

GWYNEDD COUNCIL



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council

Date of meeting:	13 May, 2021
Title of Item:	Annual report by the Head of Democracy Services on behalf of the Democracy Services Committee with regards to support for members
Contact Officer:	Geraint Owen, Head of Democracy Services

1. THE DECISION SOUGHT

It is recommended that the Full Council approve the annual report submitted for information.

2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

2.1 Submitted below is my annual report in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Act 2011. It is noted in the act that the Democracy Services Committee is responsible for specific matters (under Section 11), as follows:

- Appoint a Head of Democracy Services on behalf of the local authority
- Review the available support for the Head of the Democracy Services in relation to staff, buildings and other resources, ensuring they are sufficient for carrying out the requirements of the role
- Produce a report, at least once a year, to be presented to the Full Council in relation to support for Members.

2.2 The report focuses on the developments made during the year rather than outlining all the support that is available to Members, as well as outlining the priorities for the coming year.

2.3 I continue to emphasise that an open dialogue with you as Elected Members is a necessity in order to ensure that the support provided to you responds to your needs for the role and, therefore, I encourage you to contact me or the Chair to raise any relevant matters.

2.4 I also wish to thank all members of the Committee, and officers of the Democracy and Language Services, for their support over the last year and I

look forward to collaborating with you all in the future to further develop the provision.

3. ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

3.1 Members of the Democratic Services Committee were consulted and their input was received prior to submitting the final report to this meeting of the full Council.

3.2 THE STATUTORY OFFICERS' OBSERVATIONS:

Monitoring Officer:

The report reflects on a period which, with in the crisis, has been transformative in the context of the Councils democratic processes. As noted the advent of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 continues on this change pathway. I look forward to co working with the Service on this development.

Statutory Finance Officer:

I understand that this annual report is submitted for information, hence I have nothing to add from a financial propriety perspective. Despite the challenges presented by Covid-19, myself and the IT Service have enjoyed working with elected members and Democracy Services to successfully host online meetings.



THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRACY SERVICES (2020/21)

- Support for Gwynedd Elected
Members



RHOI POBL GWYNEDD YN GANOLOG I BOPETH RYDYM YN EI WNEUD • PUTTING THE
PEOPLE OF GWYNEDD AT THE CENTRE OF EVERYTHING WE DO

FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the annual report to Gwynedd Council Members. The report focuses on 2020/21 developments and what will be developed in 2021/22.

Following a very challenging, unexpected and very different year in 2021/21, it appears that 2021/22 will also be a year full of challenges, from the preparations for the Local Government Elections in May 2022 and the implications of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Reviewing and improving the available support for Elected Members so that they can fulfil their role is a fundamental part of my work, and the input and support of members of the Democratic Services Committee assists me with this important work.

Once again this year, I encourage Members not to hesitate before contacting me directly or the Chair of the Democratic Services Committee, if you wish to discuss any aspects of the support you require.

I wish to express my thanks and state my appreciation of all the efforts made during the year to support the democratic process within the Council, and I look forward to working with you on further developments during the coming year.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stewart Owen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**Head of Democracy Services,
Head of Corporate Support Department**

What has happened during 2020/21

It is impossible to look back at 2020/21 without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had an impact on every element of everyday living, and consequently it was necessary to revisit and look at how the whole Democracy Service works.

Over the last few years the service has been considering how to enable remote access for members to attend meetings and committees. This plan has made huge strides forward this year, specifically due to the need to comply with Covid-19 guidelines, and by October 2020 all the Council's committee meetings had been held virtually. In order to assist Members with this change a number of training sessions took place (general sessions and for each specific committee) to give members an opportunity to practise on Teams and Zoom prior to holding the formal committee itself. Guidelines were created for chairing virtual meetings and good practices to remember when taking part in on-line meetings were shared.

107 formal committees were held virtually during the year, each one with provision to be held bilingually. Every member participated in at least one virtual committee. In addition, since October 2020, we have managed to hold meetings in accordance with the dates on the committees time-table as approved by the Full Council back in March 2020.

Meetings of the Cabinet and the Full Council were webcast live from October onwards. In addition, other meetings were recorded with more than 20 live recordings of all the meetings included on the website within a short time of being held.

I wish to give special thanks this year to the Information Technology Service for all the support they have given to the Democracy Services Team (and to Members) and for being willing to offer advice and solve problems that have arisen. All of this in order to ensure that it was possible to hold virtual meetings effectively and successfully.

During the pandemic the Service continued to provide all the usual support, including:

- ✓ Arranging, publishing and taking minutes of the Council meetings - in a timely manner and to a consistently high standard. 92% of agendas published electronically within 5 clear working days prior to the meetings by the Council.
- ✓ In accordance with the Welsh Government Covid-19 guidelines, 96% of Committee decision notices have been published electronically within 5 clear working days following any committee.
- ✓ Compliance with the requirements of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales, ensuring the prompt payment of Members' pay and expenses.
- ✓ Political support for eligible political groups
- ✓ Reviewing the political balance in line with the requirement

- ✓ Offering 1 to 1 mentoring sessions at the request of members
- ✓ Producing a Newsletter to update members of the Democratic Services Committee discussions

Additionally, I would like to draw your attention to the specific projects noted below:

Members' Intranet:

For some years now the development of the 'portal' has been on the Service's work programme in order to provide information conveniently and in a timely manner to Members. During 2019/20 further work was undertaken to develop an intranet site for Members to include all the relevant information. The plan was set aside at the start of 2020/21 as it was necessary to focus specifically on the priority of ensuring the continuation of formal committees during the Pandemic. However, the work was recommenced during the last quarter of the year and following trialling the intranet in its new guise with a small number of Councillors, the provision is now available for every Member.

The intranet will be updated constantly, however, officers are eager to hear your views and get your input to ensure that the information available is useful, as well as convenient and easy to find.

Members Questionnaire

Back in February 2020, a questionnaire was sent to every Councillor to ask your views about the service provided by the Democracy Services Team, as well as what could be done to improve this support. There was a high number of responses with over 80% of Members noting that the support provided was 'very good'.

However, several ideas were also offered regarding what could be improved. The matter raised by the majority of Members was the need to make more use of on-line meetings. As has been noted already, this year has highlighted the huge steps taken to move this agenda forward with a view to establish long-term arrangements during the coming year.

Another questionnaire has been sent to all Members in April 2021, and everyone is encouraged to fill it in. We will report on the results to the next meeting of the Democratic Services Committee which is to be held in June highlighting the main messages and the next developmental steps.

Assistance for Members

This past year has been extremely challenging for you as members, and many of you have noted that your role has changed. In response to requests from members of the Democratic Services Committee, sessions were arranged for elected

members to ensure that you look after your mental wellbeing during this difficult time and these sessions were very much appreciated.

In addition, the need to look after your physical health also emerged as more and more of us spend long periods of time at our desks working and taking part in various committees and meetings. Another matter raised by members of the committee was the need for guidance, or tips, regarding information security when working remotely. Attention was given to these two issues with information shared with all members via the Democratic Services Committee Newsletter and included on the new members' intranet.

Informal sessions are also being arranged to give elected members an opportunity to ask about information technology issues. These sessions are in addition to the day-to-day support given by members of the Democracy Team, and the support given by the Information Technology help-desk when technical issues arise. Once again, this was a matter raised by members of the committee during one of the meetings, and support was put in place for you.

2021/22 Priorities

However, we must not rest on our laurels and in the spirit of aiming for continuous improvement, please see the following plans to try and move the provision for Elected Members forward to the next level during 2021/22.

Building on this year's developments

2020/21 has been a year of change, but obviously we will need to continue to develop and build upon the changes that have occurred with the way of working. A series of good practices have been presented during the year, however, there are also several lessons to be learnt. It will be necessary to take time to reflect on and consider all the developments achieved.

It will be necessary to look at the future meetings framework when we all step out of the pandemic into the new 'normal'. Specifically we will need to consider how committees will be held, be they virtual, face to face or a combination of both.

Accepting that the review will lead to a conclusion that it would be possible to hold some meetings where some Members are in a committee room and others join from home, adaptations and investment in the current facilities will need to be considered to ensure that the technology works easily and effectively. Obviously this is also in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Early in 2021/22 we hope to move to webcast the Planning Committee meetings live, with the live webcasting of Scrutiny Committees to follow. This means that the

service will be webcasting in accordance with the previous work programme prior to the pandemic.

Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

The requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 will come into effect gradually during 2021/22 and we will need to ensure that we comply with the conditions within the Act. There will be a need to look at some elements in detail, such as;

- webcasting requirements,
- encourage local people to participate when local government makes decisions,
- a duty to make and publish a petitions plan,
- continue with the remote access work to ensure that it is possible to facilitate Members to contribute to committees.

2022 Elections

With the local government elections on the horizon in May 2022, we will need to continue with the work of preparing for these.

We will need to continue with the work of promoting diversity amongst candidates, especially in relation to young people, ethnic minorities and women. It will be necessary to develop the work of trying to identify the barriers and establish a work programme in response to this and collaborate with political groups to promote this agenda.

In order to build on the good work undertaken prior to the 2017 Election, it will be necessary to:

- develop sessions to raise awareness for those who put their names forward to stand in the May 2022 elections. This will be an opportunity for prospective Members to consider and understand the situation before they are formally nominated - trying to ensure better clarity of the opportunities available to them, the requirements of them, and the support available following a successful election.
- review and prepare an induction programme for elected Members in the new Council after May 2022. Constructive and useful comments were received about the induction programme in 2017, and we need to plan the induction sessions and the follow-up training in plenty of time beforehand by considering the comments already received and further consultation with existing Members.
- consider the suitability of electronic equipment. We need to start considering now what is / will be the needs of elected Members and the

Council in the future, by starting to prepare and consider what is the most suitable equipment to offer to embers following the May 2022 elections.

DRAFT