

<b>Committee(s):</b> Digital Services Sub Committee – For decision	<b>Date(s):</b> 03 July 2020
<b>Subject:</b> Committee Meeting Video Conferencing Software	<b>Public</b>
<b>Joint Report of:</b> The Town Clerk / The Chamberlain	<b>For Decision</b>
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## Summary

In light of restrictions on travel and other measures which were implemented on 23 March 2020 to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the City Corporation's decision-making processes were initially impacted and formal committee meetings were suspended until such time that the Government enacted emergency legislation which, amongst many other things, permitted local authorities to hold virtual decision-making meetings. The introduction of the *Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020* ("the Regulations") came into force on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and in response, the Committee and Member Services Team and the IT Division worked quickly to explore how the new regulations could be implemented (technically and procedurally) so formal committee meetings could resume in a virtual format.

Following "lockdown" in March, informal meetings of several committees were facilitated by the Committee and Member Services Team via Microsoft Teams which was implemented by the IT Division as the City Corporation's primary collaboration and video conferencing tool in February 2019. After the new regulations came into force, use of Microsoft Teams to facilitate formal decision-making meetings on a virtual basis was carefully explored and tested robustly to ensure that the functionality available through the platform (i) could satisfy the regulations (voting, public participation, live-streaming); (ii) was a workable solution for the Committee Team; and (iii) provided a good user experience for Members "attending" virtual meetings. In mid-May, at the request of Members, we were asked to explore use of Zoom to facilitate virtual meetings and to date, in collaboration with the Technology Support Team 10 formal meetings (and 6 informal Member meetings) have been managed through Zoom; the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Digital Services Sub-Committee have been consulted and involved in testing; and feedback about the platforms (Microsoft Teams and Zoom) has been sought from both those managing the technology to support virtual meetings and those "attending" virtual meetings.

This report sets out the key findings arising from the Zoom testing period (26/05/20 - 23/06/20) and incorporates all the feedback that has been provided about use of the Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms for the hosting of formal virtual committee meetings.

## **Recommendation(s)**

Members are asked to:

- Note the report
- Agree which platform should be used by the Committee and Member Services Teams to facilitate formal virtual committee meetings going forward, noting that only one platform can be supported by the IT Division and there are implications associated with the use of multiple platforms
- Consider the Officer recommendation to use Teams as the preferred video conferencing software for Committee meeting based on the feedback provided below and reason detailed in Appendix A.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 allows the relevant national authority to make regulations providing for virtual meetings in local authorities, including the Greater London Authority, district, county and unitary councils, parish councils, national park authorities, conservation boards and school admissions appeal panels. The Regulations apply to meetings held, or required to be held, before 7 May 2021, so concern the specific effects of lockdown and potential continuing social distancing measures.
2. The new legislation has expedited the use of video conferencing software for Committee Meetings at the City of London Corporation and City of London Police. As of 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020, when the Community and Children's Services Committee held the City Corporation's first formal virtual meeting, meetings have been held using Microsoft Teams.
3. The Committee Team had to quickly learn about the new platform and how it could be used to facilitate virtual meetings, whilst continuing to provide comprehensive meeting management support and procedural advice in a virtual manner.
4. Working in close collaboration with the Technology Support Team, several technical and practical issues were quickly addressed and virtual meeting management through Teams worked well. However, in mid-May we were asked to trial the use of Zoom as an alternative platform for hosting virtual committee meetings, principally because some Members had used this platform in other forums and liked the user experience.
5. Since 26<sup>th</sup> May, when a meeting of the Property Investment Board was held via Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Zoom have been used in tandem for the hosting of virtual formal meetings and a large number of Members have now had the opportunity to experience both products.

6. As the testing period has now concluded, it is an appropriate point for Members of the Digital Services Sub-Committee to assess the two products (Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and confirm the chosen video conferencing software to be used for the future hosting of formal virtual committee meetings. This report therefore seeks to summarise Member feedback following the use of both, outlining the views of the Committee and Member Services Team in terms of meeting management issues, as well as the IT Division in areas such as cost, current and on-going support requirements and data security.

## **Current Position**

### Member Feedback

7. During the Zoom testing period a survey was undertaken of the whole Court of Common Council (and some co-opted members) to request feedback about their experience of the different platforms and to identify Members' preferences between Zoom and Microsoft Teams.
8. 51 Members responded to the survey – that is 41% of the Court. 24 Members (19.2% of the Court) explicitly said they preferred Zoom over Teams, 10 Members (8% of the Court) said they preferred Teams over Zoom and 17 Members (13.6%) said they had no preference.
9. If one assumes that those who have not responded to the survey have no strong preference, then the results would show as:
  - 19.2% of the Court prefer Zoom
  - 8% of the Court prefer Microsoft Teams
  - 72.8% of the Court expressed no preference.
10. The main reasons cited for people preferring Zoom were as follows: -
  - Being able to see multiple participants' videos
  - Functionality of raise hands and breakout rooms
  - Video and audio are better

### Committee and Members Services Feedback

11. Having managed 10 committee meetings through Zoom, as well as 6 informal Member meetings, and experienced how the functionality to manage "live" meetings differs between the two platforms, the overwhelming feedback from officers in the Committee and Members Services Team is that Microsoft Teams is the favoured platform (Reasons are provided in Appendix A).

### IT Division Feedback

12. There are several reasons linked to resource overhead, costs, duplication and security that lead to the recommendation from the IT Division that Teams should be the preferred platform for running and managing virtual Committee meetings. (These are detailed in Appendix A).

13. Members should note a survey of London Local Authorities was conducted on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020, to review which video conferencing tools were being used for public meetings. 20 (out of 33) were using Microsoft Teams and only 3 were using Zoom.
14. Members should also note that Microsoft are making significant investment in their Teams product with new features being released monthly which the IT Division believes will close any functionality gaps between Zoom and Teams that have been expressed by some Members. This includes the development of a 9x9 gallery view to allow up to 49 participants to be seen at once. The Teams development roadmap can be summarised and presented to Members if required.

### **Options**

15. These are the options to consider:
- Use Microsoft Teams for all formal committee meeting
  - Use Zoom for all formal committee meetings
16. The scope of this report is limited to Committee Meeting Video Conferencing Software and does not extend to other informal Member or Officer Meetings. Microsoft Teams will continue to be used for these purposes.

### **Proposals**

17. The new legislation has expedited the use of video conferencing software for Committee Meetings at the City of London Corporation and City of London Police. As of 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020, when the Community and Children's Services Committee held the City Corporation's first formal virtual meeting, meetings have principally been held using Microsoft Teams. Since the request in mid-May that we trial the use of Zoom as an alternative platform for hosting virtual committee meetings, Microsoft Teams and Zoom have been used alternately and a large number of Members have now had the opportunity to experience both products.
18. As the testing period has now concluded, it is an appropriate point for Members of the Digital Services Sub-Committee to assess the two products (Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and, taking into account Member feedback, as well as the views of the Committee and Member Services Team and the IT Division (paragraphs 5-14), confirm the chosen video conferencing software to be used for the future hosting of formal virtual committee meetings.

### **Implications**

19. Significant staff resources are required to support formal virtual meetings and our experience has shown that more officers are required to assist with those meetings managed through Zoom.
20. If Zoom was adopted as the video conferencing software for Committee Meeting, a formal support model would need to be implemented through an amendment to

the IT Managed Service with Agilisys. This would come at a significant cost, if indeed, Agilisys are able to support Zoom.

21. To safeguard against the risk of using free Zoom accounts, an expansion to the existing licensing model may also be required, at a cost of at least £30k per annum, potentially significantly more to include Officers attending Committee Meetings. Regardless of the software being used, an additional resource may be required to support the streaming of meetings – unless this is transitioned to Committee Services or the number of meetings is reduced.
22. Cost of the additional support resource is estimated to be £50,000 (including on-costs) per annum.

## **Conclusion**

23. Whilst some Members favour the use of Zoom to host formal virtual meetings, there is a divergence of views and the technological and resourcing aspects associated with the management and delivery of formal virtual meetings through Zoom. There are good reasons outlined in Appendix A as to why the Committee and Member Services Team and the IT Division would prefer to deliver the formal meeting programme through Microsoft Teams going forward.
24. Noting the feedback set out in the report, Members are asked to agree which platform should be used by the Committee and Member Services Teams to facilitate formal virtual committee meetings going forward.

## **Background Papers**

- Report to the Policy and Resources Committee: *Democratic Oversight During COVID-19 (16/04/20)*
- Report to the Policy and Resources Committee: *Remote Meetings Protocol and Procedure Rules (07/05/20)*

## **Appendences**

Appendix A – Officer Feedback

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## **Appendix A – Officer Feedback**

### **Committee and Member Services Feedback**

25. Reasons for recommending Teams include:

- The Committee and Member Services Team has to manage a far higher number of technical issues faced by some Members throughout Zoom meetings, particularly as Zoom seems more vulnerable to sound and video issues and every time a Member loses connection, they have to be “admitted” back into the meeting. One Member commented that they can manage Teams, but they find Zoom impossible and they “may have to miss attending some Zoom gatherings due to the clunky system.”
- The following staff resources are required at each Zoom meeting: Committee Clerk (and monitor of chat box), minute taker (at least 1), designated technical support officer, attendance, share screen and live stream support; and one IT officer to facilitate the live stream via YouTube. For Teams meetings, there are fewer functionality channels that need to be managed during the meeting and so less pressure on staff resources to manage the meeting properly whilst also managing the functionality of the platform.
- The general chat box and personal messages from Members must be closely monitored throughout the meeting.
- Unlike Teams, the current speaker’s screen does not pop up, so potentially you need to scroll through multiple screens to find the speaker.
- In Zoom, the Committee Team must start, monitor and end the livestream via YouTube. Going forward, the Technology Support Team has indicated that it will not have resources to support this going forward so the Team will also be responsible for the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of the livestream process which is currently undertaken by IT, which is managed through third party video software and streamed to YouTube.
- Whilst Teams isn’t perfect, it is less fiddly and easier to manage from the back office and in some instances no additional staff support is required to facilitate virtual meetings. With such a busy calendar of formal meetings, the implications for staff resources are a significant consideration.
- Whilst there is clearly a need for Member training on both Teams and Zoom, the range of technical issues flagged by Members during the Zoom test period suggests that more Members are competent with Teams.
- The Committee Team is far more competent at managing meetings via Microsoft Teams than through Zoom and so there is less risk of difficulties arising at meetings or decision-making being forced to conclude (in-line with the regulations).

### **IT Division Feedback**

26. Microsoft Teams was implemented by the IT Division as the primary collaboration and video conferencing tool in February 2019. In May 2020 there were 2250 active users of Teams and over 25k meeting participants. Knowledge of Teams continues to grow within the IT Division and in the organisation more widely, with a robust tiered support model provided through the IT Managed Service, with

further expertise and support provided to Members by the Technology Support Team.

27. Microsoft Teams is included as part of the Microsoft licensing agreement, it is therefore available to all Members and Officers across multiple device types and at no additional cost. Teams has also 'closed the gap' on Zoom having introduced some key new features in recent updates, including the 3x3 video grid allowing up to 9 participants to be seen, and the use of 'raise hands' and voting. These features are also now available across desktop and mobile applications, and there are also plans to expand the gallery view to 9x9 (47 participants) in the coming months.
28. Microsoft Teams is not solely designed for video conferencing, but more broadly as a collaboration tool to improve internal communication, as part of the wider Office 365 suite. Microsoft Teams also includes a robust chat service that allows users to communicate quickly without setting up a conference. Syncing with Office 365 also makes collaboration easy by allowing file sharing and calendar support. The IT Division are also recommending the City Corporation moves to Teams for voice telephony, and this integration makes much more sense from a support and usability perspective. Allowing a single access interface across corporate and personal devices.
29. Leading research and advisory company, Gartner, recognises Zoom as a market leading video conferencing provider. It has seen a significant increase in use in recent months and is generally accepted to set the standard for features and user experience. The key benefits of Zoom over Teams are the ability to view up to 49 meeting participants at one time and the use of breakout rooms – though it is not clear whether these features would be utilised for Committee Meetings.
30. Zoom is a new product for the organisation and at present support is only provided by the Technology Support Team (4FTE), all of whom have had to 'learn' the product themselves in recent weeks.
31. Training for Teams is available via the IT Training Team, both online and virtual classroom courses. At present there is no internal training resource for Zoom.

## **Financial**

32. There is no Zoom support provided through the IT Managed Service. Should Zoom be selected as the chosen video conferencing tool, the IT Division would need to extend the existing IT Managed Service to include the product, though this is likely to come a significant cost, if indeed Agilisys are in a position to provide Zoom support at all.
33. Zoom Business Licenses are allocated on a named user basis, at an additional cost of £192 per user per annum. Providing a Business license for all Members and supporting officers would cost in the region of £30k per annum. Were this extended further to include all Officer attending Committee, then this cost would increase significantly.

## Security Concerns

34. Zoom security has been a key talking point during lockdown, with some high-profile security breaches reported in the media. In response, Zoom has introduced several security features such as password protecting meetings by default and introducing meeting waiting rooms. End to end encryption has also been introduced for premium accounts, though is not due to be made available to the free version until later in the summer.
35. Many Zoom vulnerabilities are directly related to user's failure to perform certain actions (like password-protecting their account) or poor meeting management. The use of Zoom is supported by the National Cyber Security Council and their guidance shows there is no security reason for Zoom not to be used for conversations below a certain classification. The use of screen-sharing and file sharing is where the greatest risk lies in the use of this platform, as such the use of file-sharing should be prohibited and screen sharing only to be used with trusted partners.
36. To enable Members and Officers to join Committee Meetings in the pilot, the Zoom desktop application has been deployed to all laptops and mobile devices. The Zoom application allows meetings to be scheduled, either through using a free license or being assigned a Business license. Where a free account is created and used to schedule meetings, meetings are not subject to the configuration settings of the City Corporation's Zoom account, which poses a significant security risk.
37. By comparison, Microsoft is made available to all Members and Officers, and licensed through the existing Microsoft E3 licenses, so all instances of Teams are managed and configured corporately. Microsoft Teams has used full end-to-end encryption since its rollout, with data encryption (video, audio, and desktop sharing data) in transit and at rest. Teams has always included more robust tools for hosts to manage participants with controls over who can post or share content, who is allowed into Teams rooms either directly or via a lobby system, and AI monitoring of Teams chat looking for evidence of harassment. In general, Teams is designed around data loss prevention and information protection, as it is primarily used for persistent storage and collaboration on sensitive information, not just a simple video conferencing platform.