

Meeting of:	DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	8 FEBRUARY 2024
Report Title:	COUNCILLOR PORTAL WORKING GROUP UPDATE
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
Responsible Officer:	RACHEL KEEPINS DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER AND HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect upon the policy framework and procedure rules in respect of this report.
Executive Summary:	This report provides an update on the work of the Councillor Portal Working Group. The Group have held four meetings since its commencement and considered and discussed a series of issues and aspects associated with the use of the Councillor portal with the view to finding resolutions to improve the overall Member referral process.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the Committee with an update on the work of the Councillor Portal Working Group, for the Committee to note, including actions from the most recent meeting.

2. Background

- 2.1 At their meeting on 23 February 2023 the Committee received a report detailing an 'Update on the Digital Platform and Member Portal'. The report acknowledged that the Portal has not been without its challenges against a backdrop of unprecedented demand. These challenges have been around response time for referrals and poor narrative responses from the "report it" function. Development continues to be made to the Councillor Portal with regards the narrative for the "report it" function alongside the alignment of capacity within services, with a focus on managing the response rate of referrals. This continuous improvement approach for the Portal is focused on a partnership approach with both officers and Members working together.

- 2.2 A Working Group has been established consisting of key stakeholders as per the request of the Group Leaders to enable a review and develop a programme of works to further develop the members portal. There is also a commitment from the Corporate Management Board (CMB) and services to continually develop and leverage the benefits that the digital platform offers. . These efficiencies will support the ethos of information availability and self-service enabling better use of the Council's scarce resources. The Working Group comprises of 4 Members of the Democratic Services Committee along with Group Leaders, with support from the Democratic Services Manager, and has met on 4 separate occasions in May, July, September and November 2023.
- 2.3 Members will recall that an update report was presented to the Democratic Services Committee at their last meeting on 26 October 2023. As a result of the Working Group, a series of issues and actions has been created which had been added to the Authority's Experience and Improvement team's own action log for the Councillor Portal. These have been monitored at each meeting of the Working Group along with several being chosen for detailed discussion and exploration.
- 2.4 When last reported to the Committee, there were 2 recommendations presented that highlighted the need to develop dashboards within the Portal in order for both Members and Officers to monitor referrals effectively and improve response rates, as well as a recommendation for dedicated staff within the Communities Directorate to assist with Member referrals.
- 2.5 Unfortunately, due to the financial constraints across the Authority, it was concluded by the Committee that there was a need to address what realistically could go forward in terms of the Portal and these recommendations may not be able to be progressed at this time. However, there was general agreement that issues with member referrals, especially the timeliness of responses, needed to be addressed.
- 2.6 Some examples of actions that have been taken forward as a result of the work of the Group include a series of training sessions for Members held to provide latest updates and some tips and hints for Members in using the portal. Engagement has also taken place with Town and Community Councils and various aspects have been raised with the software provider with a view to improving the Portal for Members to use.
- 2.7 The Working Group have also commented that vast improvements have been made to the Councillor Portal and these have been very much welcomed by Members.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 At its last meeting on 7 November 2023 the Working Group met with representatives from various service areas across the Authority to discuss a series of issues highlighted within the action log including:
- Departments/Officers sometimes responding outside of the portal via email;
 - Referrals involving more than one service area or an external organisation, ownership of referrals by Officers, re-directing referrals, Members being aware of where the referral is and which officer is dealing with it, particularly when it is within the escalation process;

- A review of all response times across the service areas (also known as service level agreements (SLAs));
- Potential additional information that could be added to the portal such as grass-cutting or street lighting repair schedules.

- 3.2 Following their discussions, the Group made a series of conclusions and agreed actions including agreement that further exploration was needed into whether referrals could be sent to more than one location in the Portal, so as to make it easier for a collective response to be provided, where one or more service area was involved.
- 3.3 It was also agreed by Senior Officers and Members that investment into the development of dashboards would be extremely beneficial. There was consensus that this was required to monitor and analyse referrals appropriately both from the Member side as well as from an Officer side; for Officers to help identify where there may be particular service area issues or similarly areas consistently not meeting response deadlines. Members highlighted that access beyond ICT to this data for the purpose of responding to Freedom of Information requests, was also required.
- 3.4 In addition to this, the Working Group agreed that a review of the response times for Member Referrals was needed following proposed changes put forward for these by service areas.

Future meetings

- 3.5 The Working Group agreed to meet again in 6 months' time to allow a suitable period for further work to take place on the Councillor Portal. Members requested that they reconvene in May 2024 to consider a full update report on the action log.
- 3.6 Attached at **Appendix A** is a list of proposed response times that have been put forward by the various service areas. In accordance with the Elected Member Referrals Policy, the current aim is to process all referrals within 10 working days of them being received. The Members of the Working Group welcome the views of the Committee on these proposals noting that these will need to be finalised and agreed with the relevant Corporate Director.
- 3.7 The Working Group have also stated that they welcome any comments or queries from other Members of the Committee regarding the Councillor Portal and would be happy to explore these as part of their work.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

- 4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations Implications and Connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 The well-being goals identified in the Act were considered in the preparation of this report. It is considered that there is no significant or unacceptable impact upon the achievement of well-being goals/objectives as a result of this report.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There are no Climate Change implications as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 There are no Safeguarding or Corporate Parent implications as a result of this report.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 There are associated financial implications linked to the potential for future development of the Councillor Portal. The development of dashboards within the Portal, for example will require additional funding and will be very difficult to achieve given the current financial situation of the Authority.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

- a) Note the update provided in this report on the work of the Councillor Portal Working Group;
- b) Provide any comments on the proposed response times attached at Appendix A;
- c) Provide any comments, queries or suggestions regarding the Councillor Portal which they would like the Working Group to explore further as part of their work.

Background documents

None