

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE - THURSDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2024

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE HELD HYBRID IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER - CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, CF31 4WB ON THURSDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2024 AT 10:00

Present

E D Winstanley

Present Virtually

S Aspey
RM James
M Williams

RM Granville
R J Smith
P Ford

D T Harrison
I M Spiller
M Jones

M L Hughes
G Walter

Apologies for Absence

T Thomas

Officers:

Laura Griffiths
Oscar Roberts
Nimi Chandrasena

Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services
Business Administrative Apprentice - Democratic Services
Democratic Services Officer - Support

Invitees

Cllr Jane Gebbie
Cllr Amanda Williams

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1. To Appoint Chairperson for the Meeting

Decision Made	Councillor Ian Spiller was nominated as Chairperson for this particular meeting, however a second nomination was made in favour of Councillor Elaine Winstanley, agreed unanimously by all members as Councillor Spiller was experiencing technical difficulties.
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

2. Apologies for Absence

Decision Made	Councillor Tim Thomas
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

3. Declarations of Interests

Decision Made	None
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

4. Approval of Minutes

Decision Made	That the minutes of a meeting of the Democratic Services Committee dated 26/10/2023 be approved as a true and accurate record
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

5. Councillor Portal Working Group Update

Decision Made	<p>The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services welcomed the Deputy Leader, Councillor Jane Gebbie and Councillor Amanda Williams who were invitees for this particular item and made the committee aware of their presence.</p> <p>She went on to present the report, the purpose of which was 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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Chairperson invited comments from Cllr Walter, Chairperson of the working group <p>The Chairperson of the working group stated that he found the report to be a very comprehensive summary. He stated that when meeting with officers over the three or four meetings there had been some robust challenge which had been met with detailed explanations in relation to issues highlighted.</p> <p>He stated he felt the working group had done the best they could do given resource constraints, both financially and human resource and therefore had nothing more to add.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A member stated that he too was a member of the working group, and that the Portal system was far from perfect, but was the only system available and users need to ensure that it is maximised in usage for the purpose it is required for. He stated he had noticed some feedback; in terms of any cases he had put forward where they had been reallocated and he had been kept informed of that which was positive to note. He mentioned that on a number of occasions, Officers corresponded outside the Portal via email and members saved those responses and re-input them into the portal in order that all related correspondence was kept together. He stated there was no interrelation between the Portal and the Council's website that would facilitate members in understanding how best to put a case forward.• A member stated that he had made an observation which may be a financial constraint as he was not aware if Granicus, which was named on the bottom left hand corner of the Portal system, had provided the Authority with an "off the shelf product" that the Authority had paid for and inquired how much control the Authority had and if the developers were able to be able to amend some of the aspects that caused members issues. <p>He suggested that the user interface could have improvements which could eliminate the loop that users seem to go round. He asked if the working group could investigate these financial restraints because he was unsure if the costs relating to improvements lie with Granicus or an internal team.</p>
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The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services responded that she understood it to be an off the shelf product that is used in other local authorities, though not in Wales but possibly in England. She stated that the understanding was that there would be a cost attached to any changes/improvements as that would mean that there would be work that Granicus would have to undertake.

- The same member asked if was possible to have sight of the contract with Granicus and for the committee to be provided with the costs.

The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that she would obtain the information requested and feed this back through the Committee.

- A member queried information in the report around SLA's, asking if current individual service area data in relation to SLA's were available prior to making any proposed changes to these SLA's. He stated that there needs to be an understanding whether what is proposed is feasible and intends to provide a service that is realistic.

The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services responded that she did not have the current SLA data but her understanding was that the majority of the delays lay within communities. She accepted that it would be sensible for the committee to have the current data so that they could consider the proposed changes to the SLA. She reminded the committee that only some of the service areas were seeking an extension beyond the current SLA of 10 days.

- The Deputy Leader stated that she was a returning Cabinet member and was accustomed to the previously utilised member referral system (OTRS). Therefore, from a cabinet perspective, real difficulties had been experienced with the portal and this has been represented within the Portal Working group. As a positive, she stated that she found the "report it" function to be excellent, particularly as any member of the public can make use of it wherever they were reporting from. She stated that she had significant difficulties utilising the "Portal System" because of its limitations in its functionality.

The Deputy Leader corrected a previous comment made in that there were two member referral systems, one being the Portal and the other being OTRS which was currently in use to manage

	<p>MS/MP referrals and Cabinet Communications with external parties. She stated that within OTRS, she was able to address a referral to more than one person and one department.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader stated that the Portal was not equipped to manage complex referrals and she had significant concerns around breaching GDPR with the use of the portal despite officer reassurances.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader stated all members operate in a political capacity. There were political nuances to various responses that may need to be sent. She stated that there was a deliberate reason for that. It was because she needed to ensure that the Council is following policy. Should there be an issue, how do members investigate that prior to providing appropriate response.</p> <p>Cabinet and Members intend to resolve issues in a timely and appropriate manner as that would be the best representation for the Authority.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader referred to the 'redirection option' within the Portal system, stating there was no ownership. As an example, she stated that if referral required input from two departments, it could only go to one on the portal. An officer in the first department was then expected to take responsibility and ownership to refer it on to the next department. She stated that this functionality was not working very well because officers do not understand the back end of the Portal system. Further, there does not appear to be ownership once a referral has been redirected. The Deputy Leader referred to OTRS, previously used by all members and currently by Cabinet for MS/MP and external referrals, stating that there was a range of external referrals to many agencies which are all recorded and correspondence data to all parties was retained in one place under one unique referral system number.</p> <p>She compared this function to the Portal stating that such a function was not possible because once the referral went to one recipient and it was closed as their individual task was complete, the referral remained closed to all parties.</p> <p>She stated that on OTRS, a case can be re-opened if required because matters had escalated or the resolutions that we put forward did not work.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader informed the committee that a function of 'Merging', was possible on OTRS but not possible within the Portal.</p> <p>As an example, she stated that Members belonging to the same ward can be copied in on the same issue and to avoid duplication for Members and Service areas these referrals were usually</p>
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	<p>merged within OTRS, this functionality is not possible within the Portal system.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader stated a wider discussion on the operating system was required. She stated that the Portal was reliant on officers understanding not just their own department but operation of other directorates within the system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Member referred to the discussion on SLA's and stated that the working party identified that some referrals were more urgent than others and that maximum SLA's would not be suitable in these instances. It was suggested that the urgency was mentioned in the title of the referral.• Cllr A Williams stated that, following comments made by the Deputy Leader previously, a number of issues had been raised within their Group Leader meetings in relation to the Portal System. As an example, she stated that referrals on the Portal system were closed down without a reason being provided and a request had been made to add a closure reason. She stated that members tend to log an issue as a referral on the Portal system as opposed to a 'Report it' as they are answerable to the public and at present they were not receiving answers that they could thereafter share. Cllr Williams stated that they had been advised that there were technical difficulties in providing answers and the Group Leaders had put forward suggestions which she hoped to have an update on within the next Group Leader meeting. <p>The Invitees left the meeting.</p> <p><u>RESOLVED</u> : It was agreed that the Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Noted the update provided in the report on the work of the Councillor Portal Working Group;b) Provided comments on the proposed response times attached at Appendix A;c) Provided any comments, queries or suggestions regarding the Councillor Portal which they would like the Working Group to explore further as part of their work.
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

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6. Member Development Programme Update

Decision Made	<p>The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services presented the report the purpose of which was to :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Provide the Committee with an update on the delivery of the Council’s Member Training and Development Programme and related activities;b) Request the Committee to identify any further topics for inclusion in the Member Development Programme <p>She stated that training requests had been regularly forthcoming from both members and officers, which has been welcomed and encouraged because it enabled the programme to be specifically targeted to needs.</p> <p>Discussing attendance, the Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services gave a verbal update to the committee advising that there was a correction to Appendix B to confirm that Cllr M Williams was in attendance at the Data Protection training session dated 15/09/23.</p> <p>The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services stated that several queries had been raised as to whether there were circumstances when Members could be exempt from attending some of the e-learning training modules or training sessions where there was duplication . She confirmed that the Democratic Services Manager, will be making enquiries with the Learning and Development Team for guidance around training that is classed as mandatory.</p> <p>She stated that there would also be communication sent out to all Members advising that the democratic services team will be conducting in-person sessions where Members can come in and get assistance navigating or completing the e-learning training modules.</p> <p>She stated that at a recent Governance and Audit committee meeting held in November 2023, during consideration of a monitoring report on corporate complaints, members of that committee highlighted that they sometimes experience issues on the subject when engaging with their local constituents. The Governance and Audit Committee therefore recommended that Members may possibly benefit from having some additional training on handling complaints, potentially some challenging situations involving constituents in respect to that complaint process. This has been added to the Governance and Audits committee action record that was considered by the committee in January of this year and had been put to the Democratic Services Committee to consider whether it was to be included in the future.</p> <p>The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services went through attendance statistics for mandatory</p>
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e-learning modules and reminded Members that during an internal audit, it was reported to the Audit committee that Elected Members were to be encouraged and reminded to complete all of their code of conduct and mandatory e-learning module training.

She encouraged Members to revisit that e-learning website and undertake those additional modules.

- A Member expressed concerns over duplication of member development sessions and stated such duplication had an impact on both member and officer time. He cited examples such as Safeguarding training and 20 minute town training which members had already undertaken as part of other training/briefing sessions.

He suggested the possibility of sending members periodic reminders of mandatory training so that members were prompted to undertake these.

He also asked, in relation to the Welsh Language awareness whether it was a necessity for those members who were educated in Wales and have a GCSE qualification in Welsh to still undertake the training.

The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services responded to state that his comments will be fed back to the Learning and Development department for advice as to whether exemptions can be given in such circumstances.

- A Member welcomed the suggestion of a member session where they could be offered assistance in the navigation of e-learning modules. He also inquired about the possibility of linking their one to one meetings with Group Leaders that forms a sort of appraisal.
- Another Member agreed with the suggestion of receiving assistance to navigate e-learning modules as he currently found the system to not be very user friendly.
- A member suggested that members should receive calendar appointments with an alert or a more visual reminder for mandatory training sessions. He suggested that there is an escalation if training is then not undertaken. He also suggested that the Democratic Services team consult members prior to scheduling training as members tend to prioritise their meetings in relation to their ward over member training.
- The Chairperson stated that she would prefer training to be organised on one day of the week as opposed to being scattered across the week as this would enable management of personal schedules better.
- A member suggested the possibility of categorising training, for example as discretionary or

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	<p>mandatory so that they can prioritise accordingly and make attendance more achievable.</p> <p>The Group Manager - Legal and Democratic Services responded to state that some of the sessions, if they were recorded, could be saved on the website for members to watch back. She stated that she would then explore the possibility with Learning and Development of counting this 'viewing' towards attendance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members agreed that in response to the recommendation from the Governance and Audit Committee, they would benefit in a training session where they could learn to handle complaints particularly those of a difficult vexatious nature.• A member inquired why service areas had stopped notifying customers of work to be carried out in their respective wards as knowledge of these works could assist members in dealing with residents. He cited the example of a member who suffered online abuse in relation to this. The member confirmed that he had brought this to the attention of the relevant Cabinet Member. Another member agreed that the consequences faced by ward members due to service areas not keeping them informed has also resulted in issues in his ward. <p><u>RESOLVED</u> : The Committee agreed to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">a) Note the report and its appendices and the verbal amendment to Appendix B;b) Identified any additional Member development topics or briefings for inclusion in the Member Development Programme and prioritised them accordingly.
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

7. Democratic Services Committee Forward Work Programme

Decision Made	<p>The report was presented by the Group Manager – Legal and Democratic Services the purpose of which was to present Members with a proposed Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the Democratic Services Committee for consideration and further development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A member inquired after the possibility of reviewing the Constitution as part of the committee's FWP based on historical discussions.
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	<p>The Group Manager – Legal and Democratic Services responded that a review of the Constitution was not a function of the Democratic Services Committee and that the Constitution specifically references how changes can be made, in particular, following a proposal from the Monitoring Officer. When the Committee previously undertook the full review of the Constitution, it was following the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and it was agreed that this Council would adopt the All Wales Model Constitution making it local to Bridgend. At that time it was agreed that a Working Group would be established via the committee to fully review the Constitution. She advised the Committee that the Monitoring Officer has received further suggested amendments in relation to the Constitution and is currently considering the same. She stated that it was a very long and timely exercise and it would not be practicable to review the Constitution on an annual basis because of constraints on officer and Members resources. She confirmed that Members were welcome to feedback comments on suggested amendments to the Constitution, to the Monitoring Officer who will thereafter be able to give the committee direction with regard to setting up another a working group. Following discussions, Members noted that a review of the Constitution was not within their remit but recommended that the Monitoring Officer consider establishing another Working Group to review the Constitution.</p> <p><u>RESOLVED</u> : Members considered the proposed draft Forward Work Programme for the Democratic Services Committee attached at Appendix A and provided comment or suggestions for further items for the Committee to consider at its future meetings.</p> <p>The committee recommended that the Monitoring Officer consider establishing a Working Group via the committee to review the Constitution.</p>
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

8. Urgent Items

Decision Made	None
Date Decision Made	8 February 2024

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To observe further debate that took place on the above items, please click this [link](#)

The meeting closed at 11:15.