
29. The 2021 Act also places a 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.
30. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers, which is now included within Part 4 of the consolidated statutory and non-statutory guidance on democracy in principal councils: [Statutory and non-statutory guidance on democracy within principal councils: governance and scrutiny \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)
31. The statutory guidance sets out a number of general principles to guide authorities when developing their meeting arrangements, namely, transparency, accessibility, good conduct, use English and Welsh languages, local needs and future generations. 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.
32. 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.
33. 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.
34. 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.

35. 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.
36. Other relevant legal implications are set out in the body of the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

37. 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

7 November 2023

Appendix A [Multi-Location Meetings Policy](#) - Cardiff Council 2022

Background Papers:

[Decision - Multi-Location Meetings Policy reports to Cabinet dated 10 March 2022](#)

[Multi-Location Meeting Conferencing System Update](#) report to the Democratic Services Committee dated 28 November 2022

[Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales – supporting provisions within the Local Government Act 2000, the Local Government \(Wales\) Measure 2011 and the Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Act](#)