
DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE, 11.12.13

Present: Councillor Lesley Day (Chair)
Councillor Anne Lloyd Jones (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Thomas G. Ellis, Jean Forsyth, Evan Selwyn Griffiths, Charles W. Jones, Linda Ann Wyn Jones, Michael Sol Owen, Gareth Thomas.

Cabinet Member: Councillor Ioan Thomas (Cabinet Member – Customer Care).

Officers: Geraint George (Head of Strategic and Improvement Department), Arwel Ellis Jones (Senior Manager – Corporate Commissioning Service) and Ioan Hughes (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Apologies: Councillors Annwen Davies, Jason Humphreys, Dilwyn Lloyd, Dilwyn Morgan, Mandy Williams-Davies.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

The following members declared that they were members of town/community councils in relation to item 8 on the agenda, (Websites for Town and Community Councils):

Councillors: Lesley Day, Thomas G. Ellis, Jean Forsyth, Evan Selwyn Griffiths, Anne Lloyd Jones, Michael Sol Owen, Gareth Thomas and Ioan Ceredig Thomas.

It was confirmed that they did not need to deal with this as a 'personal interest'.

2. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 10 September, 2013 as a true record.

3. RESOURCES TO SUPPORT MEMBERS' WORK

(a) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democratic Services – Strategic and Improvement updating the Committee on the resources that were in place and to consider the main matters that required addressing in order to plan resources for the future.

(b) Reference was made to the challenging financial situation that must be faced over the coming years. In general, the Head of Department was of the opinion that the Service, to date, had succeeded to meet the requirements of the Local Government Measure 2011. However, he noted that they should continue to give consideration to being more efficient and achieving more with fewer resources.

(c) Within the 'Designated Persons Order' the Welsh Government would place a new duty on Local Authorities to scrutinise providers of other public services in their area. In response to an enquiry, it was noted that they had not received definite guidelines to date.

(ch) In terms of providing information for members, a request was made for timely information regarding the meetings of the Planning Committee to be included on 'Rhaeadr', since this did not always happen due to the timing of the distribution.

(d) A member expressed a view that they should focus on front line services rather than scrutinise other service providers if the Welsh Government would not provide financial support.

The member added that the matter of the accessibility of the Council's buildings should have been considered years ago.

(dd) In response to an enquiry about work costs, it was noted that the number of core staff was included in the appendix and that the cost of staff salaries was £286,000, with members' salaries and expenses totalling £1.4 million. Also noted was the need to try and have balance between ensuring efficiency and the emphasis on ensuring savings. The members were called on to contact the officers to submit any suggestions where the support for members could be reduced, and therefore the cost.

(e) In relation to the main activities and the support for members, it was noted that a link would be effective when sending information about reports via e-mail. A member also noted that there was particular value to the training provided for members, such as seminars on planning.

RESOLVED to accept and note the contents of the report.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA PROTOCOL

(a) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democratic Services along with the initial draft of a social media policy for councillors.

(b) The policy document offered guidance to councillors on the use of social media. Following a further meeting of the established Task Group, it was aimed to provide a second draft and consult thoroughly with all the Council members through 'Rhaeadr'.

(c) The Public Services Ombudsman had accepted that criticising ideas and opinion was part of a democratic debate. However, it was noted in the initial draft protocol that the 'Gwynedd Standard' stated clearly that individuals should not behave in an insulting or disparaging manner even in these 'political' debates. This was endorsed by the members of this Committee and they emphasised that members should adhere to the value of 'respect', which was considered an essential basis for the Council's work.

(ch) The members were invited to submit observations. They agreed that the draft protocol offered a good starting point to consult upon, and they made the following main points:-

- It should be noted that the Protocol was for the whole of Gwynedd;
- Members should be aware that they should not state anything through social media that they would be unwilling to state in a letter or verbally;
- Upon adopting the protocol, training should be prepared for members so that they could avoid pitfalls when using social media;
- There was a clear responsibility on the Council to encourage people to take an active part in local democracy – misconduct on social media militated against this;
- There was a need to think hard what the ‘penalty’ of not complying with the protocol was, and of failing to attend training on it;
- Members were councillors at all times and they should be aware of standards of conduct even when establishing and running sites in their own names.

RESOLVED to accept the report and convey the observations made on the initial draft protocol for the attention of the Task Group.

5. WEBCASTING

(a) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democratic Services.

(b) It was explained that a grant that would be sufficient for about two years had been received, and that preliminary work had highlighted:-

- the need for detailed planning in advance, which crucially allowed enough time to trial the system before it became live;
- the importance of minimising the work involved with ‘running’ the system when a meeting was underway;
- the need to raise members’ awareness of the sensitivity of such systems.

(c) A member noted the need to deal with simultaneous translation as there were some meetings where translation for the members was not required. It was considered that the situation with regard to the system’s non-Welsh language stream should be assessed once the system was operational.

(e) In response to enquiries by members, it was noted:-

- That the cameras used in Siambr Dafydd Orwig for a short while some time ago had been a pilot scheme by Aberystwyth University, and that they were no longer in operation;
- That the cameras and audio equipment had been installed by the Council, and that the only cost would be to upload everything on the web;
- That no recordings of any meetings would be edited in any way, and neither did this happen at present with recording sound when meetings were recorded;
- Some meetings would need to be prioritised for webcasting based on the likely interest in the matters to be discussed;

- That consideration would be given to the problems experienced with echo in Siambr Hywel Dda;
- There was no intention to end the procedure of holding the Planning Committee meetings in Dwyfor and Meirionnydd as well as in Caernarfon;
- Social media and the Council's website would be methods of providing information regarding what would be broadcast;
- Meetings would be broadcast live, but there would be an archive available for the public to turn to;
- That work was being carried out on reducing administrative costs and the situation could be reviewed when the opening contract with a broadcasting company ended;
- There was no hope of holding discussions with the Assembly with regard to increasing the amount of grant released;
- The identification card system which was available in Siambr Dafydd Orwig would be valuable;
- The system would ensure better connection with the public;
- Other councils' experience showed that meetings ran more smoothly, with debates being more concise since the webcasting system had been established;
- With the system in place, the camera would point at the person speaking at the time;
- Arrangements needed to be made to trial the system.

RESOLVED to continue to support the introduction of webcasting, subject to adequate funding, and request a report back to the next meeting on the detailed work plan for its introduction.

6. WEBSITES FOR TOWN AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS

(a) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democratic Services outlining the response of Town and Community Councils to receiving a grant of up to £500 to develop a website.

(b) With options of establishing an individual website or a joint website under consideration, it was seen that 10 had stated that they were not interested and nine had not responded.

(c) It was noted that there had been a change in relation to the uncertainty with regard to releasing a grant to councils who had established their own websites. In order to ensure that every council was aware of the latest situation, it was suggested that the Council could contact the 19 Councils who had either stated that they were not interested in the offer or who had not responded at all again, giving them a further opportunity to apply for the grant.

RESOLVED:

a) that the Economy Department contacts once again the 19 Councils who have either stated that they are not interested in the offer or who have not responded at all, giving them a further opportunity to apply for the grant;

b) to continue to support the work of facilitating the development of a web presence for Town and Community Councils, and to receive an update on the numbers who have applied for the grant at the next meeting of this Committee on 18 March, 2014.

7. ANNUAL REPORTS BY ELECTED MEMBERS

(a) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democratic Services.

(b) It was noted that no pressure was being put on members to provide annual reports. However, as encouragement and support for members to prepare these reports, it was suggested that a standard template could be provided as a starting point for the work.

(c) It was noted that eight reports had been submitted last year and that they could be of assistance. It was added that observations about officers were made in them in a respectful manner.

(ch) A member noted that it was frustrating at times to record the information regarding the meetings or training they had attended, and that it would be beneficial if such information was provided for them.

(d) In order to avoid any suggestion of putting pressure on members, another member suggested that members should be asked before hand whether they were considering providing a report, with the template being sent to them as required.

(dd) In terms of the response given to the reports, it was noted that the total number of responses on the website was 119, and that these varied from 9 to 50 per individual report.

RESOLVED:-

a) to accept the proposal of creating a template to include data about the number of committee meetings attended and the number of training sessions attended by each individual councillor as a way of supporting members to prepare annual reports in 2013/14

b) that a request is made for members to note whether they intend to complete a report, and that the template is then offered to all members so that they can consider whether they are going to prepare a report or not.

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 11.50am.