

**WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL****Report by Strategic Lead - Regulatory****West Dunbartonshire Council: 25 November 2020**

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**Subject: Hybrid Meetings of Council and Committees****1. Purpose**

- 1.1 To provide the Council with an update on the outcome of discussions at the Cross Party Working Group on the proposal to introduce hybrid council and committee meetings in West Dunbartonshire.

**2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 The Council is asked to note the recommendation of the Cross Party Working Group that the Council should not to proceed with the procurement for introduction of hybrid meetings but once things improve the Working Group should consider providing accommodation for groups of Members to be in the same room, if they so choose.

**3. Background**

- 3.1 At its meeting on 25 June, the Council agreed to approve the undernoted motion:

*Council notes that it will not be until stage four of lockdown relaxation that the instructions from the Scottish Government change from, 'Remote working remains the default position for those who can.' to 'Remote and flexible working remains encouraged.'*

*Council agrees that we will continue to comply with the Scottish Government's instructions, based on medical and scientific advice, and will continue to deliver services digitally by default and not unnecessarily require our employees to attend workplaces where it is not absolutely imperative to do so for the provision of services to the public.*

*Council thanks our staff for the great lengths they have gone to, to enable home working for not just Councillors, but other staff across the organisation. We note that at this time, the Chief Executive has advised the three main group leaders that officers need to remain focussed on maintaining and expanding this capability, to allow us to bring more services back quicker, for the benefit of our communities.*

*Council agrees that when government guidance allows and officers have the capacity to look at how we can enable some Councillors to be physically present for meetings, they should do so and bring a report back to the Cross Party Group and Council at the earliest opportunity*

*thereafter. All elected members will be consulted on plans, to enable officers to consider everyone's needs before writing their report.'*

**3.2** The Cross Party Working Group received a briefing on hybrid meetings at its meeting in August and agreed that all elected members should be consulted on their views before any decisions were taken. The outcome of the consultation was presented to the Group in September 2020. The Group noted that there had been a mixed response to the consultation and agreed not to proceed with the procurement of a hybrid system at this time and that the outcome be reported back to the November meeting of Council. In making its decision, the Working Group took into account a number of issues which have been summarised in the main issues section of the report.

#### **4. Main Issues**

**4.1** At present, there is no specific guidance on the size of workplace gatherings but the Scottish Government's guidance still states that **those persons who can work from home should continue to do so**. At the time of writing, all local authorities within the Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board area including West Dunbartonshire are subject to stricter conditions than other parts of the country due to increasing infection rates.

**4.2** The current supplier of the audio equipment in the Church Street office has produced a technical solution to deliver hybrid meetings in the Civic Space. This solution will use both the existing microphones and large monitors in situ together with MS Teams. The proposal involves installing two cameras at the large screen positions and connections to the existing audio system. This would allow those members in the Civic Space to be seen and to use the existing Televic microphones to be heard. Those members working from home would access MS Teams to participate in the meeting. The Council would supply the laptop/PC that allows the system to run MS Teams and could be situated in the communications room next to the Audio rack as this must connect to the mixer and must be connected to the Council's network. This is only one solution to deliver hybrid meetings and there could be others available which may be more cost effective. The working group was informed that Officers would need to engage in a full procurement exercise to identify the best option at the lowest cost.

**4.3** A lot of hard work and effort has already gone into the planning and delivery of remote meetings which in the main have worked. While there have inevitably been some teething issues with videoconferencing, the meetings have gone well and lessons have been learned to facilitate future videoconference meetings running as smoothly as reasonably possible. It should be noted that some Councils, who already have cameras installed for webcasting, and have tried hybrid meetings have indicated that the experience of the Members working remotely may not be as good as those at the meeting due to issues with the sound quality within the meeting room making it difficult for those Members participating from home to hear what is going on. This is particularly relevant given the acoustics in the Church Street Chamber.

- 4.4** At present the Civic Space in Church Street is closed and therefore the building would need to be re-opened to allow meetings to take place. If meetings proceed prior to the building being opened for general use there will be additional costs involved in cleaning and staffing of the building. A full risk assessment and an Equality Impact Assessment would need to be completed to ensure all risks and equality issues have been considered before opening the building for this purpose.
- 4.5** If the public gallery was opened to members of the public and press this would introduce a number of additional risks which would need to be identified and addressed via the risk assessment. However, one of the main considerations would be the restriction of numbers of persons allowed in the gallery space while maintaining appropriate physical distancing. It is likely the number of people able to access the space would be greatly reduced for both public and the press.

## **5. People Implications**

- 5.1** The level of staffing required to operate a meeting will depend on a number of factors such as whether the public gallery will be opened, the number of entrances to be used, etc. This will also impact on the level of cleaning required and the costs involved. For example, furniture in the civic space would need to be cleaned before the meeting and any touched surfaces and equipment used e.g. desks, chairs, microphone units would need to be cleaned after the meeting in preparation for the next meeting. This would be in addition to appropriate cleaning of other common areas such as toilets, stairwell, corridors and lifts.
- 5.2** A hybrid meeting will require a number of additional support staff to ensure the meeting runs smoothly. The last Council meeting which was conducted via videoconference involved four Committee staff and 2 ICT officers, it is likely that a hybrid model will need more staff to manage the meeting given the complexity of the set up. This could also result in delays to other work or require overtime/additional staff with relevant skills.

## **6. Financial and Procurement Implications**

- 6.1** It is estimated that it will cost approximately £12,500 to deliver the hybrid model described in paragraph 4.2 of this report; £12,000 in respect of equipment (capital) and approximately £500 in respect of the annual maintenance fee (revenue). This does not include the cost of additional laptops, WDC Officer time in supporting the installation of the equipment, connection to the network and the opening and cleaning of the building (as referred to in paragraph 4.4 above). As previously stated, there are other systems available and a procurement exercise would be required to identify the best solution for this Council.

## **7. Risk Analysis**

**7.1** There are no risks arising from the recommendations of the report.

## **8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)**

**8.1** An EIA was carried out on the introduction of hybrid meetings which identified that there could be an inequality issue for those members who were unable to participate in meetings in person due to underlying health conditions and therefore would not have the choice to do so. Furthermore, elected members with hearing impairments may find it difficult to hear clearly what is being said in the Chamber depending on the quality of the sound being transmitted from that room. A copy of the EIA is attached as an appendix to this report.

## **9. Consultation**

**9.1** Officers from Legal and Finance Services have been consulted on the contents of this report.

## **10. Strategic Assessment**

**10.1** This report recommends that Council meetings continue to operate via videoconference and although members of public cannot attend meetings in person as before, the facility to listen to the Council and main committee meetings via the live audio-cast enables the public to keep in touch with Council decision making from the safety of their own homes.

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**Date:** 3 November 2020

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**Appendices:** Equality Impact Assessment on introduction of Hybrid Meetings.

**Background Papers:** None

**Wards Affected:** None.