

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of an Extraordinary Remote meeting held on 16th July, 2024.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

The Meeting recording is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor Dr. I.J. Johnson (Chair); Councillor N.C. Thomas (Vice-Chair); Councillors G. Bruce, G.D.D. Carroll, E. Goodjohn, S.M. Hanks and J. Protheroe.

Also present: Councillors I.R. Buckley and E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health).

221 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Interim Head of Democratic Services read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

222 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillors H.C. Hamilton, K.P. Mahoney and S.D Perkes.

223 MINUTES –

RESOLVED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 1st July, 2024 be approved as a correct record.

224 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interest were received.

225 HYBRID MEETING PLATFORM UPDATE (CX) –

The Interim Head of Democratic Services presented the report which outlined that the Committee had considered a report on the revised Multi-Location Meetings (MLM) Policy at its meeting on 17th July, 2023 (Minute No. 214 refers) and which had 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 Meeting Platform solution for use at Council meetings. The revised draft MLM Policy was recommended to Cabinet for approval subject to some amendments and a

recommendation that all Scrutiny Committees be included within the revised draft MLM Policy to be undertaken on a hybrid basis and broadcast live.

The recommendations from the Democratic Services Committee were presented to Cabinet on 7th September, 2023 (Minute No. C79 refers) and proposed that the MLM Policy be adopted as recommended but that there be a trial period of six months for Scrutiny Committee meetings to be held on a hybrid basis and broadcast live, save for when Part II matters were to be discussed. This being to allow for further training of Members, the level of resources required to support hybrid meetings to be ascertained and an assessment of the livestream viewing figures prior to any further decision being made. The revised MLM Policy was subsequently approved by Full Council on 4th December, 2023 for inclusion within the Council's Constitution.

A progress update report on the hybrid solution was considered by Democratic Services on 17th November, 2023 in relation to the implementation of the Easy Conference (EasyConf) Connect platform, training and support for Members, as well as works required within the Council Chamber to accommodate various meetings of different capacities, following which the Democratic Services Committee recommended to Cabinet that furniture and layout Option F be the preferred option for hybrid public meetings. This option was subsequently agreed by Cabinet on 30th November, 2023.

With regard to the Council's current provider of a hybrid system for Council meetings, a Hybrid Implementation Project Team (HIPT) of Council officers had been established with weekly meetings being held to progress the implementation of the hybrid solution for use at Council meetings. The hybrid solution provider had also been requested to attend those meetings on an ad hoc basis when required to maintain open and regular lines of communication and to monitor performance. The progress made to date and the key decisions which were required to be made were as set out in the body of the report. The report recommended to the Committee that the Council continued its contract with VP-AV limited on a 1+1+1 year basis.

The Chair drew attention to some issues with the system which had been encountered at a Planning meeting in March 2024, at the Standards Committee in June and at Full Council on 15th July. In response the officer advised that there had been connection issues in March with some Members being unable to access the meeting who were trying to attend remotely in other parts of the country. An internal issue with connections had also been encountered which had now been rectified.

With regard to the Standards Committee, the Chair of the Committee had requested that the mosaic function in the system be used in order that more Members of the Committee could be seen at any one time on screen. Unfortunately, this function did not appear to work and this matter had been escalated to VP-AV system provider to MVI the software supplier. It was a matter of preference to have more than one person on screen at any one time, whereas the legislation required that anyone speaking be seen and heard. Some permission rights in the system had also not been allocated to some Members but this had since been rectified.

Having regard to Full Council on 15th July, it had since been established that one or two Members had internet connection issues with Democratic Services officers subsequently being informed following the meeting that these had been related to their home broadband connections.

Councillor Carroll said he was not prepared to support Recommendation (3) within the report that Scrutiny Committees going forward be held on a remote only basis and considered that resources were necessary to be incurred so that Scrutiny Committees could be held on a hybrid basis.

Councillors Protheroe and Thomas, although recognising that there had been issues in the past in establishing the system, stated that it was important to move forward.

Councillor Hanks enquired as to whether the Council was fully compliant with the law in relation to the provision of hybrid and remote meetings with the officer confirming that this was the case and that the Council had actually gone over and above the requirements as it live streamed all its meetings, save for those matters of a confidential nature. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and the Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance required that Councils had in place a policy for in person, remote and hybrid meetings. The officer, however, informed the Committee that Welsh Government, via the WLGA, had advised of their intention to conduct a review of their Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance on Multi-Location Meetings with a request for officer attendance from the Local Authorities at a meeting to discuss such matters. Committee would be apprised of the outcome of such discussions in due course.

Councillor Hanks also enquired as to whether further images which could be placed on screens as backgrounds were available, and she was advised that there were more images in the system although Members were requested to select the low level resolution on the system to alleviate any potential issues with broadband speed.

Following the resolution of Cabinet for a six-month trial period for Scrutiny Committee meetings to be undertaken on a hybrid basis, Appendix 1 to the report provided the Committee with details of Elected Members and members of the public attendance at Scrutiny Committee meetings within the Council Chamber during the six month period. Due to the limited number of attendances recorded within the six months, resource implications including costs and staffing capacity, it was therefore being recommended that future meetings of the Scrutiny Committees be held on a remote only basis unless a matter of County wide interest had been determined by the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee in consultation with the Chief Executive.

The Chair commented on his Group's disappointment that at Full Council meetings, due to limited capacity in the Chamber, Members' attendance was allocated in line with the political balance and that if some parties did not attend their seats were vacant for the meeting, which he thought unfair if other Members wished to be present. Following a further query from the Chair regarding the availability of users online being able to hear the Welsh language being spoken instead of the English translation, Committee was advised that Democratic Services were currently investigating this.

Following consideration of the report both Councillors Carroll and the Chair expressed their disappointment at the proposed recommendation to undertake Scrutiny Committees on a remote basis and although recognising the resource issues associated with hybrid meetings, they considered it important that Scrutiny Committees continued to be held on a hybrid basis and wished their disappointment to be reflected in the minutes, stating that they would not be supportive of Recommendation (3).

Committee, having considered the report and all the issues and implications contained therein,

RESOLVED –

- (1) T H A T the Democratic Services Committee recommend to Cabinet that it continues the contract with VP-AV Limited on a 1 + 1 + 1 year basis in order that future Remote and Hybrid Council meetings can be held on the EasyConf software platform
- (2) T H A T delegated authority be granted to the Director of Corporate Resources and the Monitoring Officer / Head of Legal and Democratic Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive, to continue the contract with VP-AV Limited on a 1 + 1 + 1 year basis from 21st August, 2024.
- (3) T H A T all Scrutiny Committee meetings be held on a remote basis only unless a matter of County wide interest had been determined by the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee in conjunction with the Chief Executive and the Council's current Multi-Location Meetings (MLM) Policy in the Constitution be amended accordingly.
- (4) T H A T the MLM Policy be amended to read that the Shared Regulatory Services (SRS) Joint Committee Annual Meeting can be held on a hybrid (and /or in person) basis subject to the Chair of the Committee's agreement.

Reasons for decisions

- (1) To seek Cabinet approval having regard to the robust monitoring undertaken and to ensure the Council had a hybrid meeting platform solution in place for undertaking Council meetings.
- (2) To seek Cabinet approval for the contract with VP-AV to be entered into and ensure appropriate delegations were in place to execute the procurement and contractual processes.
- (3) Having regard to resource implications for the Council and the statistical information collated during the trial period as referred to at paragraph 3.2 and Appendix 2 to the report.
- (4) To allow, if deemed appropriate, all Local Authority Members of the SRS Joint Committee to meet on a hybrid (in person) basis at least once a year.

