

Report of the Head of Democratic Services

30TH NOVEMBER 2020

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES FUNCTION

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Members will be aware of the requirement under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 ("the Measure") for each Local Authority to establish a Democratic Services Committee. The Measure also requires the Council to designate one of its officers to the statutory post of "Head of Democratic Services" and provide that officer with sufficient resources to discharge these statutory functions.

The Head of Democratic Services has a statutory responsibility to organise the discharge of the "democratic services functions" in accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 which includes:- The production of reports, as required, on the number of staff required to support democratic services and how the staff should be organised to ensure the Council, the Executive Board (Cabinet) and Committees receive high level support in the discharge of its democratic functions.

Democratic Services Staffing Resources

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) Executive Board support
(under the management of the Chief Executives' 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, an Official Car Driver and 4 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, facilitating accountability and transparency.
- Managing and providing Scrutiny and Committee Services support to the Council and its various Committees.
- Support services to Elected Members, including advice on the Council's Constitution and Members' Code of Conduct, Maintaining the Register of Members' Interests; Overseeing appeals relating to school admissions and school permanent exclusions.
- Servicing and hosting joint working arrangements – i.e. Dyfed Powys Police and Crime Panel, Wales Pension Partnership and the ERW Joint Committee.
- Servicing Council's arm's length companies i.e. Llesiant Delta Wellbeing Governance Group and CWM Environmental Ltd Shareholders Board.
- Managing the members constituency casework via a Councillor Enquiry system, Councillor expenses and arrangements for attending conferences and seminars. A new updated Councillor Enquiry process with the facility for members to view logged cases is being released currently.
- Support to the Chair and Vice-Chair of Council in their civic duties.
- Developing and updating the Democracy web pages managing democratic room bookings, operating the Authority's webcasting of meetings
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The Chief Executive's Business Support unit supports the work of the Leader and the 9 Executive Board Members and comprises a small team of staff. The Executive Board Support Office provides professional advice, research and information gathering, prepares speeches, and manages day to day correspondence and diary coordination

Key Challenges During the Year

As a result of the Covid19 pandemic much of the anticipated work planned for 2020/21 was delayed and priority given to putting procedures and arrangements in place to hold virtual meetings in accordance with the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 which came into force on the 22nd April 2020. It has been a challenging time for the team (and elected members) in changing how we work and getting to grips with new technology in order for meetings to be held remotely.

On the 23rd March 2020 the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a "lockdown" in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus and the service commenced a designated Covid19 enquiry line for elected members and maintained contact with members at least three times a week. In addition some members of the team were re-deployed to assist other areas of the Authority in managing critical service areas.

The response to the Covid-19 emergency has had and continues to have a direct impact on the workload of Democratic Services as additional resources are required to facilitate virtual meetings and ensure that our meetings can remain open to the public.

To ensure the public can access our meetings we have decided to webcast all Democratic meetings on a temporary basis until we are physically back in the Chambers.

Arrangements have been made for the public to continue to be able to ask questions in person (virtually) and to make virtual representations at our Planning and Licensing Committees. We have also made arrangements to ensure that we meet our Welsh Language Standard requirement to provide simultaneous translation at meetings.

Use of remote technologies is requiring all those involved in supporting, chairing or participating in meetings to learn new skills. Direct support has been provided by Democratic Services to Members and Officers and it continues to significantly impact on the workload of the team

The Council's Member Development Programme is an ongoing process, whilst the Covid19 pandemic has impacted upon the member development programme, training on video conferencing software has and continues to be provided to assist members with virtual attendance. We have also recently held a series of virtual Scrutiny training sessions, hosted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny which concentrated on the essential skills required to undertake scrutiny effectively and also skills for on-line meetings as we webcast scrutiny for the first time. A report on next year's member development programme will be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee in March 2021.

Key Challenges and Priorities for 2021-22

- Introduction of Hybrid meetings which will allow a mix of both physical and remote attendance at Democratic meetings.
- Refining and improving our systems for remote attendance and simultaneous translation facilities at meetings
- Preparations for the local government elections 2022. A significant piece of work will be to design and deliver the induction programme for both new Members and those returned at these elections.
- Publication of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill by the Welsh Assembly Government - this Bill proposes significant new duties including: mandatory webcasting of Council meetings; mandatory petition schemes; a duty to create a public participation scheme that will strengthen public involvement in the Democratic Process; and further development of family absence provisions for elected members.

Taken together, these developments will increase the workload of Democratic Services and introduce continued changes to roles. Having taking into account the extremely difficult (and ongoing) economic pressures facing the Council generally and the need for the Division to continue to identify / deliver / contribute to further savings, the staffing structure is considered to be sufficient for current service demands, however this will need to be continually monitored once the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill are known.