Report to Policy and Resources Committee

30th September 2024

Security of Zoom Meetings

Introduction

Following concerns raised by the Deputy Town Clerk in light of the recent disturbing cyber-attack that occurred during a Faversham Town Council Zoom meeting, where 14 individuals engaged in inappropriate behaviour, including acts of public indecency, it has become clear that continuing to use Zoom for council meetings presents significant risks. This incident not only disrupted the meeting but also undermined public trust in the integrity and security of virtual council sessions. This highlights concerns about participant verification.

This report outlines the reasons why Faversham Town Council should stop using Zoom for meetings and recommends steps to encourage in-person attendance to restore trust and ensure security.

Key Issues with Zoom

1. **Security Vulnerabilities**:
   The cyber-attack demonstrated a major vulnerability with Zoom, where unauthorised individuals gained access to the meeting. We do not implement security measures, such as meeting passwords and waiting rooms, and as such this incident shows that malicious actors can still infiltrate virtual spaces. The reputational damage caused by such incidents cannot be underestimated, as it affects public confidence in the council's ability to manage sensitive matters.

2. **Inability to Verify Participants**:
   During the attack, it became clear that none of the participants engaging in disruptive behaviour were genuine residents of Faversham. Verifying the identity of participants in virtual meetings is challenging, and the current system does not allow for reliable authentication of attendees. This means that council meetings can be easily hijacked by anonymous individuals, compromising the council's ability to engage meaningfully with the local community.

3. **Decreased Accountability**:
   Virtual meetings reduce the personal accountability of attendees. In face-to-face meetings, individuals are more likely to behave appropriately due to the visibility of their presence. Virtual settings can embolden disruptive behaviour, as participants feel shielded by anonymity. Such incidents may continue if the council relies on online platforms, leading to ongoing disturbances and distractions.

4. **Impact on Public Perception**:
The incident has likely had a negative impact on the public's perception of the council's professionalism. Hosting council meetings on platforms that are prone to cyber-attacks can create the impression that the council is not taking security seriously. Restoring confidence among residents and stakeholders will require a shift back to secure, controlled environments where such disruptions are less likely.

Recommendations for Returning to In-Person Meetings

1. **End the Use of Zoom for Public Council Meetings**:
Given the security risks and the potential negative impact on public trust, it is recommended that Faversham Town Council cease using Zoom for public meetings. While virtual meetings provided flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, the risks now outweigh the benefits. In-person meetings provide a more secure and accountable environment.

2. **Promote Safe, In-Person Attendance**:
To encourage residents to attend meetings in person, the council can implement the following steps:

   o **Health and Safety Protocols**: Ensure that all in-person meetings adhere to current health guidelines, making residents feel safe and comfortable attending. This may include social distancing, hand sanitisation, and ventilation measures.

   o **Venue Accessibility**: Hold meetings in accessible venues that accommodate all members of the public, ensuring that those with mobility issues or other concerns are not excluded.

   o **Hybrid Meeting Option for Genuine Residents**: If a full return to in-person meetings presents challenges, a hybrid model may be considered. Residents could be required to pre-register for virtual access via Teams, providing proof of residency to ensure that only legitimate participants are attending online. However, this would put additional time pressures on staff.

3. **Increase Public Engagement and Awareness**:
To rebuild public trust and encourage attendance, the council should launch a public awareness campaign emphasising the importance of civic engagement and the steps being taken to ensure the security and integrity of meetings. This can include:

- o **Public Information Campaigns**: Use local media, social media, and newsletters to inform residents about upcoming meetings and the new procedures in place to ensure safety and order.

- o **Direct Invitations to Local Groups**: Reach out to community groups, businesses, and local organisations, inviting them to participate and ensuring they feel included in the decision-making process.

- o **Councillor Surgeries**: Recommence regular/quarterly councillor surgeries on Saturday mornings which are advertised in advance.

4. **Enhance Meeting Security**:
   For added security in both virtual and in-person settings, consider introducing:

- o **Pre-registration for Attendees**: Require residents to register in advance for meetings to verify their identities and address concerns about unauthorised or disruptive individuals.

- o **Council-Controlled Technology**: If online components are still needed, use more secure, council-controlled platforms that offer better verification and security measures than Zoom.

Conclusion

The recent cyber attack during a Faversham Town Council Zoom meeting has made it clear that the council must prioritise security and public trust. Moving away from Zoom and returning to in-person meetings is the most effective way to prevent future disruptions and restore confidence in the council's operations. By promoting safe, in-person participation and considering hybrid models with strict verification processes, Faversham Town Council can continue to engage meaningfully with the local community while ensuring a secure and professional environment for its proceedings.

Recommendations for Action:

- Cease the use of Zoom for council meetings immediately, saving £600pa.

- Implement measures to encourage safe in-person attendance.

- Consider hybrid models with strict verification for legitimate residents.

- Enhance public engagement through campaigns and direct invitations.

- Improve security measures for all future council meetings.

By taking these steps, Faversham Town Council will be better positioned to serve the local community while protecting the integrity of its meetings.