

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND ON THURSDAY, 31 JANUARY 2013 AT 2.00PM

Present:-

Councillor J H Tildesley, MBE - Chairperson

Councillors

D K Edwards
M D Francis
C A Green
C Jones

Councillors

J R McCarthy
R L Thomas
R E Young
D White

Officers:-

G P Jones - Head of Democratic Services
R David-Knight - Scrutiny Manager
H Lazarus - ICT Support Manager
R Peverly - Training and Development Officer
R Ronan - Democratic Services Officer - Committees

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Members and Officers:-

Councillor L Ellis - Medical reasons
P A Jolley - Other work commitments

9 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee of 25 October 2012 were approved as a true and accurate record.

10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

11 SERVICE AND PERFORMANCE UPDATES

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report the purpose of which was to update Members on the additional information requested at the previous meeting of the Committee and to advise them of the performance of the services provided to Elected Members.

He informed the Committee that key officers and departments had been consulted regarding the current referral system and their responses had been collated. The identified benefits were summarised at paragraph 4.2.3. of the report and suggestions to enhance its effectiveness at paragraph 4.2.4.

The Head of Democratic Services advised the Committee that overall the referral system was viewed as an effective method via which Members could raise queries and provide a clear audit trail. Departments have identified those queries raised by Members outside of the referral system as more difficult to manage and monitor. He explained that more investigation was being carried out as to the appropriate use of the referral system when addressing third party queries as issues have arisen in respect of data protection and confidentiality.

Members were informed of the intention to provide a reference guide to clarify what constitutes a member referral and give a brief overview of the referrals process. A review of Directorate contacts will also be undertaken with the possibility of a single contact per Directorate.

The Head of Democratic Services explained that there had been a period when due to leave and staff sickness referrals received by Member Services had not been processed effectively. It has been agreed that to prevent this situation from reoccurring the section would look to improve cover during periods of absence and prioritise urgent referrals. The Committee was informed that further work was also being carried out on closing referrals after an appropriate response had been received and re-designating "pending" referrals to give a true reflection that departments had responded in a timely manner.

He advised that the referral system could be developed to add to the overall picture of our different customer access channels. Regular users (clients) of the system could also be identified and channelled towards the Citizens Panel so their voice could be heard.

The Chairperson asked newly elected Members of the Committee if they were finding the referral system to be an effective way of dealing with constituents' queries. The new Members responded that they were finding the system effective. It was commented that there were some queries that could be better dealt with by picking up the telephone and speaking directly to the department. However it was agreed that the audit trail provided by the referral system was useful.

A Member asked if when a response was received indicating that works would be carried out as funds become available this referral could be marked for follow up after an agreed period of time has elapsed. This would allow for the Member to be informed of progress and should avoid the matter being forgotten. The Head of Democratic Services responded that he would look at the reporting system to investigate if there was a way that this could be done effectively.

The Committee questioned if the regular users referred to in paragraph 4.2.8 were Members or constituents. The Head of Democratic Services explained that they were constituents and it was considered that if specific themes or trends were emerging these could be channelled in a different more effective way.

It was indicated that the referral system was a good system but that some directorates/departments were better at responding than others. External organisations, particularly V2C were slow and often the content of the response was not adequate. The Committee asked therefore if Democratic Services could engage with the outside bodies concerned and emphasise the importance of responding to a Member's query in a timely and helpful manner. It should be highlighted that Members were asking on behalf of clients many of whom were elderly, distressed and in need of priority assistance.

The Head of Democratic Services agreed that the department would move to establish better links with the outside bodies in order to enhance the working relationship and provide a more effective service for Members.

It was also proposed that there should be a degree of reciprocity between the Authority and other organisations and an acknowledgement of the responsibility attached to the role of Councillor. A Member of the Committee noted that V2C did respond to his queries within five to seven days if the issue was straightforward, however, more complex involved issues were often circa three months. He acknowledged that sometimes a better response was received if the query was telephoned through directly. The Chairperson commented that he had always found V2C to be very helpful and quick to respond.

The Committee noted that the table on Page 4 paragraph 4.3.4 of the report showed that the majority of referrals to outside organisations were made to V2C and therefore it was imperative that this relationship was addressed and suggested liaising with our member representatives. The Committee agreed to monitor the situation.

A Member asked that Democratic Services also liaise with Street Scene over the issues of potholes. Clarification is needed on the policy adopted on the fixing of potholes as Members had noticed that they were referring to the same potholes for filling in numerous times.

The Head of Democratic Services observed that it was encouraging to note that overall referrals had a 96.10% clear up rate between May 2012 and November 2012.

The ICT Support Manager updated the Committee on the current situation as regards their ICT provision. He explained to the Committee that Cabinet Members will be receiving their smart phones in March.

Members had previously asked if they could purchase equipment via the Authority's business contract. The ICT Support Manager informed Members that due to the overhead costs of procurement and support this is not feasible. Members can however receive a 25% discount from the EE (Orange) shop in Bridgend Town Centre on proof of employment i.e. a payslip.

The ICT Support Manager informed Members that paragraph 4.4.4 showed the number and type of queries made by Members to the ICT Service Desk between 8 May 2012 and 31 December 2012. The majority of calls were concerning passwords. He explained that all Members' queries if not resolved within three working days were escalated to the Head of Technology, Property and Customer Service. He advised that if Members were not happy with the response from the helpdesk they could telephone the ICT Support Manager directly.

A Member commented that they had been locked out of their laptop as they had not been prompted to change their password. The ICT Support Manager confirmed that they should receive a prompt 6 days before the password needs to change and he would look into the matter.

A Member asked if out of fairness Members could be offered a smartphone as part of their ICT options. This would not cost the Authority more than the options already available. The ICT Support Manager explained that one issue with smartphones was that ICT could not support the calendar function and there would also be issues around e-mails. He informed Members that ICT do not support personal devices although they can give advice regarding logging onto OWA. The six simple rules only apply to devices purchased through the Authority.

A Member commented that the total number of calls to the ICT helpdesk was 344 which on average was two tickets a day, they considered this to be quite high and wondered if there was an underlying issue. The ICT Support Manager explained that this could be a training issue in respect of new Councillors and he advised that he would be willing to provide the resources to carry out the necessary training.

A Member asked if it was possible to print attachments when connected via OWA. The ICT Support Manager explained that this depended on what internet browser was being used.

A Member questioned whether "Cloud" would be available on an iPad and would iPads be offered to all Members in the future. The ICT Support Manager informed the Committee that Cloud is available on an iPad however, iPads are currently only provided to Cabinet Members.

The Head of Democratic Services updated Members on the outcomes of the Member Development Survey that sought Members' preference in respect of member development activities. Out of the 53 members surveyed 37 responses were received and the outcomes are detailed at paragraph 4.5.2 of the report. The preferred days for training to take place are Monday and Tuesday with one topic a month and paired sessions. The pre-Council presentation will stay the same beginning at 2.00pm and lasting approximately 45 minutes.

A Member asked how many of the 37 responses were from newly elected Members. The Head of Democratic Services responded that 70% of the responses were from newly elected Members. One of the main reasons for conducting the survey is to optimise attendance, he agreed therefore that he would monitor the scheduling of sessions and levels of attendance, any concerns would be reported back to the Committee.

The Head of Democratic Services updated the Committee on the planned Member Development sessions as detailed in the report. He explained that the Environment Agency had been requested to provide a briefing to Members however, they are currently fulfilling requests from other authorities and have previously provided a session for the Development Control Committee. If Members still require a briefing they are willing to return but this will be at a later date.

The Communities First pre-Council briefing is provisional for March and we are awaiting confirmation, this key issue will however be re-scheduled if it is unable to go ahead on this date.

The Head of Democratic Services told the Committee that we are pleased to confirm that the Police Commissioner has accepted our invitation to present to Council in April.

The Committee were asked to consider any new topics that they would like to be considered for the future, and the Head of Democratic Services asked them to prioritise the delivery of events listed at paragraph 4.6.8 of the report.

A Member asked that the Dyn Project/Domestic Abuse be given priority as legislation will soon be coming into effect that puts ownership for tackling this issue on local authorities. The Head of Democratic Services explained to Members that the Member Development activities planned for the next couple of months are annual report training, a workshop on waste management and a session on planning aimed at non Development Control Committee Members. He confirmed that staff would be receiving training on the Social Services Bill towards the end of February with a view to roll this out to Members in April.

Personal Development Reviews are a requirement of the Local Government (Wales) Measure and therefore training on their completion is essential. The Equalities and Engagement Officer is currently working to develop some training on issues around equalities for all Members and Media Training is being planned for July.

The Head of Democratic Services informed Members that the team were looking at an external provider to deliver the session on "Connecting with your Community" and are currently evaluating the cost implications and agreeing the content and focus. A number of regional events have been proposed and are being considered by the WLGA and other local authorities. These events include Public Engagement and the Scrutiny Manager is working on this with a view to Bridgend being the lead authority.

The Head of Democratic Services explained that Dealing with Conflict is awaiting confirmation from external providers in respect to costs, dates and venues. He informed Members that the WLGA intend to provide Social Media training for Members and this event may be undertaken locally depending on demand. This event is being provided free of charge.

The WLGA have also asked to undertake an evaluation of the Member Induction Programme and this will consist of a representative of the WLGA facilitating either one or a series of focus group meetings with elected Members. Details will be made available when dates are confirmed.

A Member asked for details on the planning training. The Head of Democratic Services explained that due to staff commitments there will not on this occasion be two sessions, however it is hoped that a further session will be provided at a later date. The session will give an overview of the planning process. The Committee commented that they would welcome the session on waste management.

A Member asked if Directorates liaised with Democratic Services when they were planning training. The Head of Democratic Services explained that Democratic Services are responsible for co-ordinating the training for Members via the Democratic Services Committee the Member Development Strategy will tighten up the protocol for Member training and engagement.

A Member commented that it is important that all Members understand the planning process. She noted that since the number of Delegated Powers have increased on planning issues, Members are not being made aware of general trends, she asked therefore if it was possible for all Members to receive updates on these decisions.

The Head of Democratic Services advised that the Planning Department may find it difficult at the present time to provide any further data, and he was unsure how this would be collated. He would however approach the department and highlight Members concerns.

He informed the Committee that we are looking at an information management system – Modern.Gov that monitors decision records, it may be possible to provide the planning information via this system.

The Training and Development Officer explained to Members that there was a recent meeting held with Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and they were very impressed with Bridgend's Member Development Programme. As a result they intend to use it as a reference for their future provision of training. The Chairperson confirmed that Bridgend were impressive in comparison with other authorities and he was confident that the WLGA evaluation would be very positive.

The Scrutiny Manager explained that the Scrutiny Development Fund was intended to strengthen the capacity for public service scrutiny with emphasis on the development of joint scrutiny arrangements. She informed Members that Welsh Government view the health of scrutiny as an indicator of good governance and the Welsh Audit Office have developed a methodology to determine where Authorities are doing well and where there are weaknesses. This method encourages peer learning and to this end officers from Bridgend will be visiting Neath Port Talbot as observers and Cardiff will be visiting Bridgend. The Scrutiny Manager explained that Cardiff has a very mature method of working which is politically neutral and outcome based.

The Scrutiny Manager explained that the Simpson review stressed the need for collaborative scrutiny and getting away from traditional committee structures to allow processes to be more streamlined and informal. She informed Members that Bridgend is seen as being innovative and in a strong position. The Budget and Research Evaluation Panels are viewed as a stabilising force, feeding into policy development and an example of mature and progressive working.

A Member asked how the scrutiny of collaboration would be structured. They were advised that this was currently under development. Scrutiny Officers are working on a draft

proposal to undertake a joint scrutiny project with Swansea and Neath Port Talbot Councils aimed at assessing and addressing the likely impact of Welfare Reform. This project would seek to utilise Members expertise to work as co-researchers but it is still in an early stage of planning.

The Head of Democratic Services explained to the Committee that the Transactional Team Manager has been able to agree block tax dispensations from HMRC in respect of travel and subsistence as directed by the Independent Remuneration Panel. He advised the Committee that tax and benefit advice should be provided from independent, regulated and qualified tax advisors but these would have to be procured externally as this Authority does not employ any qualified tax advisors.

The Head of Democratic Services informed Members that the Independent Remuneration Panel will be visiting the Authority and this visit would provide an opportunity to clarify with the Panel the expected level of support that should be provided in respect of this issue. He advised that further investigation will be undertaken in the interim to help inform these discussions and Democratic Services will identify relevant groups of Members to be involved in the interviews.

A Member commented that the direction in respect of tax relief provided in the Independent Remuneration Panel's report is not very prescriptive and needs clarification. He expressed surprise that homeworkers employed by the Authority are not given tax dispensations for using part of their home as an office as he understood this to be common practice. This would however be a matter for the Trade Unions to pursue on behalf of employees, he welcomed the chance to discuss this issue with the Independent Remuneration Panel during their visit.

RESOLVED: That Democratic Services Committee:

- (1) Noted the content of the report and that Democratic Services will continue to work with Directorates/Departments to improve the Member Referral process.
- (2) Approved the proposals regarding the outcomes of the Member Development survey as shown in paragraph 4.5.3.
- (3) Noted the member development activities that have been planned and prioritised those activities that have been requested to be undertaken.

12 ACHIEVING THE WELSH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (WLGA) CHARTER FOR MEMBER SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report to the Committee the purpose of which was to consider the proposals for this Authority to achieve the WLGA Charter for Member Support and Development.

He advised the Committee that there are three levels of award with each level normally required to be achieved before progressing to the next. Bridgend was awarded the Standard Charter in 2010 and our charter status is due for renewal, maintenance or improvement during 2013. The Authority therefore needed to determine which level of Charter should be undertaken.

The Head of Democratic Services explained to the Committee that the assessment for each level is detailed in paragraph 3.4 and the table shown at paragraph 4.4.2 demonstrates an initial assessment of the implications to Democratic Services of achieving the Charter at standard and advanced levels.

A Member asked for clarification on page 1 “all Members are provided with adequate access to ICT”. The Head of Democratic Services explained that the Local Government (Wales) Measure requires authorities to make provision for remote working and attendance at meetings. The Minister for Local Government has made 1.2 million available to help deliver this initiative, the Head of Democratic Services informed Members that he was currently looking into different ICT solutions and the Monitoring Officer was investigating the legal aspects. He informed the Committee that the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority have instigated the webcasting of meetings.

The Committee expressed concern about the pressure that would be put on already stretched staff resources if we applied for the Advanced Charter. The Head of Democratic Services explained that the Advanced Charter would also place more pressure on Members. Option 4 as detailed at paragraph 4.4.4. to re-apply for the Standard Charter in 2013 with the intention of making a further submission for Advanced Charter in 2014 is therefore the preferred option. It provided an opportunity to submit and maintain our current level of Award with the aim to develop our processes and support in readiness for the Advanced Charter in 2014. This option also allows all Members to become fully engaged with their personal development.

The Committee suggested more regular meetings to drive forward the agenda of the Charter and maintain momentum. The Head of Democratic Services explained to Members that the Local Democracy Bill will allow Councils to widen the remit of the Committee and develop its own terms of reference, this may naturally lead to more frequent meetings.

The Chairperson informed Members that he has been invited to observe the Democratic Services Committee meetings in other authorities and he invited other interested Members of the Committee to also attend.

- RESOLVED:** (1) That the Democratic Services Committee considered the information shown in Paragraph 4 of the report and determined that the most appropriate option for the WLGA Charter for Member Support and Development would be Option 4.
- (2) That the Democratic Services Committee submit a report to Council requesting endorsement of the decision made at Paragraph 8.1.

13 REVIEW OF THE ANNUAL REPORT PROCESS

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report to the Committee the purpose of which is to provide them with an update on the pilot regarding the Annual Reports for elected Members and to propose updates to the Annual Report process.

He informed Members that Bridgend has been the leading authority in Wales regarding the development and introduction of Annual Reports. The template, exemplar and guidance was presented to the Member Support Officer (MSO) Network, who praised Bridgend on the quality of the final model. The MSO are considering the template as an All-Wales model for Annual Reports and some Councils have already adopted it in principle.

The Head of Democratic Services explained that Bridgend ran a pilot of the Annual Report process in 2012 with the 29 returning to test and prove the processes that had been developed. It is now the intention to roll out this initiative to all Members and the publication schedule is detailed at paragraph 4.10 with a final publication date of the 6 September 2013.

A Member asked if Annual Reports were mandatory. The Head of Democratic Services explained the Local Government Measure states that a local authority must make

arrangements for Members to make an annual report and publish any annual reports received, Annual Reports were not however mandatory.

The Training and Development Officer informed the Committee that the pilot was well received by the MSO network and was a potential winner of a good practice and inspiration award from the WLGA.

The Scrutiny Manager supported these comments she advised that this was a good piece of work and the commitment by Officers deserved recognition.

A Member commented that the narrative of the Annual Report was a good opportunity for Members to highlight all the work they did outside of formal meetings.

RESOLVED: That the Democratic Services Committee:

- (1) Noted the outcomes of the pilot of the Annual Report process.
- (2) Approved the amendments to the Annual Report process and the proposed schedule of publication for Annual Reports for 2012/13.

14 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report to the Committee the purpose of which was to inform the Democratic Services Committee of the proposed items that will be considered at its subsequent meetings.

The Committee discussed the proposed work programme and agreed to add the Local Democracy Bill and Remote Attendance to its meeting of the 17 April 2013.

The Scrutiny Manager suggested that Frank Cuthbert, Head of Local Government Democracy at the Welsh Assembly Government be invited to a meeting of the Committee to share progress and implementation of the measure. The Head of Democratic Services informed Members that he would look into this with a view to inviting him to a special meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Democratic Services Committee considered the proposed Work Programme appended to the report.

The meeting closed at 4.25pm.