

Minutes



Democratic Services Committee

Date: 19 February 2015

Time: 5pm

Present: Councillor C Ferris (Chair), Councillors J Mudd, K Thomas and T Watkins

Mr G Price (Head of Law & Regulation), Mr R Jefferies (Head of Democratic Services) and J Howells (Democratic Services Support Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Bond, Evans & Harvey and W Godfrey

Part 1

1 Apologies for Absence

Noted above.

2 Minutes

Re item 4: Broadcasting/Webcasting of Meetings. Both the WLGA guidance and Council's advice note on protocol had been circulated to members.

Re item 5: Council Agenda. Head of Democratic Services confirmed that only matters for decision had been circulated in paper form in the Council agenda and no negative comments had been received.

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2014 were confirmed as a true record.

3 Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were received.

4 Modern.gov

The Council's existing method of storing documents and preparing agenda papers, reports, decisions and minutes is to change in March 2015 from the current method (Stellent) to a new system via the Modern.gov organisation.

This report updated members on progress and suggested that all members receive an information session from the Company.

Much of the change relates to the process of uploading documents by Democratic Administration and Scrutiny staff but there are some changes that will impact on elected members.

The Head of Democratic Services made a presentation of the new system, which was not yet live. He confirmed that whilst Members will continue to receive links to documents via the Council's e-mail system the look and feel of the agenda papers will, however, be different.

Modern.gov offer an App that can be used to ensure members always have the latest meeting papers for the committees they serve on or that they are interested in. The App is primarily aimed at members but is also available to anyone with an interest in having committee papers on their device. It allows access to all part 1 documents.

The App allows members to specify the committees of interest and will then automatically keep itself updated with all the latest meeting papers including the full agenda pack. It also allows you to highlight sections of the pack and make annotations just as you would with a paper copy. Document navigation is made quick and simple via bookmarking and intuitive controls.

He confirmed that if required members would receive assistance from Democratic Services in downloading this App.

Several questions were raised by members:

1. When would papers be available to view via the calendar?
The papers would be available to view as soon as they were published.
2. Where appendices would sit in the report pack.
Appendices would immediately follow the report they refer to.
3. Access to part 2 documents.
A password would be required to view them.
4. Whether old Council documents would still be available.
Reports as far back as 1999 were presently being migrated to the new document management system.

Agreed:

To note the progress and to agree that Modern.gov be asked to make a presentation to all members.

5 Petitions Protocol

A discussion paper provided a proposal for dealing with petitions and identified the various occasions on which petitions may be received. It also included some thoughts on photography and filming.

A protocol was suggested for the following situations:

1. Petitions received without notice.
2. Petitions received on operational matters with notice.
3. Petitions received on policy issues with and without notice.
4. Petitions received in response to a scrutiny consultation.
5. Petitions received in response to planning of licensing consultation.

It was agreed that a protocol needed to be introduced and that the handover of petitions should take place at the Council's reception desk unless alternative arrangements had been agreed. A receipt for the petition would be provided.

It was suggested that petitioners should be encouraged to give notification when they wished to hand in a petition so that the relevant officer or cabinet member would be available to receive it. However this would be solely to receive the petition and not a lobbying opportunity.

A discussion ensued as to how many people should be permitted into the building to present the petition as it was acknowledged the Civic Centre was a public building. As the reception area could be very busy on occasions it was agreed that a limit of 3 people to actually present the petition would be stipulated. However, each case would need to be considered separately on its merit and there would be occasions when more than 3 people would be permitted to present it.

It was also agreed that no photography of the petition being presented inside the building would be permitted, unless expressly agreed in advance.

No protocol currently exists for the receipt of E-petitions and this would need to be considered at a later date.

Agreed:

To adopt the protocol.

Councillor Kate Thomas arrived during the consideration of the above item

6 Diversifying Democracy in Local Government

In May of 2013, the Minister for Local Government & Government Business put forward a motion in the Assembly calling for the advocating of open, transparent and accountable local government; and encouraging greater diversity in local government.

The Minister announced the intention to set up an expert group to consider the results of the survey of candidates, to take evidence and to set out an action plan. In March 2014 a draft action plan was produced and the Democratic Services Committee had provided comments on the plan.

The Committee considered that many of the improvements being sought could only be achieved by way of the political parties although suggestions around mentoring could be encouraged by the Democratic Services Committee as part of the Member Development programme.

The final report and action plan has now been produced and remained largely unchanged from the draft which was discussed by the committee in July 2014.

The committee considered the action plan and comments were of a similar vein as previously and whilst there were certain elements that could be carried out by the Council the majority of the points raised in the plan would need to be carried out by the political parties.

The following points raised in the plan were discussed, as they had been at a previous meeting.

Point 4: Newport already includes survey questions in the nomination papers being distributed.

Point 8: Mentions the need for local authorities to examine data for their area and develop strategies aimed at improving diversity. It was considered that this is still a matter for the political parties to address.

Point 9: It had previously been agreed that the Head of Democratic Services should encourage members who are standing down to attend exit interviews, provided they were happy to do so. It was also felt that an agreed format for exit interviews should be agreed so that results could be collated and compared by Welsh Government.

Point 14: Councillors to visit schools to explain their roles in the community. This is something that could be arranged.

Point 17: Appointment of member champions. This could be implemented.

Point 18: Every councillor should mentor a potential successor. It was considered this worked against the proposals for a more diverse membership that more closely reflected the city's population.

Agreed:

To note the report and action plan and ask for the elements that need consideration by Local Government to be considered by the appropriate decision makers in the City Council

7 Evaluation of Executive and Scrutiny Arrangements

In 2014 the then Minister for Local Government commissioned an independent survey of executive and scrutiny arrangements.

Generally the outcome was positive, although it did point out where there are best practices and possible improvements that can be made.

The WLGA had provided a briefing on the survey and this was discussed.

The cabinet system had certainly speeded up decision making and provided more clarity on responsibility than the previous committee system. However, it was acknowledged that non-executive and opposition members could feel marginalised by the cabinet system.

The scrutiny process was discussed at length. The Head of Law & Regulation confirmed that whilst cabinet members needed to be present at scrutiny meetings if they were being held to account for decisions they had made, it was not imperative they attend to discuss policy reviews.

Agreed:

To note the report and WLGA briefing and to ask the Executive and Scrutiny Improvement Group to consider where identified best practices can be considered for use in Newport's decision making processes, along with any observations of the Democratic Services Committee.

8 Member Development

Councillors have a pivotal role in taking forward the Prospectus for Change agenda and the success of this programme will depend in large part upon elected Members having the skills and capacity to drive this programme of change to ensure best possible services to residents.

In November 2013 the Democratic Services Committee approved the instigation of a pilot programme of Personal Development Reviews for elected members and in June 2014 this was made available to all members.

Twenty councillors arranged to attend a Review meeting. This report updated members with the resulting identified training needs and recommended ways in which these needs might be addressed at little or no cost to Newport City Council. The needs identified were as follows:

Interpersonal Skills

Conflict management, listening to the facts, not the emotion
Diary management, time management, case load management
Effective letter writing

IT related skills

Tracking system for casework
Using media such as Twitter, Facebook, etc
General IT skills, such as electronic filing systems
New IT developments to keep up to date
How/where to find information on the intranet

Council/Committee related skills

Speed reading
Public speaking
Etiquette of full Council, protocol, some sort of shadowing arrangement
Presentation skills
Writing and delivering speeches
Asking challenging questions
Debating skills
Greater understanding of Scrutiny
Budgets/financial jargon

Information

Who Does What, including map and acronyms
Briefings - Wider picture, eg Williams report
Parameters of role/job description

The committee members agreed that the training had been very helpful.

The Head of Democratic Services confirmed that little money was available for training and that the WLGA had now lost their member development funding. However, several of the needs identified could be held 'in-house' at no cost.

With regards to IT skills he acknowledged that members were all at different skills levels but basic training could be carried out by members of Democratic Services and he would certainly encourage this.

Both the Head of Law & Regulation and Head of Democratic Services clarified some of the protocol used at Council following questions raised by those members present. It was agreed that a training session on protocol and etiquette of Council would be held in-house.

Agreed:

That a 'general' training programme is made available to all councillors as a result of the information obtained during Member Development Reviews held during 2014. This training to particularly include general IT skills and protocol and etiquette of Council.

9 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place on Thursday 2 July 2015 at 9.30am in Committee Room 1.