

Report of the Head of Democratic Services

26TH NOVEMBER 2021

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES FUNCTION

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Members will be aware of the requirement under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 ("the Measure") for each Local Authority to establish a Democratic Services Committee. The Measure also requires the Council to designate one of its officers to the statutory post of "Head of Democratic Services" and provide that officer with sufficient resources to discharge these statutory functions.

The Head of Democratic Services has a statutory responsibility to organise the discharge of the "democratic services functions" in accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 which includes:- The production of reports, as required, on the number of staff required to support democratic services and how the staff should be organised to ensure the Council, the Cabinet and Committees receive high level support in the discharge of its democratic functions.

Democratic Services Staffing Resources

Staffing resource to support the Democratic Service is split into three distinct teams:-

- a) Committee Support
- b) Civic & Member Support
(both under the management of the Head of Democratic Services)
- c) Cabinet support
(under the management of the Chief Executives' Business Support Manager)

In addition to myself, as Head of Democratic Services, the Democratic team comprises 2 Principal Democratic Services Officers 5 Democratic Services Officers, 1 Assistant Democratic Services Officer, 3 Member Support Officers, an Official Car Driver and 4 casual drivers called upon as and when necessary.

The Democratic team deals with a wide range of activities, which include, but are not limited to:

- Maintaining and developing the Council's decision-making processes to include the preparation of agendas, reports and minutes, facilitating accountability and transparency.
- The Webcasting of all Council and Committee meetings.
- Managing and providing Scrutiny and Committee Services support to the Council and its various Committees.
- Support services to Elected Members, including advice on the Council's Constitution and Members' Code of Conduct, Maintaining the Register of Members' Interests;
- Administer appeals relating to school admissions and school permanent exclusions.
- Servicing and hosting joint working arrangements – i.e. Dyfed Powys Police and Crime Panel, Wales Pension Partnership and the new Education Partnership.
- Servicing Council's arm's length companies i.e. Llesiant Delta Wellbeing Governance Group and CWM Environmental Ltd Shareholders Board.
- Managing internal meetings between Group Leaders, Constitutional Review Group and also Cabinet member meetings with Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs.
- Managing members' constituency casework via a Councillor Enquiry system, processing Councillor expenses and making arrangements for attending conferences and seminars. A new updated Councillor Enquiry process with the facility for members to view logged cases was released earlier in the year.
- Support to the Chair and Vice-Chair of Council in their civic duties.
- Developing and updating the Democracy web pages managing democratic room bookings/

The Chief Executive's Business Support unit supports the work of the Leader and the 9 Cabinet Members and comprises a small team of staff. The Cabinet Support Office provides professional advice, research and information gathering, prepares speeches, and manages day to day correspondence and diary coordination

Key Challenges During the Year

As reported last year, the Covid19 pandemic changed the way the democratic process operated with virtual meetings introduced as a result of legislative changes. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 received Royal Assent on the 20th January 2021, the Act retained a number of aspects of the temporary coronavirus regulations and introduced a number of additional changes to how democracy has and must be managed. A significant piece of work was undertaken, working alongside the Head of Administration and Law and Legal Services Manager to include elements of the Act in the Council Constitution and these were reported to the Annual meeting of Council in May 2021.

The Education (Admission Appeals Arrangements)(Wales)(Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4 May 2020 this give admission authorities, local authorities and appeal panels some additional flexibility when dealing with appeals during the outbreak, and to ensure that appeal timetables worked in light of school closures and allowed Appeal Panels to be held remotely. The team put in place arrangements for Appeals to be held remotely and processed 188 appeals from 01/04/20 to 31/03/21.

Communication with Elected Members - The Team made 2/3 calls per week to members during 'Covid lockdown' allowing member to raise any concerns or ward issues, and feedback so that the Authority's website content could be updated and urgent matters referred up to Gold Command via the Marketing and Media Manager. Whilst calls were scaled down as the situation improved a decision was made to review and refresh the Councillor Enquiry process. Between 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021. 3,464 Councillor Enquiries were processed.

The decision to webcast all public meetings has resulted in a substantial increase in meetings being webcast namely from 50 webcasts a year in 2019/20 to 98 in 2020/21 a significant challenge for the team and our existing resources. It should be noted that we anticipate that the number of meetings webcast during 2021/22 will be approximately 200 as per the current calendar of meetings for the year.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 put in place a legal requirement for local authorities to make and publish arrangements for the purpose of ensuring that local authority meetings are able to be held by means of any equipment or other facility which

(a) enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meetings, and (b) satisfies the conditions in subsection (2).

(2) The conditions are that the equipment or other facility enables persons—

(a) in the case of local authority meetings that do not fall within paragraph (b), to speak to and be heard by each other (whether or not the equipment or facility enables those persons to see and be seen by each other), and

(b) in the case of meetings of a principal council required to be broadcast under section 46 (electronic broadcasts), or any other local authority meetings required to be broadcast by regulations made under that section, to speak to and be heard by each other and to see and be seen by each other.

This means that going forward multi-location meetings (hybrid) will be the norm with members either attending physically in a Council Chamber or remotely via Zoom. In order to achieve this the service successfully obtained Welsh Government Grant funding to procure a multi-location solution for the Chamber in County Hall. The kit was installed in July 2021 and the team has been testing the equipment with Cabinet Members prior to the solution being rolled out. Again, these changes have a direct impact on the workload of Democratic Services as additional resources are required to facilitate a combination of both physical and virtual meetings.

Key Challenges and Priorities for 2022-23

- Introduction of Multi-location meetings which will allow a mix of both physical and remote attendance at Democratic meetings.
- Preparations for the local government elections 2022. A significant piece of work will be to work with the political groups on the politically balanced composition of Committees and membership of Advisory Panels and Outside bodies and to agree design and deliver the induction programme for both new Members and those returned at these elections.
- The number of elected members on the Authority will increase from 74 to 75 members in May and the number of wards will be reduced from 58 to 51, with 22 of those being multi-member wards. These changes will need to be reflected in the Councillor information pages.
- Implementing elements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 which come into force in May 2022 which include : mandatory webcasting of Council meetings; introduction of petition scheme (including e-petitions); a duty to create a public participation strategy that will strengthen public involvement in the Democratic Process; and further development of family absence provisions for elected members; Advertising and appointing a majority of co-opted members to the Authority's Governance and Audit Committee .
- The Authority's current webcasting contract expires in March 2022 and there will be a need to enter into a new agreement taking into account the need for a higher level of hosted content (webcasting hours).

In conclusion, the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and multi-location meetings continues increase the workload of Democratic Services and brings with it continued changes to roles. Having taking into account the extremely difficult (and ongoing) economic pressures facing the Council generally and the need for the Division to continue to identify / deliver / contribute to further savings, the staffing structure, if provided with support from other teams within the department , is considered to be sufficient for current service demands, however this will need to be continually monitored as elements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act come into force.