

Minutes



Democratic Services Committee

Date: 27 January 2023

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors D Fouweather (Chair), T Watkins, K Thomas, A Sterry, P Hourahine, T Harvey, A Pimm and E Stowell-Corten

Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic Services and Electoral Register Manager) and Pamela Tasker (Governance Officers)

In Attendance:

Apologies: Councillors M Spencer

1 **Declarations of Interest**

None

2 **Minutes of Meeting held on 13 December 2022**

Agreed:

The Minutes of the meeting were held as a true record.

3 **Participation Strategy: Ward Meetings**

The Chair noted that there had been a robust discussion on Ward Meetings at the last committee where officers had been asked to come back with amended proposals.

The Members of the Committee were asked to note an email from Councillor Al-Nuaimi received by the committee which were his thoughts on the proposals for Ward meetings which endorsed the conclusions from the last meeting.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager presented the report to the committee.

Main Points:

- This report proposal was considered in December 2022 and recognised the Council's adoption of a Participation Strategy earlier that year. This set out the Council's commitment to develop more ways of engaging with residents, which includes seeking their views as part of the decision-making process.

- The report recognised the value of meeting face to face with residents as another channel of interaction that sits alongside other methods of engagement.
- Ward meetings in the past were held with residents at the request of ward members, with a maximum 3 meetings a year that were supported by officers.
- The proposals sought to formalise support and to use that as a platform to acknowledge the consultation with residents regarding the Participation Strategy last year. The feedback indicated residents wanted the Council to be visible in the community, ask residents about what mattered to them and to explore alternative methods of engagement.
- Setting the budget is one of the most important decisions that the Council makes, so having this as a standard item on one of the ward meeting agendas would boost the feedback and involvement of residents as part of this process. Similarly, having performance updates as a standard agenda item on another ward meeting date in the year would support the Participation Strategy's objective of supporting the public to digest and explore information before they may be asked to give their opinion or recommendations.
- It was acknowledged that digital engagement was useful and there was a place for it but there was an aim to look to improve different ways of engagement using face to face as a platform as an addition.
- In the previous committee meeting, the feedback from members concluded that there was a concern with limiting ward member meetings to 2 a year and it was felt it was important for residents to set part of the agenda which reflected the issues pertinent in that community.
- Feedback also stated that members wanted support for engagement before meetings to make sure they were happening and to publicise meetings with advertisements through a number of channels, such as online, through Newport Matters and in local community spaces.
- It was proposed that a third meeting could be retained, and the team could provide administration support to secure venues and help to promote the meetings, but this third meeting would not be supported by senior officers. The other two meetings would be supported by senior officers and it was recognised that that this represented a significant investment of resource in supporting ward engagement activities.
- In relation to the agendas at ward meetings, it was important for residents to be engaged and so it would be useful to retain the ability for residents to set their own discussion points further to the standing items on budget and performance, as setting their own agenda specific to the ward was an important part of the proceedings.
- **To summarise:**
3 meetings per year would be retained where 2 would be fully supported and administration support for publicity and booking meetings would be provided for the 3rd meeting.

The Chair stated that not all wards would want a meeting and with relation to the 2 meetings proposed if the wards did not want to have these meetings, then they didn't have to have them.

The Chair confirmed that the 2 meetings a year would be just for budget and corporate plan engagement but that this did not to be the whole agenda and the 3rd meeting could be about anything.

A Committee Member asked about attendance at ward meetings, and would they be cancelled if they were poorly attended. The Chair confirmed that this was up to the ward member as ward meeting attendance was varied.

A Committee Member stated that at one time all councillors in a ward had to agree on a ward meeting being held in order for it to take place as if it was a split ward, all the members had to agree and was this still the case.

The Chair stated that he was happy to have a ward meeting if the other councillors wanted one as all members had to work together.

A Committee Member stated that they were happy to go with what residents wanted.

A Committee Member stated that people may not realise they have the option of attending, but if ward meetings were advertised as requested it would be better. There had been a lot of interest in partners coming along to previous ward meetings as this was an opportunity for stakeholders to become involved and to be held accountable.

The Chair stated that a discussion was needed with Police about this to find out if they needed to be at ward meetings.

A Committee Member suggested that maybe there should be Police present at ward meetings even just for security. He also commented on the dates for the budget review and asked whether those dates were fixed by officers or would they be fixed by the consultation.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the budget consultation opened in December 2022 and then ended in January 2023, so this did take some considerable planning. It was important to ensure that there was representation by senior officers at meetings and this was shared out.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that meetings outside the budget setting would be able to have more leeway in terms of timescales.

A Committee Member asked whether other items could be requested to be discussed as well as the budget.

The Chair agreed and confirmed that it was what ward members wanted and members could also ask residents what they wanted.

The Chair reiterated that the third meeting was not going to be supported by senior officers, but the Democratic Services team would help to book meetings and a venue and the promotion of the meeting.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager stated that it depended on the venue as some community venues did incur a cost depending on what they were.

A Committee Member asked about online engagement during ward meetings.

The Chair stated that it was not possible to put in place, whilst some community councils did have this facility, but it was better that residents were able to turn up in person to meetings as there were already lots of digital methods of engagement as part of consultation and engagement.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager stated that there had been a lot of digital engagement in different ways, which does take place via other methods in terms of Social media, Wi-Fi surveys but this proposal was to expand on this.

A Committee Member stated that it was up to members to ensure meetings happened at the most appropriate time and ward councillors had a

responsibility to promote them also to get numbers there. The Committee Member stated that a meeting she had attended had 250 people there for a contentious issue and other times 4 people attended and it was a case of working with ward colleagues to time the meeting correctly.

A Committee Member confirmed that he was fully supportive of this and that if the two ward meetings were supported as discussed then it was not an issue.

A Committee Member confirmed that it seemed a reasonable compromise for 2 meetings to be supported by senior officers and the third meeting supported by administrative officers.

Agreed:

The Committee noted and endorsed the proposed framework to support ward meetings prior to consideration by full Council.

4 Date of next Meeting

21 February 2023 at 10am

- The Chair requested a Forward Work Plan to go on the agenda.
- The Chair also requested a proposal for the timing of Questions to the Leader at Council to be extended to half hour if the Committee were happy to discuss this at a future committee.
- A Committee Member stated that the constitution had been recently amended and the Chair stated that some anomalies have come up and the Standing Orders needed to be looked at.
- A Committee Member stated that this topic had been robustly debated previously and there was a strong feeling on it.
- The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that there would be an update on Member Training at the next meeting and the Chair commented that he wanted more items on the agenda.
- A Committee Member requested that the committee discussed Voter ID and could there be a presentation on this at a future committee.
- A Committee Member stated that maybe in future the role of the Standards Committee could be involved in future in relation to member training and this committee could give more feedback on this training.
- The Chair stated that he felt that the Standards Committee did not have the power to make members attend training.
- A Committee Member confirmed that the Standards Committee informed the leaders of all political groups of what members were not attending training.
- The Chair stated that the Code of Conduct was advisable but not mandatory.
- The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that there would be a third and final opportunity for Code of Conduct training at the end of February 2023.
- The Head of Law and Standards confirmed that the leaders of the political groups would be reporting to the Standards Committee in April 2023.

The meeting terminated at Time Not Specified