

Report to: Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

Date of meeting: 31 March 2023

By: Chief Operating Officer

Title: East Sussex County Council Telephony Service

Purpose: To outline the proposed replacement telephony service and gain approval to initiate procurement activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change is recommended to:

- 1) Note the strategic review and consultation activity which has led to identifying a Microsoft Teams based telephony as the preferred solution.
 - 2) Note the shared outcomes that this change has with other programmes of work including the opportunity to enhance digital skills, reduce carbon impact and aid building rationalisation.
 - 3) Approve the initiation of procurement activity and delegation of the subsequent contract award to the Chief Operating Officer.
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1 Background

1.1 The landline telephony service in East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is becoming outdated and underutilised, some of the equipment is unsupported and the current contract ends in 2024. For these reasons, and with similar contracts also ending in the other Orbis partner organisations, IT & Digital have been exploring future telephony options. Informed by this review, this report lays out the proposed replacement solution and makes recommendations to support the change.

1.2 Furthermore, the last two years have seen a profound change in the way that telephony is used. Remote working has seen new solutions introduced that enable collaboration and provide additional operational agility for public facing services and future needs.

1.3 IT & Digital, working with specialist consultants, therefore undertook a cross-council review of current telephony and identification of requirements to assist in defining the options for future telephony needs. The review has identified Microsoft Teams as the recommended technology platform for the core telephony service paired with a dedicated contact centre solution. Please see Appendix 1 for the options reviewed.

1.4 This report provides an outline of the proposed solution and draws out the touchpoints with other enabling change projects.

2 Supporting information

Drivers for change

2.1 **Current contract:** East Sussex currently has a contract with *Nasstar* for a cloud hybrid managed telephony service based on *Cisco* technologies. This contract ends in 2024 with a break point in June presenting a final contract termination date of June 2026 if a 2-year extension option is taken up. Maximum value has been extracted from the prior investment in this legacy telephony service. Hardware and infrastructure have been well exploited over time, but the handsets are ageing, and analogue gateways at the end of their useful life will go out of support.

2.2 **Changing working patterns:** Staff working in hybrid ways are adopting new technology essential to communicate, stay connected and have visibility of their team and co-workers. During the last 3 years, driven by the COVID response, staff have adapted to new ways of working, making more use of MS Teams to communicate and collaborate instead of using traditional landlines. As a result, the current landline telephony system, consisting of circa 3,500 handsets, is underutilised.

2.3 **Evolving consumer behaviour:** Residents now have increasingly elevated expectations of the organisations they deal with and the services they receive. As a result, there is a demand for faster and better public services, available through multiple channels and devices. The current contact centre telephony solution has not been designed to meet the digital needs of the organisation going forward, and this contributes to the overall business case for change.

2.4 **Changing Technology Landscape:** The pandemic necessitated widespread adoption of a work-from-anywhere culture and a growing reliance on collaboration tools over traditional telephony features. As a result of this, the telephony 'marketplace' has adapted with a shift from free standing telephony solutions to an increased supply of unified communications solutions such as Microsoft Teams. In addition to this rapidly changing technology landscape, the national telephony network is also undergoing a major change, switching from traditional analogue lines to routing all calls digitally over the internet by 2025. This technological shift positions internet telephony as a utility and brings with it new opportunities.

2.5 **Engagement:** IT & Digital worked with specialist consultants, 4C Strategies, engaged with representative departmental stakeholders to explore their current and future service needs. This feedback informed the subsequent options report, the recommendations of which were then further tested with *Gartner* consultancy to gain a rounded industry informed perspective. With an outline direction of travel defined, this proposal has been endorsed by the Digital Board and then further socialised with the Customer Experience Board and departmental management teams.

The solution

2.6 The Strategic Review recommended that the replacement core telephony for East Sussex is incorporated within the Microsoft Teams platform. This proposal is supported by the findings of a full options analysis and further corroborated by *Gartner* industry specific research.

2.7 The review has also indicated that the current level of telephony provision may not now be required. The use of mobile telephony and MS Teams video calls and messaging has substantially reduced the reliance upon direct dial telephony numbers. It is therefore proposed that as part of the implementation of the MS Teams telephony solution, a 'zero base' review will be undertaken, applying a set of criteria to determine which roles and teams are assigned an 'office' telephone number. Some services, such as contact centres, have more sophisticated needs. It is proposed to couple MS Teams with specialist contact centre telephony services to meet these critical business requirements.

2.8 In addition, it is proposed that the legacy contact centre telephony solution is replaced with a platform that has high levels of resilience and is geared to the digital era. With the ability to take advantage of advances in Artificial Intelligence and automation technologies, as and when there is a business requirement to use these capabilities.

This solution means:

2.9 By adding external telephony to the existing Teams client, most staff with standard telephony needs, will move away from traditional desktop handsets to softphones provided through the MS Teams client. This will see most of the phones that we currently see on desks removed. Internet based softphones work through the computer and allow staff to have a consistent telephony experience regardless of where they work from, removing anchors to locations. Softphones can be used with or without headsets / handsets and the project will set out an approach to how these are supplied. Although much like holding a Teams meeting without the video, the experience of making a phone call will change and staff will need familiarisation with the functionality. Developing these skills and getting used to Teams telephony etiquette shares the objectives of the Workstyles Programme and this relationship needs to be managed.

2.10 Where telephony requires a more sophisticated setup (for example the Health & Social Care Contact Centre), additional contact centre telephony services will be provisioned to ensure all requirements are met alongside the same MS Teams application experience. These add-ons will be subject to separate procurement to ensure the solution identified addresses the identified business need.

2.11 Where a location has a demand for a physical device for ease of use or availability (for example, a Reception Desk, First Aid room, or somewhere likely to need to dial 999) a phone will be provided that connects to the MS Teams system providing the same presence and directory services you receive within the MS Team application but without having to log onto a computer to use a phone.

2.12 By deploying MS Teams based telephony, the Council will be building on existing technology investment but the additional functionality has licensing implications, and the cost of additional specialist services will also need to be factored in. To make best use of resources, specific service requirements will need to be captured so that licenses can be assigned cost efficiently. This will involve close working with services to understand what they need to do and ensure that staff get the right tools to perform their role.

Benefits

Using MS Teams as our telephony platform is expected to bring these benefits:

2.13 Core Telephony

- Supports hybrid ways of working, aiding productivity by showing a users' presence (availability status) when engaged in both Teams and external phone calls.
- Simple user experience by providing a single interface for telephony, conferencing and collaboration.
- Improves customer experience.
- Retains existing telephone numbers.
- Builds on existing technology investment.
- Enables further efficiencies through integration with M365.
- Provides management and performance information.
- Provides a sustainable solution, reducing carbon footprint (removing handsets and on-premises equipment).
- Removes building dependency supporting estates rationalisation.

2.14 Contact Centre

- Enables the Council to channel shift to improve customer service and efficiency.*
- Provides accurate, reliable real-time information.
- Provides capability for supervisors to remotely manage and support staff.
- Provides 24x7 service through a range of access channels.
- Provides a lightly coupled solution allowing us to switch contact centre providers without changing the underlying telephony platform, allowing the Council to take advantage of market changes and disruptors.

*The service currently delivers a voice centric only solution for customer contact. In its current form, it will not be able to support any future move to an omni-channel contact centre and self-service functionality.

Implementation approach

2.15 The shift away from traditional landlines to softphones also involves people and process change. Staff will need support in gaining familiarity with the new phone setup. The Workstyles Programme is already working in this space with the Tech Advocates helping staff gain confidence with technology and exploiting MS Teams capability a key area of their expertise.

2.16 Landline telephones, like printers or physical post, are one of the last physical assets that tie staff to buildings. A future fit softphone solution removes that anchor and enables staff to work with ease from wherever their service needs them to. This will remove unnecessary equipment and reduce the need to travel. As well as aligning closely with Workstyles, this project expects to work

closely with the Estates Rationalisation and Carbon Reduction Programmes in mutual support of their objectives.

Resilience

2.17 Resilience is a core consideration in all projects involving foundational technology. The current telephony service is delivered through to telephony handsets and analogue gateways that are end of life with an associated increased service delivery and security risk. Whilst no technology service is infallible, as a worldwide cloud collaboration provider Microsoft 365 services are inherently designed to be highly available and resilient to failure thus this solution provides a high level of confidence.

2.18 The proposed model enhances resilience by giving users the same telephony experience wherever they need to work from and in addition, provides fully featured contact centre services to critical teams that require a more sophisticated set up. In the rare event of an MS Teams outage, the Contact Centre solution will be designed to continue working. Reciprocally, in the event of a Contact Centre solution outage, Teams will provide a seamless business continuity option to maintain customer contact.

3 Financial implications

3.1 This proposal requires procurement of:

- A Call Plan (the main telephone service)
- A replacement Contact Centre telephony solution (including licences)
- Implementation services (specialist knowledge and expertise)
- Microsoft Teams telephony licences (enabling the dial pad and unified comms experience to be added to the existing Teams interface).

3.2 The financial implications are presented in a later agenda item that contains exempt information.

4 Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

4.1 There are a multitude of drivers including contract end dates, ageing hardware and change of working patterns that have resulted in the need for the Council to review options for a replacement telephony service.

4.2 Noting the strategic review and consultation activity undertaken, identifying a Microsoft Teams based telephony solution, the Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change is recommended to:

- note the information set out in the Exempt report later in the agenda which supports the recommendations set out in this report.
- approve the initiation of procurement activity and delegation of the subsequent contract award to the Chief Operating Officer.

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