

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held in County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Friday, 30 September 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Karen Edwards, Hugh Evans, Justine Evans, Martyn Hogg and Cheryl Williams

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Julie Matthews, Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities.

The Corporate Director: Governance and Business (GW), Democratic Services Manager (SP), and Committee Administrator / Meeting Host (RTJ).

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Delyth Jones and Diane King.

2 APPOINTMENT OF A CHAIR FOR THE MEETING

The Committee considered the appointment of a member to chair today's meeting.

RESOLVED – that the Committee appoints Councillor Hugh Evans as Chair for today's meeting.

3 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED – that the appointment of a Vice Chair for the Committee be deferred until after Council has appointed a Chair for the Democratic Services Committee.

4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

5 URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items raised.

6 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held on the 28th January 2022 were submitted.

Matters arising

Item 6, Role of Diversity Champion. The Corporate Director: Governance and Business, advised that a report on member champions would be considered by full Council.

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the Democratic Services Committee meeting held on the 28th January 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

7 TIMING OF MEETINGS SURVEY 2022

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) presented a report on a Timing of Meetings Survey 2022 (previously circulated). The DSM outlined the statutory requirements under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to survey elected members on the timing of Council meetings.

The Committee was advised that an aim of the Measure was to promote and support membership of local authorities. The times at which meetings took place could be a significant factor in enabling current members to attend meetings and could also affect whether potential candidates stood for election. The DSM reported that under the Measure local authorities should survey their members at least once a term.

The DSM referred members to the draft survey questions attached as an appendix to the report.

Members discussed the following points:

- The possibility that the timing of meetings could improve the accessibility of meetings and, by being attractive to potential council candidates, improve the diversity of members in council chambers.
- Some councillors experienced difficulties getting time off work to attend meetings and the draft survey questions could gather valuable information on this.
- Hybrid meetings were felt by some of the members to be ideal, offering the convenience of virtual meetings with the meeting experience of in-person meetings, according to the needs and preferences of the attendees.
- The potential impact on staff attending evening meetings, and what views those officers might have.
- The Council's intentions to install further hybrid meeting equipment in the Council's main offices.

The Committee agreed that the survey should include a prompt relating to any difficulties getting time of work to attend meetings.

RESOLVED – that, subject to the inclusion of a prompt relating to difficulties experienced getting time of work to attend meetings, the survey questions appended to the report be endorsed by the Committee.

8 MEMBER TRAINING

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) submitted a report on Member Training and Development (previously circulated). The purpose of the report was to provide information on the post-election member training and development programme and to seek the Committee's views on the future direction and contents of the programme.

The DSM reported that a programme of member inductions, training and development had begun immediately after the Council elections in May 2022. The sessions delivered to date had included the induction of new and returning members by covering members' ICT provision, familiarisation with services and to undertake certain roles as members (for example training on the Code of Conduct, to sit on the Planning Committee or acting as a 'corporate parent').

The Committee considered the work undertaken recently to make e-learning available to members and the e-learning modules that had been prepared. In addition, the members reviewed the previous Council's policy on 'mandatory' training and the Personal Development Reviews available under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. In response to a question the DSM confirmed that Group Leaders would be supported if they were asked by their members to undertake their Personal Development Reviews.

Councillor Hugh Evans reported that the Welsh Local Government Association now had a training budget to support local authority members, the training budget previously having been cut as part of the 'austerity' cuts.

The Lead Member with responsibility for member training and development, Councillor Julie Matthews, indicated that the report covered the relevant training and development issues.

RESOLVED – that the Committee notes the report on Member Training and Development.

9 ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) introduced a report on the Role of the Democratic Services Committee (previously circulated). The purpose of the report was to outline the statutory duties and powers of the committee which was timely owing to today's meeting being the committee's first meeting since the elections.

The DSM informed the committee that each county or county borough council in Wales had a Democratic Services Committee whose statutory duties included reviewing, and where appropriate reporting on, the adequacy of staff, accommodation and other resources to discharge democratic services functions.

Members noted the remit of the committee.

During the ensuing discussion members raised councillors' appointments to outside bodies (i.e. councillors appointed by the Council to sit on external groups and organisations) and of reporting mechanisms. The Corporate Director: Governance and Business, advised that the Democratic Services Committee was an appropriate

forum for members to report on issues arising from their membership of outside bodies. Currently though, there was no established mechanism or support arrangements for feedback from outside bodies and some internal panels. Members were advised that some of the councillors appointed to outside bodies were obliged to act and report in the interests of the outside body (for example as a trustee) and not in the interests of the Council.

The Committee queried the impact being made by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Members briefly discussed the changes made by the Act to the membership of the Council's Governance and Audit Committee, the promotion of public participation and access to local government and local government elections.

In terms of the Act's provisions relating to the conduct of members the Corporate Director confirmed that the Act placed new duties on the leaders of political groups to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members of the group.

Councillor Hogg queried the definition of a political group. The Corporate Director advised that a political group is formed when two or more councillors sign and deliver a written notice stating their wish to be considered as a political group (in accordance with the Local Government (Committees and Political Groups) Regulations 1990).

RESOLVED – that:

(a) The Committee notes the statutory duties and powers of the Democratic Services Committee;

(b) A report on the provisions of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 within the remit of the Committee be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee; and

(c) A list of the appointments to Outside Bodies be circulated to members of the Committee.

10 PERSONAL CARE AND SAFETY FOR MEMBERS

Councillor Julie Matthews, lead member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities, introduced a report on Personal Care and Safety for Members (previously circulated).

The Committee was informed of the Electoral Commission's findings after the May 2022 local government elections. The Commission found that a notable proportion of candidates who had responded to their survey had experienced some form of abuse or intimidation. Members were advised that the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) recommended that members were mindful of the risks, when for example:

- Visiting people in their homes

- Receiving callers to the councillor's home
- Holding surgeries
- Travelling, whether on public or private transport and when alone
- Communicating online

The Committee's report today contained a number of links to personal safety resources for members signposted by the WLGA and also referred to the availability of support and advice on personal safety from within the Council.

Members discussed their experiences and perceptions of the abuse and intimidation aimed at candidates and elected members. One of the consequences had been changes in the law that had previously required the home addresses of candidates and members to be published.

The lead member suggested that a training session for members, incorporating the resources highlighted in the Committee's report and set within a Denbighshire context, could be useful. The Committee endorsed the suggestion.

The Corporate Director referred to the Council's Lone Worker Policy as a potential source of relevant information for members.

RESOLVED – that, in accordance with the matters raised above, the Committee recommends a training session for members of the Council be held on Personal Care and Safety.

11 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager (DSM) introduced the Committee's Forward Work Programme (previously circulated).

Members discussed the process for amending the programme and it was confirmed that committee members could send requests directly to the Committee's Chair or the DSM. The Committee was able to amend its forward work programme at each meeting, under the standing agenda item 'Forward Work Programme'.

The Committee agreed that outside of the Committee's meetings, support officers should liaise with the Committee's Chair on suggested agenda items.

Further to the earlier agenda item on the role of the Democratic Services Committee members referred to the remit of the committee. The statutory role being to review the adequacy of provision by the authority of staff, accommodation and other resources to discharge democratic services functions, and to make reports and recommendations to the authority in relation to such provision. The Committee could determine how to exercise these functions.

RESOLVED – that the Committee's Forward Work Programme be noted.