

<b>Report to:</b>	Scrutiny and Overview Committee      3 March 2022
<b>Lead Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Neil Gough, Lead Cabinet Member for Transformation and Projects
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	Jeff Membery, Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services

## **Review of Hybrid Technology and Risk Mitigation**

### **Executive Summary**

1. This report sets out the issues that have occurred with the AV equipment and Hybrid Meeting System in the Council Chamber at South Cambs Hall and the measures that have been put in place to mitigate future risks.

### **Key Decision**

2. No

### **Recommendations**

3. It is recommended that the Scrutiny and Overview Committee consider and comment on the contents of the report.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

4. The Committee is requested to examine the procedures and backups in place for when the livestream fails during public meetings and what protocols could be put in place, if not already, to assist members and be clear to the public as to what should happen in these situations. As there is a degree of uncertainty as to the way in which Members and officers at a meeting would become aware of a meeting not being streamed, and in view of the fact that using AV technology to conduct hybrid meetings is still a new way of working for both officers and Members, the Chair has agreed it is advisable that Scrutiny consider this matter.

## Details

5. The hybrid technology in the Chamber was implemented in May 2021. Since this date, there have been two major failures which have caused the postponement of a meeting and the loss of the vast majority of a recording. The first was at Planning Committee on 8 September 2021 and the latest issue at Audit and Corporate Governance Committee on 4 February 2022.
6. Since the hybrid technology was installed, South Cambridgeshire District Council has run 58 meetings using this technology. Of these 58 meetings, 5 have experienced issues that have either delayed, postponed or affected the meeting start time. This means that 91.4% of the meetings that have been run using this technology during the period May 2021 to February 2022, have done so without any major issues affecting the running of the meeting.
7. Of the 5 meetings to have been affected, 4 of these meetings came in a 9-day period between 06 and 15 September due to a faulty piece of equipment. Once the faulty piece of equipment was identified, the contractors implemented a software solution that resolved this issue, with no similar issues having occurred since. It is not unusual for business technical solutions of this complexity to require some adjustment within the first 6 months of their term and the contractors are confident that the system is now stable.
8. Since 15 September, 33 meetings have been run, with only one meeting experiencing a major fault on 4 February 2022, the resolution of which is set out at paragraph 9 below. South Cambridgeshire District Council has therefore been able to successfully run hybrid meetings 97% of the time during the period 16 September 2021 to February 2022.
9. In relation to the Planning Committee meeting held on 08 September 2021 and the related issues experienced during the beginning of September, the contractor provided the following explanation:

'The underlying cause of the audio fault was a failure of Digital Audio signal flow from the audio DSP mixer to the chamber PC via and (sic) USB Dante adapter due to a Dante "bug". The upgrade of the DSP mixer and Dante controller has resolved all symptoms.'

On 04 February 2022, the Council ran an Audit & Corporate Governance Committee meeting, for which the live stream failed after initially connecting. This meant that only the final 10 minutes were captured in the recording. The installation took account of this risk by ensuring the computer that runs the hybrid technology has its own dedicated internet line. This does not however, prevent minor lapses in the internet functionality. To prevent this happening again, a recording function has now been implemented into the technology to allow an offline copy of every meeting to be stored on the computer itself. As such, any future meetings that are live streamed will have a full recording of the meeting, available to be uploaded onto the relevant social media platforms for members of the public to be able to view.

10. Concerns have been raised in the referral to this Committee, that none of the participants of the Audit and Corporate Governance meeting on 04 February 2022 were aware that the live stream was not functioning. The existing procedure had been to have an officer confirm to the Webcasting Officer that the live stream of the meeting had successfully commenced, however this procedure has been reinforced to ensure that this monitoring continues for the duration of the meeting.
11. In addition to the major faults mentioned above, officers recognise councillors' understandable concerns regarding the impact of minor interruptions to Committee meetings, which may arise when officers need to resolve minor issues with the technology as they occur. It is the view of officers that such issues are an inevitable consequence of using complex technical systems in a live setting.
12. There is a standard procedure in place, where such interruptions arise: the Webcasting Officer would flag up that there is an issue to the Chair of the meeting, the Chair would then indicate to Members of the Committee that an adjournment is required. The Webcasting Officer would then display a holding slide to the watching public to inform them that the Committee meeting will resume shortly.
13. Competing demands on the time of a single officer conducting the meeting using the technology can introduce risk, for example, where helping an individual member with their microphone, device, or providing administrative support. The mitigation for this risk is currently the subject of staffing resource consideration.
14. Whilst the solution of any issue should be within the technical remit of the Webcasting Officer, further recourse is available through making contact with the supplier's support team. During the adjournment, an engineer from the supplier would then be able remotely access the computer to provide diagnostic and technical support.
15. To improve the opportunity for feedback from those interacting with the meeting, a note will be added to all agenda pages, asking members of the public to inform Democratic Services via the generic email, should they experience any issues with the live stream or connecting into a meeting virtually.

## **Options**

1. Note the report;
2. Consider bringing this issue back to the next appropriate meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee in the event of further performance concerns; and/or
3. Request a review into the performance of the hybrid system within a suggested period of six months, to be reported back to a suitable meeting of the Committee.

## **Implications**

16. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:

## **Staffing**

17. If the Committee were to recommend any additional staffing for streaming hybrid meetings, the resulting staffing implications would need to be considered by the Head of Transformation, HR and Corporate Services.

## **Alignment with Council Priority Areas**

### **A modern and caring Council**

18. The web-streaming and hybrid service helps to provide accountability to the public on the way in which South Cambridgeshire District Council runs its Committee meetings and allow the public to be able to engage in the way which is most convenient to the individual. For example, before implementation of this service, people who wished to make representations at a Planning Committee meeting were obliged to travel to South Cambs Hall and sit in the Chamber for potentially an entire day to wait for their three-minute speaking slot, which involved a lengthy time commitment and probable inconvenience. Now, if individuals choose, they can speak at a meeting from the comfort of their home or from their place of work, without having to commit to nearly a whole day to do so and without incurring travel costs. This technology also provides greater convenience for Members in that if they are unable to attend a meeting physically, they can choose to participate virtually in a Committee meeting from home and although they would not be able to take part in voting remotely, they can engage in the debate.

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