

Thursday, 11 November 2021

Report of the Leader of the Council

Investment in Town Hall resources to facilitate the delivery of on-line meetings

Exempt Information

None

Purpose

- 1.1 To update Cabinet on progress made with regards to facilitating on-line meetings.
- 1.2 To inform members of the increase required in Democratic resources to continue to deliver on-line meetings.

Recommendations

That Cabinet members:

1. Endorse the findings within the report and progress to date in relation to work already delivered.
2. Continue to commit to livestreaming of Council meetings.
3. Continue to ensure all committee meetings are recorded and published in order to maximise transparency of decision making and electoral accountability.
4. Support the policy change to increase the current establishment within Democratic Services.
5. Request that the Appointments and Staffing Committee consider the staffing resource implications associated with this report.
6. Receive a further report once final costs for ICT investment are received.

Executive Summary

This report provides Members with an update on the progress of the project which has seen Tamworth Borough Council live-stream Council meetings, record other Committee meetings and publish them to YouTube.

Political Leadership made clear that is their wish to maximise transparency and public coverage in terms of decision making.

1. Virtual meetings and Livestreaming of those meetings

1.1. Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic all Council and other Committee meetings were held in person up to March 2020.

1.2. Following a change in Government legislation in April 2020, Tamworth Borough Council (TBC) were able to hold all Council and other Committee meetings virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform with all the meetings live streamed using Teams Live Events by members of the ICT and Assembly Rooms technical team (with the exception of Part II business). [Note: It is a legal requirement under the Local Government Act 1972 as amended that all public meetings are accessible apart from any Part II confidential business].

1.3. All the Council and other Committee meetings from May 2020 to April 2021 were live streamed with all the recordings being kept for a period of 6 months. Details on the live streaming viewings were promoted via social media.

1.4. From 7 May 2021 the ability to hold virtual Council and other Committee meetings ceased on expiry of the enabling Regulations and the Council reverted to physical meetings, a national

legal challenge having been unsuccessful. However, the political leadership directed that all Council meetings would continue to be live-streamed so as to enhance visibility and democracy with all other Committee meetings being recorded and subsequently published to YouTube.

1.5. During this time Council meetings were live streamed directly from the Assembly Rooms using temporary GoPro cameras, the Council's existing Auditel wireless microphone system, with additional Assembly Rooms roaming mics, switching put together by ICT and Assembly Rooms tech staff and the Assembly Rooms audio system. Audio and video were fed into Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) running on a laptop and streamed via the Assembly Rooms internet connection. This platform/system used for the live steaming was however not robust enough for longer term use and was extremely resource intensive, impacting on both the Assembly Rooms and ICT teams. Technical audio and video skills were required which were not readily available in- house.

1.6. Whilst the use of Teams Live Events provided a straightforward and ready to use solution during the period of virtual meetings, setting up and moving of the equipment required for onsite meetings is far more technical and resource intensive. The equipment whilst set up in the Council Chamber needs to be checked and tested prior to each meeting. Moving the equipment over to the Assembly Rooms for Council meetings and then setting up again is labour intensive and usually takes at least a day to install and test. The equipment then needs to be relocated back to the Council Chamber (sometimes for a meeting the following day) and installed and tested again.

1.7. Teams Live Events meetings are however, labour intensive requiring two x Democratic Services staff and one x ICT Officer. There was also extra preparation for the meeting in terms of setting up the meeting using Teams Live Events, inviting external presenters, preparing scripts, dealing with external speakers (Planning) which has been resourced with temporary internal staff.

1.8. The move to Teams Live Events has been well received and has offered a greater degree of stability during meetings but again was extremely resource intensive for staff. Significant additional hours were worked by members of the ICT and Democratic Services teams. Goodwill of the staff working these hours was extremely appreciated and enabled the Council to continue to run committee meetings throughout the pandemic.

1.9. As the use of Teams is still relatively new, there remains a need to continue to support members on a regular basis.

2. Livestreaming meetings in the future

2.1. Currently, there is no 'built-in' technology to live stream or webcast meetings from any Council building used for meetings (i.e. the Council Chamber and other meeting rooms within Marmion House, Town Hall, and Assembly Rooms) to the internet. Temporary audio and video equipment along with OBS running on a laptop has been used.

2.2. To live stream meetings on a permanent more professional basis, including the facility for remote participants to join via a platform such as Teams, an investment into a new technology solution with the necessary audio and video infrastructure is required.

2.3. The Head of Technology and Information Services along with the member of ICT who has supported the ICT elements of meetings since April 2020 have looked at options for a longer-term technology solution for Council and committee meetings going forward including associated support and maintenance.

2.4. Requirements for the technical solution

- To be able to live stream a meeting on a link accessible from the Council's website which could be published with the agenda.
- To be able to retain a recording of the live stream to be accessible from the Council's website via the link for a year after the meeting.
- Provide a hybrid option for remote participants integrating with MS Teams and other collaboration platforms with screens for remote participant visibility on site
- For the cameras within the room to automatically track the participants in the meeting when they are speaking, identifying the members by name for the webcast
- Ability to include a presentation in the web cast
- Simple operation to setup, start and end the live stream by non-technical members of staff including the ability to pause the web cast for confidential items.
- For the system to be secure and comply with the Council's ICT security policies

- Minimal, non-technical staff resource required to run the system which could mean a reduction in the current requirement for additional ICT support
- Live captions/subtitling during meetings for the webcast
- Voting system built into conference units
- Integration with ModGov committee management system
- Ideally utilise existing wireless microphone system
- Recordings available for 12 months
- Vendor support to assist with and rectify issues

2.5. Additional training for the new system will be required, this would be included in the requirements specification for suppliers.

Options Considered

There were several options looked at for a longer-term committee meeting technology solution based on the Town Hall as the main location for meetings.

Public-I

Public-I is one of the market leaders in this space and used by several larger authorities including Stoke-on-Trent and Staffs County. After several discussions with them, they have provided a proposal with indicative costs. Public-I solution costs are made of 3 elements: webcasting services including cameras, hardware leasing/purchase (conferencing equipment) and streaming hours. Streaming hours can add considerably to the annual costs, the proposal is based on 50 HD hours (enough to live stream Full Council). Other meetings can be recorded and then published to YouTube.

The Public-I solution proposed provides cameras that auto focus on the member speaking, replacement wireless microphone system facilitating voting and ID card login allowing Members to sit anywhere and their name be linked with the conference unit they login to and displayed on the webcast. The proposal also includes the facility to integrate with a Teams meeting allowing hybrid meetings and associated support and maintenance. The solution integrates with our ModGov committee management system, with meeting webcasts scheduled and started from within ModGov, agenda items are also indexed with the relevant part of the web cast allowing easy viewing of the recording. The system is designed to be managed and run by non-technical staff.

Indicative costs for the solution are as follows –

- Webcasting including 50 HD Streaming Hours – in the region of £60k over 5 years with approximately £10k one off setup fee
- Conferencing Hardware - capital purchase (can also be leased) – in the region of £40k
- Our existing wireless microphone system could be used instead, this would mean cameras would have to be manually controlled and voting/login features would be lost.
- Support and maintenance – in the region of £2k pa
- Total investment over 5 years would be circa £120k

There would be some additional costs for screens to view Teams meetings and the proposal would be subject to a site survey. Costs are only indicative and included to set budget expectations.

Auditel

We also looked at other solutions in the market, focussing on Auditel as an example after discussions with Walsall Council who have recently awarded them their Chamber AV solution tender based on a similar requirement.

The Auditel system would broadly provide a like for like solution to Public-I with most of the

same feature set but can utilise our existing wireless microphones also supplied by Auditel. Their system integrates with ModGov offering a simple user interface aimed at non-technical staff. As with Public-I, Auditel streaming is charged by the hour and can be purchased upfront. Auditel have two options, up to 100 hours and unlimited with the latter not adding significant cost. The system offers hybrid, integrating with all the main collaboration platforms including MS Teams and Zoom. The Auditel solution can be implemented in a fixed or flexible installation, depending on our intended use cases for the room. The flexible implementation would require more preparation ahead of the meetings if layouts changed and therefore have a potential an impact on resource. Predefined seating layouts can be setup in the system for specific meetings.

Prior to contract award, Walsall were leasing a complete setup from Auditel to provide an interim solution. Auditel are able to provide a similar interim solution proposal for our requirements, with a complete feature set including webcasting to YouTube, Hybrid and Chamber screens to enable a trial period of use and potentially a solution to the current resource intensive streaming technology and process. We are still awaiting indicative costs for the complete solution; this should be with us this week.

In-house specified and led solution

We also considered an in-house solution specified and led jointly by ICT and Assembly Rooms technical staff using our experience of the technology used for meetings to date. After further detailed discussion and consideration, this was ruled out due to complexity, lack of the required specialist knowledge and resource availability in both teams.

Teams Rooms

Lastly, we looked at the possibility of setting up the chamber as a Microsoft Teams Room. Teams Rooms are meeting rooms setup specifically for use with Microsoft Teams, with built in audio and video, negating the need for individual laptops to join meetings. Teams Rooms allow remote and on-site participants to collaborate in a meeting with full visibility and participation. The meeting would then be streamed to the internet using either existing software (OBS) or other 3rd party technology.

This solution, although not specifically aimed at Council meetings, could provide a flexible and lower cost option although would likely require a more technical resource to manage the webcast and lack some of the key built-in features such as ModGov integration available in the other solutions. Teams Rooms is aimed at providing AV enabled collaboration/meeting spaces but may lend itself to our requirement subject to a suitable solution for webcasting to YouTube. We are discussing this further with a Teams Rooms specialist partner to consider its suitability.

Options Summary

The three in scope options detailed above still require some further investigation in terms of site specific configuration and heritage impacts but give us a starting point for putting together a more detailed and informed tender specification. It should be noted that costs for solutions discussed are only indicative, included to set budget expectations and would be subject to a formal tender exercise.

The interim Auditel leased option would give us a trial full feature option and help us understand likely resource requirements for managing the technology going forward but is a sizable, short-term commitment.

Resource Implications

ICT Costs:

Indicative costs for the Public-I solution were received in early October, their proposal would

be subject to a site visit and there would likely be some increase in cost for screens. Currently this would require an investment of circa £120k over 5 years broadly broken down as follows

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- Webcasting including 50 HD Streaming Hours – in the region of £60k over 5 years with approximately £10k one off setup fee
- Conferencing Hardware - capital purchase (can also be leased) – in the region of £40k
- Support and maintenance – in the region of £2k pa
- Total investment over 5 years would be circa £120k

We are still awaiting costs for both the Auditel and Teams Room options. Auditel have visited site, so we are expecting their proposal to be accurate in terms of costing but again would be subject to a formal tender exercise. We are in the process of further discussions with a supplier in terms of suitability of the Teams Room solution.

Auditel are able to provide a cost for an interim full feature solution on a leased basis although this is likely to be a sizable monthly commitment. The interim solution would give us the opportunity to trial an example solution and would likely not need a technical resource as can be run by a non-technical member of staff. It would also provide a reliable, low maintenance and hybrid enabled solution for the current Council Chamber in the short term whilst we procure a longer term solution through a formal tender exercise.

There is currently no budgetary provision for these costs and a capital bid may need to be included within the capital programme.

Democratic Resource Costs:

Until the final ICT solution is fully costed and impact assessed, we are unable to clarify the final impact on either ICT, Assembly Room or Democratic Service teams. Notwithstanding the potential solution identified, Democratic Services are currently operating with additional temporary hours which are necessary to support the changes in demand for on-line streamed committee meetings. The temporary required hours and duties of the post have been reviewed in light of the current vacancy and as such, a further report will be submitted to Appointment and Staffing for their consideration. The increase in budget required to support the request is £5.5k which will be submitted as a policy change via the budget process. There could also be a saving in the current staffing costs associated with a more automated system.

Legal/Risk Implications Background

There is no legal requirement to livestream meetings.

If meetings continue to be held in person the requirement for the public to have access to the meeting would be complied with and if the livestreaming was disrupted in any way there would be no legal requirement to ensure it continued to run as we are already legally compliant.

Continuing with the technology we are currently using is not sustainable and presents a risk to both ICT and Democratic Services in terms of service delivery and resource availability. It does not allow for hybrid meetings which increases associated health and safety risks with potentially more staff being on site for meetings. It may also pose a reputational risk of live streams being unreliable longer term and not available as publicised.

Equalities Implications

An Equality Impact Assessment will be prepared to support the final ICT solution.

Sustainability Implications

From an environmental perspective, if the Council did agree to continue to livestream Council meetings there would be reduced travel by Councillors (non-committee members), and members of the public to attend meetings as the option to watch live from a computer would be provided therefore this would have a positive benefit to the Council's Climate Change Strategy.

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