



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held on Monday, 27 September 2021 at 5.00 pm.

County Borough Councillors - Democratic Services Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor L Hooper (Chair)

Councillor M Webber	Councillor M Adams
Councillor J Bonetto	Councillor J Brencher
Councillor G Caple	Councillor J Edwards
Councillor H Fychan	Councillor S Rees
Councillor E Stephens	Councillor G Jones
Councillor W Jones	Councillor S Powderhill

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication

19 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct the following personal and non-prejudicial declarations of interest were made in relation to Agenda item 4:

- County Borough Councillor S Powderhill – 'I am a Town Councillor'
- County Borough Councillor J Brencher - 'I am a Town Councillor'
- County Borough Councillor H Fychan - 'I am a Town Councillor'
- County Borough Councillor J Bonetto - 'I am a Community Councillor'

20 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 6th September 2021 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

21 SUFFICIENCY OF RESOURCES REPORT - STATUTORY 'OPINION' OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

The Head of Democratic Services referred Members to his report which looked to confirm to Members the provision of staff, resources, and accommodation available to support Members in their role as required within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011.

Members were provided with a detailed overview of the work of the Council Business Unit which supports all Elected Members, including the future challenges presented to the Unit through the new ways of working

identified through the Local Government & Elections Act 2021, with particular reference to the statutory required hybrid and webcasting of meetings.

The Head of Democratic Services positively advised of the recruitment of an apprentice within the Unit to take forward the webcasting provision and the recent creation of an additional role within the Unit to strengthen capacity and resources moving forward. Members were advised that this role was currently out to advert and it was anticipated that the recruitment of this additional GR10 role would support the delivery of the Units service responsibilities over future months, especially in light of the forthcoming Local Government Elections and would enhance the Units ability to maintain the momentum of improvement achieved over the last three years.

Members were advised of the recent resignation of a long standing member of staff and also the temporary reduction in staffing over the next few months in relation to maternity absences. In light of these vacancies Members were advised of the positive internal recruitment undertaken, which provides the opportunity for the successful officer to develop their skills going forward and promotes the 'growing of own talent' within the service. In addition two temporary GR8 roles had also been created and Members were advised that successful recruitment to these temporary posts had been secured using the talent pool of the Council through the Council's graduate scheme.

Going forward, Members were advised that through the good practices performed by the Council, the Head of Democratic Services had been approached by the Programme Director of Cardiff Capital Region City Deal to provide support and guidance to their Committee functions. Funding would be made available by City Deal to provide such administration and discussions in respect of this support arrangements were still ongoing.

The Head of Democratic Services continued his overview by providing Members with an update in relation to accommodation, although stressed the need to reflect on the best arrangements for members and Officers of the Council Business Unit - post Covid-19 - to build upon agile working and the progress made with virtual meeting arrangements over the last eighteen months.

Details of digital support and Member's training were also provided within the report which provided a positive position in respect of support available.

The Head of Democratic Services concluded his report by advising that in his opinion, with the additional resources recently acquired to the Council Business Unit, he was of the view that there would be sufficient resilience within the Council Business Unit to continue supporting non-executive Members, without compromising the level of service provided.

The Chair thanked the Head of Democratic Services for his comprehensive report and welcomed Members comments on the resources available to Members.

The Vice Chair took the opportunity to thank the staff of the Council Business Unit for their support during the pandemic, supporting Members to undertake their role confidently through virtual working and also took the opportunity to congratulate Mrs Jessica Daniels for her successful promotion within the team. The Vice Chair spoke of her concerns with the loss of valuable staff for an interim period as a result of maternity leave at a crucial time with the forthcoming local elections and suggested that a further report on the support provision be made available to Members following the election.

One Member of the Committee commented on the new virtual way of working and suggested consideration be taken forward for the provision of dedicated safe spaces within areas across the County Borough for Members to utilise rather than Members having to travel to Clydach Vale. The Head of Democratic Services welcomed the idea and spoke of the potential use of identified key locations across the County Borough and suggested that a future report on this item be brought back to Committee for consideration.

Members spoke of the lead in time for the newly appointed staff members and took the opportunity to speak highly of the support provided by staff members within the Council Business Unit. The Head of Democratic Services acknowledged the tight timescales and spoke of the acting up arrangements that would also be taken forward to ensure the provision of support to Members and to help develop staff within the Unit.

Following discussions it was **RESOLVED**

- (i) To note the overall support available to elected Members, as set out within the report and the approaches be taken forward;
- (ii) To support the view of the Head of Democratic Services, as set out within the report; and agree that the proposed restructure advised upon within the report, the future levels of staff, accommodation and other resources are adequate at the present time and that a further report be presented to this Committee by the Head of Democratic Services on the sufficiency of resources for Members' support following the Local Government Election in May 2022.
- (iii) That a report in relation to identified key locations for Members to utilise across the County Borough is brought to a future meeting of the Committee

The Head of Democratic Services provided the Committee with an overview of the support provided to the Town and Community Councils within RCT, through the Council Business Unit as supported by the Community Liaison Committee. In his report, Members were reminded of the creation of the Community Liaison Committee, The Charter and the invaluable single point of contact support for each of the councils via the Council Business Unit. Details of regular clerks meetings and Community Liaison Committee meetings were provide as well as the provision and accessibility to Council led Training opportunities.

The Head of Democratic Services informed Members that recently the Council Business Unit had provided further support and assistance to the Councils to assist them with the virtual working arrangements as introduced through the Covid pandemic and further support has been provided to assist in meeting the requirements of the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 in respect of holding hybrid meetings. Through the Councils bid to the Welsh Government digital democracy fund, access to funding to implement hybrid meetings was also provided.

The Chair commented on the support provided and its importance as the Community and Town Councils were the grass routes of the community, endorsing the positive working relationship which was gratefully received by the Town & Community Councils, which was echoed by numerous Members of the Committee who also served as Community and Town Councillors.

The Vice Chair, in her capacity as Chair of the Community Liaison Committee spoke of the productive working relationship now established and provided examples of such positive working and the sharing of good practices.

Members of the Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To note the updates provided within the report and the support provided to Community and Town Council through the Community Liaison Committee and the Council Business Unit;

23 DIGITAL DEMOCRACY FUND UPDATE

Through his report the Head of Democratic Services provided Members with details of the Welsh Government Digital Democracy Fund, and the successful 3 bids taken forward by RCT.

Members were reminded that to enable the Council to undertake the new and statutory required approach to meetings, a new webcasting system had been procured, which had been funded through the Council's 2020/21 Budget, following support provided previously by the Democratic Services Committee. Additional funding has also been sought from Welsh Government in respect of further advancements with webcasting equipment through the Digital Democracy Fund.

Members were provided with the details of the 3 bids submitted, the rationale for each of the bids and the progress to date in respect of each of the projects taken forward resulting from the successful funding received.

In respect of Bid 1, Members were advised of additional funding secured to further the webcasting and hybrid provision so that the Council's 'Committee Room 1' could be utilised as a further meeting room with such built in technology. It is believed that often smaller Committee room settings blend themselves better to some of the discussions taken forward in respect of Scrutiny and smaller committees. Work is currently undergoing with Public in respect of the equipment needed to facilitate such meetings. In addition a speaker management system has also been procured for the Council Chamber to assist the Chair in the smooth running of hybrid meetings within the Council Chamber. This is seen as a welcome investment to help and support Committee Chairs in the important role that they play.

Bid 2 concentrated on the development of an online voting system, again to support Members through the hybrid meeting approach to Members. The introduction of such a system would ensure accessibility and equality without any discrimination for those outside of the Council Chamber.

Members were advised that since the application for the bid further work had been undertaken in respect of voting arrangements. Possibilities include using the bilingual voting app within the Modern Gov system which is utilised by Members to view Committee papers, the use of 'polls' within the zoom platform, using the public I voting system within the Council Chamber and of course the current system of a Committee roll call. It was advised that the Head of Democratic Services will be working with Members of the Democratic Services Committee and Group Leaders to discuss the best approach to take in respect of these developments.

The final bid related to the support and provision that could be provided to Town and Community Council's to assist them in their roll out of hybrid meetings as required by the Local Government & Elections Act 2021.

It was advised that the Council has already supported one of the Councils Community Councils by providing digital advice and support at their first hybrid meeting, reviewing the arrangements in place and producing digital options for consideration, which was discussed at a meeting of the Clerks on the 27th July. Each Community Council was asked to consider their requirements going forward as to how the Council could best support them digitally. Since then each Community Council has come forward with requests for support packages to be in place which the Council Business Unit are currently processing with a view to splitting the funds equally between each of the Councils signed up to the Charter, and then compliment this with corporate IT support over the coming year to facilitate practical implementation.

The Head of Democratic Services concluded his report by advising that although the funding was well received, it should be noted that this was one off funding and further funding arrangements in relation to some of the projects would need to be considered for sustainability of the projects.

The Chair thanked the Head of Democratic Services for submission of the successful bids and the work undertaken to achieve success with 3 bids, which the Head of Democratic Services advised was not witnessed in other Authorities.

Other Members of the Committee commented on the excellent new facilities within the Council Chamber which they felt further promoted the welsh language through the bilingual opportunities provided for and spoke of the benefits of the hybrid system, allowing flexibility for Members. A query was raised in respect of the ongoing cost of the webcasting provision and the Head of Democratic Services confirmed that the one off funding received through the digital democracy fund and the Council' base budget was utilised for initial procurement and installation of the system but did not cover future annual costings.

Following discussions, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. To acknowledge the advancements made with webcasting and hybrid meetings by the Council and the future use of the digital democracy fund to assist in these advancements
2. To acknowledge the support provided to Community and Town Councils with the roll out of hybrid meetings.

24 DIVERSITY IN DEMOCRACY WORKING GROUP

The Head of Democratic Services provided Members with an update in respect of the recent meeting of the Diversity in Democracy Working Group which was held on the 9th September, where Members of the Group considered the following items:

- Representation and a PowerPoint presentation from Race Alliance Wales
- Analysis of the Youth Engagement Campaign undertaken by the Council
- Members Survey
- Monitoring of the Working Groups Recommendations – Implementation Plan
- Future working

Members were advised that due to time implications associated with its work and the positive impact any future recommendations may have on attracting new candidates to becoming a Councillor and the wider diversity campaign, any recommendation put forward by the group would be reported to Committee, rather than presented at final report stage. It was also advised that going forward, the Working Group will concentrate on educating and information sharing and positive development of

policies and action plans such as the Council's Race Equality Action plan. Members will also receive representatives from the 50:50 campaign and Stonewall.

Member's attention was drawn to a draft Memorandum of Understanding, which was a recommendation of the working group in its interim report. The Head of Democratic Services explained that the intended outcome of the statement would be a demonstration of mutual respect to other people with varying political opinions and a show of working together for the benefit of its communities.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the report and the work undertaken by the working group and support officers and welcomed the Memorandum of Understanding and the suggested way forward which was echoed by the Vice Chair and the need for mutual respect between Elected Members.

The Chair of the Working Group commented on the future intentions of the working group and the need to look at 'real life experiences' to the barriers of diversity in democracy.

One member queried whether a definition for 'bullying' could be included within the Memorandum to avoid any ambiguity to which Members of the Committee agreed.

Following discussions, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. To note the areas of discussion taken forward at the meeting of the Diversity Working Group on the 9th September;
2. Approve the resulting recommendations arising out of the meeting as outlined within the report and to allow for these recommendations to be implemented in a timely manner.
3. That the draft 'Memorandum of Understanding' attached as appendix A be presented to the Council's Standards Committee for further comment and endorsement before presentation back to the Democratic Services Committee, subject to the inclusion of a definition of the term 'bullying' being included within.

25 MEMBERS TRAINING

The Head of Democratic Services provided the Committee with an update in respect of the training opportunities that had been made available to Members over the last few months and the active offers of training to be taken forward for Member's consideration.

Members were advised of training opportunities provided following requests through Members PDR processes, requests at Committee and general requests put forward to the Council Business Unit, as well as training opportunities recognised by the Head of Democratic Services.

Recent training had been undertaken in respect of Pre-Retirement

sessions, Refresher training for Scrutiny, Planning & Development and Licensing Committee members following the AGM, which will be taken forward on an annual basis.

Members were advised that Emergency Planning 'interactive training sessions' had been scheduled with the intention for these sessions to take forward interactive sessions to discuss proactive approaches to any emergency within the County Borough.

Further training was being arranged in respect of the subject areas Members Health & Wellbeing, Unconscious bias, Scrutiny Training to Joint Scrutiny Committee Members and virtual bitesize training sessions in respect of the Code of Conduct.

Positive advancements in training opportunities included work being undertaken to offer Members with ICT Bitesize courses, usage of the RCT Source and promotion of welsh language courses to all Members.

The Head of Democratic Services advised of the recent introduction of evaluation forms following such training, to assist the Unit in assessing the training delivered although it was advised that a poor return to such forms had been received.

The Chair and Vice Chair acknowledge the increased training opportunities provided to Members, which assisted Members in their role. The Vice Chair welcomed the opportunities available for all Members to utilise and commented on the flexible approach needed to be undertaken with the delivery of training.

Following discussions, it was **RESOLVED**

1. To acknowledge the training provided to Members since the Council AGM
2. To note the forthcoming training opportunities made available to Members

This meeting closed at 6.00 pm

**CLLR L HOOPER
CHAIR.**