

REPORT TO: East Lothian Council

MEETING DATE: 16 November 2021

BY: Executive Director for Council Resources

SUBJECT: Proposed Introduction of Hybrid Committee Meetings

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To outline the proposal to introduce hybrid Council, committee and sub-committee meetings and to secure Members' agreement to implement hybrid committee meetings.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Council is recommended to:

- 2.1 approve the implementation of hybrid meetings;
- 2.2 agree that meetings continue in the interim by remote access;
- 2.3 note that the introduction of hybrid meetings would be implemented through the replacement of the existing remote access system and will incur an initial capital cost and ongoing revenue costs;
- 2.4 note that arrangements for hybrid meetings would require changes to Standing Orders which would be brought to Council before hybrid meetings go live.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 On 25 August 2020, Council agreed that Public-i Connect Remote would be used as the platform for hosting Council and committee meetings until such times as physical meetings could resume safely. The decision was made in recognition of the Scottish Government guidance in relation to continued homeworking and social distancing that was in place at the time, given the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 3.2 It is now considered that there would be a number of significant benefits in moving to hybrid committee meetings whereby some members and officers would be physically present in the Council Chamber and others would participate by remote access.

These benefits include: the freedom and personal preference to choose how to participate in meetings; reduced travel time and travel costs; convenience for participants who have other commitments away from the Council Chamber; more effective use of officers' time as some officers only need to be present at the meeting for the duration of their own report; and the fact that hybrid meetings offer a good compromise between face-to-face meetings and remote meetings. The live streaming of meetings has been well received and has increased the transparency and accessibility of the Council's formal decision making processes for the public. It is anticipated that live streaming will continue if hybrid meetings are implemented and the system will accommodate the online participation of members of the public where appropriate, e.g. Planning Committee.

- 3.3 Members are asked to note that the introduction of hybrid meetings will require replacing the existing remote access system with an alternative in-chamber hardware/software system. In addition, a new post of Technical Support Clerk will need to be established to ensure meetings run smoothly and any technical issues can be resolved without interrupting proceedings. The ongoing annual cost of this solution, and the establishment of a new post, are likely to be in the region of £80,000 per annum. These figures are subject to verification if approval to engage with the supplier is given. It is anticipated that the new system would be leased, rather than purchased, to ensure the Council can benefit from any improvements to functionality and technology in this area over the next few years.
- 3.4 To support the arrangements for hybrid meetings, such as electronic voting and determining the number of participants that could be physically present in the Council Chamber, Standing Orders will require to be amended. Members are asked to note that the changes to Standing Orders would be brought to Council before hybrid meetings go live.
- 3.5 Public meetings held via Connect Remote have been live webcast and therefore satisfy the requirement for public access, and openness and transparency in the convening and conduct of meetings. Hybrid meetings would continue to be live webcast.
- 3.6 Haddington Town House and the Council Chamber are currently closed for refurbishment works which should be completed by spring 2022. The hybrid meeting system would be installed as part of the refurbishment works which will remove the need for any retrofit work, with hybrid meetings being implemented after the Town House has re-opened.
- 3.7 It is recommended that meetings continue by remote access until such time as the implementation of hybrid meetings.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 None

5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The subject of this report does not affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on equality, the environment or economy.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Financial – the installation of a hybrid meeting system will incur annual costs for leasing the hardware of approximately £20,000, an annual cost for the provision of helpdesk/service support of approximately £13,000 and annual costs for live webcasting of approximately £6,000. In addition there will be costs of a new technical support post as set out below. There is potential to meet some of these costs from the COVID-19 Recovery Fund. All recurring costs will need to be reflected in future years' budgets.
- 6.2 Personnel – the introduction of a hybrid meeting facility will impact on the resource required in-chamber to support the technical requirements for delivering hybrid meetings. It is anticipated that an additional post will be created within the IT service to deliver this support at a cost of around £40,000 per annum.
- 6.3 Other – it is likely that there will be additional costs of fitting out the Council Chamber, to include upgrades to the IT infrastructure. These costs are not yet known as the provider of the system will need to carry out a technical survey prior to confirming these.
- 6.4 All of these costs will be confirmed if approval is given to progress with the introduction of this system.

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 East Lothian Standing Orders
- 7.2 Report to East Lothian Council, 17 March 2020 – COVID-19 Emergency Recess Procedures
- 7.3 Report to Members' Library – Procurement of Digital Meetings System (Members' Library Ref: 79/20 – July 2020 Bulletin)
- 7.4 Report to East Lothian Council, 25 August 2020 - COVID-19 Emergency Recess Business and Arrangements for 2020/21 Committee Session

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