

Democratic Services Committee Task and Finish Group Report

New Ways of Working



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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the final report of the Task and Finish Group which has been seeking the views of elected and co-opted members on their preferred way of working for the Democratic Services function moving forward.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 introduced a legal requirement for Local Authorities to **make and publish arrangements** for the purpose of ensuring that Local Authority meetings can be held by means of any equipment or other facility which means that multi-location meetings (a mix of physical and remote attendance) must be held and this has therefore pre-empted any decision the Group may have made in regard to formal meeting attendance. The Task and Finish Group would, however, wish to encourage members to attend the Annual General Meeting in person if possible and also to attend in person after the Local Government elections in May 2022 as this will benefit members through personal interaction.

This report covers the views of members in terms of what accommodation needs are required going forward.

It is with great sadness that the Vice-Chair of the Task and Finish Group, Councillor Mair Stephens sadly passed away before this report was placed before the Democratic Services Committee and Council. Mair was instrumental in the work of the group, and she will be sadly missed.

I would like to thank members of the Task and Finish Group and officers from Democratic Services and the Better Ways of Working project team for their advice and support and their contribution to the review.

Cllr. Jeff Edmunds
Chair of the Task and Finish Group

Members of the Task and Finish Group



Cllr. Jeff Edmunds
(Chair)
New Independent Group



Cllr. Tyssul Evans
Plaid Cymru



Cllr. Irfon Jones
Independent



Cllr. Jean Lewis
Plaid Cymru



Cllr. Mair Stephens
(Vice-Chair)
Independent



Cllr. Dai Thomas
Plaid Cymru



Cllr. Emlyn Schiavone
Plaid Cymru



Cllr. Elwyn Williams
Plaid Cymru

** Councillors Rob James and Dot Jones were originally appointed to serve on the Task and Finish Group but stood down from the Group at its first meeting. Therefore, the Group continued with 8 members.

1.0 The Task & Finish Review

1.1 Objectives and Scope

The Democratic Services Committee (DSC) is required to periodically review the level of support provided to members to carry out their duties and bring forward proposals to full council as to what is required.

At its meeting held on the 23rd March 2021 (minute 3 refers) the Democratic Services Committee agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to consider new Ways of Working. The decision to establish the Task and Finish Group arose as the Authority had transformed its way of working due to the Covid19 pandemic and it was necessary to consult with elected members on how the Authority would operate its democratic process going forward.

As a result of the Covid19 pandemic the way the Authority convened democratic meetings changed significantly, as did the way the Authority provided support to elected members in their Councillor role.

Whilst the Authority has been holding all democratic meetings virtually, it was now time to consider how the democratic process will operate in the future, be that a hybrid approach or a continuance of virtual meetings only. It was also necessary to identify what support elected members require and how this can be delivered going forward (to include office administrative space and locations required).

Following its first meeting, the Group agreed that its main objectives for the review would be:

- To report to Council on member opinion on how the democratic function will operate in the future, to include member accommodation needs and how meetings will be convened going forward;
- To set an example and support the Council's initiatives i.e. carbon agenda, best use of resources etc;
- To take into account how the Authority's proposals compare with arrangements at other Local Authorities throughout Wales, being mindful that one size does not fit all.

1.2 Background

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 places a duty on Local Authorities to encourage local people to participate in decision-making by principal councils. Carmarthenshire has maintained its previous procedure in allowing the public to ask questions at Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny and to also make representations at relevant Committees i.e. Planning and Licensing, albeit virtually. Whilst not within the scope of this review, the Authority will produce a Public Participation Strategy for participation in the democratic process (comes into force in May 2022).

1.3 Work of the Group and its Approach

The Task and Finish Group's membership was as follows:

Group of 10 members on a politically balanced basis 5:2:2:1 (to include the 5 Democratic Services Committee members)

Cllr Tyssul Evans (PC)	Members of the Democratic Services Committee
Cllr Rob James (L)	
Cllr Irfon Jones (I)	
Cllr Emlyn Schiavone (PC)	
Cllr Dai Thomas (PC)	
Cllr Jeff Edmunds (NI)	Political Group Nominations
Cllr Dot Jones (L)	
Cllr Jean Lewis (PC)	
Cllr Mair Stephens (I)	
Cllr Elwyn Williams (PC)	

Councillor Jeff Edmunds was appointed Chair of the Group and Councillor Mair Stephens appointed as Vice-Chair of the Group. Councillors Rob James and Dot Jones stood down from the Group at the first meeting and these positions were left unfilled.

The Democratic Services Unit, based in the Chief Executive's Department, provided research and general support to the Group.

The following officers provided specialist advice and support during the Group's review:

- Mark Howard – Project Manager Better Ways of Working
- Linda Rees Jones – Head of Administration and Law
- Gaynor Morgan – Head of Democratic Services
- Michelle Evans Thomas – Principal Democratic Services Officer

The Group received a report from the Project Manager for Better Ways of Working on the work being undertaken by the Authority which included work to ensure that the Authority's accommodation strategy aligned with the Better Ways of Working proposals

The Task and Finish Group held a total of 4 meetings between May 2021 and February 2022. In addition, the Chair and Vice Chair invited each political group to meet with them to discuss initial thoughts and obtain the views of elected members on:-

- what accommodation Councillors felt was needed by them to fulfil their County Councillor role;
- suggestions for how meetings should be held going forward;
- what administrative, ICT and member development support was required and how this should be delivered.

Co-opted members were also approached by email to ascertain their views.

Following the sessions with the political groups the Chair and Vice Chair fed back to the Task & Finish Group who then met to agree and set questions for their all member surgery which was made available to both elected members and co-opted members in September 2021 and sought their views on how the democratic process should operate going forward.

2.0 Key Findings

The Group considered what had been the main positive and negative impacts of the Covid pandemic on members and staff involved in the democratic process, specific impacts on their roles and what aspects of the New Ways of Working should be embedded into future democratic functions. In addition, it discussed what has worked well and facilitated good new work practices.

The Group's main findings were:

- Feedback from both elected members and co-optees was generally consistent – everyone felt that democratic meetings and virtual contact with elected members had been working well. The work undertaken by Democratic Services, I.T. and Learning & Development was commended as it had taken a significant amount of training for both members and officers in order to move into the virtual meeting environment.
- Additional support was provided by the Democratic Services team for Chairs of Committee as for the first time a number of meetings were not only virtual but broadcasted live via the Authority's website.
- There was a general feeling that physical meetings allowed personal interaction, which was lacking in the virtual environment and new members in particular would benefit from meeting other members in person.
- Weekly communication with elected member via Democratic Services had been an excellent communication tool and well received.
- One major point stressed was that meeting remotely freed up time to enable those who have other work to do to join meetings; helping the carbon footprint and saving on travelling costs was also a major benefit.
- Some co-opted and elected members felt that there was a lack of personal interaction at virtual meetings.
- There were some issues regarding connectivity, and it was noted that members were and had been able to access council buildings to attend meetings if their broadband connection was poor or had developed a temporary fault.

- Some members felt that there was a need for both members and officers to be smart in their appearance at virtual meetings as it was noted that the dress code in some instances was very casual.

2.1 Budget & Identified Resources

The Authority has successfully procured WG grant funding for a hybrid solution in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen and a new upgraded kit for the Democratic Services Committee Room at County Hall. This kit was installed in July 2021 and the Authority has been testing the functionality with Cabinet Members. However, the on-going Covid19 pandemic and new variants thereof has delayed the roll out of multi-location (hybrid) meetings, therefore virtual meetings will continue until further notice.

A proportion of the travelling budget for the democratic process has been submitted as an efficiency saving in view of virtual rather than physical attendance.

The Group recognised that both the virtual and a multi-location meeting environment placed additional pressure on the Democratic Services team as does the decision to webcast all formal meetings. The ongoing challenges and changing roles will mean that staffing resources to support the democratic process needs to be kept under review with additional support provided from other divisions if needed.

3.0 Conclusions

Following commencement of the review, the Task and Finish Group was advised that the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 had introduced a legal requirement to hold multi-location meetings from 1st April 2021. This, however, corresponded with the findings of the consultations with the political groups and the all member survey, where a majority of members had expressed a preference for the hybrid approach.

The Group acknowledged the challenges of multi-location meetings for Committee Chairs and the support staff at both Democratic Services and IT.

4.0 Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group recommends to the Democratic Services Committee and full Council that:

Recommendation One

It notes the legal requirement under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 that a Local Authority must make and publish arrangements for the purpose of ensuring that Local Authority meetings are able to be held by means of any equipment or other facility which enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meetings. The Group therefore supports a move to a multi-location meeting environment as per the Act.

The Task and Finish Group does however encourage all members to attend physically for the Annual Meeting, the member induction launch and the first formal meeting of the Council in an election year.

Recommendation Two

That elected members (as is the case for officers) be permitted to book meeting spaces at both buildings owned by the Authority and at partner agency buildings. This would allow members to hold meetings with their constituents/hold surgeries in an office environment.

(The Group notes that the Cabinet can put in place its own arrangements)

Recommendation Three

That facilities for members be provided at the Authority's main administrative building as per existing arrangements i.e. Members' Lounge, Offices for Cabinet Members, Chair of Council and the Leader of the largest Opposition Group. The Members' Lounge should be bigger than the existing room with additional IT facilities provided. These arrangements to be reviewed regularly to ensure that the accommodation provision remains fit for purpose. Increasing or decreasing space based on usage as required.

Recommendation Four

The Group would encourage Chairs and Vice-Chairs to attend meetings in person in order to benefit from direct support from Democratic Services. This recommendation is made due to the complexity of running two systems (physical and remote) side by side in one meeting.

Recommendation Five

Notes the findings of the timing of meetings survey and acknowledges that a further survey will be undertaken once the new Council has been elected in May 2022.

5.0 Relevant Legislation/References:-

Reference	Link/Location
Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2021/1/contents/enacted
Democratic Services Task and Finish Group Survey Findings	Democratic Services Unit, County Hall, Carmarthen
Better Ways of Working Strategic Group	Transform, Innovate and Change, St Davies Park, Carmarthen.

6.0 Appendices

Appendix A - Task & Finish Group meetings and attendance

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Meeting	Councillors Present	Officers Present
9 a.m. 21 st May 2021 Virtual Meeting	Cllr Jeff Edmunds (NI) Cllr Tyssul Evans (PC) Cllr Rob James (L) Cllr Dot Jones (L) Cllr Irfon Jones (I) Cllr Jean Lewis (PC) Cllr Emlyn Schiavone (PC) Cllr Mair Stephens (I) Cllr Dai Thomas (PC) Cllr Elwyn Williams (PC)	Linda Rees Jones Mark Howard Gaynor Morgan Michelle Evans Thomas Siwan Rees
10 a.m. 8 th September 2021 Virtual Meeting	Cllr Jeff Edmunds (NI) Cllr Tyssul Evans (PC) Cllr Irfon Jones (I) Cllr Jean Lewis (PC) Cllr Emlyn Schiavone (PC) Cllr Mair Stephens (I) Cllr Elwyn Williams (PC)	Mark Howard Gaynor Morgan Michelle Evans Thomas Siwan Rees
2 p.m. 23 rd November 2021 Virtual Meeting	Cllr Jeff Edmunds (NI) Cllr Tyssul Evans (PC) Cllr Jean Lewis (PC) Cllr Emlyn Schiavone (PC) Cllr Mair Stephens (I) Cllr Elwyn Williams (PC)	Mark Howard Gaynor Morgan Siwan Rees
10 a.m. 11 th February 2022 Virtual Meeting	Cllr Jeff Edmunds (NI) Cllr Tyssul Evans (PC) Cllr Irfon Jones (I) Cllr Jean Lewis (PC) Cllr Emlyn Schiavone (PC) Cllr Dai Thomas (PC) Cllr Elwyn Williams (PC)	Mark Howard Gaynor Morgan
Political Group Sessions with Chair & Vice Chair of T&F Group	Independent Group & Unaffiliated Member – 30 th June 2021 New Independent Group – 30 th June 2021 Plaid Cymru Group – 28 th June 2021 Labour Group – not accepted.	
Co-opted Member Correspondence	15 th July 2021	

