

Carmarthenshire County Council

Democratic Services Committee

Annual Report 2023-2024



Annual Report

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DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2023/2024

The Democratic Services Committee met three times during the municipal year 2023/2024.

The attached report gives a brief synopsis of the role of the Committee and the work it has undertaken during the year.

I would like to thank Cllr Lewis Davies who Chaired the Committee until my appointment in November 2023 for diligence and leadership.

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the whole Committee for their time, dedication and support during the year, and to the Democratic Services Team for the advice and guidance they have given to Councillors, Statutory Co-opted Members, Officers and the public.

Cllr Michael Cranham

Chair of the Democratic Services Committee

The Committee's Remit

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 requires each County and County Borough Council to establish a Democratic Services Committee and the remit of the Committee is set out in Section 11 of this Measure namely to:

- exercise the function of the Local Authority under section 8(1)(a) (designation of Head of Democratic Services),
- review the adequacy of provision by the Authority of staff, accommodation, and other resources to discharge democratic services functions, and
- make reports and recommendations to the Authority in relation to such provision.

The Council, at its meeting held on the 17th April 2013, agreed to a recommendation of the Democratic Services Committee to include the following additional responsibilities within the Committee's functions/terms of reference:

- To secure the provision of reasonable training and development opportunities for Councillors and prepare reports and recommendations to Council in relation to such provision;
- To appoint the Council's Member Development Champion;
- To be consulted on the implementation of reports issued by the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales in respect of members allowances etc;
- To promote and support good governance by the Council.

The Local Government (Democracy)(Wales) Act 2013 added section 11A which provides that the Democratic Services Committee may, at the request of the Authority, review any matter relevant to:

- (a) the support and advice available to Members of that Authority, and
- (b) the terms and conditions of office of those Members.

Membership of the Democratic Services Committee 2023-24

The membership of the Democratic Services Committee for the period 24th May 2023 – 21st May 2024 comprised of 5 members on a politically balanced basis:

Councillor Michael Cranham (Chair)



Councillor Tyssul Evans (Vice-Chair)



Councillor Russell Sparks



Councillor Fiona Walters



Councillor Philip Warlow



Former members – Councillor Lewis Davies May 2023 – November 2023 and Councillor Hazel Evans – May 2023 – September 2023.

Democratic Services Committee Meetings held during 2023-2024

9th June 2023

7th September 2023

5th December 2023

Attendance by the Members of the Democratic Services Committee

The attendance figures for the formal meeting of the Committee is set out below.

Councillor	Meetings attended
Michael Cranham Committee Member from 8 th November 2023)	1
Lewis Davies (Chair and Committee Member until 4 th September 2023)	1
Hazel Evans (Committee Member until 13 th September 2023)	2
Russell Sparks (Committee Member from 13 th September 2023)	0
Tyssul Evans	3
Fiona Walters	1
Philip Warlow	3
Kim Broom	1 (substitute)

KEY ISSUES AND OUTCOMES 2023 - 2024

During the year the Democratic Services Committee discussed the following reports, and a brief synopsis is included for each topic and includes outcomes as appropriate:

1. Member Enquiry Review

The Committee considered a report on the outcome of a review of the Members enquiries process, undertaken following feedback from elected Members, which had investigated whether the administration and procedures in place were working effectively and whether any improvements could be made.

Outcome:

The Committee agreed to 8 recommendations to improve and modernise the Member Enquiry process.

2. Update on the evaluation of the Member Induction Programme and proposed Annual Development Plan 2023/2024

The Committee received a report on the Member Induction Programme which had been launched on the 18th May 2022 and contained a total of 40 development sessions for both returning and newly elected Members. Members had the opportunity to attend the majority of sessions either remotely via Zoom and/or physically in County Hall, Carmarthen and where some sessions had been recorded these were available via the eLearning Platform at conclusion of the session.

Outcome:

The Committee considered the breakdown of the attendance to each development session and supported holding Focus Groups to obtain member feedback.

3. Councillors' Annual Reports

The Committee considered a draft template for completing Councillors' Annual Reports.

Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 Local Authorities must provide facilities for Councillors to produce and publish an annual report and publicise the fact that Councillors were expected to produce annual reports of their activities. Annual reports were

not however mandatory, and it was a personal matter for Councillors whether they wished to publish an Annual Report.

The report template, as approved was circulated to all Members. Those Elected Members who wished to produce an Annual Report could then complete an initial draft of their report for the municipal year.

Outcome:

The Committee approved the template report, and a copy was provided to each Member for completion, should they wish to do so.

4. The Jo Cox Commission on Civility

The Committee considered a report which summarised the Jo Cox Commission on Civility's progress in raising awareness of the detrimental impact on individuals, democracy and society, of the current levels of abuse and intimidation in political life. The Commission had been launched on the 28th February 2023 and sought to drive change in British democracy by working to find implementable solutions to make life safer for political representatives and candidates for office.

Outcome:

A letter was sent by the Chair of the Democratic Services Committee to the Commission confirming the Council's support and its willingness to engage in its work.

5. Democratic Services Function

Concerns were expressed over the number of staff from the Democratic Services section required to support multi-location meetings on an on-going basis particularly as no additional resources had been made available. The Head of Democratic Services commented that the Welsh Government, which had sanctioned multi-location meetings, had been made aware of the issue which affected all Local Authorities in Wales but had not allocated any extra funding.

Outcome:

The Committee's concerns regarding staffing resources for the Democratic Function were conveyed to Welsh Government and their response is attached – Annexe 1 at the end of this document (pages 13 – 14).

6. Multi Location Meeting Policy

The Committee received a report which appended proposed amendments to the Authority's Multi-location Meeting Policy.

The Authority's Multi Location Meeting Policy had been approved by Council on the 12th October 2022 (Minute 4.1 thereof refers) and took into account the interim statutory guidance issued by Welsh Government. Committee was advised that the Welsh Government published its final guidance on the 7th July 2023 and consequently it was considered opportune to review the policy based on the Authority's experience of multi-location meetings to-date.

The proposed amendments to the policy, based upon feedback from Committee Chairs, included greater guidance on the use of cameras for remote attendees in order to maintain the integrity of the Authority's decision-making process and to reduce the opportunity for legal challenge in this regard. Minor amendments in response to the easing of covid-related restrictions and voting methodology had also been proposed.

The Committee emphasised the importance of multi-location meetings from an accessibility perspective as a means of enhancing and supporting local democracy and enabling Members to work more productively.

Outcome:

The Chair presented the revised policy to Council on the 24th January 2024 and the revised policy was adopted.

Democratic Function Support:

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 Executive's 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, and 3 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, to ensure decisions made are accountable and transparent.
- In accordance with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to convene multi-location meetings (hybrid). This means that participants can join either in person at County Hall, Carmarthen or remotely and the meetings are combined as one using a specialist piece of technology.
- Webcasting of all Council and Committee meetings.
- Managing and providing Scrutiny and Committee Services support to the Council and its various Committees.
- Providing support services to Elected Members, including maintaining and managing local Councillor information on our website (includes information on declarations of interests; gifts and hospitality; Committee membership; remuneration etc) and providing a support service for enquiries and advice on the Council's Constitution and Members' Code of Conduct.
- Administering appeals relating to school admissions and school permanent exclusions.
- Servicing and hosting joint working arrangements namely, Dyfed Powys Police and Crime Panel, Wales Pension Partnership Joint Governance Committee and Y Partneriaeth.
- Administering the Governance arrangements for the Council's arm's length companies - Llesiant Delta Wellbeing Governance Group and CWM Environmental Ltd Shareholders Board.
- Managing internal meetings between Group Leaders, Constitutional Review Group, Cabinet Member meetings with Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs, amongst others.
- Managing Members' constituency casework via a Member Enquiry system, processing Member expenses and making arrangements for attending conferences and seminars.
- Supporting 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.

Democratic Function - In Summary...

- Democratic Services manages the Council's decision-making process. The Council constitution sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. Some of these processes are required by the law, while others are a matter for the Council to choose.
- 3,080 member enquiries were received during 2023/24, a 21% reduction on the previous year (4,365) due to service requests being logged separately in accordance with the findings of the Member Enquiry review. Over 76% of enquiries were responded to within 7 working days, an improvement on previous year (73%).
- The service was instrumental in delivering the recommendations of the Member Enquiries Review and in particular implementation of the new Online Members Portal which was launched in February 2024 and provided a new and improved platform for Members to log and monitor Councillor Service requests and enquiries.
- The introduction of online petitions has proven effective and has been utilised by the public and was driven through the democratic process successfully. Six e-petitions were submitted during the year and one hard copy petition.
- Multi-location meetings (hybrid) which is a legal requirement of the 2021 Act, has proved to be successful providing attendees the choice of location. This has been managed despite no increase in staffing resource.
- The service continues to administer joint working arrangements for Wales Pension Partnership Joint Governance Committee, the Dyfed Powys Police and Crime Panel and Y Partneriaeth and also has responsibility for administering Llesiant Delta Wellbeing Governance Group and CWM Shareholders Board.
- 308 school admission appeal files were opened between 1st May 2023 and 30th April 2024, plus two exclusion appeals.
- Over 500 meetings arranged and serviced by the Team during the year (figure includes formal and informal meetings and Education Appeal Panel meetings).
- 127 webcasts broadcast during the municipal year.
- The service continues to work with Learning and Development on training and development of Members and following the Member Enquiry review a pro-active rolling programme of Member Service awareness sessions have taken place and this will continue going forward.
- The service continues to face resource challenges, particularly due to long term sickness absence within the Committee Support team and also a recruitment freeze. The service

is mindful of the wider financial context facing the Council, and the necessity upon all departments to identify efficiencies in line with the Financial Planning objectives of the Local Authority.

General Information

The Democratic Services Committee meetings are public meetings and with the exception of confidential items, all business is held in public. All public papers are published online at <http://democracy.carmarthenshire.gov.wales/ieListMeetings.aspx?Committeeld=152>

The Council is keen to see members of the public attend Democratic Services Committee meetings and all other Council meetings, including Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny and Regulatory meetings. More information can be found in our [Public Participation Strategy](#).

Further information can be provided by contacting Democratic Services:

DemocraticServices@carmarthenshire.gov.uk or on 01267 224028.

Rebecca Evans AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Cyllid a Llywodraeth Leol
Minister for Finance and Local Government



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref RE/00281/23

Cllr Davies
Chair, Carmarthenshire Council Democratic Services Commit

DemocraticServices@carmarthenshire.gov.uk

01 August 2023

Dear Councillor Davies,

Thank you for your correspondence seeking financial assistance in connection with the implementation of the provisions within the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (the 2021 Act).

The broad range of provisions in the 2021 Act will have impacted on each local authority differently depending on the arrangements already in place. Many of the provisions were developed in collaboration with local authorities during the years preceding the provisions coming into force and as such local authorities were able to plan and prepare for the changes, many of which represented what was already happening.

It is important that members are supported in their role and that democratic services teams are able to set out the resources needed to provide that support in a way that allows members to maximize opportunities to represent the needs of their communities. The consolidated guidance recently issued to principal councils was strengthened to highlight this point and my officials have recently held a series of discussions with representatives of individual democratic services teams across Wales about the implementation of the 2021 Act. I look forward to receiving feedback from those discussions shortly.

You raise the issue of Covid 19 and its effect on local government finances. During that difficult period, my cabinet colleagues and I were in regular contact with local government about the challenges being faced, and were as responsive as we could be in providing support. Additional costs relating to the changes to the democratic process were funded through the Local Government Hardship Fund.

In my role as Minister for Finance, I have to consider carefully how we balance the competing priorities identified across the different sectors in Wales. There is a process in place to determine the allocations to Local Government, and it is important that consideration be given to issues as part of this process. Once allocations to Local Government are made, it is - as you say - a matter for local authorities to determine their own internal allocations in light of the circumstances at that time.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
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Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay

As we are all acutely aware, the fiscal outlook is very bleak. Inflation is squeezing public finances across the board. Unfortunately, this is the context in which we will be undertaking our 2024-25 Budget. During the Budget process for 2023-24 Welsh Ministers had to make some very difficult decisions, and I am afraid this will continue to be the case for the upcoming Budget.

I am acutely aware that this will continue to mean difficult decisions for local authorities too. Therefore, it is even more important we continue the strong partnership working we have already established and collectively find solutions to these very difficult choices we all must make.

I understand that during the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held on 9th June the issue of multi-location meetings was raised as a significant factor in raising costs associated with council meetings. The flexibility for councils to hold meetings in Wales has been widely welcomed - indeed, it was with the support of Local Government that we were able to include arrangements in the 2021 Act to preserve and build on the measures put in place during the pandemic.

I recognise the challenges faced by Local Government in putting in place arrangements. Initially, there was a shift in resources required as more people had to be available in some local authorities to manage meetings. More than £850,000 was provided to principal councils to support the implementation of multi-location meetings and for broadcasting. Councils have reported benefits in supporting flexibility in meetings, including opportunities for economies elsewhere - such as travel and printing papers. There is also a reduction in the carbon footprint associated with meetings, as well as benefits relating to the safety of members, staff, and the public through a reduced requirement to travel, especially in dark winter evenings.

The impact has not been evaluated, but we will be reviewing the existing guidance by the end of year, and this will highlight issues that may need to be considered further.

In line with the provisions of the 2011 Measure I would expect this matter to be raised with the Council and for it to be considered internally as part of the Council's budget setting process.

My officials will continue to work with Local Government, the WLGA, and One Voice Wales to monitor progress in this area.

I am grateful to Democratic Services teams across Wales for the work that they do.

Yours sincerely,



Rebecca Evans AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Cyllid a Llywodraeth Leol
Minister for Finance and Local Government