

# Minutes

## Democratic Services Committee

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Date: 18 February 2021

Time: 10am

Venue: Microsoft Teams Live Event

Present: Councillors C. Ferris (Chair), C Evans, M Evans, K Thomas, P Hourahine, T Watkins, H Hughes, M Whitcutt, J Clarke

In Attendance: G. Price (Head of Law and Regulation), A Jenkins (Governance Team Leader), E. Howard (Graduate Trainee)

Apologies: None

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### 1. Apologies

None

### 2. Declarations of Interest

None

### 3. Minutes of the last meeting

The Minutes from 22 October were accepted as a true record subject to the following:

#### Item 4 Annual Report of the Democratic Services Committee

The initial for Councillor M Evans and C Evans being excluded. In addition, Councillor M Evans asked that the sentence be changed to 'He' commented instead of 'they'.

Councillor K Thomas made reference to the role Councillors take on and wanted the sentence removed on page 6, second paragraph. To clarify, Councillor K Thomas asked why council business was being conducted differently not why councillors were not doing their role.

#### Matters Arising

#### Item 4 Annual Report of the Democratic Services Committee

The Committee queried paragraph 2, page 4 and whether the positions had been filled. The Democratic Services Manager and one Scrutiny Advisor post was being re-advertised. The

closing date was at the end of February 2021 and shortlisting would take place in due course.

#### Item 6 Any Issues for Discussion with the IRP

The Committee as that regarding page 8, the Head of Law and Regulation feedback that a more in depth look at barriers for people becoming a councillor was addressed. It was advised that it would be noted to feed back to the IRP however this was not minuted for action by the Democratic Services Committee.

The Chair raised this point and the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) had listened to this point on a statutory basis and the Welsh Model was envied by England and Scotland who were using the Model as an exemplar.

The Chair mentioned that the issue loomed large on a recent Zoom meeting and the IRP were hoping to mentor those councillors and that some councils mentored candidates.

Councillor Hughes suggested that some of the older councillors should not be mentors and that newer councillors should be buddied up with new councillors.

Councillor Whitcutt agreed with the above point which he considered should fit into the New Wales Local Government Act and that this should be feed into the discussion as well as being a separate discussion.

Councillor K Thomas considered that this would be addressed in the guidance of the new Act and councillors would give thought to this at induction.

Councillor Hourahine, met with Democratic Services Officers at the Welsh Government regarding feedback on Councillor training, which they said was quite good, however they never gave overall feedback on this.

Councillors J Hughes suggested there was scope to look into this and it was right that the Council include this as part of the democratic process to attract the right calibre of candidates particularly in such a diverse city.

The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the existing legislation in the Wales Measure (2011), provisions were in place to encourage more people to come forward. Part of this discussion was informing people what it was to be a councillor and the responsibilities. The political groups and parties also had a responsibility to attract the right calibre of candidates.

Councillor C Evans agreed with the Head of Law and Regulation and said that the issue came with the two party system and it was sensible to look at things as they stood. It was suggested that an audit of position of where the council was to see how diverse they were and where parties would like to be by next election. Agreement between the main parties regarding a set criteria for selection could be based on attracting diverse groups, including ethnicity, age, sexual orientation disability and silent disability.

Councillor Whitcutt suggested it was a societal issue in all areas and what was needed was a joined up approach, such as involving a Cabinet Member for Equalities. There was a need to make sure that we can draw on a valuable resource as a society and that it was nothing to do with background but some issues could place social barriers.

Councillor K Thomas observed that there was a visible shortfall only have 30% females and that age was also an issue. This could only be addressed by each political group canvassing according to their policies. It needed to be highlighted and the voters could

decide if they were reflecting their views. An audit was not really a solution and instead should be the responsibility of each political group who needed to get serious on how to address this.

Councillor C Evans suggested that parties or the council should agree on a way to attract the right people via fast tracking groups such as youth council. A roadmap in place could look at the current situation/trends and where we wanted to be as a council from a non-political perspective.

Councillor Hourahine suggested this should be to the agenda as a future item for further discussion.

#### **4. Review of Standing Orders**

Council meeting on 26 January 2021 resolved that Democratic Services Committee reviewed both the impacts of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, and any proposed changes to the Standing Orders together in line with the work plan of the said committee within their normal reporting to full Council.

Councillor P Hourahine considered it was a two-part report, ie that the Motion and Local Government (LG) Act Wales 2021, were entirely separate things.

The Chair asked was the Committee content with the Question Time period and linking it with the LG Act framework or should it be changed at local level.

Councillor M Evans, considered it should be changed at local level to allow back benchers to ask questions as well as including public participation as this was encouraging democracy, therefore it was ideal to make a recommendation at this meeting.

Councillor Whitcutt advised that there was a need to look at the resolution, which advised that Committee reviewed the intention of the resolution, therefore they should be reviewed together in the same piece of work and at the same time.

Councillor T Watkins agreed with Councillor Whitcutt that the Committee look at both the LG Act 2021 and Questions to Leader.

The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the New Act would come into force in stages and would receive guidance on various aspects as it was indicated. There was a need to review the standing orders generally because of the changes coming. As a result of legislation, the Committee could meet more frequently to discuss these changes in legislation, therefore it was confirmed that this needed to be looked as a round.

Councillor C Evans thought that it was a great opportunity to reform and that it would not take long and have a positive impact. It therefore needed to be integrated properly in the Standing Orders in a matter of months.

Councillor Hughes considered it was more than just a singular issue and that the Committee needed to know how it worked in the bigger picture and looked at properly in depth and with the changes that were happening anyway. This could also enhance democracy in Newport.

Councillor Hourahine reflected on the present Questions process and advised that there were ample opportunities for councillors to use the open questions forum. Guiding principles to chairing meetings was to be more succinct. Extending questions therefore did nothing to enhance the meeting.

On a separate note, regarding the New Act and remote attendance, Councillor Hourahine could see how it would work in rural areas but geographically, it was not appropriate for Newport and considered that remote meetings were de-humanising to councils.

The Chair agreed with the last comments regarding the virtual meetings, especially in the current climate.

Councillor M Evans referred to the extension of 15 minutes to Questions to the Leader and considered that it would be ideal to make a recommendation to change this at today's meeting. Councillor M Evans was however disappointed that this issue would be put back until Christmas and would rather make the change immediately.

Councillor Clarke referred to the guidelines and that when they all came out, it would be better that they be addressed collectively.

Councillor Whitcutt mentioned that the council resolution clearly spelled out what was put before the Committee. The question was what the council had decided and had to consider in that context, therefore Councillor Whitcutt moved that The Committee accepted the instructions from council and consider all these matters as part of the same exercise. Councillor T Watkins seconded this.

Councillor M Evans asked what the timescales would be in relation to the New Act. The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the council would wait on public consultation and engagement, however, background research could be carried out on how many councils held public meetings. No decision however on public engagement could be made until public petitions were also looked at as well, which was an informal arrangement with the council. E-Petitions were used in other councils, with a set number of signatories, this could then be debated at council. It was therefore reiterated to wait to see the new legislation. The guidance would be statutory and timescale on how to implement this.

**Recommended:**

The Committee considered the referral from Council and to determined the scope for this review and how it should be undertaken. The Committee therefore considered not to review the operation of Standing Order 4.2(b) now but await further guidance on the other requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act before undertaking a more comprehensive review of existing Standing Orders.

**5. Competency Framework and Induction Training**

The WLGA issued revised drafts of the updated competency framework for councillors and the new induction curriculum for members following the May 2022 local elections. Both were updated since they were last revised in 2017 to reflect the changes in members' roles and new legislative requirements. The draft documents were presented at a meeting of the Lead Members and Officers for Member Support and Development Network on 2 February 2021, which was attended by the Chair of the Democratic Services Committee and Governance Support officers. The Committee was asked to consider the draft documents and formulate any comments or suggested revisions.

The WLGA were looking to deliver this via e-modules, further information would be put to the committee when it was developed.

Following the network meeting, the Chair considered that the framework was thorough and sensibly put.

Councillor K Thomas commented that framework was extremely comprehensive from a councillor's perspective and had generally improved considerably, with more effort and constructive thought being put into the document which was a move in the right direction.

Councillor Hughes echoed the above comments adding that it was useful for potential candidates to see the framework. As a new councillor, the most important role was that of Democratic Services itself and the important work and support that they gave. With regard to e-Learning, there might be councillors that need to be facilitated, as they may not have devices, or have disabilities, such as a visual impairment.

Councillor M Evans, agreed that the e-Learning platforms should be relatively simply designed for Councillors. There was an incredible amount of information and if councillors were to be encouraged to access these, modules could be streamlined. There were 37 modules, which was far too many and these should be streamlined. Councillor M Evans also preferred attending the Civic to meet with councillors at training sessions.

Councillor T Watkins echoed the comments above and mentioned connectivity issues in various areas of Newport. The volume of training was substantial and suggested that existing councillors buddy up with new councillors to give support.

The Chair mentioned that IT literacy should not be a requirement, as some people might not use computers but were still eloquent and worked hard for their community.

Councillor C Evans considered that the role should not be restrictive and that some councillors had good networks, even those that could not read or write. Councillor therefore did not want to see this being mandatory and felt that face to face contact was also important adding that people that choose not to use IT should not be excluded. It was therefore up to the electorate to vote these people into the council.

Councillor Whitcutt suggested reducing the modules to core modules along with undertaking an assessment to identify the basics that were required to be a competent councillor, followed by best practice to undertake further modules.

The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the reasons for the modules was not to be being onerous. Not all modules were mandatory and training was tailored to the councillors needs. The Code of Conduct was mandatory as well as Licensing and Planning Committee training and the rest of modules were voluntary and discretionary. The modules were to help members in their roles. With regard to the comments about IT literacy, the Democratic Services Officers did help members at induction on how to access laptops and emails. Again, this was tailoring to the individual.

The WLGA were also developing a generic platform not just for e-Learning and they acknowledged there would be a training need at local level and these were just general training modules as a background to help develop the role of councillors. Workshops rather than remote training might be carried out if this was the preference.

Councillor M Evans advised that the only issue was to feed back to WLGA that if faced with 37 modules relevant to all councillors, some councillors might feel obligated to complete as many as they could and there were far too many.

The Head of Law and Regulation reiterated that the WLGA put in place the modules to cover every aspect of the role of a councillor, but some members might not need the training. For example, if a councillor did not attend a particular committee that a module had covered in its training package, the councillor did not need to complete that relevant module.

Councillor K Thomas mentioned that the role of councillor was a very demanding job, there would therefore be areas that could be improved upon through these training modules and would enable councillors to improve their role.

Councillor C Evans suggested there was a need to access mandatory training, however consideration could be given to those councillors not in substantial roles and modules could be broken down into comprehensive categories.

Councillor Whitcutt advised that training should be focused and that this had improved greatly over the past 20 years. The WLGA were there to help not hinder councillors and modules produced in collaboration with Welsh Government were to help support members.

Councillor Hourahine considered there was a difference between mandatory and optional training and qualitative training. There was a need for more quantifiable training and officers should be providing the support for councillors.

The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the framework was not prescriptive and the council could develop its own induction programme. If councillors therefore gave feedback to the council, we could tailor the training to their needs. There would be no cost implications with internal training such as Code of Conduct, Governance and Scrutiny training. Other than Licensing and Planning, which was covered under the training budget.

**Recommendation:**

That the Committee considered the draft Competency Framework and Induction Curriculum for Members following the May 2022 local elections and would provide the above comments and suggested revisions as discussed.

## **6. Developing a Democracy Handbook**

For information, the WLGA had identified an opportunity to revisit all of the existing guidance on local democracy produced by the Welsh Government, with the aim to form a Democracy Handbook. As councils operated in different ways, WLGA information was supplemented at local level. The requirement in the New Act was for a summary guide to the constitution and how the handbook could fit into this. A simplistic guide would be useful on how the internal governance worked.

Events were taking place over February and March to highlight the guidance.

## **7. Work programme**

The Head of Law and Regulation advised that the work programme covered broadly the next 12 months corresponding with the New Act. Remote meetings was more about providing access to dial in remotely if councillors could not attend. This would be addressed by hybrid meetings where members could attend the council chamber and/or attend remotely.

There was a Digital Democracy Fund from the WG and the council would put in a bid for approximately £50K to develop the hybrid meetings.

Councillor Hourahine considered that the protocol was a priority for those present and those who attended remotely to be invited to speak fairly.

Councillor K Thomas referred to the serious issues she had experienced with her broadband and appreciated any IT advice.

Councillor T Watkins mentioned that everyone was experiencing technical issues with remote meetings referring to Holyrood Parliament, which had it's own problems.

Councillor C Evans suggested that the council pay for broadband. The Head of Law and regulation mentioned that council broadband was removed as some home owners broadband was more than sufficient for members to carry out their work.

Councillor Whitcutt mentioned standby telephone number to help with joining. This would be provided through Democratic Services, the Digital Team and SRS for Full Council and other committee meetings.

## **8. Date of Next Meeting**

29 April 2021 at 10am