



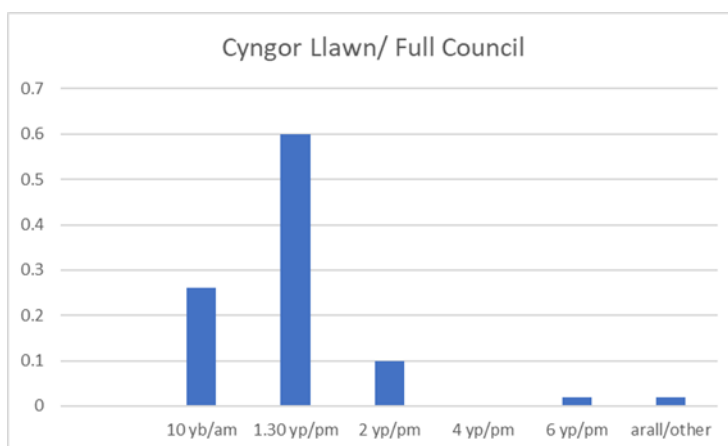
Date of meeting :	17 November 2022
Subject	Support for Councillors
Recommendation	The Democratic Services Committee is asked to note the observations and accept the report.
Contact Officer:	Vera Jones and Annes Sion

What is the background and relevant considerations?

1. The Democracy Team is working hard to ensure full support for Councillors. In order to ensure the correct support, we regularly ask for your views. This report reports on the results of our recent questionnaire and highlights the steps taken by the team over the latest period to ensure that the support is of quality and is useful to you as members.

Timing of Council Meetings

2. Statutory guidance (currently in draft form) have been published under section 6 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 on the timing of Council meetings. Councils are required to conduct a survey at least once soon after every Election to assess the choices of Councillors and to commit to act on the conclusions. The survey should be held no later than six months after the general elections.
3. In order to comply with the statutory guidance, we sent a questionnaire to all Councillors during October. One of the elements in question was to seek views on the timing of the Council's meetings.
4. 42 members answered the questionnaire in full. See below an analysis of the responses received, along with an outline of the next steps.
5. Full Council

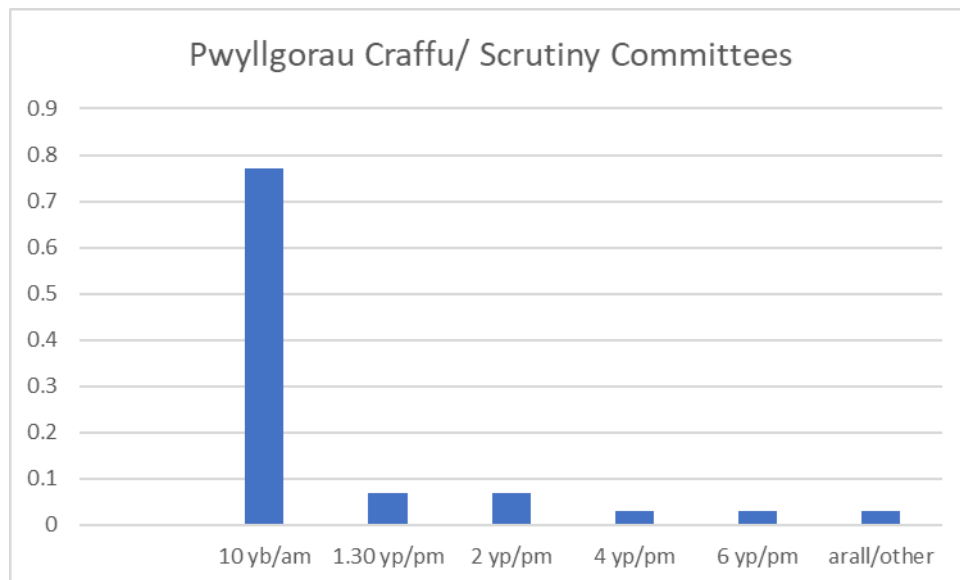


60% noted the desire for the meeting to be held at 1:30pm, with 26% noting 10am, 10% noting 2pm and 2% noting 6pm or another time. Comments were received which outlined the need to start in the afternoon as the political groups needed to be able to meet during the morning and have an opportunity to discuss the agenda.

6. Cabinet

75% of the Cabinet members who submitted a response noted the desire for the meeting to commence at 1:30pm, with 25% noting 10am. The timing of its meetings is a matter for the Cabinet itself; however, this is reported here for information.

7. Scrutiny



In terms of the timing of the Scrutiny committees, 77% noted that they were eager for them to commence at 10am, with 7% noting 1:30pm, 7% noting 2pm and 3% noting 4pm, 6pm or another time.

Comments were received noting that scrutiny committees should continue to be held in the morning as it was then possible to do ward work in the afternoon, or if it was a lengthy meeting, starting in the morning meant that it was possible to have a lunch break before reconvening for an afternoon session.

8. Planning

56% noted the desire for the Planning Committee to commence at 10am, with 28% noting 1:30pm, 11% noting another time, and 5% noting 6pm. One individual noted that they had chosen 10am as the most favourable time, but that they realised that site visits were held on the morning of the meeting on occasions, and that this would work against this arrangement.



9. Other Committees

In terms of the other committees being held, it was noted by 68% that they wished for these committees to commence at 10am, with 12% noting 1:30pm, 8% noting 2pm, and 3% noting either 4pm or 6pm or other.

10. The following selection of comments on the timing of committees represents the main messages presented:

“As a Councillor who also has a full-time job, it is not possible for me to attend every meeting that is held during the day.

The meetings that are held at 16:00 work much better for me personally.”

“For other committees, if they are held in the morning then this provides flexibility to continue into the afternoon, if more time is needed. I prefer to avoid evening meetings as many meetings in the community are held at this time, e.g. school governors, community councils, voluntary groups, political groups”

“meetings during the day work better - many other demands during the evening”

"No specific reason to be honest, I just feel that it is important to commit to the Council's work in the morning (the Full Council is the exception due to the Group meetings)! I WOULD NOT like the meetings to be held in the evening, only as an exception."

“I would be glad if committees were held in the morning if possible; I would also be glad if committees, training and Council meetings would be held on specific days, such as Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, instead of things being spread across the whole week. This would enable me to arrange and plan things better.”

11. In addition, comments were presented about the length of committees. There were clear messages about the need to ensure a break for a sensible length of time if any Committee meeting ran for a long time. This was required in order to allow individuals (both Councillors and staff) to have some time to eat, do some light exercise/move and take a break from the screen at a virtual meeting or when joining remotely during a multi-location meeting.

12. Obviously, it is not possible to meet everyone's needs, and so there will be a need to act on the recommendations of the majority. The next step is to use the above information as a basis to discussions in order to create the Committees Calendar for 2023/24. A draft will be submitted to you as the Democracy Services Committee in March 2022.



Councillor Satisfaction

13. We are eager to improve our service on a continuous basis and to provide the support that is needed for Councillors. Therefore, following the Post-Election welcome period for Members, we believed that it was timely to ask for feedback on the service being offered by the democracy team specifically.
14. A range of questions were asked, including the satisfaction with the work of the team and any developments the team could make in the future. Again, 41 Councillors responded to the questionnaire in full and noted their views about the team's service.
15. 95% noted that the service was very good, or good, with 2 councillors noting that the service was acceptable.
16. A number of additional responses were received, which included the following:
 - “The team has been welcoming since I commenced in the post and are very supportive to any enquiry”*
 - “The team has been supportive, active and has always been there to help and enable me as a new councillor.”*
 - “Effective communication, courteous, conscientious and friendly.”*
 - “In eighteen years, I don't think I've ever experienced any problems and have always found the team members to be very helpful.”*
17. Members were asked if there were any developments or changes the team could implement to further support Councillors in their role. Amongst the observations, frustration was expressed regarding the democratic/ political actions in the Council. This was a political issue.
18. Amongst the other comments were the following. One member made a request for an informal 'mentor', and a weekly list of the training available. The request has already been forwarded to the Learning and Development Team so that direct discussions can be held with the individual.
19. An enquiry was made about which documents are available on the Members' Intranet. As a result of the comment, we will be sending information over the coming weeks to outline the content of the members' intranet so that everyone is aware of the very useful information contained.
20. One member expressed discontent at the way that attendance at meetings was currently noted, and we will arrange a meeting with the individual over the coming weeks to discuss the matter.
21. One member requested a confirmation email when the democracy team receive an apology from a member unable to attend a meeting. The team will

move to act on sending a message of acknowledgement in the near future; however, this will only be actioned for apologies that are received in good time.

22. We are eager to improve our service and respond to the requirements of Councillors and we continuously state and act on our mission. In addition to the electronic questionnaire that is sent to Councillors twice a year, we will reinstate our arrangements to hold a conversation with 2 or 3 Councillors per month to discuss the support being offered and in order to gain a better understanding of the barriers.

Communicating with Councillors

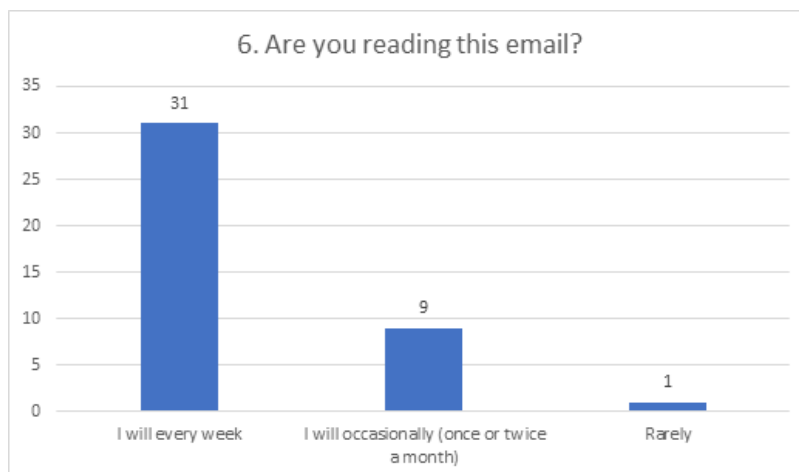
23. The exercise was also an opportunity to ask Members' opinions about the methods the Council's Communication and Engagement Service uses to share news / useful information with Councillors and how the service can be improved, so as to help Members with their work.

24. Questions were asked about four general areas – the Weekly Bulletin for Members; Council Leader and Deputy Leader Bulletin; Members' Intranet; the intention of organising briefing meetings and/or briefing notes on key issues.

25. There was positive and constructive feedback about these points, which will help the Service to continue to meet the needs of Elected Members. Here is an outline of the responses received:

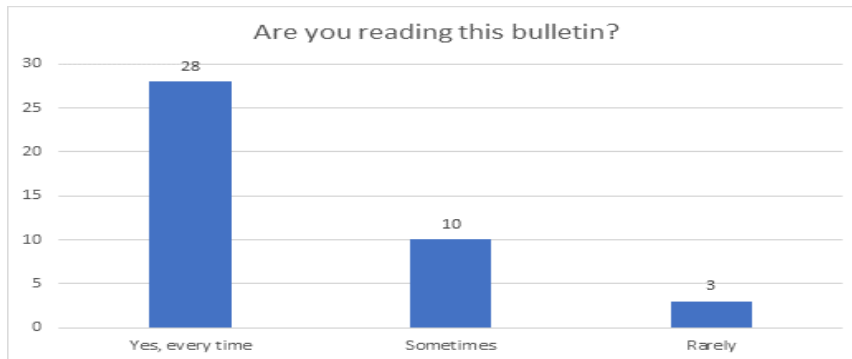
i) **Members' Bulletin**, which is sent weekly to all councillors via e-mail, containing links to news items on the intranet and some other relevant items:

- **76%** (31) said that they **read it every week**;
- **22%** (9) said they read it **occasionally** (once or twice a month);
- **2%** (1) said that they **rarely** read it.



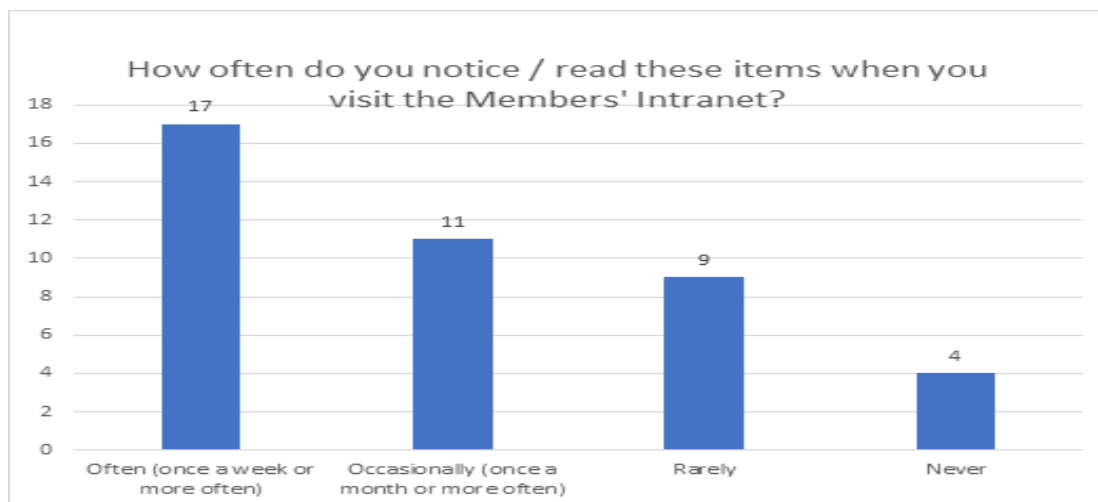
ii) **The Leader's and Deputy Leader's Bulletin**, which is sent to all councillors every other week – usually as part of the weekly Members' Bulletin:

- **68%** (28) said they **always** read it;
- **24%** (10) said they read it **occasionally**;
- **7%** (3) said that they **rarely** read it.



iii) **The news section on the Members' Intranet**, where news items and snippets of information are regularly published for councillors:

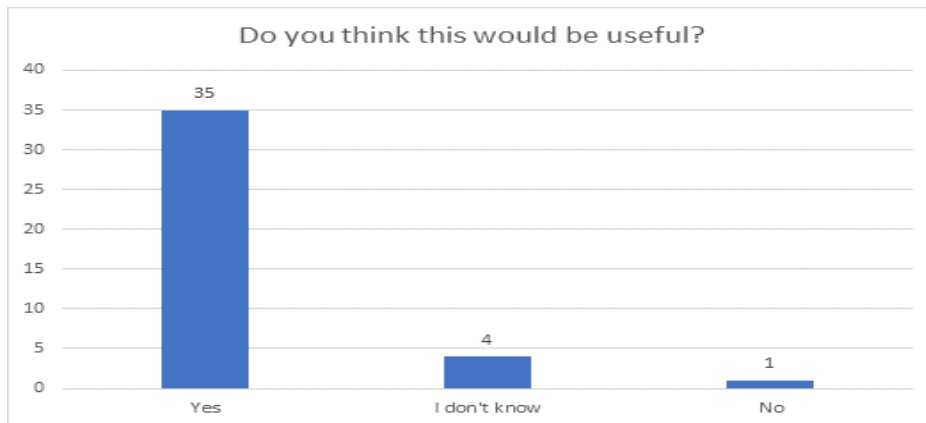
- **27%** (17) said they notice/read these items **often** (once a week or more often);
- **41%** (11) said they notice/read these items **occasionally** (once a month or more often);
- **22%** (9) said that they **rarely** notice/read these items;
- **10%** (4) said they **never** notice/read these items.



iv) **Briefing Sessions and Notes.** There are plans to start holding briefing sessions and providing briefing notes for members regarding key issues that are likely to attract the attention of constituents or in the press. The aim will be to provide

background information on a specific subject so that Members have time to understand more about the context before being asked questions about it:

- **88%** (35) said they thought **this would be useful**;
- **10%** (4) said they **didn't know** if this would be useful;
- **3%** (1) said this **would not be useful**.



26. There was an opportunity for Members to give written comments and suggestions for each question. The Service is grateful to all who took advantage of the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences. Based on this feedback, improvements will be introduced which will include:

- Regular items in the Weekly Bulletin which will signpost readers to useful information available on the Members' Intranet, for example:
 - Members' Training Calendar;
 - Directory of key officers in all service areas;
 - Council Committees calendar;
 - Details of the Council's consultations and engagement exercises, and those of our partners;
- Feature articles about Council staff members and their work;
- Articles to highlight the work of committees and working groups other than the Cabinet;
- Establish a system of holding Briefing Meetings and providing Briefing Notes for Members about key issues, similar to the virtual meeting held recently with the Chief Executive about the Council's budget and the financial situation.



Female Councillors

27. As a part of the activities of the Promoting Diversity in Democracy programme, arrangements were put in place over the last Council term to hold specific sessions for Women who are Councillors. These informal sessions (chat over a cuppa) have offered a safe space where Councillors have had an opportunity to

- support each other and compare experiences and learn from each other
- discuss barriers or issues that concern them and offer solutions.

28. All discussions are undertaken in a safe and non-political environment. We normally report back on the themes arising during the discussions in order to see whether the Council needed to consider specific steps. The main themes arising from the latest conversations were:

- That the Welcome Programme and training had been good, but that work-life balance was difficult. This was particularly true when attempting to reconcile the role of a Councillor with:
 - a) an increase in ward work (the size of wards had increased in some places and the needs of society had certainly increased) and
 - b) reconciling the role of a Councillor with full-time employment
- Another prominent theme was how society had changed, with a number seeing people who felt entitled to receive support at any time, and others noting that more in society behaved in an increasingly threatening manner.
- As a result of the above conversation, a discussion was held on safety in the Chamber, when considering holding surgeries or meeting with the public, and the threats that had occurred over social media and on the street. Everyone was encouraged to attempt to attend the training course on safety, which had been recently adapted to address councillor safety, and to look on the intranet for tips before holding surgeries. Also, a request was made for training on dealing with social media.

29. Two meetings were held, and one group was eager to arrange a "guest female" to speak about their experiences for a section of the next meeting. The other group was eager for the sessions to continue. The next session will be arranged for the beginning of 2023.

Recommendation

30. The Democratic Services Committee is asked to note the observations and accept the report.

