

GWYNEDD COUNCIL



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council

Date of meeting: 23 June, 2022

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

The Full Council is asked to 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 Democratic Services Committee is responsible for specific matters (under Section 11), as follows:
- Appoint a Head of Democratic Services on behalf of the local authority
 - Review the available support for the Head of the Democratic 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. It also outlines 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. Therefore, I encourage you to contact me or the Chair of the Committee to raise any relevant matters.
- 2.4 I would also like to thank the Chair and all members of the Democracy Services Committee, along with the officers of the Democracy and Language Service for their support during the last year.

2.5 I look forward to collaborating with you all in the future to further develop provision for the Councillors who have joined us for the new term in 2022.

3. ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

3.1 STATUTORY OFFICERS' OBSERVATIONS:

Monitoring Officer:

The report reflects on a period which has been transformative in the context of the Councils democratic processes. As noted the implementation of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 continues this pathway of change. I look forward to continuing to collaborate on these arrangements both locally and regionally.

Statutory Finance Officer:

I believe that the report is a fair reflection of the activities in 2021/22. I have no further comments from the perspective of financial propriety.



THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE
HEAD OF DEMOCRACY
SERVICES
(2021/22)

- 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. I also wish to congratulate you on being elected as Councillors for Gwynedd Council for the new term.

This report reflects on the last year of the previous Council term, 2021-22. It seems that the focus for most of us is on the term ahead, and therefore I have also submitted a brief outline of what will be developed during the new Council term from May 2022 onwards.

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

As we are at the start of the term, I would encourage any Member not to delay in contacting us if you wish to discuss any aspect of the support you need - with me directly, with the Chair of the Democracy Services Committee or any member of the Democracy and Language Service.

2021/22 was a continuation of different and challenging circumstances due to Covid-19 restrictions but I am proud to report that we have succeeded in providing and developing the service during the last year. In 2022/23 the focus will be on ensuring that you as Councillors familiarise yourself with your role and with Council arrangements following the Local Government Elections in May 2022 and also respond to the implications of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

I wish to express my thanks and state my appreciation of all the efforts made during the year by Members and Officers, and I look forward to working with you on further developments during the coming year.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gareth Owen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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

What has happened during 2021/22?

Once again, it is impossible to look back on the previous year without talking about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 restrictions has continued to influence and affect our way of working but it has also created some further opportunities.

Since October 2020 all Council meetings have been held virtually with simultaneous translation provision over Zoom. By now, such meetings are second nature for the Councillors and everyone is familiar with the arrangements. 123 virtual Council committee meetings were held during 2021/22 and 41 informal meetings for Councillors were supported.

In December 2021, the Full Council decided on the long-term arrangements for holding Council committee meetings. Obvious benefits and good practice have emerged from holding virtual meetings, practices that need to be maintained in future. In adopting the arrangements, consideration was given to a number of different factors including

- promoting diversity in democracy by enabling remote access to virtual meetings and responding to the needs of Councillors who work and/or have young families
- contributing positively to reducing the impact of the Climate Crisis by identifying ways of reducing carbon by limiting travelling for councillors and officers
- making wiser use of Councillors and officers' time by removing the need for travel.

In light of the decision to hold formal committee meetings virtually wherever possible and to hold hybrid meetings when there is a high interest from the public, we have been working on amending the facilities in the meeting chambers to enable holding this type of meeting. It has been a challenge to bring these arrangements together, especially while also ensuring that it all happens naturally through the medium of Welsh and enable simultaneous translation. It is easy to forget that all of the development work had to happen within Covid-19 restrictions, as we faced months of guidance for working from home.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Democracy Team and the Translation Team and for the collaboration with IT officers and legal officers to bring all of these arrangements together. A lot of work has been undertaken in the background to enable our hybrid meetings.

I am confident there are arrangements in place for holding these meetings from the beginning of the new Council term for meetings of the Full Council, Cabinet, Planning Committee and Scrutiny Committees. There will be some adjustment work as we proceed, and I am grateful in advance to everyone for their cooperation.

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.
- ✓ Publishing 96% of Committee decision notices electronically within five clear working days following any committee. This enables members of the public to see clearly which decisions were made at every committee and contributes to maintaining open and transparent democracy arrangements.
- ✓ Webcasting 41 Council meetings (note that we did not succeed to webcast all of the committees that were scheduled to be webcast during the time, as we were reliant on the internet connections of individual staff members).
- ✓ Complying 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.
- ✓ Reviewing and developing the training programme for the term of the new Council.

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

Develop arrangements for the May 2022 election and the subsequent period:

Members' Intranet:

The members' intranet is an integral part of arrangements made for you as Councillors and includes very useful information. It has been substantially developed during 2021/22, and the provision is much easier to use and a link has been posted on the desktop device of every Councillor.

Remember to follow the 'Looking after yourself' link that was developed in light of discussions held at the Democracy Services Committee. It offers tips on personal safety, how to sit and protect your back along with mental well-being support. The Members' Intranet will continue to develop over the next period - please contact us if you have any comments on how to improve it.

Diversity in Democracy:

After adopting and publishing the Gwynedd Council Statement on Diversity in Democracy in October 2021, a comprehensive work programme was formed and implemented to seek to encourage more diversity.

Social media campaigns were held in October and January to raise awareness of the upcoming elections and to encourage all members of the public to stand to ensure a diversity of voices are heard. Additionally, 'question and answer' sessions were held for prospective candidates jointly with the Elections Service in March to explain more about the role of Councillors and offer an opportunity for anyone to ask questions. Sessions were held by the Elections Service with young people in schools to raise their awareness of their right to vote.

It is pleasing to see that the demographic within the Chamber has changed, but I recognise there is more work to be done.

Women Councillors

A number of informal sessions were held for women councillors to come together to discuss the problems they face and to give each other support in their role as Councillor (irrespective of the political group). As the feedback has been positive, this support will continue during the next term.

Prepare for the Elections

The main focus over the last year was on preparing for the May 2022 elections and the subsequent period. The focus was on

- arrangements of the results day,
- the welcoming days and
- the Information Sharing and Training Programme for the coming year.

It has been a challenge to seek to develop a sensible programme offering the required information and training in a timely manner, but without overwhelming new Councillors. Once again there was important input from the Democracy Services Committee ensuring that the arrangements came from the Councillors' perspective and not the officers.

2022-23 Priorities

At the beginning of a new term we continue to strive for continuous improvement and we will continue to consult with you as Councillors during the coming year.

Building on this year's developments

The focus this year will be on trying to ensure that you receive the necessary information and training to enable you to achieve and develop within your role. A programme of presentations and training is available for you, but please remember to contact the Learning and Development Team if you wish to receive any further or different training.

We will continue with the informal sessions for Women Councillors and also hold similar sessions for new Councillors - an opportunity for informal discussions, to ask any questions and support each other in your role.

We will also implement the Committee Arrangements Framework and move on to offer hybrid provision for meetings of the Full Council, Cabinet, Planning Committee and Scrutiny Committees. We need to refine our arrangements in this field.

Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

The requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 will come into effect gradually and the details of the requirements continue to be developed. We will need to ensure that we comply with the conditions of the Act, looking in detail at some elements such as:

- webcasting requirements,
- encouraging local people to participate when local government makes decisions,
- a duty to make and publish a petitions plan,
- continuing with the remote access work to ensure that it is possible to facilitate Members to contribute to committees,
- securing an annual review of the individual training requirements of every Councillor,
- reviewing committee starting times,

Regular reports on this element will be submitted to the Governance and Audit Committee to ensure compliance.