

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held at County Hall, Usk on 12th May 2014 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT: County Councillor D. Evans (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Blakebrough, D.L. Edwards, R.G. Harris, S.G.M. Howarth and V.E. Smith.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs. T. Harry - Head of Democracy and Regulatory Service
Mrs S. King - Senior Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors P.R. Clarke, A. Easson, S. Jones, P. Jones, J. Prosser and S. White.

2. PUBLIC OPEN FORUM

There were no members of the public present.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

We resolved that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17th March 2014 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

A query was raised regarding timescales for actions, particularly in relation to the report for member training. The Head of Democracy and Regulatory Services advised that a report would be considered at full Council in June, regarding Member Training and Development.

5. MINISTER REPORT ON DIVERSITY

We received the Report on Diversity, from the Welsh Government Minister for Local Government and Government Business, which had been circulated for member information.

The report followed a survey that had been undertaken which Monmouthshire County Council had contributed to.

During discussion we noted the following points:

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- A member advised that they had found the report interesting, particularly reasons surrounding diversity.
- We highlighted the importance of providing an environment where people feel comfortable and mentoring should be encouraged.
- It was recognised that the spectrum of politics had completely changed over the past years and the role was time consuming.
- Members were aware that there was significant time commitment required for both Male and Female Councillors, due to various reasons, such as family and carer responsibilities.
- A member highlighted that experience of post holders should be considered and elected members should reflect on what they would be able to offer.
- Concerns were expressed regarding communication and some members were dissatisfied that they did not feel as informed as they had previously been.
- Clarification was requested regarding responsibilities and delegated powers. The Head of Democracy and Regulatory Services advised that the scheme of delegation was included in the constitution and officers had been tasked with a review to ensure that it reflected relevant legislation and delegated powers.
- The decision making process was discussed, in terms of increased diversity and more contributions.
- Scrutiny had been developed significantly in the authority and operated effectively, it would offer influence on decisions, challenge and holding executive members to account. Members had a role in ensuring that appropriate questions were asked and that performance is as it should be.
- We noted that the Cabinet work programme was regularly produced and updated.
- The frequency of meetings, particularly scrutiny, raised concern amongst members and some members were frustrated as actions were not achieved through the call-in process.
- A member highlighted that some issues had been the subject of scrutiny and reports had not been accepted.
- The Audit Committee had received a report on collaborative working and it was felt that there was a missed opportunity that financial matters were not considered. It was clarified that the report was a Wales Audit Office thematic piece of work which had gathered the information, the response had been provided in relation to a whole list of partnerships, and was not specific to questions, main partnerships were listed within the report.
- We noted that the Assistant Head of Finance would propose a new format for financial reports. Discussions had been held, following concerns raised, that performance and financial information was not integral. It was anticipated that reports would be more integrated, however, this proved difficult due to timings and deadlines. A report would be submitted to Cabinet with revised reporting framework.
- There was a requirement to look at areas where skills were already available and it was requested that information within finance reports could be more up to date.
- Members were informed that finance reports would be tailored to the specific select committee and any issues pertinent to the committee would be summarised within the covering report.

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- The committee appreciated that reports were specific to the relevant select committee and that officers would bring forward any issues of concern.
- Committees would be provided with the information so that they can evaluate performance of a particular area. However, it was noted that there should be more effective feedback from members to their group.
- We discussed training for members, in terms of their roles at committee meetings and asking questions as part of the scrutiny process.
- Some attendance at some scrutiny meetings had been poor, we noted that representatives on committees would be nominated by political leaders and numbers of select committee members may be reduced.
- Officers advised that attendance at meetings should be addressed by group leaders and the decision on whether to attend a meeting would be decided by the individual.
- Members were informed that they would be supported by officers, but clarification was required regarding the areas where support was needed. **It was agreed to add an item to the future agenda for discussion.**
- Clarification was provided regarding number of staff within the Local Democracy section. We were advised that an organisation chart was being developed by the Information Management Officer.
- Concerns were expressed regarding the decreased number of staff within Democratic Services and that different officers had been attending scrutiny committees. There was no continuity and it was a requirement to remain focused.

6. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

We discussed items for the future work programme, as follows:

- Requirements for developing role of councillor.
- Concerns were expressed regarding the conditions within the Council Chamber, particularly in relation to sound and lighting. It was suggested that an exercise was undertaken, to gain views on the suitability of the building and chamber.
- We were advised that the issue had been discussed at Political Leaders group and members had not advised of any major issues. **We agreed that a questionnaire would be distributed to members for their views and that a Health and Safety assessment would be carried out by the Health and Well Being Lead Officer.**
- We noted that it would be beneficial if members sat in fixed positions at Council meetings and retained those seats for each meeting.
- **Questionnaire to go out, then item on next agenda. Lawrence to do H&S check on chamber.**
- It was requested that a question could be included within the survey regarding whether members had experienced any symptoms following a Council meeting e.g. I sickness, headaches, red eyes. Useful to ask if have experienced any of symptoms.
- **We agreed that future work should consist of 3 elements, 1) checking infrastructure is in place to support members, (linked with the**

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development charter) 2) how can we be more proactive in getting residents involved (engagement – involving residents and challenging policy) 3) how we can be more proactive in challenging Welsh Government who make decisions on behalf of Monmouthshire County Council residents.

- Discussions were held regarding involvement of the Welsh Government in Democratic Services Committee meetings. **We agreed for an item to be included on the next agenda, in relation to connections and engagement with Welsh Government.**

We discussed the frequency of meetings, currently held 6 weekly and it was suggested that meetings could be held quarterly, to ensure a more detailed agenda.

It was agreed to add an item to the next agenda.

Clarification was requested regarding the scheme of delegation. The Head of Democracy and Regulatory Services would contact the Monitoring Officer.

7. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held at County Hall, Usk on **Monday 23rd June 2014 at 2.00pm.**

The meeting ended at 11.40 a.m.