

DEMOCRACY SERVICES COMMITTEE THURSDAY, 29 JUNE 2021

Present:

Councillors:

Anne Lloyd Jones (Chair), Annwen Daniels, Anwen Hughes, Judith Humphreys, Eryl Jones-Williams, Cai Larsen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Robert Dewi Owen, Dewi Wyn Roberts, Dylan Bullard.

Officers: Geraint Owen (Head of Corporate Support Department), Iwan Evans (Head of Legal Services), Vera Jones (Democracy and Language Services Manager), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader), Sioned Mai Jones and Natalie Lloyd Jones (Democracy Services Officers).

Councillor Dylan Bullard was welcomed to the Committee.

1. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Dewi Owen was elected as Vice-chair for the 2021/22 year.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors: Annwen Daniels, Mair Rowlands, Linda Ann Jones.

3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

4. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

5. MINUTES

It was agreed that the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 18 February 2021 were accurate.

The Chair asked whether dates had been set for the Area Forums. The Democracy and Language Manager stated that there were no definite arrangements to date, but an update would be provided as soon as possible.

6. SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRE REPORT

RESOLVED:

To accept the report

The Democracy Team Leader presented the report. She explained that the satisfaction survey had been sent to all members in April, and they had until June to respond to the survey. She explained that the survey contained a range of questions covering the work of the team, future developments, the members' views on future committee arrangements. 38 responses had been received, which was over half the members.

She noted that members were satisfied with the service: 92% had noted Good or Very Good as a response.

Comments were received on the service, and suggestions for developments as follows:-

- Comments regarding the system with the Cabinet, however, it was noted that this system was statutory.
- Requesting more training sessions on time management – they had therefore sent this comment on to the Learning and Development Team.
- Concern had been raised about difficulties in contacting some officers via e-mail.
- Ideas were proposed for extending the tea-break virtual sessions which were already being held for women.
- Requesting further training on Teams and Zoom.
- With regard to future committees, 84% had noted that they were keen to ensure that hybrid committee meetings could be held, with the team noting that they were exploring possible solutions before proceeding to trial options.
- They added that new equipment and material was needed in the chambers to enable this.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:

- A member asked what would happen with the old video conferencing system?
- A member queried if there were plans to obtain the opinions of those who had not completed the survey?
- Members expressed their feeling that virtual committees were good in terms of saving on travelling and costs, however many members noted that they missed attending a normal committee.
- They queried whether any changes could be reviewed after the election in 2022 to see what the new candidates' views are.
- The members thanked the officer for the report

In response the Democracy and Language Services Manager noted:

- The hybrid provision would enable people to join a meeting from the chamber or remotely in their home.
- The Democracy Team Leader added that they could send an e-mail to the members who had not responded to the survey, in order to obtain their opinion on future committee arrangements.
- According to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, members must be given the option to join virtually.

7. PREPARATION FOR 2022 ELECTIONS

RESOLVED:

- a) To accept the report
- b) To approve the general work programme

The Democracy and Language Services Manager presented a paper discussing the main matters being considered in preparation for the 2022 elections, as these matters must be implemented as soon as possible.

The main elements were discussed in detail, including:

Preparation:

- She outlined the main matters being addressed, which included providing comprehensive information to prospective candidates
- She mentioned the project being led by the Elections team that related specifically to schools and encouraging young people to participate in elections, thereby ensuring diversity in democracy.
- She noted that information will be shared as soon as possible regarding the electoral wards.
- The idea of producing a handbook containing the main information for new councillors was discussed.

Information technology provision:

- She explained to the members that they will have the choice of different types of provision in 2022, namely their own provision, or a choice of various devices from the Council.
- In the same vein, she referred to the support and training that would be available together with an information pack for 2022 for new and returning councillors.

Election/results day arrangements:

- The procedure for announcing results was discussed, noting that the service had been commended for its plans during the last election.

Induction and training programme:

- It was explained that there would be welcome days for new and returning members, with sessions beginning soon after the results.
- Because of the current restrictions, it was noted that we need to plan for having members in the chamber and ensuring health and safety as we do this.
- As part of the new training programme there will be a need to secure training for Chairpersons to conduct virtual and hybrid meetings.

During the discussion the following observations were made:

- A member enquired whether they would be returning to counting on the night.
- Concern was expressed about the lack of information to date regarding electoral wards, and that this was unfair to prospective candidates.

- A member enquired how many councillors had resigned and why, in order to see what barriers existed to being a councillor.
- In terms of the IT provision a member expressed that it would be easier to access IT support if everyone had the same device.

In response to these observations:

- It was explained that there would be no change to the current procedure for counting votes, and that the Democracy and Language Services Manager was only discussing the matter of announcing the information.
- She noted that there was research going on in the background to analyse councillors' reasons for resigning.

8. DIVERSITY IN DEMOCRACY

RESOLVED:

To accept the report

The Head of Corporate Support Department gave a foreword, stating that a request had been received from the Welsh Government for all authorities to make a declaration regarding their commitment to ensuring diversity in democracy. He added that the Council was aiming to present the declaration in October together with the work programme, so that there was time to consult with members and officers.

On the tail of this, the Democracy and Language Services Manager noted that a draft plan was being produced, and some actions had now been taken.

During the discussion the following observations were made:

- It was noted that the candidates were elected by the residents of Gwynedd, therefore all the Council could do was encourage diversity. A member added that it was out of the Council's hands as to who was elected in the end, as the electorate tended to elect the person and not their background or gender.
- It was reiterated that it was important that the Council supported whoever stood as a candidate.

In response the Democracy and Language Services Manager noted:

- The Council had a role in creating the environment to allow anyone to stand as a candidate. In addition to this, she stated the need to ensure that the environment was inclusive so that people from all types of backgrounds or gender could stand as a candidate..

9. ACCESS FOR THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

To accept the report and the interim arrangements.

The report by the Head of Legal Services was presented, which explained the arrangements for public access to virtual meetings. The Committee were reminded that public rights had been restricted for a period of time at the start of the Covid pandemic in order to hold virtual meetings. He explained that these regulations had ceased back in May 2021 and that changes had emerged considering this, namely:

- Members and other contributors had a statutory right to attend meetings virtually
- Enabling the public to attend virtual meetings

The Democracy and Language Services Manager elaborated on this by noting that there were arrangements in progress to try to enable hybrid meetings, so that remote attendance at meetings was possible. She added that considerable preparatory work was needed, and the approach would need to be trialled regularly.

During the discussion the following observations were made:

- Members gave thanks for the explanation of the very difficult situation as regards meetings, because of the current restrictions
- A member expressed their opinion that it was not enough for the public to be allowed to merely view the web-cast only, and that it made a difference for the public to be able to be in the same room so that they felt involved in the decision. The member added that if it was a matter affecting society, a member of the public should be present physically, albeit virtually.
- The officers were thanked for the arrangements and the work carried out so that meetings could continue. This gratitude was extended to chairpersons who had adapted to new methods of chairing meetings.

In response the Head of Legal Services and the Democracy and Language Services Manager made the following points:

- It was interim arrangements that had prevented the public from accessing meetings, but those arrangements had now been lifted and the public were now allowed to view and hear deliberations at meetings.
- They had trialled conducting the meeting via a webinar in other committees, and there would be further trialling in the near future, however they had not managed to trial today's committee because of technical difficulties.
- Future arrangements would make it easier for members or the public to attend meetings and committees as there was the option to do so virtually.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 11:55am.

CHAIR

