On Video-conferencing: A Guide to Good Practice in Conducting Community Council Business

A paper from Edinburgh Association of Community Councils (EACC)

Simon Holledge

We believe community councils should continue to meet, in good times and in bad, representing their communities and contributing to the governance of the city.

At the present time, normal physical meetings have become impossible due to the Coronavirus pandemic. This means we have to adapt and use alternative means of communication, both as individuals and as groups.

Fortunately we now have a number of different ways of contacting each other, and members of the public, using phones, tablets and computers. Video-conferencing in particular can be used on most devices to connect groups together, offering features that are not available for simple face-to-face meetings.

This paper addresses some concerns which have been raised in community councils in Edinburgh about the use of video conferencing and offers pointers to the successful use of these approaches.

What are the advantages of virtual meetings?

The convenience of being able to attend a virtual meeting from anywhere is important for busy people who might otherwise not have time to attend a physical meeting.

They are also good for those with mobility issues.

They encourage CC members to develop digital skills and the ability to present themselves and their ideas on camera.

Software features include ways for participants, including members of the public, to contribute notes and questions, at the same time as other people are talking.

Meetings can be recorded, obviating the onerous job of producing full minutes of meetings. These recordings can be archived for future reference.

What are the disadvantages of virtual meetings?

Community councillors may initially feel uncomfortable with the new medium, though this can be overcome with training.

Good internet connections are necessary, though computers are not necessary as smartphones and tablets can also be used.

Paid subscriptions are needed for the use of important features of conferencing software, and for full-length meetings. However it may well be that members of community councils already have the required access.

Those on the wrong side of the 'digital divide', and people lacking communications skills, are unlikely to be able to use video conferencing, either because they lack the necessary devices, or because they lack confidence in using them.

What are the rival video conferencing programmes?

Wikipedia currently list over 30 software packages (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_web_conferencing_software). Of these the best known are Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype and Skype for Business. These differ in terms of design, ease of use and the way they handle bandwidth. The latter is crucial in terms of video conferencing quality. If internet connections are not stable, then the meeting cannot take place.

Zoom is currently the most popular software, known for its easily-learned, user-friendly interface, however this could change in the future as competing companies bring out new versions of their software. We would recommend you try different packages to see which one works best, while regarding Zoom as the default for overall performance.

It should be remembered that City of Edinburgh Council and other public agencies in the city are only allowed to conduct official business using Microsoft Teams unless they are prepared to participate using their own equipment.

Is security necessary?

Face-to-face community council public meetings take place without any special security. What security is necessary for video conferencing? There is a possibility of virtual meetings being disrupted by 'outsiders', however the software packages have built-in features that enable the host to minimize any trouble. These include unique meeting passwords, enabling waiting rooms for those joining (to check identities) and the ability to

mute and remove participants from a meeting. In practice, these features should be completely adequate for community councils.

Is encryption necessary?

Zoom, in particular, — though Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, and Cisco Webex are similar — has been criticized for not having full ('end to end') encryption.

Encryption is the system of coding and un-coding communications, set from one person to another, on the net. The purpose is to prevent intermediaries, including the hosting organization itself, from reading what is being sent. (Examples of encrypted services are the messaging apps, WhatsApp and Signal, and the email service Protonmail.)

In our view, encryption level security is not necessary for community council meetings. It should be emphasized that the City of Edinburgh Council itself does not use encrypted emails. Instead a standard text is attached ("*This email and files transmitted with it are confidential and are intended for the sole use . . .*).

What practices do we recommend in video conferencing?

1. **Muting**: participants should mute their microphones to prevent noise disruptions during meetings and conserve bandwidth. The host should mute all participants by default at the beginning of the meeting.

2. **Video off**: in larger meetings, people should also switch off cameras to conserve bandwidth.

3. **Welcome screen**: meetings should make use of a 'welcome screen' to remind members to mute their mics and note any other meeting rules.

4. **Self-presentation**: Members should be encouraged to present themselves clearly, by putting light sources in front (not behind) them, positioning cameras at eye level, and looking into the camera (not at the screen) when they are talking.

5. **Identity**: participants should be encouraged to display their full names and designations on screen. (This is the rename function on Zoom.)

6. **Virtual backgrounds**: members should be discouraged from using virtual backgrounds (of desert islands etc.) without a green screen.

7. **Management**: managing a successful meeting will normally be a team or shared activity. The traditional chair or convener will usually need technical support from a host or co-host who can watch the participants,

read the Chat, bring in participants who may have been overlooked, manage screen-sharing etc.

8. **Recordings**: meetings will normally be recorded and participants should be notified that this is happening.

9. **Chat**: Meeting organizers will need to decide whether or not to enable the Chat box function for participants to send written messages to the group (and other individuals). This can be used to report technical problems, make comments and ask questions, though on some packages there is a separate Q&A box.

10 **Participation**: Members should be asked to indicate when they wish to speak by using the 'hand' facility on their screen.

11 **Voting**: When given a clear direction by the chair members can be asked to vote using the 'hand' facility on their screen, or through a roll call.

Open meetings

Community Council meetings are in normal times open to members of the public to observe and participate if invited. Members of the public can still be involved if the date and time of meetings is advertised along with an arrangement to send the necessary link to access the meeting. A variety of methods are available to achieve this using the Community Council website and/or social media, or inviting users to join through Eventbright or similar.

Outside speakers

Community Councils can continue to conduct meetings with developers through video conferencing.

AGMs

AGMs can be conducted virtually and accounts approved, so long as they follow the correct procedures as indicated by the City Council.

Reference materials:

The Scottish Business Resilience Centre's Guide ***Zoom: Etiquette and Security*** is concise and helpful, and sensible on security.

Edinburgh Association of Community Councils (EACC)
17 October 2020