

Minutes



Democratic Services Committee

Date: 22 July 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors C Ferris (Chair), M Whitcutt, J Clarke, T Watkins, K Thomas, G Giles and M Evans

Gareth Price (Head of Law and Regulation), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic Services Manager), Pamela Tasker (Governance Officer), Felicity Collins (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Councillors P Hourahine, C Evans and C Townsend

1 Apologies

Apologies received from Councillor C. Evans, Councillor P. Hourahine and Councillor C. Townsend.

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the Last Meeting 29 April 2021

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and approved as an accurate record.

4 Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 - Implementation

The Head of Law and Regulation introduced Leanne Rowlands the new Democratic Services Manager to the committee and informed members that she would assume the role of Head of Democratic Services and will be accountable to the Democratic Services Committee in terms of governance support and democratic processes. Following on from the previous meeting, the two items on the agenda are interconnected matters on where the council is with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and the Public Participation Strategy, and the New Working Model with its implications for the new incoming Members.

The Democratic Services Manager provided members with a verbal update on the matter through presentation. The lead officer highlighted the two requirements of the legislation regarding public participation and engagement:-

s.39 - Duty to encourage local people to participate in local government decision making to include the making of decisions in partnership or in conjunction with any other person

s.40 - Prepare and publish a strategy on encouraging people to participate (as above) and review the strategy following every local government election. Members were advised that the strategy must be in place before May 2022.

The Council has carried out some work in advance with the participation element of the act. The officers in the working group have been focusing on the 5 requirements on the road mapping document with clear links to equality plans and previous strategies. Members were informed that these officers are considering what the council already has in place on how residents can make representations and access meetings and decisions, such as the website, digital forms, complaints.

Panels such as the citizen and youth panels are deemed useful forums for public decision making. It was mentioned that social media accounts such as the Facebook and Twitter pages are used by the council in putting out information to the residents however the Council are looking to see where they can improve on different platforms and fill the gap to encourage engagement with the public.

The officer informed members that the council want to determine what democratic processes the residents are already aware of and how to enhance the transparency with its residents so will use this roadmap as a basis of what they might need. The main issue that has been considered by officers, is that there are particular members of society that are hard to reach, therefore they are thinking of inclusive strategies on how to support them, encourage them to become a councillor and participate in decision-making.

It was explained that the next step after this, will be for the council to come up with a much more detailed plan for public consultation, engaging with underrepresented groups and drafting the strategy for this consultation.

Head of Law and Regulation assured the committee that the officer working group are doing the leg work so the council is not starting completely from scratch on the strategy in order to build upon what the council is already doing with the support of consultation and working with the partnership team.

The Democratic Services Committee's role is to offer suggestions on what the council could do better, and for instance, guidance on how to communicate better with communities. The officers welcomed a steer from the elected members in order to make progress with the officer group work.

The Democratic Services Manager opened up questions from the committee on the strategy.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee commented on the low amount of viewing on the Full Council's streaming facility and suggested that officers could look at how other councils perform and how they encourage public engagement for where they can raise questions to the Members. Members acknowledged the drawbacks of this as it could risk the same individuals raising complaints/concerns to councillors. Members queried if the officers could find out what other councils are doing, how they manage open public questions at council meetings and how this could be made suitable for Newport City Council.

The Head of Law and Regulation responded by stating that there was no best practice or exemplar model on what the council should or should not do. This means that the council will ultimately decide which strategy suits it and the decision making process. The officer confirmed they were keen to report this feedback back but would not want to suggest there is a model out there as an exemplar as good practice as it should be tailored to the needs of each local authority.

- A Member mentioned that the issue also could lie within how the council represents itself to the residents. For example, looking at the photographs of councillors, with visual representation, the council should be inclusive by including all age ranges, ethnicities and backgrounds of life. The committee commented that should the council wish to attract people from all works of life, they would need representation that they feel affiliated to and the members queried if this could be a high priority. The Members also expressed concern that some individuals may not be interested in becoming a Councillor due to the social media abuse from the public that they could receive such as racist and sexist abuse. Therefore, Members asked if the working panels would help in promoting how to become a Member.

In response, the Lead Officer clarified that there is no panel as such, and confirmed that it is an officer working group which is largely operational in making those changes. They have set out identified elements of the plan and such pieces of work need the Members' input. The officer assured the members that they will update them on the operational work with the changes made but the participation strategy would need to be guided by the members for what would be included for the first draft before going to public consultation. It was reiterated that this is the start of the conversation and mentioned that the Committee may need to organise extra meetings from now before next May as there will be regular updates for the Members.

- Members asked if they could have a copy of the presentation provided by the Democratic Services Manager and queried if the council would consider installing televisions within public places like the museum, library and the Riverfront Theatre to show council meetings taking place. Members mentioned perhaps the council chambers/foyer could be made accessible for people to watch what is being discussed like they do with the Welsh Government meetings.

The Head of Service confirmed in terms of television screens the council can do that and they could cover this in the next agenda item with regard to live streamed screens, which will be subject to licensing requirements in council buildings but however the officer confirmed that this could be done by May 2022. The Officer also confirmed that they can have a copy of the presentation emailed to them.

- A Member of the Committee asked for confirmation on when the hybrid meetings and legislation have to be implemented by.

In response, the Head of Service confirmed that it has to be implemented by May 2022.

- A Member of the Committee commented on how important it is for the council and politicians to be as transparent as possible for reasons of efficiency as well as some wards have experienced significant issues with complaints on certain things not being reported in the same way anymore. For instance, residents cannot see if a car is legally parked within its street or not without parking permits being used more. Therefore, Members asked if the council has considered the pressure this could put on certain areas of Newport.

Head of Law replied that it would be depending on how the council chooses to engage with their constituents or not and also a matter for city services with regard to the permits but whole point of legislation to encourage transparency,

in order to get people to stand as councillors with a working relationship by listening to members of the public.

- The committee then queried whether the officer could confirm that the officers of the working group, are diverse to ensure all points are covered.

In response, the Lead Officer asserted that as it is an officer working group, the group is not taking any decisions or changing anything as the stage they are currently in is just the nuts and bolts, right at the start of the process. This is where the Democratic Services come into the discussion as a cross party forum for that to communicate if there is any disengagement in terms of elected members and the people they represent in tackling the main question of how can that be improved.

Members were advised that at an officer level, they can only take it so far on what to put forward for consultation so ultimately it is up to members to decide what kind of engagement they want to encourage.

- A Member expressed their concern with regard to the online abuse that they could face for being in the public eye and asked for the council to emphasize what people need to be aware of what they are signing up to and one member argued that the staff are protected more so than the councillors, and that this could deter members of the public stepping forward to become a councillor.

Members were reminded by the Head of Service that in the council meeting before the last, the Diversity Resolution was passed which entails a number of actions on this to encourage people to come to council as a member which also covers discussions about online abuse. Members were advised that the council is conscious of encouraging members to use social media as a means of communication but also acknowledge that it can be a double edged sword as it makes them open to being abused online. The officer refuted the member's claims that staff are more protected as the same type of abuse can happen to an employee but it is more about members in the public eye and need to be made aware of what their rights are and how they are protected. There has been changes such as not having Members' personal details on the website but instead publishing the civic address.

- A Member of the Committee asked if the council would run an introductory seminar for those who are interested to go over protections and their personal rights.

The Head of Service stressed that in terms of legal protection, the same law applies in terms of social media usage for both employees and members. If anything is posted that is threatening toward the individual, the officer explained that there is not much that can be done from their end except to ask the social media providers to get posts taken down and users reported and blocked. Members were informed that they have examples of both officers and members receiving threatening emails and under such acts, the protections in place are always considered, however, a seminar can be considered to ensure members of the public would be aware.

- The Committee Member went on to ask with regard to this work on the strategy, how would this affect the regional partnership board? And if so, what does the council need to do about that and how will the Regional Partnership Board affect what they discuss and set up?

In response, the Head of Service clarified that the public services board meet on regional basis and that as it went through council on Tuesday, this would not affect it. It was explained that the partnership board is not decision making in that respect and that they will adopt the plan on whole of Gwent but clarified that it stands with the individuals within their wellbeing and in terms of decision making and engagement that will be on a local level. Therefore the public participation strategy will not affect that at all, as the Local Boards end in 2023, the Public Services Board whether regional or local, is a board of legislative bodies that set wellbeing objectives and policies of the region; not a decision making body.

The Committee was advised that it would be more for the local authorities to decide on how to steer this strategy within their area and up to Newport City Council on what they can do to meet the wellbeing objectives.

- A Member of the Committee queried if the participation strategy will only be valid until the elections next year, would the council consider having a non-political 'meet the councillors' drop in session at the civic centre foyer just to talk to people. It could give the public an opportunity to see first-hand what members experience on a day to day basis, and dispel any myths of how politicians mostly go out for lavish meals. The committee asked if so, this could be organised for October/November 2021.

The Head of Service responded by pointing out that come early next year the council will be into the early election period so this session could be misconstrued as political canvassing so reminded members that they must be careful about meet and greet sessions before any big elections. It was explained to the committee that this has to be reviewed after every election every 5 years, sometime within that period, the committee and the council would review it.

In terms of communicating with residents, by using social media you can reach far more members of the community via that channel rather than a foyer for a set time within the civic centre. For example, discussing ward meetings as a way to get residents to engage with the council. The council has to use social media to get messages out and the council has not fully developed the Members' annual reports and members were reminded that they can add more to in before it is published in terms of explaining to residents what they do.

- A Member of the committee acknowledged the issue of the logistics about a drop in session but also asked the council to acknowledge that there are some parts of society who are not on social media as not everyone is confident on technology. Members agreed that it is difficult as people are generally not engaged if they do not have access to knowledge of the council. Therefore Members queried what would be the best way to overcome this hurdle and could the candidates' convention be organised for after the election?

The Head of Service replied by stating that the team will try and find out what other councils do and maybe look into putting on a seminar to discuss members' usage of social media and protections from this. With regard to the drop in session, the council can have a look at that as it would be for potential candidates.

It was stressed to Members that this would be need to be subject to social distancing, and non-political.

The officer raised a slight concern on the current council members and potential members on meeting members of public, however, if it would be more of a recruitment drive then the WGLA could be behind that. This is because there would be nobody better to talk to than to talk to current members.

Members were advised that the working team could look at that with the useful points and look to build them in the strategy which will be brought back to the councillors for more deliberation.

5 **New Working Model**

The Democratic Services Manager gave an overview of the New Working Model in order to open up dialogue for input from the Members. It was explained that the current position was that Cabinet considered the paper on 7 July which was approved in principle, pending consultation with the staff and trade unions and therefore the final report will be presented to Cabinet in autumn. Members were advised that this includes the four areas that underpin the new model and the relevance to the Democratic Services Committee.

The New Working Model considers the implications of working remotely for the staff, it covers the well-being side of the home working policy with an allowance for those allowed to work from home one day a week but the model looks to back the investment in well-being considering those especially with long term health conditions and for supporting mental health post pandemic.

With regard to the remote working, there will be different techniques to continue being engaged with a dispersed workforce.

Members were advised that within the model the council are looking at determining the optimum usage for the civic centre and council buildings for them to meet the council's objectives. The officers are ensuring that this would meet the requirements for the public and look for opportunities to increase the usage of the building to also help with the ongoing costs and ensure flexible working opportunities.

The Democratic Services Manager assured the Committee that the Civic Centre will remain as the main administration area, zoned in particular groups of staff, meeting rooms and reception publically available. Members were informed that there are other areas that could be opened up on the premises to others and also are looking at new technology solutions such as how room bookings can be supported by the track and trace facility.

Members were informed how the council want to make sure that the equipment meets the IT needs of the council under the new working model and how it could support the development within the Digital Strategy Refresh on how hybrid meetings can be implemented.

The Committee was assured that the Members discussion will be catered for in order to meet the requirements of the Local Government Elections Act and part 3 places duty on the Council to make provisions for access to these meetings. This flexibility was intended to attract a more diverse group of members into Local Government. There are plans for hybrid meetings to be in place for next year as the council are working with the current supplier to advise on what needs to be implemented within the Council Chamber.

On a last note the officer mentioned the wellbeing of the Council's relations with the members and acknowledged the impact of dispersed working has had on both staff and its members. It was reiterated that staff and members have the same access to e-learning and support. Therefore, the committee were asked whether the council should enhance this model as the cabinet has recently agreed that any member specific intervention should be considered within the Democratic Services Committee.

The Democratic Services Manager welcomed any questions from the Committee.

The Committee asked the following:

- A Member of the Committee expressed their concern as the civic centre is a wonderful historic centre and argued that it would be inappropriate for staff working at the civic centre to have members of the public walking around. There would be a huge cost to modernising the building but said it is great to see work being done but the committee queried whether there are individuals asking to use space at the civic.

The Head of Service replied by explaining that this would be technically more for the work stream for the dispersed staffing model, the report to Cabinet made it clear that the main driver of this idea was not to make savings or generate income from the building. In response to concerns, the changes to the civic centre were due to the working life balance and a way to deliver services, the spare capacity in the civic centre is a by-product of the new working model.

Members were informed that the long term issue that the council needs to address within the implementation plan to discuss with the unions on how that will work with flexible working patterns. For example, what will be confirmed – how many people are allowed within the civic at one time in designated areas how to restrict numbers and look at the logistics of that.

If the Council has a number of spare rooms, then the Council would need to consider would could be the use of those once all of the prior points have been agreed.

For example, the Public Services Hub could be used for in terms of efficiency of shared use, it could be impractical but it is a long term ambition to look at this. However, the officer stressed that the focus is more on the staff and to see to the arrangements for the staff.

Commercialisation was considered years ago and is certainly not one of the objectives behind the working model as the council has no current plans to sublet the civic centre. They wish to think best about the accommodation of the building, however it was explained that it is difficult to update the committee on the plans because it will be one of the last parts of the model to be looked at.

- The Committee acknowledged that the old normal is not going to return as things will not be the same again and thanked the Democratic Services team for the work undertaken during the pandemic. Members asked if the Democratic Services Manager could distribute the presentation with the members of the committee so they know what is on the agenda as far as these issues are concerned with at the moment.

The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that they will send across the presentation to the Members.

- A Member of the Committee referred to the members section of the Local Government Act, with the Remuneration and IT support, the Councillors do not have

much say in that unless the Welsh Government send it into consultation. Therefore the technology updates need to be put forward on a more regular basis to Members so they are kept updated. The committee highlighted that Members are experiencing difficulties on the systems used and the quality of equipment that they have as they have to get every 4 months to bring in Councillors to check business developments within the IT system, now and again the Members stressed that Members experience confusion over the usage of systems and updates of software.

In response, the Head of Service commented that with relation to the remuneration, it depends on the context of what they are being looked at, for instance, members allowances are fixed by the remuneration panel so there is no discretion with that. Within the report, the Local Government Elections Act, no matter what model the council will adopt, the legislation stipulates that the local authority must have a facility within the civic centre for members to dial in to meetings.

Members were advised that logistically, there will be issues and how we run these meetings, this will be a hurdle for the Democratic Services team to consider closer to the time.

As there will be a new way of working, Members themselves will not be present within the civic centre as often as before, so they would like to discuss what would be best for the Members' wellbeing, as the Democratic Services Committee to advise the council of the impact of this dispersed working model.

The officer went on to explain that the impact of hybrid meeting will be on how heavily reliant the council will be on the operations of IT systems. For instance, when remuneration comes into it, the Committee was asked to consider whether the IT member package was good enough for what will be needed going forward. In the past, members agreed to be given a tablet and a laptop plus mobile phones for senior members but the committee will have to reconsider what devices members will need in order to be able to read agenda items whilst being logged onto a Teams meeting.

Therefore it was explained to the Members that now is the time to look at Member IT support and see what can be enhanced. The Council pays for IT support that the Members need, and it was noted that issues previously have been about concerns relating to the broadband that Members had in their homes – whether it was adequate or not was considered. Should it not be adequate, it was queried whether the council should pay for Members' broadband bill for upgrading. The officer stressed that those issues are the kind that the council want opinions on directly from the Members.

- A Member of the Committee queried whether there is scope for an IT champion to assist Councillors with their digital equipment.

In response, the Head of Service confirmed that this would be Councillor Mayer in non-technical terms. As it comes under the Cabinet Member's portfolio for technical solutions through resources. However, with regard to the equipment, if what the Members have got is not fit for purpose, the council what to be informed so the digital team can look at what the options are.

Discussion ensued amongst Members on how they found working remotely. Most members agreed that the equipment was a good standard, but they experience lots of issues with the system being used. As a majority of the members experience their systems crashing and therefore the system needs looking into.

The Members recognised their higher workload but not down to meetings, more down to the combination of increased public complaints. The members acknowledged the

positive of not having travel time so they tend to attend more meetings. The positive is that they also are better prepared for busy meeting days as they do not lose out on downtime before attending.

In response, the Democratic Services Manager noted the Members' comments and assured the committee that the digital team are looking at a comparison paper at the moment for future consideration of how to go about this.

- Members mentioned that the Council has adapted very well with technology despite there were concerns expressed, about how difficult it can be to attend a meeting if there are technical issues, as it then affects the councillor's attendance record when it would be no fault of their own which has a knock-on effect for the public when they check attendance records.

Discussion ensued and a Member noted that they can feel isolated at times but also relish in the fact that the system is good to use as a central point and hub for communication but would like the council to look at if there would be any other platforms to use for meetings apart from Microsoft Teams, as the council has experienced issues with strategic stakeholders such as members of the Police not being able to attend important Teams meetings.

- Therefore the Members asked if it could be possible to log attendance differently by logging who tried to log in but experienced issues so they would not be marked as absent.

Head of Law and Regulation responded by explaining that it is not that easy unfortunately with the Regulations, attendance is remote attendance, therefore intending or trying to dial-in is not good enough for the record. Members were reminded they need to get online 15 minutes prior to the meeting. If there is a connection and if logged in successfully but the Member is experiencing glitches – the record would have them down as attended.

But if a Member called the Democratic Services team and said that they could not get on the meeting yet asked if they could log them as present, then that is not allowed. Therefore if the Member is experiencing IT difficulties, it gives the team a few minutes to provide support.

- A Member of the Committee mentioned that the link is broken down as sometimes when they try and phone through to the team, they cannot get an answer.

The Democratic Services Manager replied that the shared duty system has been distributed in the newsletter for the Democratic Services. For a rota shared line, they only deal with one call at a time on the generic line that day.

- A Member asked if the Democratic Services Manager could send on the generic number so they can have the right direct number.

The officer agreed to this but reminded the Members emailed the structure of the team out with the contact details already this month but will send it out again to ensure receipt.

Referring back to the IT kit, Head of Law confirmed if the Members are happy with the kit provided then it's the reliability and support that the council can look into discussing with the Digital Team.

- A Member of the Committee welcomed the Democratic Services Manager's earlier mention that there is a report about the efficiency of Microsoft Teams.

In response, the Head of Service said that while looking at a comparison of IT systems, the corporate policy is to use Microsoft Teams initially due to the security issues in terms with Zoom. The Council do not mind individuals using it to access other meetings but the Council has a problem with the data security for this, such as for hosting Council meetings but the report will go into that in more detail.

A further issue mentioned was also the cost of the licence for all of the operating systems, as Microsoft Teams is included within the cost. Members were advised that the Council pays corporately for more licences, and it would be £100k+ for additional licenses with security issue and cost charge issues. However, all of this will be within the report put forward by the digital team.

Therefore due to the lack of secure platforms, the Digital team group are more qualified for information within that report.

Agreed:

The Committee acknowledged this and noted that in terms of resolving issues, the support from the officers has been excellent, and this was not a criticism of Democratic Services or Shared Resources Services.

The Committee also requested that a direct phone number for the officer running the meeting to be mentioned at the bottom of agendas for future assistance if issues did arise.

6 Date of Next Meeting

In terms of the future dates, depending on how well progressed the Council is on the Public Participation Strategy, it depends on progress of the draft. It was recommended by the Head of Service that it might be useful to have an earlier meeting in September to make some progress on this legislative piece of work.

The Committee agreed to looking at future dates when the time is right.

Meeting terminated 11:40am.

7 Webcast of Committee

https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting_YjE3ZWUxOTgtODc4NC00MDdjLTgwMmUtYjBiNDQxYzc2ZDMY%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22id%22%3a%222c4d0079-c52c-4bb3-b3ca-d8eaf1b6b7d5%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%22b61021cb-bb83-40c1-ad67-58a6c6a2b187%22%2c%22IsBroadcastMeeting%22%3a%22true%7d&btype=a&role=a