

Minutes



Democratic Services Committee

Date: 11 October 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors C Ferris (Chair), P Hourahine, J Clarke, T Watkins, K Thomas and G Giles

Apologies: Councillors M Whitcutt, C Evans and C Townsend

1 Apologies

Councillor C. Evans, Councillor C. Townsend and Councillor Whitcutt.

2 Declarations of Interest

None to declare.

3 Minutes of Meeting held on 22 July 2021

Councillor K Thomas referred to the question on page 9 and asked for the wording to be amended as members of the public are welcome to the civic centre. The Committee noted that the comment was relating to another item with regard to drop in sessions for potential standing candidates for becoming a councillor.

Subject to this addition, the minutes of the meeting of 22 July 2021 were approved and **accepted** as a true record of the meeting.

4 Annual Report of the Head of Democratic Services

The Head of Law and Regulation provided a brief overview of the annual report of the Head of Democratic Services. It was explained to the committee that both the Head of Service and Head of Democratic Services have worked on the report.

Key points:

It covers the period November 2020 to October 2021 with an update on where the Council is with Democratic Services staffing arrangements in terms of supporting councillors to discharge their roles.

Committee was advised that the Democratic Services team is at full complement with Leanne Rowlands in the post as Head of Democratic Services and as the Democratic Services Manager. Two scrutiny advisers in post after a long delay during the lockdown.

The view is that they have sufficient support in the team to support the committee but that is subject to review in terms of Council policy or if there will be new initiatives to look at. They would keep the structure and capacity under review.

Over the next twelve months, the Democratic Services team's main priority is to develop the technology for hybrid meetings and to provide training for members to enable them to use the system effectively.

The Committee will get a report in the agenda in terms of hybrid meetings, the priority will be within 6-8 months, in time for the May elections in 2022 to meet that transition from remote to hybrid meetings with the sufficient support.

When the civic centre is back in occupation with people meeting in meeting rooms; attendees can dial in remotely as the statute requires this. This is to support the councillors deliver their work programme for the next twelve months.

The Lead Officer welcomed questions and comments from the Committee.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Chair of the Committee queried when attending a meeting in person, would that individual carry more weight in the discussion for being at the face to face meeting.

In response, the Head of Law and Regulation stated that they have to ensure those dialling in remotely have the same rights and ability to participate in discussion as others and are not disadvantaged in any way. Chairing the meeting will also take different skills, the officer is conscious of that training need.

It was reiterated to the Committee that dialling in will be a personal choice to the Members and not something required for public health reasons.. However going forward it will be a matter of personal choice; therefore if someone cannot get to the Council chambers for any reason, they can dial in remotely. For such meetings members cannot be disadvantaged in terms of their voting and role within the committees.

- Councillor Hourahine queried if there should be a reason given for remote working, for instance, would personal choice be a reason for that.

The Lead Officer confirmed that personal choice is a reason; the point of hybrid meetings is to be part of the Welsh Government diversity equality agenda. As some Councillors with other commitments such as work cannot travel into the civic centre, will be able to dial in remotely. There will be no need to give apologies for absence for not being physically sat in the meeting as the remote attendance counts because the Member will be participating in the meeting.

- Councillor Giles noted that it was good to hear of the success of the reorganisation, that the team has all of the staff they require and congratulated everyone on their posts.

In terms of virtual attendance; Councillor Giles commented that this could hopefully increase attendance because not everyone is able to get in so it gives more opportunity for people to attend meetings in that way. They can see a lot of thought has gone into ensuring there is equality of access. If it works well, it will be a good thing.

- Councillor Clarke congratulated the team on getting full staff levels on board after being through Covid. In the year from November 2020 to November 2021, they are looking at hybrid meetings for the future but noted it was important to reflect back on how it has been conducted and mentioned what the chairs of committees will have to do to get on top of the virtual meetings. In reflection, it has been a good job done by everyone and thanked the team.

- Councillor Watkins echoed the previous point that as long as the meeting system works well, then it will give a positive effect. It gives the opportunity for those unable to access the civic centre for any reason, to attend the meeting.
- It was mentioned by the Chair that the meeting system seems to be improving and is more workable.

5 **Annual Report of the Democratic Services Committee**

The Head of Law and Regulation informed the Committee that this is the draft report for the Committee which they present to Council on the work of the committee from over the last 12 months and the work programme up until next May 2022. The draft annual report includes information about memberships, activities and the work programme for the next few months and touches on a lot of work that the Democratic Services Manager will discuss in the later agenda items.

The Committee made the following comments:

The Chair noted it was a fair appraisal and asked the Committee if it met with their acceptance.

- Councillor Hourahine noted that on page 32 on the second paragraph; it states that the Committee felt the induction was comprehensive but there was concern raised about the intensity of training with 37 modules being developed. The Member asked if the Committee is concerned about the training as he could not recall having that discussion.

In response, the Lead Officer confirmed it was recorded within the minutes as such. The general view was that it was welcome, Councillor Matthew Evans was concerned about the number of modules so discussed that the main thing was to identify which were mandatory and specific to individual roles so they can undertake certain roles. Although there was an initial concern – the team explained to the Committee that Members didn't have to attend all of the modules; that is why they wanted to clarify which ones would be mandatory or specific to their committee role.

- The Chair of the Committee mentioned that perhaps it should be included to state that not all modules are mandatory.

The Head of Service clarified that it confirms that point at the end of the report.

- Councillor Thomas noted that new Councillors joining will be going into the post with not much insight. Therefore the complexity of the role needs to be clearly explained with full support provided to them to take up training opportunities that are appropriate to their roles.
- Discussion ensued and the Chair suggested if they could mention in the draft report that the training is optional for the experienced Members, as there would be no need for them to do it.
- Councillor Thomas noted that all measures must be taken to ensure that it will be a simplified route map for how the Members engage with the training.

In response, the Head of Service confirmed they were happy to take on board the Committee's comments.

Part of the work programme will be for 6-8 months' time with the programme of inductions, there are messages that the team could feed back to potential elected Members. It was noted this was more of a reflective view of what the Committee discussed at that meeting.

- The Chair suggested that with the draft report, the officers could bear in mind the comments from the Committee and the Monitoring Officer could write a form of words to introduce this to council, which could be something they can reinforce in introductory comments.
- Councillor Thomas also commented that almost a decade ago the Members training was very sparse, and observed that there has been a great significance of training introduced from the last two administrations. Introducing something well packed to upskill the Councillors is good and shows there has been a culture shift.

Councillor Clarke also commented how the new technology facilitates a broader degree of training and availability for that.

The Head of Service responded that the Member training development was in its infancy many years ago but has significantly developed over the past two introductions. The next one will be more intensive again. This is because they can now identify what specific skill sets that Councillors need. In terms of what Councillors require for their specific roles and identifying how to develop Members' skills.

The introduction of e-learning has helped, so people do not have to come into the civic every time they do a course.

Comments from the Committee will be taken on board but for face to face learning; the Democratic Services team want to get the balance right on how they deliver the training and what the requirement for that is.

- Councillor Giles advised that from starting as a Councillor around 18 years ago; there was no training available. From then, there has been a huge improvement with new cohorts coming in from differing professional backgrounds. Councillor Giles noted that it is good to see the training develop and would be a good idea to pick and choose for the specific needs.

The long standing Councillors could see the 'start from scratch' approach as off-putting, therefore a more sophisticated system would be a good idea.

Councillor Giles then asked if there is something between the online and face to face modules. Sessions where people can come into a Committee meeting for training but they do not have to physically be present. There would be issues with Members with different circumstances/being unwell so the mixed training could tie in with the equality and attendance issue.

The Head of Service confirmed that once the Council Chambers are set up for hybrid meetings, they could provide training on that basis. For example, mandatory training could be held in the Chambers for those who can come in. The hybrid facility could be accessed for the Members who are unable to make it in. The hybrid function takes delivery for training to another level and definitely avoids the issue of availability. It was mentioned that a few training sessions could be a half-day session – therefore hybrid meeting attendance could be down to personal choice.

- Councillor Watkins agreed the prior point that it is a good idea and mentioned that there needs to be an ongoing period of training over the Council period as Committees change after a period of time. This ongoing training could be specific to another committee, for instance, for Planning Committee; the Members would have to go through training on the planning system again. If a new Member comes in three years down the line in a new term; they would need to attend the training. The Member mentioned that this applies to any committee that requires further training.

In response, the Head of Service agreed and confirmed there will be a focus on introductory training come May 2022 for the intake of Councillors to get them up to speed with how the decision making process works. The roles for different Committees going forward means that the Members individual training needs should be constant and not just within a month in terms of inductions as it is clear that Members roles can change. For instance, one could become Chair and would need specialist training in that, including chairing hybrid meetings.

The Lead Officer reiterated the point of individual training plans for Members. Similar to Council staff having a performance review every year; where they learn the areas to improve and develop as an individual. Applying the point for Members; there could be training and a development plan over the four year period; not just following the new election period.

- The Chair of the Committee made the suggestion of the role of mentoring would be needed with the change of Committees. In terms of new Councillors joining; the Chair queried if education could be ongoing. The Member stressed that mentoring would be essential, especially for new Councillors. Especially with more senior roles; would not underestimate the value that Members get in terms of the representative role. For example, Licensing Committee, being Chairs of Scrutiny Committees with questioning skills. Mentoring comes in terms of the community leaders and suggested that it could be critical as officers cannot replicate the training, as they are not involved in ward work. Therefore the Member asked if mentoring by senior Members could be critical for training.

The Chair commented on page 32 of the report, and asked if there were any other points the Committee wished to raise.

The Committee confirmed they were happy with the report,

6 **Participation Strategy (Presentation Update)**

The Democratic Services Manager provided the Committee with an update and a refresh on the participation strategy which is a requirement under the Local Government and Elections Act for the whole of Wales.

Key points:

This a policy of strategy that encourages local people to participate in local government decision making. The council wish to consult and share the strategy by May 2022.

There are five requirements of the participation strategy, the one that the Committee would be focusing on is around how to promote becoming a Member of the Council or related Authority. The Officer advised the Members how they will incorporate the feedback that the Committee gave to the officer. The Officer provided an overall timeline, that the strategy is in development at the moment and there should be a working document available ready for

December. At that point, the document will return to the Democratic Services Committee for review and comments. From that stage, any amendments will be made and then it will go out to consultation with the public in February.

The group is considering other strategies on safe ways of reaching out to other residents that do not have much of an online presence. The Committee was informed that they are working with groups in the city that are hard to reach and therefore do not have much of a voice on such matters.

Members were advised that from the consultation, they will gather the evidence and outcomes and present it to full Council in March 2022; so it should be ready in time for the strategy to be published in May. This will then form part of the induction training that the Committee has discussed with the Officers in this meeting.

This is important for encouraging participation from Members and potential Members, to share this information with the public so everyone will be aware of the changes made.

In terms of information on how to be a Member; changes have been made on the council website. It takes visitors to a link on the WLGA website with a short film for watching. The Democratic Services Manager advised that such videos mention different experiences of being a Councillor being shared with the public.

The Committee was advised that for the next steps, the officer group working on the participation strategy are looking to develop a communication plan to signpost access to the information on how to become a Councillor. So the Council are focusing on getting that message out to the public.

The Democratic Services Manager informed the Members that they will finish the first draft of the strategy which will then be shared with the Committee in December.

The Committee made the following comments:

- Councillor Giles noted that the work being done sounds positive and recognised it was very good in the different ways of getting others to apply, such as viewing videos online. The Member advised they look forward to the catch up mentioned.

The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that they will bring the initial strategy to the Committee in December. The officer advised that it might come in later in February 2022 also as they have a chance to do budget consultation which would be the best opportunity to get as much feedback as possible.

- Councillor Watkins asked if the Democratic Services Manager could circulate the video to the Committee.

The Officer confirmed that the link to the video is embedded as a link within the presentation and that the Lead Officer will send this to the Members.

7 Role Descriptions for Members (Verbal Update)

The Democratic Services Manager advised that the Committee has made reference on the Member's roles in one of the prior agenda items; and advised Members that they will re-share the role descriptions that have come from the WLGA on the videos provided to think about what they are going to put in place for the elections for next year in May 2022.

8 Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales draft Annual Report Consultation - February 2022

The Head of Law and Regulation stated that this is a draft report, issued every year October/November time inviting Councillors to comment before it is published in January/February before it comes into force next May.

Members were reminded that they normally do not comment on how much the Remuneration Panel decides what the appropriate amount of payment is for Councillors.

They are re-basing the allowances, in the last few years there has been a relatively small inflationary allowance but now they are advising that the basic salaries have not kept pace with inflation over the last five years; so they are looking to re-base all of the allowances. Therefore the salaries for Members and Leaders will go up, senior salaries for Chairs of Committees and salaries for the Mayor will increase by a commensurate amount.

So it is more for if the Members of the panel have any comments to make to the Independent Remuneration Panel at this moment in time.

The Committee made the following comments:

- Councillor Giles acknowledged that it is tricky for the Members to comment on this in a sense, of public opinion in the role as politicians. It was mentioned that Members do not take all that they might be entitled to as they feel very aware of that. The independent assessment is very important and the comparisons that it takes within the community. When it comes out, how it is presented to the public is very important but stressed how important it is that it is an independent view that holds the weight.
- Councillor Watkins queried if the Committee Members could individually comment on the report.

The Head of Service responded that they should not, as it was sent to the Council for comment. The Council's procedure for this would be for the Democratic Services Committee to collectively comment on the draft report. The Officer clarified that it is not a public consultation; as it is the IRP consulting with each of the Local Authorities in Wales. They can comment on it as a Council as is customary and within the remit of the Democratic Services Committee to formulate any comments at this stage.

- Councillor Watkins asked what the deadline is for making comments and could the Committee make comments.

In response, the Head of Law and Regulation confirmed the consultation has to be in sometime in November so confirmed this would be the last collective Committee meeting they can bring the report to.

- The Chair queried if the Committee thinks they work a three day week.

Members of the Committee agreed that they do a lot more than stated in the report. Councillor Thomas stated that the Councillor roles certainly fall outside of normal working hours; an example was mentioned when a constituent rang a Councillor at 3am. The Member mentioned that those who are not Councillors, would be surprised at the innovative ways they find to give the service that Councillors provide within their role. They try their best to give services in their role.

Councillor Giles followed on from the previous comment which tied in with the discussion of attracting people into the role. To say three days does not give that

flexibility that seems attractive. It is quite difficult as some weeks the workload is very busy but other weeks can be not as busy. Anything that sounds like an employment of certain days does not fit with the role as it is about the flexibility and being available.

The Member stressed that they acknowledged that Councillors are not an emergency service but mentioned caution in setting out the role to be a specific number of days.

- The Chair asked if the Council should make a representational net score for instance on the length of time worked on average.

The Head of Service responded by stating that they do not believe that the IRP is stating all Councillors work three days a week; they are using it as a base of what is appropriate for an allowance.

The Committee was advised that it is up to the Members if they wish to comment on that, on whether the analysis of a part time role is equivalent to a part time salary. The issue is that they have got to base the assessment of allowances on something.

The Officer mentioned that they could review on what the panel base a reasonable allowance and clarified that the IRP recognises that being a Councillor is a full time role, but the equivalent salary should be equivalent to a part time earning on an average salary basis.

- Councillor Giles expressed concern in terms of how the public could view the salary being based on part time work. The Member suggested that they look at the wording through the communications across to the public as they may not realise it is more work, because it is being based as part time work.

The Head of Service commented that this is something in terms of the messages that can be passed on to potential Councillors as discussed with the previous item. It is about getting information out on what it means to be a Councillor, not just because they are paid £16,000 under the impression that it is only a three-day job.

The Head of Service stated that the emphasis should be on communicating with people coming into the role to help their understanding about the responsibilities of being a Councillor rather than going back to the IRP suggesting they re-base their figures on something else.

The Committee confirmed they were happy with the Independent Remuneration Panel report.

9 **Date of next Meeting**

Monday 13 December 10am.

10 **Live Event**

[Democratic Services Committee, 11 October 2021 - YouTube](#)

The meeting terminated at 10:56am