



DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH (SIRHOWY ROOM) ON WEDNESDAY 27TH MAY 2015 AT 5:00PM

PRESENT:

Councillor C.P. Mann - Chair
Councillor D.T. Davies - Vice - Chair

Councillors:

H.W. David, W. David, D.T. Davies, R.T. Davies, Mrs C. Forehead, Mrs P. Griffiths, Ms J.G. Jones, G. Kirby, Mrs M.E. Sargent, and J. Taylor.

Together with:

A. Price (Interim Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), J. Davies (Business Development Manager), E. Sullivan (Democratic Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs G. Bevan, P.J. Bevan, D.G. Carter, Mrs D. Price and Mrs E. Stenner.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the beginning or during the course of the meeting.

3. MINUTES - 17TH MARCH 2015

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 17th March 2015 be approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

4. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair on behalf of the Democratic Services Committee wished to formally thank Mr Jonathan Jones, Democratic Services Manager for his past service and all the support provided to Members during his time with Caerphilly County Borough Council. Mr Jones had recently left the authority to take up a post with the Welsh Ambulance Service and Members requested that their appreciation for his contribution to Member Development and Support be noted.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

5. ANNUAL REPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

Mrs A. Price (Interim Head of Democratic Services) introduced the Annual Report for Democratic Services which detailed the current and planned services and support for Elected Members.

The different Democratic Services functions were outlined and the support provided to Members in terms of Committee Services, Member Training and Development, Scrutiny and the Civic Office were noted.

With regard to Committee Services, Members were advised that 211 committee meetings and 13 planning site visits had been arranged during the last council term. There had been 11 members' seminars on a wide range of issues, including the Medium Term Financial Plan, School Categorisation and Caerphilly Collection Services. All meetings had been properly advertised with agenda's and minutes produced within the required timescales. During 2014 the Modern.Gov document management system had also been successfully implemented and the benefits of its improved functionality were now being realised. This had been a major project over the last 12 months and its straightforward search and document retrieval system offered an easy to use interface and greater transparency.

In terms of Member Training and Development a number of programmes had been implemented including mandatory, annual refresher, recommended and requested training. The Officer confirmed that a full review of the programme would be presented to the Democratic Services Committee in due course. A Training Need Analysis (TNA) had also been undertaken; with a report on the analysis outcomes presented to the committee at its last meeting. Officers were currently working with the WLGA to provide Members with their requested training options. This report also fed-back the preferred times and venues for committee meetings as well as training and development events. Going forward further options such as e-learning and recorded sessions would be explored in order to offer as wide a variety of learning platforms and accessibility as possible.

The Interim Head of Democratic Services confirmed that the WLGA Charter submission for Member Support and Development had just been successfully renewed, the evidence requirements were summarised and the award criteria outlined.

Scrutiny support over the past 12 months was detailed and the support provided by the Scrutiny Research Officer for various Task and Finish Groups acknowledged. The instrumental role of Mrs C. Forbes Thompson in the Many Hands – Sharing Public Accountability in Wales event in Llanddrindod Wells on the 27th March 2015 was recognised. Members noted that a review of Scrutiny was currently underway following recommendations from the Wales Audit Office and the outcome of the review would be reported to the Committee's September meeting.

Civic Office support was summarised and it was noted that the Mayor attended 370 engagements between May 2014 and May 2015. Members of the Democratic Services Team provided continuous support to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor in all aspects of their duties.

As Members were aware webcasting had also been implemented over the last year with 3 meetings of Council successfully broadcast. Viewing figures were currently low Officer's hoped these would improve once the facility was more widely advertised. The problems experienced with electronic voting were noted and the Officer confirmed that further practice session would be organised to ensure that Members were completely comfortable and confident in the process before it was re-introduced at Council meetings.

The Officer confirmed that once again 100% of the Annual Reports for Elected Members had been published within the agreed timescale and improvements to the Caerphilly Website meant that they could be more easily viewed by the public. The level of support provided to Members in terms of information technology both hardware and software was summarised and it was noted that the recent Windows upgrade had been complemented by a series of training sessions. Reference was made to the provision of specialist a software reader for a Councillor with a visual impairment; this facility translated written documents into an audio commentary. It was noted that any general or specific support requirements such as the IT Reader would always be considered and support.

Staff and resources within Democratic Services were explained including current and future budgetary constraints. In terms of the printing budget Members were advised that reductions in this area would need to be looked at going forward. With regard to the Democratic Services Manager post, the Officer advised that this post would not be replaced and that existing members of the team would provide these duties by utilising the support of the wider Legal and Governance team.

Members were introduced to Mrs Jackie Davies, Business Development Manager, Legal Services who would be taking on a more active role by supporting Members training and development. The Chair welcomed Mrs Davies to the meeting on behalf of the committee.

The Chair thanked the Interim Head of Democratic Services for her report and Members questions and comments of the overall support to be provided were welcomed.

Clarification was sought in relation to electronic voting if the failure to introduce it at the same time as webcasting would have any impact in terms of transparency in decision making. Mrs Price confirmed that voting by show of hands can be clearly seen by the public in attendance and on the webcast and there was no statutory requirement for electronic voting, however it did afford a more pragmatic approach to the voting process. Members were advised their views on electronic voting would be sought and further practice session organised before its re-introduction was considered.

Members wished to formally acknowledge the work done by the Committee Services Section and expressed concern that their already busy workload would be added to. Concern was also expressed that by not replacing the Democratic Services Manager post a vital link for Members was being lost.

A Member expressed concern with regard to Councillor attendance at meetings and in particular certain Member's that arrive late, leave early or do not offer apologies for absence. This concern was shared by the Committee and clarification was sought as to whether it would be possible to record these instances. Members were mindful that this would place an additional onus on committee services staff and how best to record this data was discussed at length. Concern was expressed again that any further reduction in Committee Services staffing levels would place an unacceptable strain on the remaining staff members in a area that was essential to the role of Members. Assurances were sought that the current staffing levels would be maintained going forward.

Mrs Price confirmed that Members attendance levels were reported quarterly to Scrutiny Committees and within Annual Reports for Elected Members. However there was no record kept of Members arrival or departure from meetings.

Having fully considered the issues around Member attendance It was moved and seconded that a record of Members attendance in terms of Councillors that do not tender apologies for absence, arrive late or depart early from Scrutiny Committees, Council, Cabinet and Planning Committee meetings and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that a record be kept of Councillors that fail to tender apologies, arrive late or depart early from meetings and this data be reported back to the Democratic Services Committee.

Members were advised that additional support at Scrutiny would be provided by staff from the wider Legal Services Team. Solicitors would be trained by the Scrutiny Research Officer who would continue to co-ordinate the Scrutiny function. Mrs Price confirmed that she was conscious of the affect on remaining staff by not filling vacant post particularly when taking into account the constant cycle of meetings to be covered. However each vacancy had to be looked at on a case-by-case basis in tandem with secondment and redeployment opportunities.

Members emphasised how essential the consistency and continuity of the advice given at Scrutiny was and that this must be considered when utilising a wider network of staff. Members were unsure that using Solicitors to provide Scrutiny advice was the best way forward and expressed the preference that dedicated support continue.

The value of Scrutiny Committee pre-meetings was discussed at length with poor levels of attendance here also noted as a concern. The length of Scrutiny agenda's was also debated and reference made to the number of information items being incorporated that were never called forward for discussion. Members suggested that print cost savings could be achieved by revising the current practice of providing hard copies of information items. They could instead be made available in an electronic format in the first instance and only printed if called forward for discussion. It was noted that this was one of the recommendations arising from the current Scrutiny Review, the outcome of which would be the subject of a report to Council.

A Member advised the difficulties many Members experienced when reading large documents on screen and given the importance of the issues being considered at the different committees might prefer to receive printed copies of all documents irrespective of committee membership. Clarification was sought as to whether individual requests to receive only hard copies of committee papers would be accommodated. The Officer confirmed that last years print budget was over spent by £20,000 so savings in this area were a priority. Mrs Price reminded Members that this decision was taken some time ago, and fully supported by Council that printed committee papers would only be sent to the membership of the committee. Councillors we being encouraged to use information technology where possible but printing all reports for all Councillors would incur huge costs. Officers were aware that document accessibility would not be a one size fits all solution and individual requirement in terms of specialist equipment or provision would always been considered but the move away from printing all documents needed to be maintained. Mrs Price offered to look at print costs and provide an analysis to Democratic Services Committee if Members agreed it would be useful. It was noted that some Council's had used the Mod.Gov system to stamp the print cost of individual committees onto agenda in order to highlight the issue, this might be an option to take forward, if Members were agreeable.

Members were pleased to note that consideration was being given to information items and that tailored support needs would be accommodated. A Member agreed that sitting in front of a lap-top screen for hours was not ideal however the different Group Room's and the Member's Library contained printed copies of all the committee agenda's and he often accessed these facilities to read through reports. He expressed the concern that stamping the print costs on agenda's, placed a monetary value on the process which he considered a negation of democracy. This view was shared by a number of Members.

Reference was made to the decision process and the route a report made through the different committees, from Scrutiny, to Cabinet and on to Council, which often meant printing the same document three times. Members suggested that where reports followed this route, they should be retained from the original print run and Councillor's could bring them to subsequent meetings without the need to reprint, agenda's could also be appropriately noted as a reminder.

The Officer noted the suggestion and confirmed that all options were being considered including how to reduce the repetition of printing.

A Member also suggested consideration be given to circulating the decision's made at Scrutiny to all Councillors for information, either in draft minute or decision notice format. The Officer acknowledged the suggestion and agreed to look at how best this could be progressed.

6. ANNUAL REPORTS FOR ELECTED MEMBERS 2014-15

Mrs E. Sullivan (Democratic Services Officer) provided a verbal update on the progress of the Annual Reports for Elected Members for 2014/15.

The Officer confirmed that last year 100% of eligible Members produced an Annual Report for 2013/14 and that all reports were published within the statutory timeframe. Mrs Sullivan thanked Members for their support, hard work and commitment which enabled Caerphilly County Borough Council to be one of only two authorities to publish reports for all their Councillors.

The Officer confirmed that the pre-populated templates for 2014/15 would be circulated shortly and once again Members would be fully supported by the Democratic Services Team. The deadline for the submission of reports was noted as Tuesday 30th June 2015, this would allow reports to be checked and sent back to Members for final approval in time for the publication deadline of the 31st July 2015.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the update.

Approved as a correct record subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 16th September 2015 there were signed by the Chair.

The meeting closed at 18:05 pm.

CHAIRMAN