

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL SCRUTINY CHAIRS & VICE CHAIRS

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs & Vice Chairs meeting held on Tuesday, 21 March 2023 at 4.00 pm

County Borough Councillors – The following Councillors were present in the Council Chamber:-

Councillor J Edwards (Chair)

The following Councillors were present online:-

Councillor R Bevan Councillor J Bonetto
Councillor J Brencher Councillor S Evans
Councillor G L Warren Councillor G E Williams

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Ms J Nicholls, Democratic Services Officer
Mrs S Handy, Members Researcher & Scrutiny Officer
Mrs S Daniel, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Mrs T Watson, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer
Mrs J Daniel, Graduate Engagement Officer

Apologies for absence:-

Councillor C Middle Councillor K Webb

5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

6 ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that the agenda item had been brought to seek the views of Members of the Committee, in respect of the formatting, content and approach of the annual reporting mechanisms. The publication of annual reports from the scrutiny function, was a requirement within the council's constitution, and provided that opportunity for those annual reports, that found their way to full council, to be considered by all Members, as well as an opportunity to highlight the important role that scrutiny played in various matters and subjects, over the course of the municipal year. He continued that as part of the changes to the terms of reference of the Governance and Audit Committee, the annual Overview and Scrutiny report for the previous year, had recently been considered by this Committee, and would continue to do so, as this was a statutory requirement, and this retrospective report, for the previous municipal year, would also be taken to council, before the AGM. In relation to reporting of the current municipal years activities, the approach taken forward, would provide an overarching report, adopted by the Overview and Scrutiny committee, with forewords on behalf of the individual Chairs, relating to the work, the workstreams and the

actions undertaken by the individual scrutiny committees, forming one scrutiny report, and would be taken forward either at the AGM depending on business, or the first meeting of the new municipal year. The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications clarified the position in respect of the Chair of the PSB, explaining that a report would need to be signed off by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the PSB and this would be reported independently through to, not just this council, but also Merthyr Tydfil Council and, in the future, Bridgend, as part of those discussions as well.

Following consideration by the Committee it was **RESOLVED** to note the formatting, content and approach of the annual reporting mechanisms.

7 UPDATE REPORT

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications began by explaining that the purpose of the report was to provide Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs with a general update in respect of the provisions and support available to scrutiny Members to assist them in undertaking their role, and he would take Members through each heading, providing an explanation, before seeking Members views and opinions.

Scrutiny Chairs Blogs

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that after the 2018 Wales Audit Officer (WAO) Fit for Future report, which identified a number of areas for improvement, in terms of scrutiny arrangements, it recommended improvement to the public's understanding of scrutiny, and the general awareness that scrutiny played. One of the actions, was the development of Scrutiny Chairs' blogs. These were undertaken to good effect, until the pandemic, when resources were shifted to other areas. The blogs did continue during that period, however the focus, frequency and publicity, was potentially lost. He explained that paragraph 3, of the report, highlighted the proposal to re-introduce the blogs, starting with a blog, from the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, and between now and the council's Annual General Meeting (AGM), blogs would be published from Scrutiny Chairs', with a rolling programme of those on a quarterly basis. These would either be drafted by scrutiny officers, with Chair input, or drafted by Chairs', for approval by Members of the Committee.

A Member thought this was a great idea but asked for clarification around frequency of the blogs.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications confirmed this would be done quarterly, with that quarter given over to an individual Chair/Scrutiny Committee. This would be promoted on the council's social media channel as well, whilst encouraging Members to share that blog to ensure the profile of scrutiny, was equal to that of the Cabinet.

A Member asked how the effectiveness of the blogs would be monitored, and whether there was an opportunity to be innovative in some way.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that in terms of being innovative, video blogs would be something to consider, following the initial written blogs, which fitted in with the public engagement and participation strategy, which would be coming forward.

A Members asked if the blogs would be published in the Daily Update.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications confirmed this.

Research Provision / Open Consultations

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that the research provision in place, had been introduced in 2019 as an action arising from the 2018 WAO Fit for Future report, but was now a statutory requirement, and it was pleasant to see post elections, new Members actively using that function. What needed to be done now, was introduce the use of that function more into the scrutiny side of things e.g., scrutiny researcher supporting the proposed 21st Century schools working group.

The Principal Democratic and Scrutiny Officer explained that consultations were circulated to Members, to better capture the relevant consultations for each individual committee, giving Members the opportunity to feed into those, either as a committee or individually.

There were no questions from Members.

Scrutiny Pre-Meetings

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that scrutiny pre-meetings were introduced after the local elections and was an action from the 2018 WAO Fit for Future report but was not supported by Chairs and Vice-Chairs at that point. He explained that the reason for the introduction was consideration of good practice in other local authorities, and to ensure that when a scrutiny committee took place, that the discussion and direction of the meeting was focused, avoided duplication, and parochial questions being asked. These had now been run for a full municipal year, and there were different levels of success, across each individual scrutiny committee. Going forward, there needed to be continued support from scrutiny officers, in terms of the general scrutiny process. He did not feel this was the time to move away from the model, but more needed to be done in terms of supporting Members of those committees, in terms of questioning, information around the subject matter, to ensure there was the maximum opportunity for Members to be able to add value.

A Member highlighted the issues of non-attendance at pre-scrutiny meetings, and asked how the Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications would get through to some of the long-standing Members, who didn't see the benefit in attending.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications acknowledged that there was a job for the service to do, to show that there was value to pre-meetings, which in some cases, hadn't been achieved over the last municipal year, so how to support Members around questioning and providing support for unfamiliar subject matters, in terms of questions. He was very conscious that the WAO would continue to watch the scrutiny arrangements and wouldn't want this to be an area of weakness identified again.

A Member noted that some members were asking questions in the pre-meeting but not in the main meeting, so this was something to discuss. The Member also felt there was a training requirement, if the subject was unfamiliar, to be able to

ask meaningful questions. e.g., a factsheet, infographic, etc.

A Member felt that having a pre-meeting with Officers, was helpful, in terms of preparation.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained that it had been a conscious decision to discontinue officer meetings, as there needed to be that separation, that supported the culture change that needed to take place but understood that Chairs often wanted that greater understanding around a report. In terms of next year's work programme, there was always a section on training, and when Members considered which areas they wanted to look at, could consider what areas Members wanted that better understanding of.

A Member asked if a glossary of terms / acronyms sheet, could be circulated to Members, to explain the terminology.

Cabinet/Scrutiny Engagement

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications explained the last section of the report was in relation to Cabinet Member attendance and what was proposed as part of this model, would be to increase the frequency of Cabinet Member attendance, moving forward. Scrutiny officers would produce the reports that accompanied Cabinet Member attendance, and as part of that, the appropriate scrutiny committee would refer back to the areas, in that preceding period e.g. in the last quarter, what matters had been undertaken, as well as the performance information which, came to the committee, to support Members questioning of that Cabinet Member. He noted that alongside this approach, there would shortly be a change in the way performance information, was presented, which would assist the scrutiny processes, significantly.

A Member was happy with this approach and did feel more visibility was needed from Cabinet Members, in terms of attendance and engagement.

Following consideration on the information contained within the report, by the Committee, it was **RESOLVED** to agree to take forward the Chair's Blogs on the Council website, starting with the Blog of the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the first instance for the 2022/23 Municipal year.

8 MULTI-LOCATION MEETING POLICY

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications advised that this matter had previously been considered by Democratic Services Committee and one of the recommendations arising from that would be consideration by Chairs and Vice-Chairs. This would find its way to the AGM and what it sought to achieve, was to build upon the good practice in terms of the implementation of virtual / hybrid working. There was nothing revolutionary contained within the report, but there were some key changes, to formalise some of those arrangements and the changes could be identified, within the Multi-Location Meeting policy, at Appendix 1, as tracked changes, in red. The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications then highlighted these key changes to Members.

A Member clarified that if a Chair wasn't happy that a Member was attending a meeting from an unsuitable location, that after discussion with the relevant

officer, a Member could be asked to move to a place that was more appropriate.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications agreed that there had been significant discussion around this to ensure that this wasn't just a decision for the Chair, as there could be a perception of political bias, in terms of how that standard was being implemented. It would always be in consultation with himself, or officers from democratic services or legal services, supporting the meeting, to ensure the location the Member was engaging from was professional and confidential.

A Member explained that this had been revolutionary for her and was in agreement in respect of cameras being off, for the Chair to be informed, beforehand. The Member sought clarification whether there were any parameters to say that at least 1 meeting needed to be held as hybrid. The Member also felt it was important that whether a Member attended online or in person, that they were made to feel like an active contributor, and their contribution was valuable and worthwhile, as she wouldn't want anybody however they attended, to think that their contribution was invaluable or wasn't being heard.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications emphasised from an officer's perspective, the service had done its best to go over and above, in terms of ensuring whether a member was engaging online or in the chamber, that their participation was equal, which was the direction of the legislation. In terms of the Chair being online, and participants in the Chamber, it was difficult to achieve, with the current technology, but that technology was catching up, and he was confident that in the medium-term appropriate technology could be introduced. He recognised that it suited Members of Education to be online, and there had been no criticism of that and there was always the statutory requirement to survey Members annually, in terms of attendance at meetings, which would be done shortly.

A Member noted that it was useful to have a digital option, but for important meetings and full Council, she would make every effort to attend in person.

Following consideration by the Committee it was **RESOLVED** to note the Council's Multi-Location Meeting policy (as set out in Appendix 1) prior to its consideration by Council.

9 URGENT BUSINESS

None

This meeting closed at 4.50 pm

**CIlr J Edwards
Chair**