ANGUS COUNCIL

8 SEPTEMBER 2022

HYBRID COUNCIL AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS OPTIONS FOR TOWN & COUNTY HALL

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ABSTRACT

This report provides members with updated options, costs and risks for delivering future council and committee meetings through a hybrid model in the existing chamber in Town and County Hall.

1.   RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Council:

(i)   Notes the revised options highlighted in this report for the delivery of future hybrid council and committee meetings;

(ii) Notes the financial implications and risks of each option; and

(iii) Approves either: -

(a) the furniture solution and Option 3 (the recommended technical solution option as detailed in this report) to be progressed and implemented, to be operational for the February 2023 council meeting; or
(b) the furniture solution and one of the other technical options to be progressed and implemented and to be operational for the February 2023 council meeting.

2.   ALIGNMENT TO THE COUNCIL PLAN

This report contributes to the following priorities in our Council Plan for 2017 – 2022:
i)   Economy: Angus to be a go-to place for business
ii)   People: To maximise inclusion and reduce inequalities
iii)   Place: Our communities to be strong, resilient and led by citizens
iv)   Our Council: Angus Council to be efficient and effective

3.   BACKGROUND

In June 2022, Full Council considered Report 177/22 which set out proposals for physical locations and technical options for delivering hybrid council and committee meetings. The report is included at **Appendix 2** for reference. Full Council agreed that the existing chambers at Town & County Hall with a new furniture layout would be used for future hybrid council and committee meetings. It was also agreed to defer the report and to delegate authority to the Director of HR, OD, Digital Enablement, IT & Business Support following consultation with the Leader of Council, the Leader of opposition and a non-aligned representative to consult on costs of less expensive hybrid systems including costs for associated equipment and report back to full council in September.

A Member Officer Working Group (MOWG) was formed and had three very productive short meetings including a visit to the chamber space at the Town and County Hall. This allowed the technical and furniture requirements to be reviewed and less expensive options identified, to be considered by Full Council.

This report details less expensive options that deliver solutions for hybrid council and committee meetings within the agreed layout of the council chamber at Town & County Hall.

4.   OPTIONS

A single proposal for furniture and three options for hybrid meeting delivery are described below:

Furniture Solution (Recommended)

The proposals in Report 177/22 to Full Council in June 2022 gave full flexibility to the chamber space with the ability to move the new slimline desks on fitted castors and incorporating a flip top desk allowing neat storage against a wall when not in use. New chairs would also be on castors to improve flexibility. This would have allowed the chamber to easily be used for other purposes if needed. The desks were also various sizes to allow the maximisation of visitor space. Power feeds were hidden in an integrated system which were easily uncoupled. This higher level of flexibility was reflected in higher cost.

The MOWG determined that full flexibility of the chamber was not an essential requirement, and this has allowed the specification of standard sized slimline tables without castors, the flip top function or the integrated cabling system. The use of standard sized desks has altered the layout slightly and reduces the space for visitors. However, having the ability to have hybrid meetings will allow visitors to attend remotely. The power feeds will be clipped to the underside of desks but there will be no ability to quickly uncouple. The desk positions will effectively be fixed, limiting the flexibility of the space and use for other purposes. However, should the council decide that the chamber was no longer suitable, the furniture could be re-used and moved to another location. A rise and fall desk has also been specified to improve accessibility and the number of chairs for laptop stands for officers has been increased. The costs include all associated electrical and cabling work.

As full flexibility of the space is not required the MOWG recommends that only this revised, less expensive option should be considered. The cost of this fixed furniture proposal is £14k and sees the costs reduce from £26k which were detailed for the flexible furniture proposal in the report to Full Council in June 2022.

The revised layout is shown in **Appendix 1**.

The changing of the large portrait paintings in the chamber was also considered by the MOWG. This would entail two smaller paintings being removed to allow display screens to be fitted. However, given the costs of removal of the other larger paintings, hanging of replacement paintings from the collection and the need for areas of redecoration, the MOWG determined not to present this as an option.

Technical Solutions

The Full Council decision to return to the chamber in the Town & County Hall and the MOWG proposal that full flexibility of the space is not an essential requirement means there is no longer the need to consider wireless microphones that were included in the various options presented in the June 2022 report – the wireless microphones could be moved to provision this. With the dedicated space in the chamber now proposed and not required for other purposes, cheaper wired microphones have been costed for all options instead. This change in requirement has allowed for the overall cost of the technical solution to be reduced.

Through discussions with suppliers and the MOWG there are three options for consideration. These options all provide equivalent microphone and audio capability as before but also with

display screens. Two options also provide cameras to deliver the necessary video requirements for hybrid meetings.

Each of the options make use of wired push-to-talk microphones (mics). There is a choice of using either 17 or 34 mics for the in-person audio. Using 34 mics would allow each member/officer to have a dedicated mic, so 2 per table. If it was acceptable to share a mic between members/officers then the number required would reduce to 17. There would be no difference in performance or output using fewer mics, but it would reduce costs and this is included in the Financial Implications section for each option.

Each option also uses 3 display screens to show video of remote attendees to in-person attendees in the chamber. These would include 2 large (75") screens behind the top table for the majority of in-person attendees, mounted on the walls to ensure suitable viewing and not causing any obstruction. One smaller (55") screen would be deployed for those seated at the top table, mounted on a stand with casters to allow it to be moved when not in use.

The positions of the different components are shown in the layout plan at **Appendix 1**.

Each solution would be fixed in place in the chamber with the necessary cabling for mics, audio, video, controllers, power and networking. Should the council decide that the chamber was no longer suitable, the equipment could be re-used and moved but would require the chosen supplier to de-construct the components and install/re-configure these into a new location.

None of these options offer any change to the way that council meetings are livestreamed and recorded, so existing resources, software and procedures to livestream to YouTube would remain as is for other meetings, resourced by the Business Support team.

None of the other benefits which were offered by the previously costed fully managed system are included either, again enabling the costs to be reduced from the technical solution outlined in the previous report. Papers would remain on the committee area of the angus.gov.uk web site separate from the recordings with no opportunity to host these in one area. The MOWG have suggested that combined papers be made available for public and that agenda items are tracked to the position in the YouTube video. Work is ongoing to consider delivery of this which would require review of the existing web site committee area and appropriate procedures to maintain this by the council's IT and Executive Support staff. This requires additional effort pre and post meeting to update the web site for each committee meeting.

Option 1 – Audio only
This solution would deliver microphone and audio capabilities within the council chamber but with no video of in-person attendees. This would be equivalent to how meetings were run pre-COVID, but allowing the audio/video of remote attendees to be seen within the chamber and on the livestream and recordings.

Video of remote attendees would be shown within the chamber on the 3 display screens. Any remote attendees' video would be displayed on the screens within the chamber and also on the YouTube livestream and recording, but chamber attendees' output to YouTube would be audio only.

Other equipment required to deliver this solution would include the push-to-talk mics which would also provide amplified audio as described above.

This option is least complex but offers a poor experience for remote members, council officers and the public who would not see any video from the active speakers in the chamber. While being the cheapest option, it could portray a poor image of the council's commitment to public engagement and our ability to deliver basic video conferencing capabilities. There are also potential equalities implications as detailed in the Equalities Impact Assessment.

Option 2 - Static cameras
This solution would provide audio and video from the chambers, with remote attendees visible on screens for in-person attendees. Remote attendees and public viewers would see a general view of the chambers focussed on a section of the room, allowing them to see proceedings but not focussed on specific speakers.

This solution would use 3 cameras at points within the chamber designed to capture different sections of the room;

- The top table including the Chief Executive, Provost, Director of Legal and Democratic and Committee Services officer. This would also seat speaking officers
- The Left side of the room including the front and back rows of members and seating non-speaking council officers
- The Right side of the room, including the front and back rows of members and possibly picking up a view of any press and public attendees

Switching between the three cameras in the meeting would not be automatic based on who was speaking, so would require someone in the room to do so by selecting the active camera using a controller tablet device sat at the top table. Remote attendees and public viewers may see a view that does not include the active speaker if the wrong camera is selected, or there may be delays if it's not clear who is speaking or about to speak.

While this solution is acceptable in terms of providing all requirements for in-person and remote hybrid meetings, it lacks in terms of good visualisation of active speakers within the chamber. The need for manual camera switching could also be problematic and requires a resource to operate. There are also potential equalities implications as detailed in the Equalities Impact Assessment

Option 3 - Tracking cameras (Recommended)
This solution would provide audio and video from the chambers, with remote attendees visible on screens for in-person attendees. Remote attendees and public viewers would see a focussed view of the active speaker in the chamber.

As per option 2, this option would also use 3 cameras at points within the chamber designed to capture different sections of the room;

- The top table including the Chief Executive, Provost, Director of Legal & Democratic and Committee Services officer. This would also seat speaking officers
- The Left side of the room including the front and back row of members and seating non-speaking council officers
- The Right side of the room, including the front and back rows of members and possibly picking up a view of any press and public attendees

While these cameras would be placed to cover the different areas of the chamber, they would use pan, tilt and zoom functionality to focus directly on the active speaker, based on the microphone that is active. This gives a clear video view of the active speaker for remote and public viewers, allowing them to follow the proceedings clearly.

Switching between the cameras in the meeting would be automatic based on who was speaking. This is achieved by assigning and configuring a camera for each mic, ensuring that the best camera is assigned to pick up the video from the active speaker, zooming into the designated areas to give a focused view of the speaker.

This solution offers the best quality video of the options, clearly focusing on in-person attendees to ensure that proceedings can be followed regardless of whether attendees are within the chamber or remote. The automatic camera selection ensures that discussions are followed clearly without any necessary manual operation.

This is the recommended option, with shared mics used to deliver the audio requirements and keep costs firmly within budget.

5.   **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The table below summarises the implications for the Council's General Fund for the options.

Option	Total	
	Capital Cost	**Revenue Cost**
(Recommended) **Fixed Furniture proposal**	**£14,000**	**£0**
Option 1 – Audio only (shared mics)	£17,760	£1,800
Option 1 – Audio only (individual mics)	£24,600	£2,460
Option 2 - Static cameras (shared mics)	£23,170	£2,320
Option 2 - Static cameras (individual mics)	£30,010	£3,000
(Recommended) **Option 3 - Tracking cameras (shared mics)**	**£31,850**	**£3,185**
Option 3 - Tracking cameras (individual mics)	£38,689	£3,870

The recommended furniture and technical solutions would result in a one-off capital cost of £45,850 and ongoing annual revenue costs of £3,185.

The maximum cost (Option 3 with individual mics) would mean a total capital cost of £52,689 and ongoing annual revenue costs of £3,870. The least expensive option (Option 1 – audio only and shared mics) would give a total capital cost of £31,760 and annual revenue costs of £1,800.

In relation to funding for the costs of investment in the options, the only specific budget provision which currently exists is £40,000 for replacement of the audio system in the Council Chamber at Town & County Hall which was set aside previously. In the event members wish to implement an option which exceeds the £40,000 funding in place additional funding of £5,850 (recommended option) or £12,689 (maximum cost option) will be required to cover the shortfall. It is proposed that any funding shortfall arising be met from the Council's uncommitted General Fund Reserves which at 31 March 2022 stood at nearly £6.5m.

The ongoing annual revenue costs are expected to be offset by reduced expenses on travel costs for other committee meetings by elected members.

6.   **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and is attached to this report.

7.   **RISK**

Lead times for the delivery of audio and video equipment can be 12 weeks or more, which could affect the delivery date of Feb 2023. This is not supplier-specific but due to global interest in this market as companies re-appraise their operating models post-COVID.

8.   **CONSULTATION**

The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive and all Directors have been consulted on the content of this report.

NOTE: The background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) which were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report are:

   i)   Report 211/21 - Update on Review of Remote Meetings Arrangements and Potential for Hybrid Model for Meetings

   ii)   Report 286/21 - Update on Review of Remote Meetings Arrangements and Potential for Hybrid Model for Meetings

   iii)   Report 105/22 - Council Meetings - Interim Arrangements and Future Plans

   iv)   Report 118/22 - Council Meetings - Interim Arrangements and Future Plans

   v)   Report 177/22 – Hybrid Model Options for Future Committee Meetings

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Appendix 1: Revised layout