

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Friday, 9 June 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Karen Edwards, Hugh Evans, Justine Evans, Martyn Hogg (Chair) and Delyth Jones

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Julie Matthews (lead member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities), Councillor Peter Scott and Councillor Andrea Tomlin

Corporate Director: Governance and Business (GW), the Public Engagement Officer (JS), Democratic Services Manager (SP)

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Michelle Blakeley-Walker, Cheryl Williams and Elfed Williams.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 URGENT MATTERS

There were no urgent matters.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The committee did not receive any nominations for candidates for the role of vice chair of the committee.

5 DRAFT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Councillor Julie Matthews, the lead member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities, introduced a report on a draft public participation strategy (previously circulated).

Members were advised that the report aimed to update the committee on the progress made in producing the strategy, to get early engagement and feedback on the draft report, and to ensure that the strategy had the support of the committee.

The Public Engagement Officer (PEO) provided a detailed account of the draft contents of the strategy, the aim of which was to set out how the Council aimed to encourage local people to participate in Council decision-making.

The strategy would complement the existing Engagement Policy which gives guidance and support for officers and Councillors when carrying out a range of public engagement and consultation activities.

Members were informed that the adoption of a public participation strategy was a statutory requirement, having been introduced by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Act specifically aimed to address:

- Ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal councils' functions.
- Ways of promoting awareness among local people of how to become a member of the principal council, and what membership entails.
- Ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council.
- Ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made.
- Arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the council's duty in section 62 of the 2011 Measure (bringing views of the public to attention of overview and scrutiny committees).
- Ways of promoting awareness among members of the principal council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people.

Principal Councils were required to consult with the local community in developing and reviewing the Public Participation Strategy. This strategy must be reviewed at least once after every ordinary local government election. The committee was informed that external researchers had been appointed by the Council and had undertaken an independent audit of the Council's existing services, an online survey and street surveys with members of the public. Some of this research had been commissioned for an existing corporate plan project entitled 'People are involved in shaping and improving service', with the research being relevant for the purpose of developing the public participation strategy. Findings from the research were included in the draft strategy.

The PEO reported that a final version of the draft strategy and its Well-being Impact Assessment would be presented to the Strategic Equality and Diversity Group in July prior to being brought to the committee in September.

In considering the presentation members queried whether the strategy could cross-reference the Council's different strategies that contribute to, or overlap with the public participation strategy's aims?

In response to questions, the PEO advised that consideration could be given to the regular compilation of social media posts and information relevant to councillors, to assist members appropriately share content of interest to their residents.

RESOLVED – That the committee notes the contents of the draft Public Participation Strategy and agrees to the inclusion of the Strategy in the forward work programme for the September 2023 meeting.

6 DUTY OF GROUP LEADERS TO PROMOTE ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

The Monitoring Officer (MO) submitted a report (previously circulated) on the duty of group leaders to promote ethical behaviour.

The committee was informed that the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 provided a new duty on the leaders of political groups to take reasonable steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct of their members. Members were advised that the duty did not make a group leader accountable for another members' behaviour, but the role was about group leaders taking reasonable steps to promote ethical behaviour within their groups.

The MO reported on committee roles in respect of the new duties. The Council's Standards Committee had a statutory role in monitoring group leaders' compliance with the duty and to advise and provide training for group leaders on discharging the duty. He added though that it was appropriate for the Democratic Services Committee to be consulted and kept informed on the implementation of the new duty.

Members considered the draft statutory guidance which included examples of how group leaders could discharge their duty, and the related activities of the Standards Committee members.

The committee agreed that training on the duty of group leaders to promote ethical behaviour would be beneficial.

RESOLVED – that the committee notes the report and endorses the provision of training being made available for group leaders on the duty to promote ethical behaviour.

7 PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS

A report by Councillor Julie Matthews, lead member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities on Personal Development Reviews (previously circulated) was submitted.

The committee was informed that the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 required that a Personal Development Review (PDR) be made available to each councillor. A PDR was a way for a member and the Council to mutually assess a member's personal development needs and would be set within the context of the role of the member, their aspirations for what they hoped to achieve, the purpose and aspirations of the Authority and the needs of the community.

Members were advised that a PDR was not an appraisal of their performance so the facilitator would not provide feedback to a councillor on their performance. It was not compulsory for any member to have a PDR. A PDR could include a review of the training, development and support a member had received or would wish to receive. It could also be a conversation to clarify expectations and roles or the how the Council works and its goals.

In terms of facilitating a PDR a councillor could ask their group leader to undertake the exercise, and the Democratic Services Manager confirmed that support and a briefing was available for any group leader undertaking a PDR. Alternatively, a councillor could ask for an appropriate officer to conduct their PDR.

Members identified the following points:

- The next round of PDRs should be started with a briefing for group leaders on how to undertake a PDR.
- Providing to group leaders a list of the training that could be provided would be helpful.

RESOLVED – That, subject to the above comments, the committee notes the information on personal development reviews for councillors.

8 COUNCIL POLICY ON MEMBER TRAINING

A report (previously circulated) by Councillor Julie Matthews, lead member for Corporate Strategy, policy and Equalities on a Council Policy for Member Training was submitted.

The committee was advised that the Member training report was being presented in order to consult with members and to shape a future Council policy on Member Training. A report would be taken to full Council next month so the committee had an opportunity to make any formal recommendations on what the policy should be directly to Council.

Members were informed of the following points:

- The report summarised some of the training and development programmes that had been delivered from the initial induction after the elections in May last year.
- Member training and development, like officer training and development was on-going in nature and should reflect the needs of the individuals in relation to their roles and aspirations, and the goals of the organisation as well as any legislative requirements.
- Most of the training plan was provided by the Council's officers. This did not require extra funding but did require officer time and that was an important factor in the size and complexity of the training programme that could be delivered. For some types of training external facilitation could be required which, if coming at a cost, would need to be contained within the member training budget.

- The appendix to the report was a short guide on how to access the councillors' e-learning site and showed a listing of the modules available.

The committee was presented with the example of Code of Contract training, which was a mandatory training session for all councillors. The mandatory requirement was a part of the Code itself which councillors agreed to abide by when becoming a member. The committee was reminded that Council could decide to make other training mandatory for all, or certain members undertaking specific roles, and details of the previous Council's mandatory training policy had been included in the report.

As members were office holders and not employees of the Council it was not possible to replicate the mandatory training arrangements used for staff, but Council did have options to encourage compliance with mandatory training for councillors. The committee was advised that these could include:

- The provision of training records to the group leaders
- Reporting on mandatory training records, for example to the Democratic Services Committee
- Publishing training attendance and non-compliance details in respect of mandatory requirements
- Groups considering training issues in their allocation of roles to their members.

Members of the Committee discussed and agreed the following points:

- The setting of reasonable mandatory training requirements for appropriate subjects and roles. The use of 'once a term' as a timescale for mandatory training to be completed was regarded as being unsuitable by the Committee.
- The engagement of the political groups and the group leaders in encouraging compliance with any mandatory training requirements. To support this, the Committee asked that group leaders be provided with the training records for their members, and any necessary training and assistance to undertake their group leader duties in respect of member training.
- The engagement of officers in developing and promoting member training.
- The clarification of any exemptions from sanctions for individual members for whom it was not reasonable to comply with a Council requirement on mandatory training.
- Group leaders being informed prior to the publication of any non-attendance records.

RESOLVED – that the committee recommends the agreed points above to Council in respect of the Member Training Policy.

9 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager introduced the committee's forward work programme report (previously circulated). Members were reminded of the committee's remit and the committee's attention was drawn to the forward work programme attached to the covering report.

Councillor Hugh Evans queried whether the committee had a role in overseeing or monitoring the governance arrangements for regional and community projects, such as those being developed in the Shared Prosperity Fund. The Corporate Director: Governance and Business advised that the Governance and Audit Committee or Scrutiny committee remits were probably closer aligned to undertake that work. He highlighted that a request using the Scrutiny Proposal Form could be made to the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group asking them to consider allocating the topic, potentially to the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED – that the Democratic Services Committee notes the forward work programme.