

Democratic Services Committee Annual Report 2022-2023



RHONDDA CYNON TAF



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Cllr W Jones

FOREWORD

Chair of the Democratic Services Committee

It was my privilege to take forward the role as Chair of the Democratic Services Committee through this important inaugural year for the Committee, following the Local Government Elections in May 2022. The election welcomed 35 new Members within the Council and the role of this Committee has been more important than ever, to ensure that we support all new and returning Members to undertake their role. The work and support of the Council Business Unit should not go unnoticed through the Member Induction Programme and beyond, with the support and advice, training and the provision of technology to assist members. This appreciation was clearly visible through the results of the Members Survey results and our thanks go to the Head of Democratic Services and the dedicated team who continue to go over and above to support all elected members.

As a committee we have welcomed the work undertaken to establish a suitable voting system for Members to take forward at Committee and appreciate the review of numerous options to try and take forward an option that works best for us as a Council as we proactively take forward hybrid meetings across the Committee structure. Linked with this is the importance of establishing a robust policy for hybrid meetings and the Committee provided positive challenge and comment on the draft Multi Location Meeting policy, which will now work its way through to Council for endorsement.

We have embraced a fresh forward-looking approach as a committee, being fortunate to build upon the strong foundations of the previous Committee and its former Chairs. We continue to champion areas previously progressed, in particular the diversity and equality agenda that the former Committee passionately highlighted through its working group arrangements, which has made a positive difference to the diversity of the Council.

As a new Committee Membership there are many areas and opportunities we have committed to take forward over the next

Municipal Year to ensure that each and every Member is given the best opportunity to deliver for their residents and will look to produce a robust work programme in the new municipal year to achieve this aim. In particular, we look forward to the review of the Member training program and its delivery following the successful Personal Development Review process that has been undertaken by the Head of Democratic Services and his senior colleagues.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank my Vice Chair, Councillor M Webber for her invaluable support and advice during my first year as Chair of the Committee and to each of the Members for their attendance, input and positive challenge brought to each and every meeting.

I would also like to place on record my thanks for continued corporate resources identified to support the improvements agendas being taken forward by the Democratic Services Team.

**County Borough Councillor W Jones
Chair.**

Members Of The Democratic Services Committee



Councillor W Jones
Chair



Councillor M Webber
Vice Chair



Councillor L Addiscott



Cllr J. Bonetto



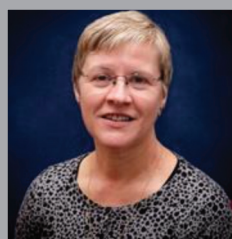
Councillor S J Davies



Councillor A J Ellis



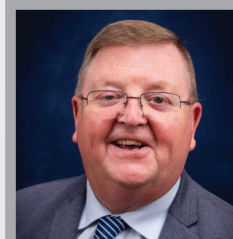
Councillor R Evans



Councillor P Evans



Councillor S Hickman



Councillor G Jones



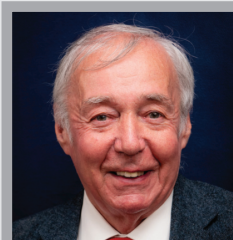
Councillor S Morgans



Councillor S Powderhill



Councillor C Preedy



Councillor B Stephens



Councillor S Trask



Councillor J Turner



Councillor K Webb

Member Induction Program and Training

The Member Induction Programme saw the most extensive programme of training to newly elected and returning Members, over and above the prescribed mandatory training requirements. During the course of the first municipal year, further general and bespoke sessions were delivered both externally and internally. In addition, Members were provided with a Member Induction Booklet and training literature and of course the provision of electronic devices such as laptops and mobile phones to assist them in undertaking their role and training.

The training sessions were undertaken both virtually and through the hybrid approach and at various times to accommodate Members with their personal and business commitments. Where Members were unable to attend, individual 1-1 sessions were arranged. The provision of training on a group-by-group basis was also positively received.

The Democratic Services Committee is responsible for the training and development opportunities provided to Members by the Council Business Unit. Therefore the Committee were keen to review the Members Survey to establish the feedback from Members in respect of the Induction programme to ascertain the relevance/length/content of the sessions and where, if any, improvements could be made for future induction training programmes. It was pleasing to note that overall, 87% of Members said they were satisfied with the delivery, timings and content of the training. It is appreciated that for a few Members the programme was difficult to accommodate and the Council Business Unit were appreciative of the feedback, to allow them to where possible refine the induction programme for the benefit of future Members.

Going forward, it is important to build on the training foundations of the Induction Programme to ensure Members are further equipped with the skills and further knowledge base to undertake their role and the Committee have supported the Personal Development Review Process undertaken by the Head of Democratic Services, providing Members with the opportunity to take forward private discussions to establish any additional training needs and also the opportunity to discuss general wellbeing, which as a Committee, we feel is just as important.

A report outlining the training programme going forward for the 2023/24 Municipal Year was considered by the Committee during its April meeting, with training to be taken forward on a number of different settings, through political group settings, Committee settings and one to one training and the Committee welcomed the refresher training to be provided following the Council Annual General Meeting. A specific training programme is already in place for Members of the Audit and Governance Committee and with many of our Committees, Members MUST undertake initial training before taking forward their place on a Committee Membership.

Members are reminded that any training requests can be brought forward either through requests by Committee's, individual requests direct to the Head of Democratic Services or through political group requests.

Resources

At its meeting in February the Committee were presented with the Head of Democratic Services statutorily required opinion in respect of the sufficiency of resources available to support Members in their role.

Members were provided with detailed information surrounding staffing levels, accommodation, training and digital support, all key areas for Members.

Through the report Members welcomed back 3 Members of staff from maternity leave, passed on their thanks and best wishes to one team member who had secured employment elsewhere and provided thanks to the Head of Democratic Services, The Council Business Unit and officers from within ICT for their continued support and assistance, with particular reference to the Member Induction programme. Members were advised how the good working practices of the Council Business Unit were recognised by other organisations, with the unit taking forward support to the Central South Consortium and taking forward the Joint Scrutiny arrangements for both the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cardiff City Deal Region Scrutiny Committee.

Members were made aware of the changes to the office accommodation setting within the Council Offices, and committee were supportive of the approach being taken, and the direction of travel being set by the Head of Democratic Services in terms of evolving the provision to respond to new virtual ways of working. Members were mindful that the Council were currently out of compliance with the current requirements of the Advance Level Charter in respect of Member meeting room requirements as a result, although Members welcome the involvement of the Head of Democratic Services in shaping the revised national Charter requirements currently being reviewed.

Members were supportive of the digital provisions that had been made available to Members and the Head of Democratic Services re-emphasised the importance of security of Member devices following recent phishing attacks on the Council, with particular aim to Elected Members, hence the importance that Members should use whenever possible Council devices to undertake Council business.

Hybrid / Webcasting

The Democratic Services Committee have been heavily involved in the implementation and roll out of the webcasting system since initial discussions in 2019 and it is pleasing to see so many of the Council's Committees being webcast and live streamed with Members choosing to attend meetings either via attendance at the Council Chamber or through the zoom platform. The webcasting infrastructure has assisted the Council in its proactive approach to hybrid meetings, with the facilities also being used by the WLGA to host its AGM and by the Public I User group, the Council's webcast provider.

The live streaming / webcasting of meetings is a further approach to engaging with the public, allowing members of the public to watch meetings as they happen from their own setting, rather than having to attend the Council Chamber, which has previously been recognised as a barrier for public participation. Other benefits achieved through webcasting include:

- A positive demonstration of accountability and transparency;
- Encouraging engagement and debate, by creating more opportunities for the public to access meetings;
- Accuracy of recording of meetings including recording of decisions, voting and attendance;
- The opportunity to raise the profile of the work of Councillors, and the discussions behind the decisions of Council and its committees.
- Assists in supporting our paper light approaches to meetings moving forward as some facilities in the Council chamber are currently inhibiting the role-out of a paper-light approach.

Hybrid Meetings conducted since Council AGM 2022 – April 2023

Committee Meeting	No of Meetings	All Views	Live Views	Archive Views	Times Shared
Council	12	2,739	411	2,328	26
Cabinet	13	3,396	288	3,108	3
Democratic Services	2	65	9	56	0
Scrutiny	18	988	106	882	10
Planning & Development	17	3,359	745	2,614	7

The Committee recognise that although the webcast views are healthy and are higher than any physical attendance by the public at meetings, still further needs to be done to increase public participation within democracy and the Committee welcome the Public Participation Strategy that the Council will be taking forward, as required by the Local Government & Elections Act (Wales) 2021.

The hybrid approach to meetings is well established within the Council and the Committee considered the Draft Multi Location Meeting Policy at its meeting in February, where Members constructively challenged the policy to ensure that it created a meeting environment that was suitable for all. Members recognised the importance to establishing the policy, including the conduct of Members through hybrid meetings and refining of meetings that would be held as Hybrid or purely virtual.

Going forward with the digital advancements available the Council Business Unit are reviewing the various virtual meeting platforms available to ensure value for money, security and professionalism of meetings.

Voting Arrangements

At its meeting in September, the Democratic Services Committee undertook a pilot of a digital voting arrangement through the Civica Modern.Gov system, a system utilised by the Council to access Committee papers.

Voting through the Modern.Gov in-app voting feature would support both physical attendance and remote attendance with simple, secure and transparent voting functionality through a paperless application. The application provides the opportunity for the Democratic Services team to Pre-submit votes and ad-hoc voting on agenda items for hybrid or virtual meetings. In addition, the app also manages attendance, the entire voting process, vote re-runs and casting votes, provide a suite of additional information, which is publicly accessible.

Utilising the Mod Gov App, Members' attendance will continue to be recorded alongside their respective profiles on the Council website with the addition of voting results which will be captured under their 'Voting Record'. This process will ensure accountability and transparency where voting has taken place and a clear record of Members' decisions.

Although Members were supportive of the voting app and taking forward a phased roll out approach (following thorough training provision), advancements have been made in the digital market with other hybrid voting arrangements being developed which the Head of Democratic Services is scoping to ensure that the Council take forward the most appropriate voting arrangement.

Timely Updates in respect of voting arrangements are to be provided to the Committee.

Members Portal

During the Member Induction process, Members were provided with training on the Members Portal, a web based portal which it was hoped would allow Members greater flexibility and access to undertake their Elected Member role. The system currently allows Members to submit questions to Council, completion of Declaration of Interest at Meetings and to submit a Call In. It is the intention that all training materials will be available on the Portal for Members future reference. The Portal is a developing system and it is proposed that it will, in time, provide statistical information, compiled from the Council's customer reporting system ('The CRM'). Information on reported matters, such as dog fouling or pot-holes, will be compiled on a ward by ward basis, alongside information on the resolution of these complaints. The portal will also provide information on the latest business of the council being considered and matters such as planning applications which relate to the respective Members electoral division.

The current status of the Portal was considered by the Democratic Services Committee during February and it was discussed how the Portal in its current form needed to be reviewed to ensure it provided the intended platform that was envisaged. Volunteer Members of the Committee have therefore taken forward the role as 'Member Portal Champions' and are working with Council Business Officers in respect of developments to the system and have already identified a number of advancements which would improve the users use of the system as well as amendments to the look and feel of the Portal, to make it more aesthetically pleasing. The submission of Member Expenses will shortly be made available on the system as well as key contacts, training materials and inclusion of a well-being section. The Member Portal Champions will take forward tests on the system following the developments prior to a further roll out to all Members. It will be the intention that the portal is reviewed on a regular basis by the Member Portal Champions to ensure it continues to be an important and useful aid to Members in undertaking their role, so that the Portal becomes the 'go to place' for all Members when wanting to access information / report problems and get involved in the democratic process.

Members Safety & Security

The Role of an Elected Member is integral to the running of the Council and as such an important role of an Elected Member is to keep in touch with their residents and communities, which includes communication via telephone, email, social media, virtual meetings and face to face contact with constituents, for example, by holding ward surgeries, making visits to people's homes, or when receiving people at their own homes.

It was therefore important that as a Committee, we reviewed the safety and security arrangements in place to ensure Members feel safe and secure in undertaking their role. Due to the new ways of virtual working and the use of digital devices, it isn't surprising that there has been an increase in the cyber attacks against the Council.

As a Council we have been subject to a large number of cyber phishing attacks and as Elected Members details are more easily sourced due to the nature of the role undertaken and the contact details available on public facing websites, Elected Members have been at the centre of some of these attacks. It is important that as Members, whenever possible, we limit use to trusted Council digital devices which allows access to emails, teams and Council systems to Members, whilst Members are safe in the knowledge that this access is trusted.

Members on Council provided devices are more protected from such attacks, and also cannot be impersonated as they are protected by the Council's cyber security technologies. For the reasons mentioned above, Members will now only be able to access Council emails from a Council digital device. It is for this reason that all Members, by default, were provided with the provision of a mobile telephone from the local elections in May 2022.

Online abuse is also on the increase, as social media platforms are one of the main channels of communication. The social media training provided at the Member Induction programme was therefore of vital importance to help Members interact safely and confidently with constituents and residents of the County Borough. Members are reminded that access to such training can always be made available to help Members feel more confident in dealing with difficult and persistent messages.

A range of safety provisions available to Members were outlined at the Democratic Services Committee in April and it is important to recognise the effects on Members wellbeing, when a victim of any personal or cyber attack, which is discussed in the next section.

Members Wellbeing

The welfare and mental health of Members is crucially important and Members need to be aware of the support that is available to them if they wish to utilise through the Council's Occupational Health service.

Members are reminded of the support arrangements available to them, through informal and private discussions with the Head of Democratic Services, opportunities to utilise the Council's Occupational Health team and referral through the self referral Care First program

(<http://www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk>).

The Committee supported the return of the Coffee Catch Up session, an opportunity to allow all Members to come together in an informal environment to network and catch up in person, which is sometimes missed through the hybrid / virtual approach to meetings. Although the latest session was hampered by the adverse weather, it was lovely to see Members from all political parties coming together and the Council Business Unit, with the support of this Committee will look forward to taking forward more of these opportunities over the next Municipal Year.

Looking Ahead

As a Committee and through our Member Portal Champions we will continue to develop the Members Portal to ensure Members can easily access and obtain information, engage in the democratic process and report problems on behalf of constituents. This 'one stop shop' will hopefully assist Members going forward.

In addition to the above it important that we continue to monitor Member's training. For both returning and new Members, training provides many opportunities and helps Members become even more confident in their roles. It is appreciated that for New Members, the induction process involved lots of new and key information, so it is important that we continue to build on this knowledge base going forward. We need to make sure that we have done all that is possible to make any Member, newly elected or long standing, easier by providing them with the information and support necessary to equip them in undertaking the positive and rewarding role of a Councillor.

We will continue to strive to make improvements in the democratic process and a transparent voting system will help improve accountability. This combined with a focus on public participation in the democratic process will further improve and enhance the decision-making process within the Council. We will therefore monitor the implementation of the Public Participation Strategy as part of our on going work and the ongoing commitment to hybrid meeting arrangements, as outlined within the Councils Multi Location Meeting Policy.

Appendix - Terms of Reference for the Democratic Services Committee

- Carry out the local authority's function of designating the Head of Democratic Services;
- Keep under review the provision of staff, accommodation and other resources made available to the Head of Democratic Services, in order to ensure that it is adequate for the responsibilities of the post;
- Make reports to the full Council in relation to these matters;
- The Democratic Services Committee may require Members and officers of the Council to attend before it to answer questions such Members and Officers having a duty to comply with but are not obliged to answer any questions which they would be entitled to refuse to answer in court proceedings in England and Wales. The Democratic Services Committee may invite other persons to attend meetings of the Committee;
- The Democratic Services Committee must meet at least once in every calendar year.
- The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee must secure that meetings are held in accordance with the requirements set out in these terms of reference;
- The Democratic Services Committee must consider any report or recommendation sent to its Members any report prepared by the Head of Democratic Services under Section 9(1)(h) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 at a meeting held not more than three months after copies of the report are first sent to Members of the Committee;
- The Democratic Services Committee must as soon as practicable after it has prepared a report or made a recommendation under Section 11(1)(c) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 arrange for a copy of it to be sent to each Member of the Council who is not a Member of the Committee;
- The Democratic Services Committee will have overall responsibility for deciding what should be regarded as reasonable training and development opportunities as part of its function of providing support to Members to carry out their functions. In addition to the list set out below, the Democratic Services Committee may add some policy areas for which training is considered essential, such as planning or licensing:
 - Induction
 - Role and functions of the Executive, the Council and its Officers
 - Overview and Scrutiny
 - Information Technology
 - Code of Conduct
 - The role of a Councillor as a local Member
 - Public Engagement
 - Equality and Diversity training
- The agreed training and development opportunities will be contained within a published development strategy; The WLGA's Charter for Member Support and Development ("the Charter") will be used for guidance purposes in maintaining the award of the "Advanced Charter";
- The Democratic Services Committee will propose the appropriate level of funding to be made available for the purchase of external training, should there be the case that the reasonable training and development needs of the Council cannot be met in-house.