

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held at County Hall, Usk on 23rd June 2014 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT: County Councillor D. Blakebrough (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Evans, D.L. Edwards, R.G. Harris, P. Jones, S. Jones, S.G.M. Howarth, V.E. Smith and S. White.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs. T. Harry	-	Head of Democracy and Regulatory Service
Mr J. Pearson	-	Local Democracy Manager
Mrs S. King	-	Senior Democratic Services Officer

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

We noted the appointment of County Councillor D. Blakebrough as Chair of the Democratic Services Committee.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN

County Councillor D. Evans was appointed as Vice-Chair of the Democratic Services Committee.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors P.R. Clarke, D. Edwards and J. Prosser.

We welcomed the Local Democracy Manager and thanked the previous Chairman for the success of the committee. The aim of the meeting was to review the purpose and direction of the committee and highlight aspirational actions to take forward.

4. PUBLIC OPEN FORUM

There were no members of the public present.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

**Minutes of the Democratic Services Committee
Dated 23rd June 2014 - continued**

6. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

We resolved that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12th May 2014 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

We noted updates, as follows:

- The Health and Safety questionnaire would be circulated by the end of the week.
- Members requested that the questionnaire would contain feedback regarding the suitability of the whole building.
- Members requested that a clock was provided in the Council Chamber.

We resolved that a whole building/site questionnaire would be circulated to all members. Feedback would be submitted to the meeting in September and the Design Manager would be invited to attend the meeting.

7. PURPOSE OF THE DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

The Chair invited members to comment and discuss the purpose of the committee. During discussion we noted the following:

- It was recognised that the committee had a useful function and had developed.
- We were advised that some other authorities had reduced the frequency of Democratic Services Committee meetings to 4 times a year.
- The Chair highlighted three pillars of the committee, 1) point of committee that services/resources in place to support members doing job – charter is action list for checking 2) promoting democracy to residents in Monmouthshire, i.e. going out to meetings, know role of councillors and what ‘we’ do.
- An item had been included on the agenda, promoting local democracy and ideas were invited on how this could be developed. 3) how do we engage with Welsh Government and establish links e.g. do we invite minister or we visit them. There was a requirement to raise awareness and for the public to understand the purpose of the committee.
- Further discussions were required in terms of finding ways of engaging, with Welsh Government and the public.
- It was recognised that the remit of the committee would be broader than just making sure that resources and support were available to members.
Members were encouraged to be proactive and update information and profiles on the website.

8. WALES CHARTER FOR MEMBER SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

The Chair highlighted that the charter was an action plan for ensuring that appropriate measures were in place.

It was suggested that the document could be colour coded (Red Amber Green).

**Minutes of the Democratic Services Committee
Dated 23rd June 2014 - continued**

The Head of Democracy advised that a report on member review would be considered by Council and there would be a possibility of aiming for charter status.

We were advised that the provision must be in place for member review, but it would be the choice of an individual member if they took up the offer, and the member would choose who they met with as facilitator. There would be a requirement for a training programme to be compiled.

Members were reminded that refresher training was undertaken on a rolling programme, in terms of finance, performance, risk, scrutiny, code of conduct, however, the number of members attending training had been limited.

The purpose of the charter would be to consider skills and competency of members. A consultation document would be developed for member training. At present, only licensing and planning training would be mandatory.

We resolved that a working group would be established to colour code the document and a few of the contentious items would be included on a future agenda for discussion.

A member requested a locker and paper copy of a phone book, which contained officer contact numbers.

We were informed that the information management officer was undertaking work, to ensure that all information would be available on the Hub. Laptops would be provided in the group offices, which would be set up for easy access for members.

9. PROMOTING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

We welcomed the Local Democracy Manager and the committee were advised of promotional work that had been undertaken in the past. In 2010, 6 young people visited County Hall (Cwmbran), which was successful and built upon for subsequent years.

Events were proposed in 2012 and members were invited to get involved, however, take up was low. The 'Run MCC for a day' event was held earlier in 2014 and competition finalists were involved in activities.

During discussion we noted the following points:

- Members expressed concern that competition finalists had not been involved in what had been promised.
- It was recognised that there was a need for work on local engagement, which would include a strategy and action plan.
- Actions for promoting democracy, would involve, working with schools, development of a strategy for the year, meetings with the community, updating website, raising awareness for residents to get involved in democracy. Success would be measured at the end of the year.

**Minutes of the Democratic Services Committee
Dated 23rd June 2014 - continued**

A working group would be established (which would not be formally minuted), to develop an engagement and awareness strategy.

We resolved that a letter would be sent to each of the four secondary schools in Monmouthshire, advising that the committee were looking at engagement of democracy portfolio and asking to notify when head boys/girls have been appointed.

We agreed that the meeting in October and 3 subsequent meetings, would be held in schools.

10. DEMOCRATIC SERVICES STRUCTURE

We were informed that the team consisted of, the Local Democracy Manager, Elections Officer, Senior Democratic Services Officer, 2.5 Democratic Services Officers (one was currently vacant and 0.5 would soon be vacant), Leader Secretary, Chairman Secretary and Member Secretary.

A flow chart would be circulated to members in relation to the structure within Democratic Services, which included, elections, Democratic Services, member support and Chairman's office.

During discussion the following points were noted:

- Concerns were expressed regarding the number of officers within the team and continuity in supporting meetings. We were advised that when the team was at full complement there could be dedicated officers to each committee, but whilst the team were short staffed cover would be shared between officers.
- Time had been saved by sending out electronic agendas and changes would be made with the website.
- Sufficient resources would be available when the team was fully staffed and it was confirmed that vacant posts would be filled.
- It was requested that all councillors received all full agendas. The Head of Democracy advised that this issue would be clarified, as part of the review of constitution.

The committee requested that feedback was provided regarding the vacant posts, at the meeting on 1st September 2014.

11. UPDATE ON TAX ON HOME TO WORK MILEAGE CLAIMS

The Head of Democracy advised that in accordance with HMRC rules, the authority had now started to tax members claims from home to county hall. The guidance stated that home becomes a workplace if members met with constituents at the members home.

**Minutes of the Democratic Services Committee
Dated 23rd June 2014 - continued**

It was recognised that members work from home, but there was a requirement to comply with rules and a need to be able to demonstrate that there was a regular occurrence meeting constituents at home.

During discussion the following points were noted:

- A member highlighted that taxation was a personal circumstance and there was a need to be able to demonstrate that the main place of work was home.
- The committee did not believe that the main place of work was County Hall, particularly for constituency business.
- Members expressed concerns that home details were displayed on the website, and if home was not the main place of work then these details should be removed and the main County Hall details used.
- Due to the nature of Monmouthshire as a rural County, members emphasised that they often had to go out and visit constituents at their homes.
- It was recognised that a definition of a place of work was required, particularly as members used their own utilities at their homes, for work purposes.
- We confirmed that further information and clarification was required.

We resolved that a member seminar, with payroll, would be arranged.

12. ENGAGING WITH WELSH GOVERNMENT

We resolved that this issue would be discussed by the working group looking at local democracy would look at this.

13. WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15

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

- Questionnaire on building
- Report on H&S
- Working Group to be established to colour code the Charter
- Working Group to be established to look at draft strategy for local democracy
- Letters to be sent to schools
- Organisation chart to be circulated to members
- Head of Democracy to check and confirm agenda despatch
- 1st September meeting, receive information on vacant posts
- Seminar to be arranged regarding tax on mileage

14. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

We discussed the frequency of meetings and agreed to continue with the interval between meetings.

We agreed that a letter would be sent to schools and if possible, meetings would be held at schools in October, November, December and January.

**Minutes of the Democratic Services Committee
Dated 23rd June 2014 - continued**

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held at County Hall, Usk on **Monday 1st September 2014 at 2.00pm.**

The meeting ended at 4.30 p.m.