On video conferencing: guidance from the Edinburgh Association of Community Councils (EACC)

Simon Holledge, EACC Secretary

The Edinburgh Association of Community Councils (EACC) 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 difference ways of contacting each other, using our phones, tablets and computers. Video conferencing in particular can be used on all our devices to connect our 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 and also good for those with mobility issues. If meetings are run to published schedules, people can join selectively for the items that interest them, a further time-saving.

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 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, ideally with time indexing of the different sections.

What are the disadvantages of virtual meetings?

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

Good internet connections are necessary: broadband for computer users, or mobile for smartphones and tablets.

Paid subscriptions are needed for meeting hosts for the use of important features of conferencing software such as 'polling', and for full-length meetings, depending on the programme used. (It may well be that members of community councils have the required access privately.) People joining meetings organised by others do not need paid subscriptions.

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

Can the public be invited to virtual meetings?

Yes! In normal times, community council meetings are open to members of the public. They can still be involved in a virtual meeting if the date and time is advertised along with an arrangement to send the necessary access link. A variety of ways are available to achieve this using the community council website and/or social media, or inviting users to join through the online event organiser Eventbrite (https://www.eventbrite.com) or similar.

Can community councils host outside speakers (guests) at virtual meetings?

Outside speakers can come to to virtual meetings and show explanatory slides and other media. These presentations, like the rest of the meetings, can be recorded. In some circumstances, it may also be decided to pre-record talks to be seen by community council members in advance of a proposed discussion of an issue.

Can community councils hold virtual annual general meetings (AGMs)?

Community council annual general meetings (AGMs) can he held using video conferencing, following the correct procedures as indicated by the city council. As explained below 'polling' (or voting) features can be used, or alternatively informal voting by a show of hands.

What is a webinar?

A webinar is a 'web seminar': a presentation, lecture, or workshop using video conferencing. In video conferencing this implies a different setup, with attendees divided into active participants and passive observers for whom this is a 'view-only platform'. This facilitates saving bandwidth while meetings can accommodate large numbers of people. Under this format, questions can either be written in a chat or Q&A box, or submitted in advance by the audience.

Normally short presentations can be managed under the normal meeting format that allows general discussion, however webinars are good for intensive teaching sessions. (On Zoom, webinars are only available for paid accounts.)

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, Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype and Skype for Business.

These differ in terms of design, ease of use and the way they handle bandwidth (i.e. digital communications throughput). The latter is crucial in terms of video conferencing quality. If internet connections are not stable, then the meeting cannot take place.

Why has Zoom become the most popular video conferencing software?

Zoom became synonymous with video calling during the pandemic. Its easily-learned, user-friendly clean interface, video and audio clarity and efficient use of bandwidth made Zoom an attractive choice for beginners. There is a free version (albeit time limited) and reasonably priced subscriptions.

At the time of writing, Zoom is established as the most popular video conferencing software, used by almost all civic groups in Edinburgh, from heritage

organizations such as Edinburgh World Heritage and the Cockburn Association, to the various political and environmental groups, and indeed the main political parties.

However the dominance of Zoom could be challenged 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 and ease of use.

Why does the City of Edinburgh Council use Microsoft Teams instead of Zoom?

The City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) have spent £5 million on Microsoft software during the past three years. Like other administrations and big corporations, they favour the use of large multi-functional integrated suites that offer all-in-one solutions for administrators and staff members. Microsoft 365 (formerly Office 365) offers precisely this and Microsoft Teams is part of Microsoft 365.

CEC currently insist on conducting official business using Microsoft Teams. This means that council officials are not allowed to use their work computers for any platform other than MS Teams, and must use personal devices for non-Microsoft communications.

The quality of Microsoft Teams as used by CEC can be seen in their webcasts.

Is special 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, full encryption is not necessary for community council meetings, where confidentiality is not required. It should be noted 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 you recommend in video conferencing?

1. **Keep your software up to date**: make sure you have the latest version.

2. **Meeting links**: for security reasons it is better to send attendees meeting links by email rather than publish them on a community council website.

3. **Familiarization:** testing the software before the meeting will help avoid glitches. Starting the meeting 'solo', especially if you are the host, will enable you to check the settings and the location of the various option buttons.

4. **Waiting room**: use an initial waiting room to visually check the identity of attendees. In the case of a large meeting, attendees can be asked to register beforehand.

5 **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.

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

7. **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.

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

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

10. **Lock down**: once the meeting has started the host can lock it down to prevent any late entries or potential disturbances.

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

12. **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.

13. **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. For webinars on Zoom, there is a separate Q&A box.

14. **Agenda**: having a written list of agenda items for participants to follow will help the meeting stay focused on what is relevant.

15. **Polling (voting)**: in formal situations such as an annual general meeting (AGM), a 'polling' feature should be used for single and multiple questions to be put to participants, if necessary anonymously, and a report on the results will be downloaded. Obviously informal voting is also possible via a show of hands (real or graphic).

16. **Recordings**: meetings will normally be recorded and participants should be notified that this is happening at the beginning of the session.

17. **Virtual backgrounds**: members should be discouraged from using virtual backgrounds (of desert islands etc.) *without a green screen*, because of image disintegration.

Appendix 1

The table below shows the free and paid versions of five of the main video conferencing software programmes.

Software features vary significantly and need to be checked carefully before purchase. Companies are making large investments in research and development, with a view to securing larger market shares.

This information should be used with caution as company policies frequently change. It was current on 1 November 2020, just after a major sales campaign by Zoom had closed.

	Free	Paid	Premium
Cisco Webex	50 minutes limit. No recording	Starter £11.25 per host per month. No recording	Plus £14.85 per host per month. Includes recording.
Google Meet	60 minutes limit (?). No recording	Business Starter, £4.14 per user per month. Includes recording?	Business Standard, £8.28 per user per month.
MS Teams	No recording and no phone calls.	Microsoft 365 Business Basic at £3.80 plus VAT, per user, per month (annual commitment)	
Skype for Business	*No free version*	Business Essentials $3 per user per month	
Zoom	40 minute limit for group meetings. Unlimited time for 1:1 meetings. Includes 'local recording' to the host's computer, phone calls.	Pro at £11.99 per license per month. Meetings up to 30 hours, up to 100 participants. Social media streaming.	

Reference materials:

Scottish Business Resilience Centre: ***Zoom: Etiquette and Security*** https://www.sbrcentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SBRC-ZOOM-Conferencing_compressed.pdf

Zoom Help Centre tutorials: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206618765-Zoom-Video-Tutorials

Wikipedia articles:
Zoom, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_(software)
Zoom Security, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_(software)#Security
Zoombombing, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoombombing

Edinburgh Association of Community Councils (EACC)
1 November 2020
SCMH