

AUDIO & VISUAL PROVISION FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS

Head of Service:	Amardip Healy, Chief Legal Officer
Wards affected:	(All Wards);
Urgent Decision?(yes/no)	Yes
If yes, reason urgent decision required:	Current temporary contract for Audio visual equipment is due to end shortly.
Appendices (attached):	1:Confidential example proposal 2019 2: Confidential example for one off hire 3: Meeting Statistics 4: Confidential example proposal 1 - full 5. Confidential example proposal 2 - reduced

Summary

To consider options for the purchase of an audio and visual solution for Council and Committee Meetings.

Recommendation (s)

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) To comment on the options set out at paras 2.36 to 2.39 of this report for meeting infrastructure;
- (2) Agree for officers to investigate preferred options from Recommendation 1 for the purchase of audio & visual meeting equipment for the Council Chamber;
- (3) To delegate to the Director of Corporate Services and the Chief Finance Officer, in consultation with the Chair and the Vice Chair of Strategy and Resources Committee, the purchase of an audio visual solution for Council and Committee meetings.

1 Reason for Recommendation

- 1.1 To provide microphone and camera options to run Council and Committee Meetings.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Committee will be aware that there have been numerous occasions where the technology used in the Chamber has failed, resulting in the experience, for those not only participating in the meetings, but also those attending the meetings, being less than satisfactory.
- 2.2 Pre pandemic, in 2019 advice was taken as to what improvements were necessary to address the issues being experienced. The Council were advised that the age of the microphones, and the technology supporting them, were most likely to be the cause of the failures, together with a poor sound amplification system within the Chamber.
- 2.3 A capital bid was submitted in 2019 for funding to replace the system. It was based on the quote set out at Appendix 1. The Bid was turned down for the following reason: *“Not supported as not considered essential for business continuity and given the immobility of the proposed system, we should await the outcome of the Asset Management Plan. Therefore defer until AMP agreed.”*
- 2.4 Following large numbers of objections to a planning application, public capacity to hear the planning committee was increased. The costs examples for the options are set out at Appendix 2, the Council did utilise one of the options and incurred a one-off cost.
- 2.5 At the start of the pandemic, the Coronavirus Act 2020 brought forward Regulations to facilitate the holding of decision making Council meetings remotely. These regulations (The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020) permitted the holding of remote meetings along with Members being able to vote remotely at such meetings. This was not permissible before these Regulations.
- 2.6 Initially, Council & Committee meetings were all cancelled to allow a focus by the Council on its responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies legislation. During this time a remote meetings platform was instituted along with a remote meeting protocol. The Council's approach to remote meetings allowed the public to watch a Council or Committee meeting as it happened from anywhere. The only limitation was the number who could watch at one time (250), however this has to date never been an issue. The meeting platform allowed for public speaking to occur and presentations to be broadcast. This was particularly helpful in allowing those new to the work of a Local Authority to follow an agenda or a particular item.

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- 2.7 From the 7 May 2021, Local Authorities were required to hold its Council and Committee meetings in person. In April 2021 the microphone system in the Town Hall failed and engineers were unable to secure a temporary solution.
- 2.8 As a result of restrictions on capacity to comply with covid secure requirements, it was necessary to facilitate the ability to carry on with live streaming meetings. This allowed those who wanted to attend a meeting but were either unable to or prevented from doing so, to continue to watch the Council meetings. As a result, a temporary solution was put in place to allow for a view of the chamber to be streamed.
- 2.9 Having been advised, before the start of the pandemic, the system had reached end of life, with all the changes since the pandemic around accessibility, this now presents an opportunity to review and consider what form the replacement provision and equipment should take.

Current temporary arrangements

- 2.10 Through a temporary hire, the Council has trialled two different solutions to see what could work best for it.
- 2.11 Both trialled systems provide hybrid meeting functionality through integration with GoToWebinar, and are adaptable to other platforms. During the trials up to 20 members/officers have been accommodated in the Council Chamber (to comply with the Covid risk assessment) and up to 250 participants/observers can join via GoToWebinar.
- 2.12 Audio/video from the Council Chamber is broadcast to the internet and linked to that from approved external participants to enable a full 'hybrid' meeting. The current hire expires on 27 August, and the period can be extended. However, due to the extra cost, renting a system should be seen as a temporary solution.

Options

- 2.13 The purpose of this report to set out some of the alternatives available and what may be suitable to allow further detailed consideration of options for replacement of the current infrastructure to the Chamber.
- 2.14 With the introduction of the remote meeting regulations last year, the demands and expectations of public access to decision making has led to many local authorities reviewing the nature of public access to committee meetings. Historically many Councils were already webcasting Council and Committee meetings. However, holding meetings remotely meant that webcasting from one venue was no longer possible. The development of meeting platforms since last year for live views of Committee meetings has helped to add a new dimension to how meetings can be streamed live.

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- 2.15 In terms of considering options, the Council does not have a fund set aside for replacement. The normal process would be through a capital bid, however, there is urgency for the purchase of a replacement system to avoid rental charges. It is therefore important to be clear on what options should be taken forward, to ensure the possible expenditure sits within the context of corporate priorities and competing demands on the Council's financial resources.
- 2.16 The objectives for the purchase of any new infrastructure are:
- a) to secure a better experience for those in the Chamber as well as for those who may be able to watch remotely;
 - b) to make sure that any spend sits within a context of high financial pressure on the Council;
 - c) the infrastructure is moveable should the Council move from the Town Hall;
 - d) allows the Chamber to remain a flexible space, to enable the seating and desks to be moved to accommodate different event layouts.

Proposals

Audio

- 2.17 A number of options have been considered in terms of a replacement microphone system. The growth in the technology supporting audio systems now offers a wide range options. Systems can identify speakers, log a queuing system for those wishing to speak, as well as count and record voting.
- 2.18 Most of the systems are based around a particular microphone unit and the options are added as a part of a software package. It is important to recognise that systems are expensive, the current system cost the Council in the region of £80,000 when it was first introduced over 20 years ago. Any replacement system, is still likely to be expensive in light of the constraints of the Council Chamber needing to be a flexible space. Anticipated costs would be in excess of £100,000.
- 2.19 The setup of the Council Chamber in terms of seating layout has been with the 'horseshoe style, Fig 1 below. The Chamber itself is used as a flexible space, which means the room's furniture is often removed to allow for functions. For example all the desks are removed for Annual Council, Fig 2 below.

Fig 1: Chamber layout: Horseshoe style

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Fig 2: Chamber layout: Annual Council



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- 2.20 Due to the need for flexibility a fixed microphone system cannot be introduced and instead a battery operated, Bluetooth system is required. This limits the options in terms of the type of equipment and makes the configuration of a system more expensive to provide.
- 2.21 The Chamber needs a replacement of microphones and with this there is the option to enhance the facilities for example the adding of e-voting solutions. In light of the restraints of the layout of the Chamber and Members' preferences, the number of microphones must accommodate all the Members. The most the Chamber needs, is at a meeting of Full Council and therefore the system will need to accommodate 38 for Members and could limit the number for officers and Chaplin to 4. The current Electoral Review may reduce the number of Councillors, but securing 42 will allow for a few spares to be available.
- 2.22 The cost of moveable microphones is expensive and by reducing the number the cost could be reduced considerably.
- 2.23 If cameras were to be added to any solution, then the benefits of having a camera system could be utilised particularly for Council meetings which could have the effect of reducing the number of microphones which are needed.
- 2.24 The current layout of the Chamber is set up to accommodate social distancing, Fig 3. With the desks in rows of 4 seats, with Members seated two desks apart. The layout accommodates all current committees, and has 20 microphones available.

Fig 3: Chamber layout: Covid Secure set up



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- 2.25 If the future layout reflected a traditional auditorium style at Fig 4, lecterns could be added to the outside of the rows, nearest to the windows, to allow Members to walk up to a lectern to address a meeting of Council. This would mean fewer cameras would be needed to stream those speaking Members seating towards the rear of the Chamber. It would also reduce the need for each Member at a Council meeting to have a microphone, and consequently reduce the cost of replacement. Those Members who may have difficulties moving around the Chamber would have access to their own desk microphone.
- 2.26 The suggestion would be to have 2 lecterns on either side of the room with a microphone on each. With the current 20 microphones, the number could then be increased to 28 with another 2 as spare potentially. This reduces the number needed from the proposed 42 to 30. In terms of a general idea of costs, confidential Appendices 2 and 3 show examples of the different levels of costs depending on how many microphones are purchased.

Fig 4: Chamber layout: potential layout



Visual

- 2.27 The Standards Committee is currently considering arrangements to enable wider public access to the Council's decision making processes. The drive being to encourage informed and engaged debate and enhanced scrutiny and transparency of processes.

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- 2.28 One of the main ways to deliver visual accessibility to meetings is through live streaming. Live streaming (often referred to as webcasting) of Council meetings is now common practice in local authorities across the country. There are many versions of webcasting being used by local authorities, but and sometimes the experience of the public accessing such systems falls short of expectations. Webcasting requires a great deal of investment to avoid cameras constantly moving between speakers in an haphazard manner. High quality webcasts require a great deal of new infrastructure and costs need to be balanced against the other improvements which could be achieved in terms of enhanced audio infrastructure.
- 2.29 The feasibility of a basic low cost self-broadcast alternative utilising webcams for simple consumer devices such as smartphones or tablets, hosted on Council social media platforms have been considered by other Councils. Often this approach was often discounted as it was found to offer poor viewer experience with only static wide-angle coverage of the meeting room, variable audio quality, and unreliable network connections. More sophisticated webcasting systems allow access to the relevant agenda papers, identify Members speaking or voting and/or follow presentations displayed in the meeting room.
- 2.30 By managing the costs, an opportunity could be taken to propose the acquisition of new display screen technology which will enhance decision making by improving the visual tools available to Members, this could be potentially of particular value in the consideration of planning applications, and to better engage residents attending meetings
- 2.31 The Council presently has only limited ability to display plans, videos and presentations at meetings. It relies on projector screens, some of which are now at end of life.
- 2.32 The opportunities to enhance decision making and public engagement in meetings through the use of more advanced display technology is now a standard for most local authorities. It would also improve stakeholder and partnership events where often such technology is used to deliver messaging.
- 2.33 The arrangements covered by this report only related to the Chamber. Committee Rooms 1 and 2 have been updated by the Council's IT department to allow for internal meetings to be held remotely.
- 2.34 It is not proposed that recordings of meetings are retained or published. There are a range of issues with the management of meeting recordings. To publish would require more resources and at this time it is felt there is nothing to be gained.

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- 2.35 The cost of meeting infrastructure is expensive. It is important to consider the wider benefits that each type of infrastructure provision, may bring. It would therefore be useful to understand the levels of engagement with the Committee processes.
- 2.36 Although the Authority did not keep the data around public attendance pre-pandemic, most Committees generally had low levels of public attendance. Levels would increase dependent on the content of agenda items with Planning Committee generally having the highest levels of attendance. Since the pandemic, meeting attendance data is available via the remote meetings platform. Appendix 3 sets out a summary of the number of Council and Committee meetings held remotely from the 12 May 2020 to May 2021.
- 2.37 In summary, Table 1 below sets out the total number of sessions held remotely, this includes non-decision making meetings. Table 2 below sets out the specific Committee based data (which includes Council):

Table 1: 12 May 2020 – 18 May 2021, summary of sessions provided by Democratic Services

Total number of meetings, briefings and training sessions	Total attendees across all sessions	Combined total duration of sessions
303	3,115	331 hours, 39 Minutes

Table 2: 12 May 2020 – 18 May 2021, summary of public Committee meetings (Restricted Committee meetings, briefings and training sessions are not included in the below)

Total number of committee meetings open to public	Total number of public attendees across all meetings (Attendees observing multiple meetings are recorded multiple times)	Total number of unique public attendees across all meetings (Attendees are recorded once, even if they observed multiple meetings)	Total number of public speakers at remote meetings via webinar software
71	960	641	61

- 2.38 The number of meetings open to the public and the numbers attending, evidences not just the work of the Council but also the public interest in its work. It is also important to note that 61 speakers were able to speak at meetings held remotely. The level of engagement helps to establish the business case for provision.

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Proposals

- 2.39 To enable a system specification to be drawn up there are a number of suggestions the Committee is being asked to consider. Once a specification is drafted, the suggestion is to seek three to five quotes and assess those against the Council's requirements.

Number of microphone units

- 2.40 The Council's existing (defunct) system has 52 units. It is envisaged that that with a new system, this could be reduced to 42 or 30, both options would still provide sufficient units for meetings of the Council if all Members were in attendance, as the layout could be adapted accordingly to suit 30 microphones as set-out in Figure 4. Dual (shared) microphone units are also available, but given the nature of the pandemic, this is not felt advisable.

Recommendation: that Committee advise whether a c.42 microphone or c.30 microphone solution should be pursued.

Number of webcams

- 2.41 3 tracking cameras are currently provided by the hire system and provide a very effective broadcast.

Recommendation: MS purchase of 3 tracking HD cameras.

Hybrid functionality

- 2.42 Hybrid functionality enables remote audio and visual access for participants, allowing Members, officers, public speakers and guest speakers to participate remotely. It has been successfully used at all recent meetings of Committees. Hybrid functionality also includes public broadcast of meetings to the internet as standard. A lower cost alternative is to webcast meetings without hybrid functionality, but this would not enable remote access from any remote speakers/external parties.

Recommendation: Include hybrid connectivity to GotoWebinar, Teams or other another platform as appropriate.

Mobility of the system

- 2.43 To utilise any new the system from different venues in the future requires an anticipated use to be scoped.

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- 2.44 Any future or alternative venue will require sufficient internet connectivity and audio/visual equipment which can be integrated with the system to facilitate amplification/projection of sound and output of video during meeting. Any move of location will require wiring and connection before it is operational.

Recommendation: Define anticipated scope of use of system from other venues and detail within system specification.

- 2.45 There are a number of constraints which affect the suitability of new systems which require careful consideration to ensure a fit for purpose replacement system is secured. To this end the Council has worked with three specialist providers in the market place to consider options. All three have extensive experience in designing, configuring and supplying audio visual equipment for meetings within the public sector.
- 2.46 One example of a quotation is contained the Confidential Appendix 2. This includes a maker's promotional offer which requires us to place an order by 28th September, to realise a cost saving of approx. £13,000 ex VAT. Another example for a reduced system of 20 microphones is contained at Appendix 5.

Other Options

- 2.47 The Council could decide not to invest in replacement microphones and improved equipment. This would mean there would be no microphones and the meetings could not be broadcast remotely.
- 2.48 The full 42 microphones option is both expensive and at time of financial pressure difficult to justify. If the solution with lecterns and 30 microphones is not something which Members find works for Council meetings then there is always the option to add additional microphones at a later date.

3 Risk Assessment

Legal or other duties

3.1 Impact Assessment

- 3.1.1 No formal equalities impact assessment has been undertaken because this does not represent a major service change. There are no touch screen electronic voting systems on the market which incorporate facilities for visually impaired users so in certain circumstances appropriate modifications to process may be required.

3.2 Crime & Disorder

- 3.2.1 Not applicable

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- 3.3 Safeguarding
 - 3.3.1 Not applicable
- 3.4 Dependencies
 - 3.4.1 Not applicable
- 3.5 Other
 - 3.5.1 Not applicable

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 The provision of audio visual equipment is essential for delivery of the Council's democratic decision making process. This Council should ensure that any future preferred option demonstrates value for money and is adaptable in its use to address potential changes in the delivery of this function.
- 4.2 Initial quotes received indicate that the cost of a permanent system similar to the current hire system, will be in the region of £130,000. Officers believe there are a number of options that can be considered to provide a more cost effective alternative.
- 4.3 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** As the solution would help manage public attendance in the Council Chamber, the replacement of the audio and visual equipment can provisionally be funded from a mixture of Contain Outbreak Management Grant, which holds an uncommitted balance of c£60,000, and capital receipts reserves, which hold an uncommitted balance of £2.588m.
- 4.4 At the time of writing, it is unclear how much of the Contain Outbreak Management Grant will be available to finance this project, because new demands for use of the grant may arise in the coming months. As such, the grant will only be applied to fund this project if appropriate, and any funding shortfall will be financed from the capital receipts reserve.

5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 The Council is not obliged to live stream its Council and committee meetings but it is increasingly considered best practice to do so.

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- 5.2 Regulations issued in 2014 require authorities to make available reasonable facilities for members of the public to report on meetings using any communication method, including film, photography, audio recording and social media. The Regulations have encouraged the public to be able to informally film or record meetings and the Council has introduced a formal process to allow this in 2018. However, to date it has been rare for any member of the public to request to film a meeting by a member of the public. Even if webcasting or live streaming were permitted, informally filming and recording would still have to be permitted.
- 5.3 There is a balance to be had around what the Council needs and what would be nice to have. Most systems will allow the additional functionality to be added at a future date with software updates, if needed. If a modified layout in the chamber, moving away from the horse shoe could allow for more single lectern style microphones which would reduce the overall costs.
- 5.4 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** None arising from the contents of this report.

6 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

- 6.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged: Effective Council.
- 6.2 **Service Plans:** The matter is not included within the current Service Delivery Plan.
- 6.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:** none
- 6.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** none
- 6.5 **Partnerships:** none

7 Background papers

- 7.1 The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

Previous reports:

- none

Other papers:

- Capital Bid 2019