



Leading Welsh MP, Mark Williams, increases his accessibility to constituents and combats climate change with WebEx online meeting technology

Benefits from using WebEx included:

- Greater accessibility to constituents and staff based in two locations over 230 miles away
- Seven online meetings cut travel time by over six days
- WebEx online meeting technology has the potential to reduce Williams' carbon emissions by nearly 3 tonnes a year
- Saving taxpayer's money by cutting travel expenses

Limited accessibility and a heavy carbon footprint

"Having a constituency in West Wales and an office in Westminster means I spend a lot of time travelling back and forth," explains Mark. "It is important that I have face-to-face time with both my constituents and staff but I was very aware of not only the time and money it was costing, but also the environmental impact." Although Mark already used train to travel back to his constituency, on average the journey to and from Ceredigion takes 10 hours. Mid week meetings have always proved a particular challenge despite the continuing need to be accessible to constituents.

"I reached a point where I spent far more time travelling to meetings than having them, which isn't an efficient use of my time and meant I was less accessible to my constituents and staff," says Mark. "Some face-to-face meetings just weren't necessary so I looked at how technology could help me to have productive meetings in an online environment."

The cost of travel is also an ongoing concern for MPs. They have received much scrutiny from the media and public after the first detailed breakdown of the UK MPs' £5 million travel expenses were released in February this year. This was a result of a two-year Freedom of Information campaign by Liberal Democrat MP Norman Baker and showed that a number of MPs were using car, taxi and air travel in what some construed as an extravagant manner.

With heightened awareness of this issue, Mark has to be conscious not to waste taxpayers' money on unnecessary travel, that could be put to better use elsewhere.

Another important factor for Mark is the environmental impact of the travel, particularly in the wake of the Stern Review and recent G8 summit in Germany. The pressure to reduce carbon emissions is filtering down to local-level politics and MPs are increasingly under pressure to prove their green credentials. "Whilst I already use train travel, I wanted to further reduce my carbon footprint by stopping excessive mid-week travel to Ceredigion or across London for meetings," he says. "Climate change is something we can all do something about, especially now that technology exists to help reduce our dependence on travel."

Taking advantage of online meeting technology

In June 2007, Mark decided to trial WebEx online meeting technology as a means to increase the time he had to meet constituents, colleagues and other stakeholders, as well as reducing travel costs and carbon emissions. An important reason for this choice was the ability to be more accessible to his constituents, as he explains: "Nothing can replace my traditional surgery, but WebEx lends itself very well to my job. Even when I have to be in London, I can have meetings with my constituents who are over 230 miles away." It was the first solution



Profile

Mark Williams MP, an English-born former deputy head teacher, became the MP for the West Wales constituency of Ceredigion in May 2005. He was appointed as the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Wales in March 2006.

Mark has always had an active interest in the environment. As a member of Greenpeace and the Countryside Alliance, he constantly looks for ways to reduce his carbon footprint, particularly as he splits his time between his constituents, over 230 miles away in Wales, and his responsibilities in Westminster.

¹ MPs spent £2 million on driving, £1.5 million on trains and £1 million on flights last year.

Mark had tried and his staff quickly became familiar with it.

WebEx online meeting technology only requires a phone and a web browser, so anyone can hold a meeting without having to install extra software. It also enables screen and application sharing, with the added advantage of voice and multi-point video. If it is used with a web cam it recreates a face-to-face meeting, without the drain on time, money or carbon emissions associated with travelling. Mark goes on to say: "WebEx provides a lot more flexibility in where and when meetings can be held so I can use my time more productively. It enhanced my role as a constituency MP, when in Westminster."

Less travel allows more face-to-face contact and boosts green credentials

Since implementing WebEx online meeting technology Mark has been able to hold more meetings but at a fraction of the time. "WebEx allows not only me, but those who want to hold meetings with me, to be a lot more spontaneous and you quickly become reliant on it," he says. "It encourages people to have direct dialogue with me whereas before it was much more limited."

In the first 20 days of the trial, Mark held seven meetings via WebEx varying between two and three participants. If they had been face-to-face, the travel time entailed would have totalled over six days. He comments: "I've been very impressed with the opportunities for face-to-face communication when I'm away from my constituency and it has cut down on the amount of travelling I've had to do."

Perhaps more significantly, from those seven meetings, a total of 4012 miles were saved in travelling, which amounts to 161.5 kilograms of carbon dioxide. This means on a yearly basis, by using WebEx, Mark could reduce carbon emissions by nearly 3 tonnes and make a serious commitment to reducing emissions. WebEx has enabled Mark Williams' meetings to become more efficient. "Despite some saying that this type of technology decreases face-to-

face contact, I've found it actually promotes it," he explains. "Before I would have communicated by telephone or email a lot more but now I can directly talk to people and see them via a web cam. That makes for a much more productive dialogue." This also satisfied a request from internal staff for more face-to-face time with Mark, made impossible before due to lack of time, and a weekly diary that usually involves four days in London.

Another example of how WebEx has helped productivity is during weekly meetings where relevant articles in the media are discussed. Before, headlines and page numbers were faxed to attendees in advance so they could search for the article. Now, not only can participants share these clippings but other documents as well, such as press releases. They can then be discussed and any changes made immediately onto the document.

Another benefit for Mark was the ability to record meetings: "Whilst I don't need to record every meeting it would be invaluable if a constituent had a complicated issue."

It also has the benefit of cost savings with less being spent on travel so money can be put to better use.

Constituents too are benefiting from increased contact. A Ceredigion voter was keen to talk to Mark about train transport early in the week and rather than having to wait for the MP to visit his constituency on the Friday, a WebEx meeting was set up on the same day so he could discuss the issue immediately.

Looking forward

The benefits Mark has seen in such a short time have convinced him that his use of WebEx and the consequential benefits will continue to grow, particularly as constituents become more familiar with it. This will enable him to have more direct contact with them as well as taking a significant step to reducing his carbon footprint.

"With increasing attention on how taxpayers' money is being spent and the green credentials of MPs, WebEx is a solution that tackles both these issues and more besides," he says.

See how much carbon you can save by avoiding travel.

www.webex.co.uk/gogreen

