



CABINET – 8TH DECEMBER 2021

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF A HYBRID MEETING SOLUTION

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION AND CORPORATE SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek Cabinet approval to procure and implement a hybrid meeting solution in Ty Penallta that will enable meeting attendees to fully and seamlessly participate in meeting proceedings either in person (physically) or from a range of remote locations (virtually).

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Since June 2020, the vast majority of public meetings carried out by Caerphilly Council have been held remotely. This has enabled members and officers to participate in the democratic process while also aligning with WG guidance to work from home wherever it is possible.
- 2.2 While the practice has now become fully embedded, it is inevitable that at some point in the future, greater numbers of elected members and officers will choose to physically participate in meetings. It is also conceivable that some members and officers will choose to, or need to, engage in those same meetings remotely.
- 2.3 The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 requires local authorities to “make and publish arrangements for the purpose of ensuring that local authority meetings are able to be held by means of any equipment or other facility which - (a) enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meetings”. This essentially brings in to law the concept of ‘multi-location’ or ‘hybrid’ meetings and the Council’s responsibility to support both physical and virtual attendance. The Act also requires that Councils live stream public meetings along with the existing requirement to simultaneously translate meetings into Welsh. This is not something that the existing platform can currently provide.
- 2.4 Caerphilly’s Members have also made it clear that when returning to the chamber in person, they wish to engage in the democratic process in the same way they were able to do so prior to the pandemic. This would mean standing, speaking to the room and voting as they have done previously, something that the current platform cannot offer at this time.

- 2.5 Furthermore, the Welsh Local Government Associations Diversity in Democracy Programme has seen many Councils, Caerphilly included sign a pledge that provides a clear, public commitment to increase diversity; demonstrate an open and welcoming culture to all and to consider different ways of supporting councillors with other commitments. Clearly, a platform that would enable participation in the democratic process for individuals who could not easily attend Council meetings in person, would support this pledge.
- 2.6 Two suppliers have provided compliant project costs against the stated specification and the recommendations below seek to move forward with the chosen provider for the work.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 That Cabinet agree to:

- 1) Award the contract for the implementation of a Hybrid Meeting solution and associated hardware to Supplier B for an initial period of 3 years with an option to extend for up to a further period of 3 years
- 2) Meet the £124,899 one off capital costs of the solution and the associated electrical infrastructure upgrades of circa £7k from the Member Services Earmarked Reserve.
- 3) Meet the total ongoing costs of £126,841 for the software platform and associated support and maintenance for the initial three-year term of the contract by establishing a specific earmarked reserve from the 2021/22 Miscellaneous Finance Revenue Contribution to Capital Outlay (RCCO) budget.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Over the next six months it is likely that there will be greater numbers of members and officers returning to the building and wishing to participate in meetings in person. There will also be officers and members who, for differing reasons, wish to participate in the same meetings remotely.
- 4.2 At present, the Council's existing platform would not provide an optimal solution to support hybrid meetings and so an alternative solution that provides a seamless experience for physical and remote participants has been sought.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 The vast majority of public meetings carried out by the Council have been held virtually since the beginning of the pandemic. This has enabled members and officers to fully participate in the democratic process while also aligning with WG guidance to work from home wherever it is possible.
- 5.2 Over the coming months, it is likely that there will be at least a gradual increase in the number of elected members and officers who wish to travel to the Council's offices to participate physically in public meetings. The public themselves may also wish to begin observing public meetings either in person or virtually.

- 5.3 The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 requires local authorities to “make and publish arrangements for the purpose of ensuring that local authority meetings are able to be held by means of any equipment or other facility which - (a) enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meetings”. This essentially brings in to law the concept of ‘multi-location’ or ‘hybrid’ meetings and the Council’s responsibility to support both physical and virtual attendance.
- 5.4 The Act requires participants in those multi-location or hybrid meetings to have access to the necessary equipment or facilities that enable attendees to “speak to and be heard by each other and to see and be seen by each other”.
- 5.5 At present, the majority of participants currently join meetings remotely and, in this instance, the product that currently supports virtual meetings can more than meet the needs of those participants. Should that position change, however, and the majority of participants join meetings physically, the current platform requires the use of microphones and headsets for all individuals that are sat in close physical proximity to one another, making the use of the existing platform more problematic.
- 5.6 There are also a number of additional requirements being placed upon principal councils, such as the need to simultaneously live stream public meetings so that they can be seen as they occur rather than via a delayed recording published after the meeting has concluded. Again, this is not something that the existing platform can currently provide.
- 5.7 Aside from the legislative requirements for multi-location or hybrid meetings to take place, Caerphilly’s Members have also made it clear that when returning to the chamber or other meeting rooms in person, they wish to engage in the democratic process in the same way they were able to do so prior to the pandemic. This would mean standing, speaking to the room and voting as they have done previously, something that the current platform cannot offer at this time.
- 5.8 Furthermore, the Welsh Local Government Associations Diversity in Democracy Programme has seen many Councils, Caerphilly included sign a pledge that provides a clear, public commitment to increase diversity; demonstrate an open and welcoming culture to all and to consider different ways of supporting councillors with other commitments. Clearly a platform that would enable participation in the democratic process for individuals who could not easily attend Council meetings in person which would support this pledge.
- 5.9 Over the last eighteen months or so elected officials and officers have become used to meeting remotely. More recently, a small number of individuals have chosen to attend the Council offices in person and engage in those remote meetings using the existing platform. A lot of compromise and a significant amount of learning has been generated during this time with feedback directly shaping the specification sent out to market and detailed below:
- 5.10 System Specification

The following paragraphs were included as the systems specifications (or requirements) against which suppliers could base their system proposals:

- a) In order to ensure a solution that is transparent, accountable, democratic and compliant with recent legislation, the ability to hold multi location meetings, where participants can be both seen and heard, regardless of their location, will be a critical component of the solution delivered.

- b) Full Council and Committee meetings are currently held over Microsoft Teams, with meetings recorded and uploaded to the Authorities dedicated You Tube channel. It is envisaged that attendees will be required to bring their own assigned laptops to the meetings to facilitate the use of some of the functionality provided with Teams such as voting, but will still benefit from the in room technology as far as possible – for example in-room cameras and microphones.
- c) These meetings can be held within the main Council chamber or on occasions the 3 large core meeting rooms within the Ty Penallta building. These are identified as:
- Sirhowy Room
 - Ebbw Room
 - Rhymney Room
- d) Moving forward, under the Local Government and Elections Wales Act 2021, the Authority must make arrangements to broadcast certain meetings live with a requirement for participants to see and hear each other at these specified meetings.
- e) Arrangements must also be made for multi-location meetings which is a meeting of the Authority whose participants are not all in the same physical place. Examples of such meetings could include the following scenarios.
- Meetings of a committee where all participants are in the same physical location except one individual who joins from another location, with a physical public gallery being provided.
 - Meetings of a committee where a roughly equal number of councillors are present in a physical space and joining through remote means; those joining through remote means may include the Chair.
 - Meetings of a committee where all members are joining through remote means but nonetheless a physical public gallery has been made available in council premises.
 - Meetings of a committee taking place wholly through remote means where no physical arrangements have been made.
- f) There may also be occasions where a separate meeting room is utilised as an overspill room if the number of attendees exceed thresholds deemed safe to enable appropriate social distancing, or purely due to the usual capacity of the meeting room. The ability to invite this separate room into the meeting, either as an active participant or in a “viewing only” capacity must be included in the solution.
- g) The proposed cameras for the Chamber and large core meeting rooms must be able to display a view of the whole room so that all participants can be seen, and capable of being distributed to all television screens located within those rooms and the Atrium.
- h) The proposed microphones for the Chamber and large core meeting rooms must be capable of capturing the voice all delegates within the room, so that all delegates can be heard.
- i) Once a meeting attendee is speaking the cameras must be able to automatically detect and zoom, so that individual delegates can also be seen.

- j) The solution to be capable of integrating with the speakers, televisions and drop-down screens, and all other appropriate equipment currently within the Chamber and large core meetings rooms. Where this is not possible any additional hardware required must be clearly identified, costed, and included within the final solution.
- k) The ability to either record or webcast meetings live to the authorities YouTube channel or similar platforms is also an essential requirement of the solution.
- l) It is also imperative that provision for a simultaneous translation service is considered and integrated, in order to comply with Welsh Language Standards. For your information a copy of the Welsh Language Standards issued by the Welsh Commissioner
- m) Bidders were required to itemise all hardware required for their solution, including, but not limited to, industry standard audio equipment, professional broadcast video cameras, equipment to connect these video and audio sources, and hardware and software to broadcast meetings live via the Authorities YouTube channel or similar platforms.
- n) All materials and equipment were costed and provided by the suppliers and they are solely responsible for all elements of the entire installation. An exception to this is any electrical requirements, which will be carried out by the Authorities current electrical contractor and is deemed out of scope for this tender. Specific Risk Assessments and Method Statements should be submitted for approval prior to any installation works. Installation technicians will be CHAS registered and PASMA Certified
- o) Bidders should also, as part of their tender, include full installation and cabling costs associated with their final solution.
- p) The Council will require the successful tenderer to provide full training to staff on how to operate the solution where required, and if any equipment is required to be changed.

5.11 Tender Submission and Pricing

Tenders were invited for this requirement in July 2021 via a mini competition tender process undertaken from the Council's existing Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) arrangement for the Provision of Education Technology and Associated Services. Following the closing date for tender responses to be received, no bids had been returned.

Officers therefore sought other compliant routes to market and identified an alternative arrangement that could be used on a direct award basis along with the above DPS e.g. NHS Shared Services Partnership framework.

Both routes to market included Microsoft preferred suppliers that have significant experience dealing with Microsoft Teams platforms and both suppliers were contacted directly to price against the specification detailed above.

Site meetings were held with both companies to review the scope and scale of the project with Officers from Democratic Services, Procurement Services, IT Services and Facilities Management and all attended the meetings to ensure a consistent message was delivered regarding the requirement.

Suppliers submitted detailed costs against the specification set out by the project team and a price comparison of the two submissions has been undertaken and is set out in the table below:

| | Supplier A (£) | Supplier B (£) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Hardware | 236,575.00 | 63,361.01 |
| Optional Additional Encoder | 4,000.00 | 3,500.00 |
| Optional 85" Surface Hub | 25,700.00 | 22,648.43 |
| Software | 0.00 | 105,960.00 |
| Maintenance / Support | 14,000.00 | 20,881.17 |
| PS & Prelims | 7,300.00 | 35,389.47 |
| | 287,575.00 | 251,740.08 |

The lowest cost submission was submitted by Supplier B and, subject to Cabinet approval for the funding, the Council will award a contract to Supplier B and subsequently begin the process of implementing the new system.

5.12 Conclusion

The introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act combined with the new working practices that have emerged through the COVID-19 response has created the requirement for the Council to introduce a hybrid meeting solution.

Following the pricing exercise being carried out by the Council a supplier has been identified who can meet the emerging needs of the organisation and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) act and permission is sought to implement the solution.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 That the solution will be implemented and fully functional ahead of the 2022 Local Government Elections in May.
- 6.2 That the necessary training and development be delivered to meeting participants ahead of the system being made live.
- 6.3 That the solution can seamlessly integrate with the existing audio and voting equipment in the Council Chamber.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The Integrated Impact Assessment can be accessed via the link below:

[IJA Hybrid Solution](#)

- 7.2 In summary, the IJA has shown that there are a mixture of positive and neutral benefits attached to this proposal but has not identified and negative benefits. This is primarily a result of the proposal providing enhanced choice and additional options for democratic participation than are currently available. With greater choice, the potential for broader democratic engagement and the ability to broadcast live and in two languages, the solution appears to be a positive step in the right direction for the Council.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The capital cost of awarding the contract to Supplier B and for carrying out the associated works is £124,899. This will cover the hardware, additional encoder, 85” Surface Hub and the PS and Prelim work. It is recommended that this cost should be funded from the Member Services Earmarked Reserve, which currently has an uncommitted balance of £313,641.
- 8.2 There will also be a requirement to upgrade the electrical infrastructure within the Council Chamber to support device charging. These costs are estimated at circa £7k and are again one off in nature. It is proposed that this cost is also met from the Member Services Earmarked Reserve.
- 8.3 The ongoing costs of the software platform and associated support and maintenance for the initial three-year term of the contract total £126,841. It is recommended that this cost should be met by establishing a specific earmarked reserve from the 2021/22 Miscellaneous Finance Revenue Contribution to Capital Outlay (RCCO) budget.
- 8.4 Any costs associated with training and developing officers and elected members in the use of the system will be carried out in house by colleagues from Democratic Services, and Digital Services utilising existing budgets.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None.

10. CONSULTATIONS

- 10.1 All consultation responses received have been included in the body of this report.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

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