



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

11th SEPTEMBER 2023

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

INFORMATION REPORT - MEMBER'S SUPPORT

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with a general overview of the support arrangements available to Members from the Council Business Unit.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Democratic Services Committee:
- (i) Consider the information contained within the report in respect of support arrangements.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The role of an Elected Member can be complex and challenging. Constantly changing priorities and legislation require difficult decisions for which Members need to be well informed. It is therefore essential that Members are equipped and supported to allow them to undertake their role confidently.
- 3.2 During the Annual Member Survey conducted during April 2023, Members were positive in their comments upon the support provided to them by the Council Business Unit. 71% were very satisfied and 24% satisfied of the support. 4% advised that their view on the support was 'unknown' as they felt that they had not utilised the support arrangements.
- 3.3 Members feedback in respect of this question was the lack of awareness of support that was available.
- 3.4 At the Democratic Services Committee on the 5th July 2023, Members considered the Member Survey results and it was resolved that a future report on Member Support Arrangements be brought forward. In addition, information contained within would also be taken forward through a Members Briefing Session.

- 3.5 A Members Briefing Session, open to all Members of the Council is scheduled for the 13th September 2023 at 5pm. Diary markers for the session have been circulated in advance.
- 3.6 The Head of Democratic Services is always keen to improve the service and the experience of Members and always seeks feedback in how services can be improved upon for the benefit of all Members, current and future.

4 HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND THE COUNCIL BUSINESS UNIT

4.1 The Head of Democratic Services (HoDS), which is a statutory required post is taken forward by the Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications.

4.2 The HoDS is responsible for the support arrangements provided to Members, ensuring all Members, regardless of post or political background are provided with the same level of support, training and development. In addition, the HoDS will be responsible for ensuring sufficient office accommodation, resources including staffing levels and facilities are in place to support Members to undertake their role. On an annual basis the HoDS will produce a report to the Democratic Services advising, in his opinion, on the resources and support to Members. The latest report can be considered here.

4.3 Statutory functions of the Head of Democratic Services include:

- Determining the level and range of staff support available to Elected Members.
- Ensuring Members are effectively supported to discharge their committee responsibilities.
- Advising members in respect of the Council's democratic and committee arrangements.
- Ensuring the resources available (i.e. accommodation and technology) are sufficient to allow Members to effectively perform their role.
- Ensuring that appropriate training and development arrangements are in place for all Elected Members.

It is key for the appropriate resources to be made available by the Council to support these important democratic functions.

4.4 Through the HoDS, Members are supported by a team of officers within the Council Business Unit / Member Services. The Unit supports Democratic, Scrutiny, Executive and Regulatory functions and Members' Support Services. In addition, the service leads on two Joint Scrutiny Committees. The service also supports the Council's Mayoralty, the Office of the Leader of the Council, and the Cabinet Office. Support for executive functions do not form part of the statutory responsibilities of the Head of Democratic Services of the Democratic Services Committee.

5 COUNCIL BUSINESS UNIT / MEMBER SERVICES SUPPORT AVAILABLE

COMMITTEE SUPPORT

- 5.1 The Council Business Unit is responsible for developing and supporting effective decision making. The Unit is responsible for the drafting and publication of Committee Agendas, Minutes and Decision Notices for all Committees, not including working groups. Dependent on the Committee and the topic under consideration many of the reports presented to Committee are also drafted by the Unit, which can include the drafting of Committee Annual Reports.
- 5.2 Officers within the Unit work with respective Chairs and Vice Chairs and Committee Members to develop and maintain work programmes , engaging with officers and other organisations for attendance at meetings.
- 5.3 In respect of working groups, Officers will support Members through the drafting of Terms of Reference and drafting of final report of the Working Group, assisting the working group with the production of robust recommendations, for consideration by Cabinet.
- 5.4 In line with the requirements of the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2019, the unit undertakes the support arrangements of hybrid meeting provision. This entails supporting Members through the usage of the equipment in the Council Chamber, attendance through the Zoom platform, (creation of the zoom meeting, sending through of diary markers) ensuring welsh translation are available as and when needed, taking forward the recording of meetings through the webcasting equipment and publishing committee recordings on the Council website and publishing attendance at the meetings.
- 5.5 In respect of Scrutiny Committees the Unit are responsible for supporting Members with their 'pre-meetings', which involves supporting Members with key lines of enquiry when considering the reports before them. Such support improves the effectiveness of scrutiny committees, helping members to prepare questions and assists in organisation of the formal meeting itself, through development of a consensual view regarding the outcomes and objectives of the meeting. The pre-meetings are still being developed with different approaches taken forward to suit the different styles of working of each Committee.

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME – TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES DELIVERED UPON

- 5.6 Following any Local Government Election, or bi-election new and returning Members are provided with an induction programme to assist them in undertaking their role. The induction programme is developed by the Head of Democratic Services. Following the 2022 Local Government Elections a detailed induction programme was taken forward, details of which can be found [here](#).

- 5.7 Going forward, the Head of Democratic Services along with colleagues in the Council Business Unit have identified training support and opportunities through the Member Personal Development Review programme, which was recently undertaken with Elected Members.
- 5.8 A detailed Member Development Programme was produced and approved at the Democratic Services Committee at its meeting in July.
- 5.9 Offices within the Council Business unit under the direction of the Head of Democratic Services are ensuring that the programme is delivered upon, by arranging and facilitating the training.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS

- 5.10 The Head of Democratic Services along with colleagues in the Council Business Unit have undertaken Personal Development Reviews (PDR) for the majority of Members. A Personal Development Review is a way for members and the Council to mutually assess the development needs and aspirations of individual members, through a confidential setting. PDR's are not a performance appraisal of councillors. A PDR is a means of supporting and developing members' skills in areas they themselves consider need improving both individually and collectively. The process also allows opportunity for Members to discuss any other areas of concern and support outside of training.
- 5.11 All individual PDR's have been considered when preparing the Member Training Development Programme, no information from individual councillors is shared outside of the individual review that would identify an individual councillor.
- 5.12 Through the PDR process officers have been keen to stress the importance of acknowledging Members Wellbeing, highlighting the Occupational Health facility available.
- 5.13 Due to the success of the PDR process the Head of Democratic Services has offered to take forward a further 'Catch Up' session with Members to ensure Members are happy with the support and training provided and to allow for a general discussion in respect of a Members wellbeing.

MEMBER CHARTER

- 5.13 Throughout Wales, Councils are striving to provide the best possible support for their Members to enable them to meet the daily challenges faced with the number of roles required of them. Such support takes the form of skill and knowledge development, support facilities and support services.

- 5.14 To provide structure to the national programme of support, the Wales Charter for Member Support and Development was developed collaboratively by the Association, Councillors representing each of the political groups and Democratic Services officers from each Council.
- 5.15 The Charter aimed to provide a broad framework for local planning, self-assessment, action and review together with networking and comparison amongst Councils and the sharing of good and innovative practice. Its wide adoption has raised the overall amount and standard of support given to Councillors in Wales.
- 5.16 Rhondda Cynon Taf Council were one of the first Councils to receive the Charter in 2007. In 2010 the Council went one step further and were awarded the Advanced Charter due to the high level of support provided to Elected Members, which was renewed in 2014.
- 5.17 In addition to the above in 2013 the Council were awarded the Good Practice and Innovation Award. This award highlighted the excellent and innovative practices that the Council took forward with the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit with regard to Elected Member support, which demonstrated that the services and support had demonstrably improved the outcomes for the Council's Elected Members and the Council as a whole. It was established that this ongoing practice was over and above that required for the advanced level of the Wales Charter for Member Support and Development and therefore award winning. ([Council Submission](#))
- 5.18 Assessment for the Charter was a self assessment ([Self Assessment](#)) undertaken by officers within the Council Business Unit and submitted to the WLGA for review and dependant on the outcome of the review the receipt of the award. The Charter was designed to establish that an essential range of support and development arrangements for Councillors were in place.
- 5.19 Assessment for the Advanced Charter was a peer assessment including a site visit undertaken by officers, and member peers from Wales and England. The Advanced Charter was designed to recognise that the arrangements required for the Charter are working effectively.
- 5.20 The current charter requirements are under review following recent legislation changes. Once the Charter requirements are confirmed the Council, through the Head of Democratic Services will look to ensure the support arrangements in place within RCT compliment the Charter requirements.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY AND TOWN COUNCILS

- 5.21 The Council Business Unit support RCT's Town and Community Councils through the Community Liaison Committee and the Community Councils clerks meetings.
- 5.22 Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, along with 11 Community Councils and 1 Town Council have signed up to a shared Charter, following guidance received from Welsh Government.
- 5.23 The Charter was designed to build on existing good practice and embrace the shared principles of openness, to achieve the best possible outcomes for the residents and communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf. The Charter was based on equal partnership encompassing a set of principles by which all will work together.
- 5.24 Through the Charter the Council Business Unit support the Community and Town Council through the following (This list includes but is not limited to):
- (i) Regular clerks meetings and Community Liaison Committee meetings
 - (ii) Access to Training
 - (iii) Support to meet the requirements of the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 in respect of holding hybrid meetings.
 - (iv) Access to funding to implement hybrid meetings
 - (v) Single point of contact support

INFORMATION SHARING

- 5.25 The Head of Democratic Services considers the sharing of information to Members as an integral part of the role of the Council Business Unit, which ensures that all Members receive notification of the publication of all agenda items, Cabinet Decision Notices and the publication of Key Delegated Decisions.
- 5.26 The Unit also provides Members with a daily update providing links to Council news stories as well as latest news and statements from the Welsh Government. In addition, the weekly update provides Members with a list of the week ahead with links to forthcoming meetings as well as sharing of items specific to Members, details of decisions taken forward at meetings and also the inclusion of local events and training opportunities. When important messages need to be provided to Members in an urgent matter the Unit have undertaken messages through the instant notification messaging system. Such messages have been used in respect of inclement weather.

- 5.26 The Council Business Unit are responsible for a number of inboxes such as the Council Business Inbox and Member Services Inbox. When necessary the unit will send additional communications to Members outside of the daily update when important communications need to be taken forward.
- 5.27 The Head of Democratic Services has introduced a fortnightly update to Members in respect of open consultations, to ensure all Members have equal opportunity to take forward their view on an open consultation.
- 5.28 The Council Business Unit is responsible for the updating of information on a number of Council pages on the Council website in respect of Council Business. This includes ensuring Members profile pages are updated to ensure accurate information is available to allow members of the public to contact Elected Members. In addition, details surrounding Member Role Descriptions, Declarations of Interest , privacy notices, training and attendance logs are also updated via the unit.
- 5.29 Processing of petitions delivered to the Council are taken forward by officers within the unit and details of which are published on the Council website. Other webpage content under the management of the unit include Notice of Motion, Becoming a Councillor, Your Cabinet, Work Programmes, Scrutiny, Diversity Declaration (this list is not exhaustive).

MEMBER SERVICES / MEMBER REQUESTS

- 5.30 A large part of a Members role is dealing with queries and concerns from their constituents. It is therefore important that we provide Members with the skills and knowledge to respond to these queries and to provide a mechanism for such responses. The Council Business Unit therefore have the Member Services inbox which Members can use to forward on requests from constituents so that officers within can direct the queries to the relevant departments to seek a resolution to the query. There is also the Member Customer Care hotline that is available for Members to direct queries through to, although this is managed by colleagues in customer care.
- 5.31 With both the Member Services email address and the Member Customer Care pathway, officers will always try to provide a response to Members within an appropriate timescale.
- 5.32 It is appreciated that Members will work differently within each of their wards, dependent on the needs of their constituents. Some Members may find ward surgeries are a helpful tool to engage with their residents, walk throughs of the ward, while others may take forward virtual platforms for engagement. The Council Business unit through Member Services will always look to support Members with any needs they might have with such engagement.
- 5.33 Some Members have produced Ward Newsletters, which Member Services are able to support and assist with the production of such. Members are reminded that such Newsletters should be kept professional and in line with your role as councillor. The Newsletter can be no longer than 2 pages of A4

paper (if taken forward through Member Services for production) and we ask that a reasonable amount of copies are requested, although it is appreciated that this may differ depending on the size of the Members ward. Members are able to utilise this support up to a maximum of 3 times a year.

- 5.34 Members are also able to obtain stationery and other reasonable requirements to assist them in their role, which can be sought through Member Services. Such requests also relate to letterheads and business cards and of course any furniture or equipment provision to allow them to undertake their role from within their homes. If Members need assistance with the set up of any home office equipment the support is available through Member Services and or ICT.
- 5.35 Members are reminded that rooms are also available for them to utilise within the Council Headquarters and this provision will be continued within the new office accommodation in Llys Cadwyn.
- 5.36 It is important that all Members of the Council are afforded the opportunity to receive information to help them undertake their role and to make informed decisions. In recent years the Service has been successful in acquiring and retaining a Research facility dedicated for Members. This facility allows Members to request certain research projects to be undertaken on behalf of a Member, to assist them in Constituent queries or to strengthen their understanding of a subject area. The research provision is currently under utilised by Members and following a review of the facility, work to promote this through a dedicated webpage on the Council website and an area on the Members portal will be explored by the HoDS.

DIGITAL

- 5.37 Through the new ways of working imposed on the Council through the pandemic, and the new statutory required hybrid approaches to meetings, the provision of ICT equipment to Members is now more important than ever.
- 5.38 The Council Business Unit working with colleagues in ICT ensured that post-election, all Members were equipped with a digital device to allow them to undertake their Elected Member role, and to attend Committee meetings via the virtual Zoom platform, with appropriate training provided to each Member through the Council Business Unit and ICT colleagues.
- 5.39 In line with the recommendations of the Independent Review Panel and the decision taken forward by the Democratic Services Committee, Members were also provided with a mobile telephony provision.
- 5.40 The Council Business Unit are always on hand to help any Member with any issue they maybe having of an ICT nature. If the unit are unable to provide assistance in the first instance then the query will be directed to colleagues within ICT.

- 5.41 The unit, along with colleagues in the Digital Skills Team are always happy to take forward any digital training requests by Members.
- 5.42 The unit have been heavily involved in the development of the Members Portal, a dedicated area which Members can access to assist them in their role. The Portal, is a developing system and in its current format has limited functionality although 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. Training on recent developments to the Portal will look to be undertaken to Members in the Autumn by the Unit and through colleagues in the Digital Skills team.
- 5.43 The Head of Democratic is always looking to improve the service for Members and to encompass new ways of working to assist Members. Going forward the Unit will be looking at developing digital voting technology.

MEMBERS WELLBEING / SAFETY

- 5.44 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 should contact the Head of Democratic Services or Officers within the Council Business Unit who can refer a Member to the service.
- 5.45 In addition to the above the Council Business Unit have provided notification through the Council Business Units weekly update of the Care First Lifestyle scheme.
- 5.46 The scheme is available free of charge, offering immediate information, answers and advice on a range of workplace and personal issues. Care First Lifestyle is an online solution provided by Care First. All access is confidential, providing:
- Phone Counselling
 - Online Counselling
 - Advice and Information Specialists
 - Free Advice
- 5.47 If Members require access to the system then it is recommended that Members contact the Council Business Unit who can direct Members as to how to access the system. Going forward it will be the intention to add this information to the Members Portal.

- 5.48 Since the covid pandemic and the provision made available through the Local Government and Elections Act, the hosting of Committee meetings through the hybrid / remote system has provided many benefits including greater flexibility with work / life balance, yet it has also produced a number of unintended consequences, such as Members feeling isolated. It was apparent that the informal, net working discussions by Members in advance of a physical meeting at the Council Chamber has sometimes been lacking.
- 5.49 To try to address this aspect the Council Business Unit have previously conducted virtual coffee mornings, allowing Members the opportunity to come together, chat and share experiences, which we hoped boosted Members wellbeing.
- 5.50 Through the Head of Democratic Services, the Council Business has reintroduced these coffee catch ups, although in a physical setting at the Council Headquarters, which have been well received by Members.

MEMBERS SAFETY

- 5.51 The Role of an Elected Member is integral to the running of the Council and the Council, through its Council Business Unit and in partnership with the Police and Community Safety team have taken forward a number of support provisions to ensure Members personal safety.
- It is important that Elected Members recognise what is unacceptable behaviour. Members throughout their term of office are likely to have to deal with unpleasant or challenging interaction on occasion with residents in their community.
- 5.52 With the rise of usage in social media platforms written and online abuse is another avenue of abuse that Elected Members are potentially subjected to. Whilst most of the aggression councillors experience will usually sit at the 'low to modest' spectrum of unacceptable behaviour, severe abuse can tip into the legal definition of violence even if no physical interaction is involved.
- 5.53 Intimidation affects people differently but can significantly affect an individual's physical and mental health. Intimidation against Elected Members whether in person or through online abuse undermines representative democracy, stifles debate and threatens the integrity of democratic structures. It can also discourage those who may wish to represent their community in being involved in the Council, potentially impairing the diversity and vibrancy of representative democracy.
- 5.54 It is important that if a Member does feel threatened or that they are subject to unacceptable behaviour that they know how to report this behaviour as potentially criminal behaviour. Members are encouraged to contact South Wales Police through the mechanisms previously advised upon and to notify

the Head of Democratic Services or Council's Monitoring Officer to see where we can assist.

- 5.55 The Council Business Unit support Members in respect of safety with social media training detailing how Members should deal with aggressive behaviours, security provision installation at home if necessary, production of lone working policy, removal of Members home address from the Council website. The Unit are currently looking to take forward the stay Safe Phone App, which will be offered to all Members.

6 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council Business Unit provide support for each and every Member regardless of their political grouping. The report encourages the authority to examine the way that business is conducted to ensure the equality of access and involvement of all Councillors.

7. CONSULTATION AND INVOLVEMENT

- 7.1 Members Survey 2023.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 None

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None

10. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 10.1 The work of all Councillors is fundamental to the work of the Council and subsequently the delivery of the Corporate Plan, hence ensuring Members are fully supported in undertaking their roles is important to the work of the Council overall.

- 10.2 Ensuring all Members are supported and have equal access to support and development links to the future generations well-being goals of a more equal Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities.

11. CONCLUSIONS

- 11.1 The report looks to provide an overview of the support arrangements in place for each and every Member.

11.2 Members are reminded that the Head of Democratic Services runs an open door policy and if there were any support arrangements or concerns that Members wished to discuss then Members are able to do so at any point through the Municipal Year

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

SEPTEMBER 2023

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS – none.