

Meeting of:	DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	21 NOVEMBER 2024
Report Title:	RESEARCH SUPPORT AND SERVICES FOR COUNCILLORS – PROTOCOL
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
Responsible Officer:	RACHEL KEEPINS DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER
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 details the requirements for a Member Research Protocol following the new statutory guidance issued under section 8(1A) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. It provides an initial assessment of what is currently available to Members within the Authority and seeks Members comments as a basis for a Research Support and Services Protocol.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Democratic Services Committee on the existing research support available to Elected Members and to seek direction for the development of a Research Support and Services Protocol for Elected Members.

2. Background

- 2.1 The new Statutory Guidance issued under section 8(1A) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 states that “all elected members should be able to access a range of information and support” in order to undertake their roles effectively.
- 2.2 It is clear that Councils across Wales are already undertaking a range of research support activity to assist Councillors in fulfilling their duties, and it is anticipated this will mainly focus on signposting individual members to existing sources of information or available training, for example, brief prepared for scrutiny committee meetings or how to use research, statistical or legislative websites. It may also

include targeted support for groups of members for example, leading a task and finish group investigation or support for individual members related to their role on the council, for example as chair of a committee.

- 2.3 The Statutory Guidance provides an opportunity for Councils to review this support and establish a clear commitment or protocol for research support and services, identifying areas for potential improvements within the resource constraints faced nationwide.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 The new guidance states that, as a minimum, it is recommended that Councils undertake an internal review / audit of the existing research support provided to Councillors and evaluate against the examples given within guidance. It is recommended that this is undertaken through the Democratic Services Committee.

- 3.2 In undertaking such a review, the following questions are proposed in the guidance for Members to consider:

- Are background papers available to help all Councillors understand key decisions?
- Are all Councillors provided with regular performance management information, or is it readily available to them?
- Is demographic information readily available to all Councillors, including information on local services and their usage?
- Are Councillors signposted to useful sources of information?
- Are Councillors able to request specific research requests, and are the parameters clearly set out?
- Is there regular circulation of local and nation events which Councillors may be interested in?

- 3.3 The guidance also states that the service should not be solely reactive, the proactive provision of timely briefings on new policies, changes in the law or other matters that could impact on the work of members should form part of the service.

Accessing information

- 3.4 In terms of support in accessing information, the guidance states that Councils should:

- Frame councillor access to information procedure rules expansively – with a presumption in favour of the release of information to councillors unless a clear public policy reason exists not to;
- Proactively provide councillors with management information and other data to ensure that they are kept informed about the business of the authority. Councils

could produce an information bulletin or digest for councillors on a regular basis – subject to resources as suggested above;

- Engage with members to better understand how and where their roles will require that they access certain information sources, and support them to gain that access. This may include negotiation with partners, and others who may hold information relevant to councillors' roles;
- Ensure mechanisms are in place to protect personal data in line with appropriate legislation.

Confidential Information

- 3.5 As far as possible Councils should specify publicly why a matter is exempt from publication or from discussion in a public forum – ideally providing more information than just the description given in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.
- 3.6 Equally, Councillors should be made aware that Councils are frequently under legal obligations to others with regard to maintaining the confidentiality of certain information (in particular commercial information and personal information) and such releases could open up the Council to challenge.

Going Forward

- 3.7 To assist Members, an initial assessment has been undertaken of the proposed aspects the guidance asks it to consider when undertaking a review of existing support and arrangements. This is attached at **Appendix A**.
- 3.8 In addition to this Scrutiny also have their own process for research support and scoping out potential scrutiny items for their Forward Work Programmes, that focuses on impact, risk, performance, budget and community perception and considers a set criteria that looks at:
- Public Interest - the concerns of local people should influence the issues chosen for scrutiny;
 - Ability to Change - priority should be given to issues that the Committee can realistically influence, and add value to;
 - Performance - priority should be given to the areas in which the Council is not performing well;
 - Extent - priority should be given to issues that are relevant to all or large parts of the County Borough, or a large number of the Authority's service users or its population;
 - Replication - work programmes must take account of what else is happening in the areas being considered to avoid duplication or wasted effort.
- 3.9 More in depth processes are required for Research and Evaluation Panels when undertaken by any of the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

3.10 Some local authorities have dedicated Research Officers who can undertake detailed external research. Unfortunately, we do not have these roles in Bridgend and therefore the capacity for additional research is limited.

3.11 Taking the above into consideration, there is a need for Members and Officers to recognise what already exists across the Authority, as identified in the attached assessment, and be realistic about what can be achieved in our own Research Protocol for Members, and to manage expectations carefully.

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 no financial implications as a result of this report.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

- a) Note the content of this report as the basis for developing a Research Support and Services Protocol for Elected Members including the initial assessment attached at **Appendix A**;
- b) Provide any suggestions or further comments on how information could be made more accessible to Members, for consideration and inclusion in the Protocol.

Background documents

None