

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held in the Cabinet Room, County Hall, Ruthin on Friday, 1 July 2016 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Joan Butterfield, Bill Cowie, Martyn Holland, Barry Mellor (Chair) and Cefyn Williams

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Barbara Smith (Lead Member for Modernisation and Housing), Lisa Jones (Legal Services Manager) and Steve Price (Democratic Services Manager)

1 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted by Councillor Arwel Roberts.

2 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were declared.

3 URGENT ITEMS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent items were raised.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED – that Councillor Bill Cowie be appointed as vice chair of the Committee for the ensuing year.

5 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Councillor Bill Cowie referred to item 6 – Local Government (Wales) Bill – on the proposals to reform Welsh local government's legislative framework. Councillor Cowie believed that the proposals to merge unitary authorities were an unnecessary distraction.

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the Democratic Services Committee's meeting held on the 22 January 2016 be confirmed as a correct record.

6 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR ELECTED MEMBERS

A report on training and development for elected members (previously circulated) was introduced by the Democratic Services Manager (DSM).

The DSM reported that an internal departmental restructure had re-located the support arrangements for member training and development to the Democratic Services team. He outlined details of the current training programme including a visit by the WLGA later in the month to give a training session on effective Scrutiny and an indicative training programme for the new Council being elected in May 2017.

Councillor Barbara Smith (lead Cabinet member with responsibility for member training and development) advised the committee that the current training programme was being reviewed, and whilst it was acknowledged that the programme for the current Council would be winding down, there would be lessons taken to apply to the programme for the new Council with a series of meetings with officers to develop the programme.

Members discussed the following:

- Annual reports, amendments to the template used for annual reports and enabling members to include their own comments on their activities and training.
- Personal development reviews and plans would be available within the training and development programme for the new Council.
- Prospective candidates for the County Council should be made aware of the heavy demands on their time from Council and constituency duties and training. The Committee were in agreement that roadshows for candidates should be held and give an indication of the demands the role of county councillor would place.
- Candidates should also be made aware that good attendance at meetings and mandatory training was to be expected from all members.
- An information pack for potential candidates would be helpful.
- The importance and attendance levels at 'mandatory' training.

The Committee discussed the difficulties experienced by councillors in employment in getting time off from work in order to attend Council meetings or training. It was acknowledged that small businesses could find it difficult to release staff for Council duties but that more could be done to assist members in employment. In respect of some instances of poor attendance the Committee viewed the current statutory minimum requirement for members to attend only 1 meeting of the authority during a 6 month period as being too low.

RESOLVED – that the Committee:

- (i) Requests that clarification be sought on the availability and limit on leave for local authority duties;**
- (ii) Recommends to the National Assembly for Wales that the minimum number of local authority meetings a county or county borough councillor must attend in a 6 month period be raised; and**
- (iii) Supports the full attendance by members at any training sessions viewed as mandatory by the County Council.**

7 MEMBER ATTENDANCE

The Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services submitted a report (previously circulated) regarding the ways in which changes could be made to the committee arrangements to attempt to improve member attendance.

The Legal Services Manager (LSM) reported that concerns had been raised by some elected members, officers and external regulators in respect of the levels of attendance by members at formal committees of the Council. Actions to improve attendance could include:

- Removing the bar on members of the Corporate Governance Committee being members of a Scrutiny Committee.
- Allowing the vice chair of Council to be on committees other than the Corporate Governance Committee. The LSM advised that the new version of the Council's Constitution currently being drafted could remove these two barriers to attendance.
- Allowing substitutions at committee meetings. The LSM reported that substitutes were not viewed as conducive to effective support or conduct of committee meetings and were therefore not being recommended.
- Changing the number of members or quorum of committees; these options were not being recommended.
- Reducing the size of the Planning Committee. The LSM informed the Committee that Denbighshire's Planning Committee was unusually large at 30 members and although a reduction was not currently being planned it could be considered in future.
- Changing the timing and location of meetings. A task and finish group of members would meet to consider this issue.

Members of the Committee endorsed the proposed changes to the Constitution outlined above. In respect of evening meetings suggestions from members included setting a time limit or finish time to each meeting so they would not continue late into the night.

Members also referred to the importance of effective meeting behaviours such as not simply repeating points made by other speakers and for members to be more disciplined in only speaking on issues that are important and relevant to the business being discussed. The Committee supported training on effective meeting skills, questioning skills and on chairing meetings.

RESOLVED – that the Committee endorses the approach to the options to improve member attendance at formal committees as outlined in paragraph 4.5 of the report.

8 DENBIGHSHIRE'S STYLE OF MINUTES

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) submitted a report on Denbighshire's house style for minuting meetings (previously circulated).

The DSM reported that the Council had an agreed 'house style' for minutes which was reviewed in 2010 by a Democratic Arrangements Review Programme Board (comprised of the Leader and Group Leaders or their substitutes) which considered the recommendations on minute-writing styles put forward by a joint Member / Officer working group. The conclusions were subsequently circulated to all the Groups, who returned no comments. The style of minutes was agreed to follow these principles:

- Minutes were to be written in a clear and concise way, without using overly complex terminology and using plain English / Welsh.
- Minutes would focus on the main points raised at the meeting that were relevant to the item under discussion, and to the decision or recommendation being made.
- The minutes would not generally contain any incidental issues raised and this was expected to lead to a reduction in the length of the minutes. The benefits expected were that minutes would be easier to read and less costly to produce (minutes of Licensing applications and reviews would continue to be recorded comprehensively).
- Members would be able to ensure a comment was minuted and attributed to them on request at any meeting.

The Committee supported the adopted style of minutes and highlighted the ability of any member to have their contribution recorded in the minutes on request at the meeting. Members reported that this mechanism should be sufficient to resolve problems experienced by some members whose comments had not been recorded.

RESOLVED – That the Democratic Services Committee endorses the current house style of minutes for formal committees.

9 FORWARD WORK PLAN

The Democratic Services Manager queried which items the Committee would like to consider for its forward work programme.

RESOLVED – that a report on Candidates' Roadshows and the Training and Development Programme for the new Council from May 2017 be considered at the next meeting.