

Minutes



Democratic Services Committee

Date: 13 December 2022

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors D Fouweather (Chair), T Watkins, K Thomas, A Sterry, P Hourahine, T Harvey, A Pimm and M Spencer

Felicity Collins, Elizabeth Bryant (Monitoring Officer), Leanne Rowlands (Customer Services Manager) and Pamela Tasker (Governance Officers)

In Attendance:

Apologies: Councillors E Stowell-Corten

1 Apologies

Councillor Corten.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor K Thomas implied that all Members have an interest as it affects all Wards.

3 Minutes of Last Meeting

The Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 18 October 2022 were accepted and approved as a true record of the meeting.

4 Ward Meetings

The Democratic Services Manager presented the Ward Meeting Report to Committee which contains possible changes to the support for ward meetings.

Since the pandemic, the face to face meetings came to a stop and were not re-instated as there are a range of ways of making representation to the public.

It was noted that the council is required under the Local Government Act to encourage residents to engage and the Participation Strategy has been developed. It was noted that people want more of a voice not through just digital means.

Members were advised that the report aims to support all of the requirements on consulting with the public in a broader approach, including face to face approaches and facilitating the feedback from the residents on the decisions on ward meetings.

Key points:

The report proposes for two ward meetings to be facilitated per year for each ward. The first meeting would be around the budget consultation and the second would be six months later focusing on council performance and service plan feedback.

It was noted that the ward meetings would be supported by officers in setting up the meetings and helping with the publicity to ensure they are well attended.

The meetings would be discretionary as it would be down to the Ward Member requirements. Members were reminded that if every ward wanted to hold twice yearly meetings, that would come to 42 meetings per year and they would require adequate officer support for those meetings to happen.

A consistent approach is necessary and that this is a proposed change in supporting those meetings, it is a requirement for the committee to make and share the process with other Councillors.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager went through the consultation feedback from the residents.

Committee raised the following points:

- Councillor Thomas felt that the documentation could be made more accessible and explanatory and used an example, stating that the planning application documents are counter-intuitive. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager assured Members that they will be updating the Committee in February to share on how they have progressed the participation strategy.
- An observation was made by Councillor Thomas that the comments from residents in the consultation have an angry tone. The Chair stated that with online feedback, people can hide behind usernames, whereas in neighbourhood committee meetings they are there for a sensible discussion, and therefore accountable for their comments.
- Councillor Thomas noted that the Stow Hill ward should have the ability to have ward meetings and felt it was regrettable they could not have been reinstated sooner since the pandemic. It was highlighted by the Member that the ward meetings are one but a very important strand of the participation strategy but felt that the strengths of having ward meetings were lost in the document.

When looking at different sections; the Member felt that the agenda should be led by the residents and not the council as it was noted their ward would hold three meetings a year in which residents had an opportunity to raise issues.

Councillor Thomas also expressed concern on the point of two meetings per year being sufficient; as the Stow Hill Ward would do and disagreed with the prescribed maximum number of two per ward as Members have local issues which arise and therefore it would not be desirable to use the proposed agenda model.

- The Chair reminded the Members that it would be one meeting to discuss the budget, and then another for the council performance which would be prescriptive on what is being discussed and also to take into account the staffing levels for facilitating those meetings.

- Councillor Watkins asked if there would be an opportunity to have extra ward meetings with Senior Officers in attendance.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager advised that support from a senior officer for minute taking would be for two meetings a year. But reminded Members that the ward meetings are not the only way to liaise with the public as they would not replace the surgeries and other methods that the Councillors have in place.

It was explained that it is about formalising the support the council are able to provide. Although the ward meetings are not the only part of the participation strategy they are trying to move it forward with the resident's wishes and provide support to the Members.

It was noted that not all Members are experienced in those type of meetings so the senior officer's presence would add assurance.

- Councillor Watkins noted he was a single ward member for one of roughly the largest wards in Newport. Therefore the Member wished to clarify whether residents will be able to dial in remotely to the ward meetings. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager advised that is not something they have considered but they could potentially look into that. However the ward meetings are supposed to be a different way to engage with the residents aside from via technology; as they already have good Wi-Fi consultation and interactions through social media. This would be for those residents who may not have access via the technology.
- Councillor Watkins asked if it would be possible for the ward meetings to be in place for the upcoming budget consultation period.

The Lead Officer confirmed that they are looking to put as many meetings together for the Members who wish to have them in the New Year. They are aware of the tight timeline from cabinet consultation until the 2nd February 2023.

- Councillor Sterry noted that he is in the biggest ward in Newport and the numbers of attendees fluctuate for in person meetings. Therefore the Member asked the officers to confirm how they would look to advertise the ward meetings to reach all of the residents.

It was mentioned that his party asked for Lliswerry's meetings to be advertised in Newport Matters but were told they could not as that was classed as political.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager recognised that while social media is a good tool, they are mindful of the less engaged residents and continue to look for places where the information can be shared in a formalised standard approach.

- Councillor Thomas made the suggestion of a rolling table on the website for residents.

The Democratic Services Manager advised that the suggestion could be looked into.

- Councillor Hourahine noted that he agreed with the notion that the topics should be agreed with the chair with a rotating chairperson for the meeting as they do within his ward. The Member went on to state that the options set out on page 13 are for Committee to approve the framework and make further amendments at that stage.

It was recognised by the Member that by agreeing to that, they would be putting those ward meetings in place but stressed it would be unlikely for wards to go back to three meetings a year.

The Member felt that the options were fairly straightforward if they were approved but if the committee would not approve, they would like to ask the officers to consider the flexibility points that have been made.

- Discussion ensued amongst the Members and the Chair felt that the council should not be prescriptive on what to discuss with the agenda. Committee acknowledged it would be a tight timescale to organise the meetings for this coming budget consultation and the Chair suggested that they could push the decision back and get the amendments that the committee has requested so they could be in place for the future years.
- It was acknowledged by Councillor Sterry that some wards are a lot smaller than others in size and some may have more meetings a year and asked for that to be taken into consideration.

The Chair noted the logistical problems for all different types of wards. The Member also noted Councillor Watkins' issue of a venue may not be able to support the digital meeting but it was noted by Councillor Watkins that some community councils, were offered finance from the Welsh Government to set up the remote dialling in system.

- Councillor Thomas asked with regard to the options on page 13 on the acceptance of framework; if the ward meeting suggestion was accepted, would the Committee accept the participation strategy.

In response, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager clarified they would not be accepting the strategy itself, just the ward meetings being held twice a year.

The Chair asked each Committee Member to confirm their recommendations for clarity.

- Councillor Thomas suggested for the wards to have the option of three meetings, not a prescribed number of two as it is necessary for some wards to address a wide range of issues with their constituents.
- Councillor Watkins was willing to accept the framework as a minimum but would like to see Members being able to request and arrange additional ward meetings with a senior officer present as local issues arise.
- Councillor Spencer agreed that the wards should be able to have a minimum of three meetings per year.
- Councillor Hourahine wished for the agenda of the ward meetings to be co-ordinated with the chair of those meetings and agreed that there should be a minimum of three ward meetings allowed.

- Councillor Sterry confirmed he was happy with the proposal but expressed his concern with the minimum number being two for meetings per year as his area has four due to the amount of residents in the ward.
- Councillor Pimm confirmed he was happy with the mentioned proposals.
- Councillor Harvey stated that he would be happy with a minimum of two meetings with the option for additional meetings if needed.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the Committee Members would accept the framework with the following recommendations considered:

1. A minimum of two ward meetings a year.
2. An agenda set by the co-ordinators and residents rather than a prescribed one.
3. Support for other meetings such as ad-hoc meetings.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager advised the Committee that she is happy to take back the recommendations and will have another look at the proposal but reminded the Members there will be a limit on the number of meetings handled by senior officers. The Committee were asked to note that the council is in a tough position over the past few months' capacity wise.

- Councillor Watkins noted that it would not mean that the officers would have to be there for everything, like police officers.
- The Chair noted they would require a helping hand for advertising the meeting and asked if the Committee would need to wait until January to discuss the report.

The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that given the timeline, it would need to be discussed in January 2023.

- Councillor Thomas mentioned with regard to advertising; a strategy of an undertaking from the officers that they recognise the commitment to advertise in certain ways. In Stow Hill, a poster would be produced, and suggested one on the website on a rolling basis, or in Newport Matters. It was mentioned that Councillors would do the majority as they print the leaflets and footwork themselves.

In response, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager advised that the council would look into the suggestions made but appreciated with the costings; they have to ensure they are supported under the budget.

The Committee wished to go with the second option for further information provided in an additional meeting for January 2023 before the scheduled meeting of 21 February 2023.

5 **Date of Next Meeting**

The Committee Members agreed to re-convene for an ad-hoc meeting in January 2023. The meeting booked after that will be on Tuesday 21 February 10am-12pm Committee Room 1.

The Chair suggested after that the Members could get the report to all Members so they can input additional comments through email.

Meeting terminated at 10:50 hrs

