

## Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

17 December 2015

---

### VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

Report of Cllr Richard Wenham, Executive Member for Corporate Resources  
([richard.wenham@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:richard.wenham@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk))

Advising Officers: Deb Broadbent-Clarke, Director of Improvement and Corporate Services ([deb.broadbent-clarke@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:deb.broadbent-clarke@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)); and

Jonathon Partridge, Head of Governance  
([Jonathon.partridge@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Jonathon.partridge@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk))

---

#### Purpose of this report

To enable the General Purposes Committee to consider the opportunities for virtual attendance at Committee meetings

#### RECOMMENDATION:

That General Purposes Committee review the options detailed in paragraphs 9 to 11 and agree their preferred approach to enabling virtual attendance at meetings in the future.

#### Introduction

1. Central Bedfordshire is committed to the openness and transparency of its democratic processes. The Council's meetings provide an important mechanism for engaging residents in decision-making and enabling elected Members to represent the concerns and views of residents.
2. Over the previous year webcasting has been introduced to many of the Council's meetings as a way of making the most of modern technology to encourage residents and organisations to connect with meetings without having to physically attend.
3. In addition to webcasting several public authorities have trialled the use of virtual meetings as a way of improving productivity, flexible working and improving attendance at meetings. Solutions used by authorities have involved various different forms of technology, such as Skype and Facetime.
4. At Central Bedfordshire we have recently trialled the use of Skype to enable officers to attend internal meetings virtually. Skype is an internet-based service and a poor internet connection at either end of

the call can cause poor audio and/or video quality. Experience of Skype has so far been mixed with some calls experiencing very high quality audio but some experience has been very poor. Poor video and audio quality is due to a mix of factors such as the strength of the internet connection at either end of the call, problems with the Skype application itself or the version of Skype software being used by participants.

5. As a result of this mixed experience IT are currently reviewing options to implement a more stable system of video-conferencing between Council devices that will provide a suitable solution and alternative to Skype. Testing of these options should commence before the end of the municipal year.

### **Presence required for 'attendance' and voting**

6. Relevant legislation states that in order to vote on decisions or recommendations a Member must physically be present at the meeting at which the matter is considered. Similarly, in order to be counted towards the quorum of a meeting a Member must physically be in attendance.
7. Despite lobbying of DCLG by other authorities to amend legislation, allowing Members to be considered present at a meeting when attending virtually legislation has remained unchanged.

### **Options for consideration**

8. The Committee is invited to review the options detailed below and consider a way forward. Notwithstanding the options below it is considered good practice for the Council to investigate the manner in which virtual attendance can be facilitated at non-public (informal) meetings. Informal meetings are not webcast and it is good practice to encourage officers and Members to attend meetings virtually where this will provide efficiencies.

#### **Option 1:**

9. Virtual attendance at meetings is not permitted. Any Member unable to attend a meeting must continue to use the established mechanism and submit questions two days in advance of the meeting to the clerk or to an agreed substitute. Where questions are received in advance of the meeting they can be circulated and raised under public questions, statements and deputations with a formal response being provided to the Member outside the meeting or to their substitute at the meeting. Consideration will need to be given to the following:-
  - a. Members must ensure they provide questions or statements two working days prior to the meeting for them to be circulated and a formal response provided in a timely way.

- b. Members will need to make every effort to ensure the arrangement of substitutes for meetings they can not attend.
10. The Chairmen of Committees should ensure that where questions are provided by submitted by Members who are not in attendance or have not been able to arrange a substitute that they are acted upon and a response is provided to that Member.

**Option 2:**

11. Facilitate virtual attendance of Members at formal Council meetings in their role as 'community leaders' but not as Members of a Committee. Consideration will need to be given to the following:-
- a. In light of relevant legislation it is not possible for Members to 'attend' formal meetings in order to vote or take part in the meeting in their capacity as a Committee Member. .
  - b. Appropriate equipment will be required both by the virtual attendee and at the meeting, both of which will require testing. The Council will incur additional cost to both supply and use equipment to facilitate virtual meetings. The attendee will need to advise the clerk and the Chairman within a required period of time in advance of their intention to attend a meeting virtually.
  - c. The use of Skype is not currently suitable to facilitate virtual attendance at meetings for a prolonged period of time. The attendee would need to consider whether their participation relates to just one item or to several items on the agenda. If there are more items of interest a more stable connection will be necessary within the Council offices and it would be appropriate to wait until a suitable IT solution for video-conferencing had been implemented within the Council before implementing this option.
  - d. Additional resources will be required to provide capacity for staff to operate equipment prior to and during meetings and to facilitate the engagement of virtual attendees. This will require the presence of an additional officer. In circumstances where more than one Councillor attends a meeting virtually the impact on resources will be more pronounced and further additional staff will be necessary to attend a meeting. Whilst it might be possible to facilitate the virtual attendance of one Councillor the meeting would become more complex with multiple virtual attendees.
  - e. Meetings in the Council Chamber are webcast, a process will be required to ensure anyone watching via the webcast remotely and also those present at the meeting are able to see and/or hear the virtual attendee. Further consideration will also be necessary of the manner in which disruption of a meeting caused by virtual attendees can be prevented.
  - f. Virtual attendees must be aware of their surroundings. Confidentiality and sensitivity of information must be considered.

Where necessary attendees must not be in a place where the conversation could be overheard. The security of links enabling virtual attendance may also be an issue, particularly if an exempt matter is under discussion.

### **Reason for decision**

12. Members are asked to consider the options detailed above to provide a steer on the extent to which virtual attendance at meetings should be permitted at meetings. Following that steer officers will be able to undertake more detailed analysis of the costs and the protocols required to implement the preferred approach.

### **Council Priorities**

13. The Council is committed to providing opportunities for residents and Councillors to engage in the democratic process.

### **Corporate Implications**

14. If Members support virtual attendance at meetings training for staff and Members would be required to ensure the system runs smoothly. An additional officer would be required to attend meetings to facilitate virtual attendees.

### **Legal Implications**

15. The requirement to be physically present at a meeting in order to be part of the quorum and to vote is detailed in the Local Government Act 1972 (paragraphs 6 and 39 of Schedule 12) and this is mirrored in the procedures for meetings within the Council's Constitution. None of the proposals detailed would contravene the legal requirements. Going forward the rights and responsibilities of members will need to be preserved as will transparency and accountability of members and the decision making process. If virtual attendance is allowed mechanisms will need to be in place to govern the appropriateness of such attendance in particular meetings, ensure the same level of interaction is available and that there are processes in place to counter any breakdown in technology.

### **Financial Implications**

16. Any virtual attendance at meetings will result in both capital and revenue expenditure. Should Members agree to encourage virtual attendance at formal meetings a detailed analysis of the financial implications will be required to determine the costs of necessary IT infrastructure.

## **Equalities Implications**

17. In their role as community leaders it is important for elected Members to represent the views of residents within Central Bedfordshire. Central Bedfordshire Council encourages engagement in the decision-making process and particularly in public meetings and already provides several opportunities for residents and Members to engage. Councillors can raise questions on behalf of residents or during the debate of a particular item and Committee Members are also permitted to send substitutes to raise issues on their behalf. Finally residents are able to attend meetings themselves to raise questions first-hand. These existing mechanisms have facilitated the engagement of Councillors and residents from across Central Bedfordshire in a wide range of public meetings.

## **Conclusion and next Steps**

18. Members are asked to review the options detailed in this paper and recommend a preferred approach, taking into account the staff and financial implications. In light of the steer provided by the General Purposes Committee a more detailed report can be provided prior to a trial of a different approach.

## **Appendices**

None

## **Background Papers**

None