

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held via VIDEO CONFERENCE on Friday, 5 November 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Joan Butterfield, Rachel Flynn, Gwyneth Kensler, Christine Marston, Bob Murray (Chair), Rhys Thomas and Graham Timms

Observer: Councillors Meirick Lloyd Davies

Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets: Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill

ALSO PRESENT

Head of Legal, HR & Democratic Services (GW), The Democratic Services Manager (SP), Head of Business, Improvement and Modernisation (AS) and Committee Administrators (SJ and RTJ)

POINT OF NOTICE

Due to the current restrictions on travel and requirement for social distancing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic the meeting was held remotely by video conference and was not open to the general public. All members had been given the opportunity to attend as observers and the Local Democracy Reporter had also been invited to observe.

1 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies received.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services confirmed that all members present would have a personal interest in agenda item 8 – Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales Annual Report 2022 / 2023, as it determined Councillor salaries. This was not regarded as being a prejudicial interest under the Code of Conduct.

All Councillors present declared a personal interest in the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales' Annual Report 2022/23.

3 URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent matters raised.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Democratic Service Committee meeting held on 12 March 2021 were submitted.

Page 8 – Agenda Item 7 - Draft Revised Guidance on the Code of Conduct – Members felt the term ‘Thicker skinned’ was inappropriate. The Head of Legal, HR & Democratic Services, stressed the phrase had been used in the guidance notes from the Ombudsman and in a High Court Judgement on the Code of Conduct.

Resolved: - that the minutes of the Democratic Services Committee meeting held on 12 March 2021 be received and approved as a true and correct record.

5 PROPOSALS FOR MEMBERS TO ADOPT NEW WAYS OF WORKING

The Head of HR, Legal and Democratic Services (HHRLDS) introduced the report (previously circulated). He offered his apologies for the confusion with the appendices related to the agenda item.

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets was in attendance for the item. He confirmed that a working group had been established to review and discuss new ways of working. It was confirmed that the working group had met on the 19th October 2021 and had agreed the recommendations put to members in the report.

It was stressed the proposals set by the working group had been put forward to assist the hybrid meeting set up and enable members to access meetings remotely if they wished to do so. The proposal had been to provide every member with two pieces of technology, a laptop and a large screened mobile phone. The working group had decided not to issue members with an iPad.

The Lead Member stressed the changes to technology used would be following the next elections and ICT training would be provided to all members.

The HHRLDS confirmed to members that current law enforced local authorities to have provision for members to attend meetings remotely. The majority of public meetings were now being held remotely with the meeting being live streamed via the council webcast. This allowed the public and press to observe the meeting. Members were reminded the standard meeting structure would still apply, with members still required to state any declarations and part 2 documents remaining confidential. Members were guided through the general principles and protocols proposed.

The Head of Business, Improvement and Modernisation (HBIM), confirmed training to members would be provided on the new technology. He stressed the importance of having technology equipped to allow members more access and ease when attending meetings virtually. ICT staff would be available to offer support and guidance to members. He congratulated members on the quick learning they had completed during the pandemic to allow for meetings to continue.

The Chair thanked the officers for the support he had received, setting up his devices to enable him to work from home.

Members thanked the Lead Member and officers for the information provided, during the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) encouraged members to use the provision for claiming expenses including the facility of childcare. If members had receipts for expenses, then claims could be made to support members to attend meetings.
- Officers and the working group would look at options for members on an individual basis and aid the set up for members with the technology they required to access meetings from remote locations.
- Remote meetings still required a level of formality and decorum. The facility of blurred backgrounds could be adopted by members to add privacy. It was confirmed space would be made available in council buildings for members to use to attend meetings. Currently it was only the Council Chamber in County Hall, Ruthin that was technically set up to support hybrid meetings.
- The use of hybrid/ remote meetings may not be suitable for all meetings. For some meetings not administrated by Democratic Services such as adoption panel it may not be feasible to hold a remote meeting.
- Members understood the need to record meetings, it was requested that members be made aware when meetings where to be recorded.
- The new mobile device could be used as a Wi-Fi hotspot if needed.
- The poll function on Zoom was available to use if required. It was note that the function had been used a number of times to hold decision making votes. Voting by roll call can be time consuming but it made clear how members wished to cast votes.
- Health and Safety of members and officers was a concern. Members and officers had been encouraged to discuss any concerns with others. Support and guidance would be provided for all if any issues arose. The choice to work remotely was hoped to provide more flexibility for members to choose where they attend meetings from.
- The HBIM confirmed he would look into the licencing rights of PDF to allow members to add notes to documents on devices.
- Members could add 'Councillor' or 'Cllr' to name on Zoom to clearly show any public viewers who they are.
- Members suggested the wording in the Hybrid Protocol section 3.6 (appendix2) be amended from 'ensure' to read 'best endeavours'.
- All council building including libraries would be reviewed to see if they could be offered as a place to connect to a meeting.

The Chair thanked the Lead Member and Officers for the detailed response to members questions and concerns and wanted to thank the ICT team for the support and guidance it had provided to all members during the changes resulting from the changes to remote working. Members wanted to praise the work from the working group.

Members,

RESOLVED that:

- *Members note the contents of the report and attached appendices;*

- *Members agree to the recommendations included in the report with the amendment to the hybrid protocol (3.6) reading 'best endeavours' and*
- *A section be included to ensure members are aware of meetings that are recorded.*

6 DIVERSITY IN DEMOCRACY

Members were guided through the report (previously circulated) by the Head of HR, Legal and Democratic Services (HHRLDS). Members were reminded that a report had been presented to County Council on 7th September 2021 on 'Diversity in Democracy'. At that meeting members approved the declaration set out in Appendix 3 to the report and delegated the preparation of an action plan to support the declaration to the Democratic Services Committee.

The report covered the work of the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) as part of its Diversity and Democracy Programme. Included in the work of the WLGA was an ambitious Diversity and Democracy Programme to try and ensure that council chambers were more representative of the communities that they each served. Highlighted in the report were a number of barriers that had been previously noted including;

- Time-commitment and meeting times;
- Political and organisational culture;
- Childcare and other caring responsibilities;
- Public criticism and online abuse;
- Remuneration and impact on employment; and
- Lack of diverse role models and incumbency.

The HHRLDS stressed with the new ways of working and the hybrid system of meetings it was hoped the time commitment and traveling to meetings barrier would be eased for potential candidates. It was also confirmed following every election a specific report was presented to County Council to discuss meeting times and any specific requirements.

The HHRLDS highlighted that included within the action plan were steps to improve the ways in which meetings were conducted to ensure people who may be in full time employment, running their own business, or have a disability or caring responsibilities can participate in local democracy. It was stressed an important role of an elected Councillor was to support the commitment of becoming a diverse council. Increasing engagement with the public and to raise awareness of the role of a councillor and the positive contribution that councillors make to local authorities was vital. Members heard that the WLGA had launched a 'Be a Councillor' website which contained information about the role of a councillor and offered support and development opportunities. It was confirmed that training guidance for the new council would be provided by WLGA.

The HHRLDS confirmed the description provided within the report had been provided by the WLGA including the wording used for the criteria for potential candidates.

Members were informed that a national agenda had begun to address concerns and issues relating to the use of social media. It was stressed by members the

abuse and harassment received over social media had been appalling. The HHRLDS stressed the importance to support and aid these agendas.

It was confirmed to members it had been a legal requirement to include contact details for Councillors, but the law was soon due to be changed. Members were also reminded of the protocol currently in place if they had any concerns or wanted to raise any issues. He took on board any concerns or comments regarding training and would happily receive members' feedback on training that is provided.

The HHRLDS suggested to members that the action plan be presented to members for comments. Members requested that a meeting be set up to receive the action plan to have an engaging discussion on the proposal. Members were all in agreement.

It was,

RESOLVED that members note the report and a further detailed report on the action plan be presented to committee.

At this juncture of the meeting, a number of members had to leave. The attendance of the meeting fell below the requirement for quorum requirements. It was decided to continue with the business of the meeting.

7 ROLE OF YOUNG PERSONS' CHAMPION

The Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services(HLHRDS) stressed the importance of the proposed new Young Persons' Champion role. Members were guided through the report (previously circulated) and provided with background information regarding the role.

Members were reminded that following a notice of motion presented to County Council in September 2021, and it was resolved that a report on the role of a Young Persons Champion be presented to Democratic Services Committee to define the role and a further report to be presented to Full Council.

Members were informed the Lead Member agreed the role could be offered to any member wishing to take on the position. The HLHRDS confirmed the draft role description had been created in line with the current Champion roles held within the authority.

Following the discussion members discussed the following in more detail:

- The Young Persons Champion covers all ages up to 25 not 18 as stipulated in the draft report.
- Engagement with young people and schools was vital for the selected Champion.
- Members agreed the position was needed and would provide a positive link for young people and the authority.
- Members stressed the importance of receiving feedback from the Champion Roles in the authority to learn and develop understanding.

- The HLHRDS confirmed the role would include a specific list of qualities for the applicant to fulfil for the role. The individual selected would have close working with the Lead Member and advocate young people on behalf of the council.

The HLHRDS informed members as the committee was no longer quorate they could not formally rectify the recommendation but could support the description of the role.

It was therefore,

NOTED, that members were broadly supportive of the Young Persons Champion description and broadly supportive of the role for an appointed individual or Councillor.

8 DRAFT ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL FOR WALES 2022-2023

The Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services (HLHRDS) introduced a report (previously circulated) in respect of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales' (IRPW) annual report for the civic year 2022/2023.

Members were reminded that IRPW was established in 2008. The Panel's remit and functions were extended in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. The Panel's remit included councillors, other members of national park authorities, Welsh fire and rescue authorities and community and town councils in addition to county and county borough councils. The Panel was able to stipulate the actual amount of payment an authority may make to a member and the duties and responsibilities which may qualify councillors to receive payments.

The HLHRDS stressed the authority had to comply with the recommendations and must pay the basic salary. All members had been encouraged to receive their entitled salary. It was confirmed that the basic salary was proposed to increase to £16800 from £14368, an increase of 17%.

Members were guided through the report that illustrated the different salaries paid for the senior positions.

Members were informed the salary paid to the Chair of a committee was provided to the Chair only, if for any reason the Vice-Chair took the Chair position on a long-term basis a section of the draft report provided arrangements for the authority to follow.

It was stressed to members the final reports recommendations would be binding and all local authorities would have to adhere to the report.

It was therefore,

NOTED, by the committee the determinations of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales for 2022 – 2023 in respect of the payment salaries and payments to co-opted members.

9 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Service Committee Forward Work Programme was presented for consideration.

The Chair confirmed the next meeting scheduled was 25 March 2022. Members agreed that if possible that a separate meeting be arranged before the March meeting to discuss the Diverse Council Action Plan once a detailed draft was constructed.

Members agreed to include an agenda item at the next meeting on WLGA – Induction Process.

*Members **NOTED** the verbal update.*

The meeting concluded at 13.00 p.m.