Report to Protocol Meeting

Video Conferencing for Council Meetings

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1   Introduction

This report outlines the current situation in terms of remote access to Council statutory meetings and the relevant positions of Microsoft Teams versus Zoom. I will

- Describe the products
- How they are currently implemented in DCC.
- Recent issues with Teams
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- Attendance Management and Voting

While the current requirement is for a remote meeting video conferencing system it is likely following legislative changes that attendance and voting management will be required. This will have a major impact on the future direction of the implementations in DCC.

It should be noted that while the two major products used in DCC are Teams and Zoom the IS department facilitates access to many other video conferencing apps from the corporate level of Cisco Webex or Skype to smaller systems connected to video conferencing room systems. This is enabled by the IS department as the business functions within DCC deal with a range of clients.

While the IS department makes a range of applications available to business units with recommendations on how they are used, it is up to the business unit to satisfy itself that its suitable for their business purpose.

2   Product Descriptions

The two main products are Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

2.1   Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams is part of the Microsoft Office 365 cloud based applications. These applications cover every part of the requirements of a modern organisation. The Teams application connects teams of people into virtual teams where they can share information, collaborate together, access systems and replace the traditional telephone and video services in the one application.

The utilisation of MS Teams has been increasing for a number of years but in line with the requirements of the Covid 19 crisis its utilisation has taken off worldwide.

While there are free and guest access allowed within the system it is generally used as part of a corporate environment where the full suite of Office 365 products are utilised. As part of such a corporate application suite it has been tested independently and is seen to be very secure.

Office 365 including Teams is part of the core architecture of products implemented across the local authority sector. It has even replaced standard desktop telephony functions in some authorities.

2.2   Zoom

Zoom is a video conferencing product owned by the previous founder of Cisco Webex the previous market leader. The company is based in China and the USA. It solely provides a video / audio conferencing service. It started with a small consumer user base with a functional system provided free of charge with a 40 minutes limit on calls. The user base has grown exponentially during the Covid 19 crisis and is now one of the largest in the world. The system was designed for ease of use over other considerations initially

It had major security issues at the beginning of the year leading to structural changes and a concentration by the company on enhancing its security features over any other enhancement. The security failures had reached even the main stream media. Many organisations at that time limited its corporate use. DCC issued general security advice to all staff with regard to video conferencing in particular Zoom at that time. The Company has substantially enhanced the security of the product since.

2.3   Comparison

The two products design and function are very different despite the fact that they can both be used to hold video calls. User preference is a matter of individual choice and a unbiased assessment of the standing of the two products is that Zoom is regarded as easy to use for the infrequent user while MS Teams is seen as more functional and therefore complex as it carries out a wider range of functions with more interfaces.

It is obvious that in terms of video conferencing, many of the advantages that Zoom historically had such as the 7x7 matrix and breakout rooms are either now available (7x7) or in the pipeline for MS Teams.

Similarly Zoom are now seeking to add additional features around file sharing and collaboration.

3 Current Implementation in DCC

Both products are implemented in DCC, over a period of time.

Prior to the Covid crisis DCC had commenced a pilot of a rollout of Office 365 including Teams for 150 staff. There was a requirement to upgrade the corporate email and sharepoint collaboration sites as they were reaching end of support. With the increase in demand for video conferencing during the crisis, the pilot was extended to meet critical business needs for video conferencing. We currently have 1,800 active users of Microsoft Teams in DCC. All staff will have a Teams licence as part of a rollout of Office 365 by end of year as the corporate email system is currently being upgraded.

The Teams pilot has been extended to connect to the corporate Active Directory or main IT directory and password system during the summer to support a single user name and password. A temporary work around on the Teams calendar and meeting creation was implemented until the exchange email upgrade and hybrid implementation could be undertaken. This upgrade has been designed, switched on and will be rolled out to all staff over the coming weeks. This will allow a single calendar in all locations including any Teams client anywhere. This will vastly improve the experience for all staff creating and joining a meeting once migrated.

The IS department is also upgrading the remote access Citrix system. This will be rolled out to all staff by Christmas and will contain an integrated Teams client.

Zoom has been used initially for area video meetings using a business licence. A report with recommendations was issued by the IS department following the security issues raised earlier in the year with regard to Zoom usage. Zoom is available for any business user at a cost of €130 per year for the basic package. The licence is only needed for meeting hosts not attendees.

4   Recent Issues with Teams

The disruption caused to Councillors who could not access two major meetings recently is sincerely regretted. This occurred when a global error affected all Microsoft Teams users in Western Europe. This caused issues with all users located in Europe connecting to meetings for a certain time-period. There was nothing that could be done for a single customer and Microsoft resolved the issue that day. This is a risk with any major cloud vendor.

This was made more difficult for DCC users as we are currently using a work around rather than a single integrated calendar for Teams / Outlook. Councillors and senior managers are prioritised in the rollout of the integrated email, calendar and Teams software.

5   Future plans for the Products

Teams, which is part of Microsoft Office 365, is a core component of the ICT strategy for DCC in the coming years. DCC will use Office365 as the upgraded versions of our email, calendar, simple workflows, file sharing and collaboration. This will also be the interface into a range of desktop and mobile applications for a wide range of internal purposes.

Zoom is available on the network for any user that requires it. The IS department strongly recommends that all business uses are with the commercial licence and that all the recommendations of the security review be implemented while using it.

It should not be used for file sharing or other collaboration.

6   Attendance Management and Voting

The biggest challenge to both products is not each other but the requirement following legal changes expected in the near future regarding attendance management and voting during remote meetings. This may well drive the requirements needed for video conferencing.

There are three options to be investigated further

- A system that is not directly linked into either video conferencing system to record these functions. This would allow Zoom or Teams to be continued to be used.

- Utilising an integrated application into the Teams / Office 365 environment to record attendance and provide the voting infrastructure. This is likely to be the solution used across the sector.
- Utilise an existing integrated voting / remote access system developed for the existing UK market. Such a system is developed by the public web casting company used by DCC for such a purpose. It links to Teams or Zoom but would require the client to be used by councillors for voting and other matters.