Item which the Chair has decided is urgent by reason of the need to ensure arrangements for future meetings of the Council as defined under the Multi-Location Meetings (MLM) Policy, approved by Cabinet on 7th September, are in place as soon as possible.

<u>Agenda Item No. 13(i)</u>

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 30TH NOVEMBER, 2023

REFERENCE FROM DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE: 27TH NOVEMBER, 2023

"   HYBRID MEETING PLATFORM UPDATE (CX) –
<u>Matter which the Chair has decided is urgent by reason of the need to agree a preferred option to inform key decisions required to be made in proceeding with hybrid public meetings and the Committee's recommendation be referred to Cabinet for further consideration.</u>

The Committee considered a report on the revised Multi-Location Meetings (MLM) Policy at its meeting on 17th July, 2023 and recommended to Cabinet the same for approval subject to several amendments including that all Scrutiny Committees be included within the revised draft Policy to be undertaken on a hybrid basis and broadcast live. The reference from the Committee was considered by Cabinet on 7th September, 2023, with Cabinet noting that there was an increased level of complexity and resources required for the administration of hybrid meetings as physical attendance needed to be planned as well as setting up remote equipment, increased numbers of staff to support meetings and the inclusion of simultaneous Welsh translation.

Cabinet, on 7th September, 2023, resolved that the MLM Policy be adopted but that there be a trial period of six months for Scrutiny Committee meetings being undertaken on a hybrid basis and broadcast live.

The report therefore provided the Committee with an update in relation to the implementation of the Easy Conf hybrid system for Committee meetings, with Committee also being informed that following discussion with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council, it had been agreed that the phased approach below would be taken to introduce hybrid public meetings:

- Cabinet – 30th November, 2023
- Scrutiny Committees, Governance and Audit and Planning Committees during December 2023 / January 2024 and
- Full Council Special meeting – 15th January, 2024.

The Head of Democratic Services further advised Committee that the Easy Conf hybrid meeting solution had been installed and commissioned in September 2023 and a programme of snagging had followed to ensure the system was ready to be

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thoroughly tested ahead of the soft launch with Members. The report also drew attention to the number of functionalities within the system that had been tested which included the simultaneous Welsh language translation function, hybrid voting and the radio frequency identification card (RFID). A number of Member training sessions had been scheduled and were being worked through as highlighted within paragraphs 2.13 to 2.22 of the report.

In addition to the implementation of the technical platform to enable hybrid meetings to be held work was required within the Council Chamber to accommodate various meetings of different capacities. Members were reminded that the size of the overall Council membership at the last Local Government elections had increased from 47 to 54 Members. The Chamber's dimension and shape posed a challenge in accommodating the maximum in person capacity of Elected Members and officers while aligning with statutory regulations, notably the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Equalities Act 2010. Furthermore it was noted that design considerations to anticipate and accommodate potential forthcoming proposals from the Boundary Commission for Wales would add further complexity in terms on capacity requirements. An evaluation of the existing power infrastructure had also been conducted to inform the design process. Paragraph 2.31 of the report provided details of the options in respect of capacity for the Committee's consideration.

The Head of Democratic Services drew attention to Option D which would require the purchase of new equipment and furniture at a cost of approximately £136k with a lead time of eight weeks. However, for Option F, the existing furniture would be utilised in a compliant layout enabling a large proportion of the current Council membership to be accommodated alongside a number of key officers to support meetings. This would be a minimal cost of £3,500 associated with electrical and minor repair works and a lead time of four weeks to achieve the option. The report therefore proposed that Option F be supported. It being further noted that there was uncertainty as to the number of Members who would decide to attend in person meetings or elected to attend remotely, a trial would enable numbers to be run and attendance monitored during the period with minimal expenditure being incurred and that a further review be undertaken in due course to inform the optimal approach.

Councillor Mahoney, stating that in his view the Chamber should have enough room to accommodate all Members of the Council.

Councillor Haines was also of the view that all Members of the Council should be present in the Chamber for Council meetings and had been disappointed as to how long the introduction of the hybrid solution had taken.

Councillor Perkes stated that in her view Option F should be the preferred option, with the option to review at a later stage.

Councillor Protheroe concurred with that view, as did Councillor Goodjohn in regard to health and safety concerns.

Following a vote it was subsequently

RESOLVED –

(1)   T H A T the progress made to date in respect of the implementation of the Council's hybrid solution platform to be used at Council meetings be noted.

(2)   T H A T Option F be referred to Cabinet as the preferred option for hybrid public meetings.

<u>Reasons for decisions</u>

(1)   Having regard to the progress made to date.

(2)   In order to inform decisions to be made by Cabinet."

Attached as Appendix: Report to Democratic Services Committee: 27th November, 2023

Matter which the Chair has decided is urgent by reason of the need to agree a preferred option to inform key decisions required to be made in proceeding with hybrid public meetings and the Committee's recommendation be referred to Cabinet for further consideration.

Meeting of:	**Democratic Services Committee**
Date of Meeting:	**Monday, 27 November 2023**
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Corporate Performance and Resources
Report Title:	Hybrid Meeting Platform Update
Purpose of Report:	To inform Democratic Services Committee of the options available to the Council in proceeding with hybrid public meetings.
Report Owner:	Rob Thomas, Chief Executive Tom Bowring, Director of Corporate Resources
Responsible Officer:	Jeff Rees, Operational Manager Democratic Services
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	Consultation has been undertaken with the Leader, Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Resources, and the Council's Monitoring Officer.
Policy Framework:	The report is a matter for Executive Decision by Cabinet

Executive Summary:

The Committee received a report on the revised Multi-Location Meetings (MLM) Policy at its meeting on 17th July, 2023 (Minute No. 214 refers) which provided a progress update on the legislative requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 ("the LG&E Act") and on a hybrid solution for use at Council meetings.

The revised draft MLM Policy was recommended to Cabinet for approval subject to several amendments including within the revised draft MLM Policy that all Scrutiny Committees be included within the revised draft MLM Policy to be undertaken on a hybrid basis and broadcast live.

The reference from Democratic Services Committee on 17th July, 2023 was presented to Cabinet on 7th September, 2023 (Minute No. C79 refers). It was stated that the reference from the Democratic Services Committee to Cabinet included a recommendation that all Scrutiny Committees be included within the then revised draft MLM Policy to be undertaken on a hybrid basis and broadcast live, save for

when Part II matters were to be discussed. It was noted that there was an increased level of complexity and resources required for the administration of hybrid meetings as physical attendance needed to be planned, as well as setting up remote equipment, increased numbers of staff to support meetings and could also include the possibility of simultaneous Welsh translation.

Resource implications were discussed at the meeting as there would need to be increased input from Democratic Services, ICT and Facilities to service hybrid meetings as well as the need to broadcast them live.

Cabinet, on 7th September, proposed that the MLM Policy be adopted but that there be a trial period of 6 months for Scrutiny Committee meetings regarding the preferred option of the live broadcast of hybrid meetings in relation to Scrutiny Committees. That would allow further training of Members, the level of resources required to service hybrid meetings to be ascertained and an assessment of the viewing figures prior to any discussion about an appropriate budget as part of financial discussions for next year's budget as a potential priority spend. Cabinet resolved that the resolutions of Democratic Services Committee at its meeting of 17th July be agreed regarding the broadcast for hybrid meetings, subject to Scrutiny Committees meetings being included in the list of meetings being held on a hybrid basis for a trial period of 6 months.

Regular meetings of the Hybrid Implementation Project Team (HIPT) have been held on an at least weekly basis attended by colleagues from Democratic Services, ICT, Facilities and OD and Learning, supported by colleagues from the Business Improvement Team to progress the implementation of the hybrid solution for use at Council meetings.

The progress made to date and the key decisions which require to be made are as set out in the body of this report.

Recommendations

1. That the Democratic Services Committee notes the progress made to date in respect of the implementation of the Council's Hybrid solution platform for use at Council meetings.

2. That the Democratic Services Committee considers the options available to the Council as set out in the report to inform the key decisions which are required to be made in proceeding with hybrid public meetings and the Committee's recommendation be referred to Cabinet for further consideration

Reasons for Recommendations

1. To update the Committee on the progress made to date.

2. To seek the Committee's views on the available options to inform the decisions to be made by Cabinet.

1. Background

1.1 In June 2023, and updated in July and August 2023, Welsh Government published Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales – Supporting Provisions Within the Local Government Act 2000, the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (WG23-23) https://www.gov.wales/statutory-and-non-statutory-guidance-democracy-within-principal-councils

1.2 Part 3 paragraph 1.50 of the Statutory Guidance issued in June 2023 states that *"the 2021 Act requires principal councils to broadcast meetings of the full council live as they happen. This development will allow the public to follow the proceedings of the full council in real time from wherever they are, hear the contribution of their local representatives and understand the issues raised in respect of agenda items. The council is also required to make the broadcast available electronically for a reasonable period after the meeting. This should be available for at least six months following the meeting. This should not be seen as a prohibition on councils to the broadcast of other meetings of the council. This is the first step in respect of broadcasting and the Welsh Government intends to extend this requirement to several other council committee meetings in the future. As part of its strategy councils should explore the views of the public about which of the council's committees they consider should be broadcast. This will require councils to ensure the public are clear about the nature and scope of each of its committees and sub committees."*

1.3 The Statutory Guidance also advises that relevant Authorities can develop their multi–location meetings arrangements as to what is right for them and the communities they serve. Part 15 Paragraph 15.58 advises that the exact contents of a policy will be agreed at local level and refers to decide which

meetings will have physical provision made for them and which will be conducted wholly through remote means also see paragraph 15.60 of the Statutory Guidance.

1.4   The overall purpose of Welsh Government amending the law as referred to in the Statutory Guidance is to give relevant Authorities powers and freedoms to convene MLMs to achieve greater accessibility and improved public participation in local government and local democracy. These powers are linked to the requirement for Principal Councils to broadcast (by audio and/or video) certain meetings.

1.5   As also referred to in the Statutory Guidance, MLMs offer Local Authorities the potential to update and transform the way they do business. It provides opportunities for Authorities to become more flexible and efficient and raise their profile in the local community and to bring their work directly into people's homes. Public access to MLMs is likely to be significantly higher than the level of audiences attending meetings in person previously and the Guidance also advises that attendance levels during the pandemic bear this out.

1.6   The Local Authority is also under a duty to make and publish arrangements for the purpose of ensuring Local Authority meetings are able to be held by means of any equipment or other facility which enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meetings.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

2.1   The LG&E Act requires the Council to put into place arrangements to allow Members to attend formal Council meetings from a remote location and these arrangements are reflected within the Council's MLM Policy. The MLM Policy therefore considers the technology to enable remote attendance as well as the physical environment within the Council's Civic Offices to facilitate meetings.

2.2   As set out in the previous report to Democratic Services Committee, the Council is working to implement hybrid meetings using the Easy Conference ("Easy Conf") system. Work is progressing to implement this in a planned, tested and risk assessed way to ensure it is successful.

2.3   Following discussions with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council, it has been agreed that the below phased approach will be taken to introduce hybrid public meetings:

- Cabinet , 30th November

- Scrutiny Committees, Governance and Audit and Planning Committees during December 2023 / January 2024, and

- Full Council Special meeting, 15th January 2024.

2.4   This report provides Members with an overview of the work to implement the technology (EasyConf), the support for Members in their use of the new platform

and the changes to the Council Chamber required to accommodate meetings as per the MLM.

Implementation of Easy-Conf Platform

2.5   The Easy-Conf hybrid meeting solution was installed and commissioned in September 2023, and a programme of snagging followed to ensure the system was ready to be thoroughly tested ahead of the soft launch.

2.6   Once fully commissioned, a programme of system testing was carried out on the Easy-Conf Hybrid Remote Meeting Platform in a number of scenarios, with different numbers of attendees attending in the Council Chamber, attending remotely from the Civic Offices whist connecting to the Council's wireless network, attending remotely whilst connecting to home broadband and VoG VPN, and attending remotely whilst connecting to home broadband without being connected to VoG VPN.

2.7   All aspects of system functionality were tested, both in the chamber and remotely with only one issue relating to remote screen sharing whilst an attendee was connected to home broadband AND VoG VPN remaining on the snagging list. This issue can be mitigated by remote attendees connecting via home broadband only (not VoG VPN), if they wish to remote screen share. Whilst this issue will be resolved shortly it will not delay the planned soft launch of the system as outlined in the timetable above.

2.8   Simultaneous Welsh Language Translation functionality has been fully tested and works seamlessly for both local and remote attendees.

2.9   Hybrid voting has also been fully tested and again works for both local and remote attendees. This functionality will mean that all votes are now fully automated and recorded votes will take seconds to carry out, as the automation removes the need to go through the roll call to collect individual votes manually.

2.10 The hearing loop and Bluetooth transmitters are currently being tested with the microphones to ensure that any meeting attendees in the Council Chamber can hear proceedings regardless of the type of hearing aid they use.

2.11 A Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) card has been configured for each local meeting attendee, which will allow them to sit anywhere in the Council Chamber. The Hybrid Meeting Solution will automatically identify attendees when they press the request to speak button on their microphone. The meeting delegate will be displayed on the screen when they speak, along with their name and designation bilingually. This functionality provides much greater flexibility, as meeting delegates can now sit anywhere in the Council chamber without the need for their seating position to be pre-programmed into the system.

2.12 Overall, the technology is therefore working as required to support the soft launch of the system as outlined above.

Training & Support for Members

2.13 Arrangements have been underway to deliver Member training sessions on the use of the Easy Conference meeting solution.

2.14 All Members received an enrolment invitation to undertake the related iDev e-learning certification, which was circulated on 31st October, 2023. This included additional information relating to three in-person sessions in the week commencing 4th November to allow Members to access further support and experience in using the remote meeting platform and physical equipment in the Council Chamber in order to be comfortable and confident in participating in meetings using the new system.

2.15 The support of Group Leaders and Independent Members has also been sought via separate email to encourage their group colleagues / themselves to participate in the above support arrangements.

2.16 As of Wednesday, 22nd November, 53 out of 67 Elected and Co-Opted Members (79%) had completed the e-learning video module on iDev, a further 3 are in progress and 11 are yet to start.

2.17 The three general drop-in sessions offered to Members during the week commencing 4th November were not deemed as essential to attend but were received positively by the 17 Members (including 1 Co-opted Member and 2 Committee Chairs) who took up the opportunity.

2.18 During the sessions Members were apprised on the infrastructure of the Chamber, key points to note when attending a meeting in-person from the Council Chamber as well as key points when attending a meeting remotely via the Easy Conf Remote Meeting Platform. All of which was reinforced within the three videos that formed the iDev e-learning module.

2.19 Questions that were raised by Members during these sessions were recorded and a formal response was provided to all Elected and Co-opted Members on Wednesday, 22nd November.

2.20 A Cabinet specific Easy Conf Drop-in session was also arranged on Thursday 9th November and was well received by the majority of the Cabinet Members present. Two attended in-person from the Council Chamber and four individuals were remote, therefore, a successful hybrid scenario was re-created. Since this session, Cabinet Members have also had the opportunity to experience the system from both an in-person and remote perspective with support from the Cabinet Officer to ensure their connectivity, accessibility and functionality.

2.21 The only remaining point, to be further tested as a result of the drop-in sessions, was support available to Members who had identified as having a hearing impairment. This support was being provided by Democratic Services Officers, on a 1-2-1 basis, with the individuals concerned.

2.22 Further drop-in sessions have now been scheduled as follows:
Chair Specific - As part of the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group Meeting at 6pm on 28th November, 2023. Elected Members (without a Chair seat) who were

not able to attend the three original drop-in sessions have also been invited to this drop-in as an additional opportunity to receive support.

Co-opted Observer Members (without voting rights, who do not have access to a corporate iDev e-learning Account) – Friday, 1st December at 2pm.

Council Chamber

2.23   In addition to the implementation of the technical platform to enable hybrid meetings to be held, work is required within the Council Chamber to accommodate various meetings of different capacities. Members will note that the size of the overall Council Membership at the last Local Government Elections increased from 47 to 54 Members.

2.24   As part of the Hybrid Implementation Project Team's (HIPT) work, consideration has been given to the current capacity and electrical infrastructure of the Council Chamber to be able to hold a Full Council meeting in the event that all Members of the Council and relevant officers attended in person. A number of options have been developed and considered by officers to identify the most practical and cost-effective solution to hold meetings of the Full Council in the current Chamber accommodation.

2.25   The Chamber's dimensions and shape poses a challenge in accommodating the maximum 'in-person' capacity of Elected Members and officers while aligning with statutory regulations, notably the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Equalities Act 2010. Additionally, design considerations to anticipate and accommodate potential forthcoming proposals from The Boundary Commission for Wales, add further complexity in terms of capacity requirements.

2.26   In addition, an evaluation of the existing power infrastructure, including distribution boards and floor power boxes, was conducted to inform the design process. When previously installed, the draw on the electrical capacity of the Chamber was not sufficient as it would be for meetings of this number of attendees and associated equipment.

2.27   The designs considered sought to strike a balance between functionality, compliance and future adaptability, whilst meeting the diverse needs and constraints of the Chamber environment.

2.28   In collaboration with the Council's Health and Safety Section and Building Control Section, a risk assessment was conducted by the Facilities team. This assessment referred to Building Regulation Approved Document B (Fire Safety) as a guide, focusing on establishing minimum unobstructed escape route distances and considering the specified widths for exits. Moreover, compliance with guidance from Building Regulation Approved Document M (Access to and use of buildings) was considered in the assessment.

2.29   As part of the design requirements, power outlets for desks to support laptops and microphone setups were necessary and acknowledging requests for enhanced cable storage and power connections, efforts were made to explore solutions to meet these requirements such as placement of floor power boxes,

minimizing trip hazards from cables, and maintaining operational distances around furniture and occupants for safe movement and egress purposes.

2.30 Six distinct desk layouts (Options A – F) were considered, each outlining different occupancy levels (based on the current and predicted Council Membership and number of officers supporting), dimensions of existing and new furniture in various layouts.

2.31 The options considered were:

- Option A – Capacity 62: Current furniture set out in new layout (square option)

- Option B - Capacity 64: Current furniture set out in new layout (circular option)

- Option C – Capacity 64: Bespoke fixed furniture & chairs (circular option)

- Option D – Capacity 69: Bespoke fixed furniture & chairs (circular option)

- Option E – Capacity 48: Bespoke fixed furniture & chairs (circular option)

- Option F – Capacity 40: Current furniture set out in new layout (circular option).

2.32 The HIPT evaluated the options above and propose Members give consideration to two of these options in further detail, these being option D and option F.

2.33 Option D would require the purchase of new equipment and furniture at a cost of approximately £136k, with a lead in time of 8 weeks. This option has the benefit of 'future proofing' the Chamber based on the predicted number of Council Members and staff at 100% capacity. Choosing this option would impact on the ability to achieve a hybrid approach by January as proposed.

2.34 If Option D were to be chosen, the existing furniture in the Council Chamber would be reutilised in other corporate meeting rooms which currently have ageing furniture which is overdue for replacement and therefore would not be wasted. However, investment of this scale in the context of significant budget pressures, and with uncertainty as to the number of Members who wish to attend in person meetings in the Chamber or electing to attend remotely from another location, as the legislation intended is challenging.

2.35 Option F would utilise the existing furniture in a compliant layout enabling a large proportion of the current Council Membership to be accommodated alongside a number of key officers to support meetings. There would be a minimal cost of £3,500 (associated with electrical and minor repair works) and a lead in time of 4 weeks to achieve this option.

2.36 It is proposed that in order to move with pace, that Option F is initially supported on the basis of a trial arrangement. This would see existing equipment/furniture used as per the timetable illustrated in this report ahead of the Special Full Council Meeting on 15th January, 2024 (with the support of Group Leaders).

2.37 As there is uncertainty at this point as to the numbers of Members who will decide to attend 'in person' meetings or elect to attend remotely, a trial would enable meetings to be run and attendance monitored during the period with minimal expenditure being incurred and a further review to be undertaken in due course to inform the optimal approach.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

3.1   The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2005 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the "well-being goals".

3.2   These proposals are consistent with the Council's Corporate Plan and in particular the wellbeing objective 'to work with and for our communities', The proposals reflect the Council's desire to increase public participation in the democratic process, including involvement in meetings and also in attracting people to be a part of the Council.

4.   Climate Change and Nature Implications

4.1   The introduction of hybrid meetings seek to reduce travel and energy consumption and are consistent with the Council's Project Zero commitments.

5.   Resources and Legal Considerations

<u>Financial</u>

5.1   The costs associated with this policy will be met from existing budget provision, however where required any future cost pressure bids relating to this Policy will be reported as appropriate.

5.2   Committee is advised that resourcing live streaming via this method has been and continues to be staff resource intensive. Although the Council agreed to live-stream its Council meetings from 1st May, 2021 (save for those matters of a confidential nature) there was no legal requirement at that time to do so and this remains the case.

5.3   Depending on the option for the Council's Chamber, budget will be required to fund any procurement required.

<u>Employment</u>

5.4   The additional staff resourcing implications associated with facilitating hybrid meetings is set out in the body and financial implications sections of this report.

Legal (Including Equalities)

5.5   Consideration has been given as referenced in the body of this report to the Health and Safety At Work Act (1974). Sections 2 and 3 of this Act mandate employers to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of their employees while at work and to safeguard others from potential risks. Risks might arise if there is a failure to provide a safe working environment, including adequate provision of power supply to desks with non-fixed furniture, leading to potential hazards like cable-related accidents or electrical risks. In addition, disconnection of power supplying desks with non-fixed furniture poses risks related to operational disruptions, potential damage to electrical systems, and safety hazards if not managed appropriately. Such disconnections without proper protocols might lead to electrical accidents, data loss due to abrupt power cutoffs, or even impact on meeting business needs.

5.6   The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

-     Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts;

-     Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;

-     Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;

-     Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage;

-     Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language;

-     Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

5.7   Officers are documenting an equality impact assessment which will be taken forward.

6.   Background Papers - None