

DEMOCRACY SERVICES COMMITTEE THURSDAY, 18 FEBRUARY 2021

PRESENT:

Councillors:

Anne Lloyd Jones (Chair), Annwen Daniels, Annwen Davies, Anwen Hughes, Judith Humphreys, Eryl Jones-Williams, Linda Ann Jones, Cai Larsen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Robert Dewi Owen, Dewi Wyn Roberts, Mair Rowlands.

Officers: Geraint Owen (Head of Corporate Support Department), Vera Jones (Democracy Services Manager), Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader), Carey Cartwright (Learning and Organisational Development Manager), Cara Williams (Members Development Officer) and Natalie Lloyd Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Hefin Underwood.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent matters.

4. MINUTES

It was agreed that the minutes of the previous committee meeting on 17/11/2020 were accurate.

5. THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

A draft annual report was submitted by the Head of Democratic Services to receive any observations from the committee before its submission to the Full Council in May 2021.

A foreword was provided noting that the Head of Democratic Services, the Democracy and Language Manager and officers had a role to review the support available for members continuously.

It was reported back on a challenging year, emphasising and congratulating that all elected members had now become familiar with virtual committees.

A brief overview of the contents of the report was provided, drawing attention to the successes of the department, which included:

- Adapting to allow remote access to officers and members in order to realise the requirements of the local government act.
- A direct reference to the Translation Team Leader and translators for adapting to new methods.
- A direct reference to the I.T. team, with a particular reference to the Programme Office Manager for his commitment and assistance.
- Discussing the projects such as Members' Portal and the Intranet, which ensured that the important information is easily available for members.
- Members were asked whether the contents of the report met their needs.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by members:

- Gratitude was expressed for the report and the comprehensive information, noting that receiving these allowed members to be informed about the department's procedures.
- It was noted that the members' portal was not completely ready to be used but enthusiasm was expressed to be able to use it in the near future.
- The new way forward of continuing with virtual committee meetings for the vast majority of them was welcomed, reasons in favour of this was noted such as saving on travel time and promoting more people to stand in future elections.
- Attention was drawn to the need to consider securing Councillors' information.
- It was noted that it had to be ensured that members had full access to resources, including devices and proper internet connection if procedures would become virtual on a more permanent basis.
- Assistance to upgrade resources
- It was enquired whether all elected Council members had registered with the information commissioner.

In response to these observations, the Head of Democracy Services noted that the I.T. service was in the process of examining the Members' Portal to ensure access for all, as minor amendments were required prior to its launch.

She agreed that securing information was an important element for them to consider, especially as officers and members worked from home and continued to deal with information. She reiterated that securing information would be a subject that would require more attention in future and that more information would be reported back in future.

DECISION

To accept the report and it was agreed to submit the report to the Full Council in May 2021.

6. COMMITTEE FRAMEWORK

An overview of the logic behind the report was provided by the Head of Democracy Services. It was noted that the purpose of the report was to introduce a framework to hold committee meetings in the future. It was explained that the vast proportion would be held

virtually; however, it was recognised that some would occasionally be required to be held on a face-to-face basis.

The report was submitted by the Democracy and Language Manager, who discussed the draft principles to hold committees and meetings in the current and future position. The different types of potential situations were discussed and which committees would be likely to return to a face-to-face basis when it would be possible to do so. It was noted that the exceptions to virtual committees and meetings would be the meetings of the Full Council, Employment Appeal Committees (depending on the appellant's wishes), Licensing Subcommittee (depending on the appellant's wishes) and the Chief Officers' Appointment Committee (when conducting interviews).

The need to reinforce the right and duty of members to speak Welsh at each meeting was added. It was added that this was vitally important, especially within regional committees and meetings as others needed to be promoted to use the Welsh language in order to normalise it.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by members:

- The members expressed their thanks for the report and it was noted that this was a huge change as Council committees and meetings had been held on a face-to-face basis since the start.
- Some concerns were raised, especially the situation for new members. It was added that the office and chamber environment was an opportunity to network and chat with fellow members; this may be a loss to some such as new members who needed to get to know members and officers at the beginning of their term.
- It was asked whether officers would experience the same changes in their methods of working as members, i.e. would they continue to meet virtually after restrictions lifted?
- It was proposed that it would be essential to meet on a face-to-face basis occasionally in order to challenge and scrutinise.
- It was noted that the availability of Teams facilitated contact with officers during the current period as it was more personal than a telephone call.
- It was enquired whether it would be possible to arrange a training session for members on using Zoom?
- The importance of reminding organisers of the right to use the Welsh language within virtual meetings was reiterated. This was reinforced by proposing that it should be added to the virtual meetings protocol.
- It was noted that the availability of officers needed to be ensured before formally changing to virtual arrangements, as they were not always available via a quick e-mail.
- It was asked if everyone, including members and officers, had been asked about their personal opinion on moving to a permanent virtual method in future.

The following responses were received to the observations:

- It was confirmed that requests would be considered if there would be a need to hold face-to-face meetings, especially in cases when it would be necessary.

- It was noted that officers would not return to former arrangements in the office where there was no need to do so. It was reiterated that services were in the process of identifying what functions could be undertaken from home just as successful as in the office.
- It was accepted that it was not appropriate for everyone to adapt their work model; however, managers were in the process of assessing this.
- It was confirmed that it would be possible to work beyond the proposed framework, for example, following an election to induct new members. This would be necessary in order for them to hold conversations and meetings with returning members, officers and new members.
- In response to an observation regarding the availability of officers, it was noted that contact numbers remained the same, therefore, it was possible to contact officers directly should the e-mail method be too slow.
- It was ensured that the service would commit to review the framework should the need arise.

DECISION

To accept the report.

7. PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES CONSULTATION

The report was submitted by the Monitoring Officer, noting that the Ombudsman was consulting on new draft guidance on the Code of Conduct for County Council and Town and Community Council members.

It was noted that the document explained the code for members in a coherent manner and in order to ensure better understanding among members of what was included. Attention was drawn to the main aspects of the body of the report and committee members were then asked for their observations. It was reiterated that the main points to consider were how useful was the document to personally assist them to understand the requirements of the code of conduct and whether the document was of use to them as members.

It was explained that the observations on the consultation would be submitted to the Standards Committee on 22 February, 2021.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by members:

- It was noted that the document did not discuss any potential penalty that would fall on members should they breach the code of conduct.
- The observation was made that the code of conduct emphasised a presumption that councillors needed to be thick-skinned and to accept that you would be open to personal criticism.
- This was reiterated, asking where was the line for criticism as this could prevent people from standing as councillors.

- It was noted that the code of conduct did not mention community council clerks and it was noted that it could be a cause for concern regarding the duties of clerks to declare interests where appropriate.

The Monitoring Officer responded to the observations as follows:

- It was noted that it was difficult to identify where the line was regarding criticism; however, only political criticism was acceptable and personal abuse was unacceptable.
- In response to the concern about community clerks, it was noted that they had a direct code of conduct, namely the code of conduct for statutory officers. It was reiterated that the rules differed but it was implemented in the same manner as the code of conduct for elected members.

DECISION

To accept the report.

8. CALENDAR OF MEETINGS

The proposed calendar was submitted by the Democracy Team Leader. It had been submitted to the committee in order to receive observations prior to its submission to the Full Council in March. It was added that the calendar before the committee today had already been circulated among officers to ensure that it was in line with statutory and budgetary requirements.

During the discussion, one observation was made by a member stating that no dates could be seen for area forums.

In response, the Democracy Team Leader noted that area forums were not part of the calendar in question; however, meetings of the area forums would recommence in the near future.

DECISION:

To accept the report and submit the recommendation to the Full Council in March, 2021

9. TRAINING FOR MEMBERS

A report was submitted by the Learning and Development Manager to update the committee on training that had been available for members since the previous committee meeting. The committee was reminded how training provision methods had been adapted during the COVID-19 period. It was added that this had been an opportunity to trial a new method of receiving feedback via an on-line method.

A summary of recent events was provided, reiterating that a quiet period was in the pipeline before the election. Reference was made to the latest programme for information for committee members and a request was made for any input from members on potential training areas for the future.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by members:

- Members gave thanks for the good provision of virtual training that had been available and it was reiterated that the report was an accurate picture of the provision.
- It was noted that many more seemed to be attending the virtual sessions as opposed to sessions in the past
- A member noted that a feedback form on paper would be useful as members received a number of e-mails and there was a possibility for the feedback e-mail to get lost in their midst.
- It was stated that the training programme included a balanced number of training as well as personal development opportunities.
- It was asked whether it would be possible to upload recordings of the training sessions for members who could not attend.
- A request was made for I.T. sessions in order to develop information in the field and it was reiterated that these would be more useful in smaller groups or on a 1:1 basis.

In response to the above observations, the Members Development Officer noted:

- It would be possible to ensure that forms were circulated in order to receive members' feedback following training sessions.
- It was explained that a number of recent sessions had been to raise awareness, therefore, no feedback collecting method had been shared.
- It was confirmed that a series of I.T sessions in small groups had been arranged for March.

DECISION:

To accept the report.

The meeting commenced at 10:30 and concluded at 12:17

CHAIR