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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held
at Council Chamber - Council Chamber on Monday, 23rd January, 2017 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: County Councillor F. Taylor (Chairman)

County Councillors: R. Harris, D. Edwards, J. Higginson, P. Jones,
J. Prosser, F. Taylor and A. Webb

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

John Pearson	Local Democracy Manager
Nicola Perry	Senior Democracy Officer
Matthew Gatehouse	Policy and Performance Manager
Abigail Barton	Communication and Engagement Manager

APOLOGIES:

Councillors D. Evans, P. Clarke, S. Jones and S. Howarth

1. Declarations of interest

Members agreed to declare interests under the relevant item.

2. Public Open Forum

There were no items for the public open forum.

3. To receive the minutes of the meeting held on 17th October 2016

The minutes were approved and signed by the Chair.

4. To receive the action list of the meeting held on 17th October 2016

We noted the action list.

The Chair advised that there had been no written response to the IRP but she had attended a consultation meeting and would provide an update.

It was requested that the information to be distributed with the Council Tax demand be circulate to Members for information. We were advised that the deadline for the final copy for approval is 9th March 2017.

5. Update on activity: Raising awareness and forthcoming events

There had been an opportunity for anyone interested in standing for election to attend an event in November. There had been representation by a member of all political groups, along with members of the public. An interesting discussion had taken place regarding information on becoming a local member, and some of the possible barriers.

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We were advised that election briefings were taking place on 26th and 31st January, for current members, candidates, clerks and agents. The Local Democracy Manager highlighted the areas to be covered at the briefings.

It was suggested that Members circulate the information, or add to their local websites.

We heard of an upcoming event being held at County Hall on 20th February 2017. This would be an opportunity for young people to come to the chamber and gain an understanding of politics in general, as well as an opportunity to think about the links to decisions made by the Council. All Members are invited to attend. Group Leaders have confirmed attendance.

In terms of Community Governance, we were awaiting timescales for a citizens debate, to be facilitated by local groups. This may be held in the next term of Council. Further information would be circulated when available.

The Chair hopes to look at recommendations for the next Democratic Services Committee, with options to take forward.

We noted that there is to be a Senior Leadership Team restructure while Mr. W. Mclean is acting as Interim CYP Lead.

It was suggested that Whole Place Officer and Volunteer Programme Lead be invited to the next meeting. It would be appreciated if officers could present to the Committee detail of who they are engaging with in the democratic process, and how they are making improvements.

We received information regarding purdah, noting that it was expected to commence on 21st March 2017. Further information would be distributed closer to the election.

6. Independent Remuneration Panel - Feedback from consultation events

The Chair had attended a consultation event and relayed the comments of the Committee. The following points were highlighted:

- Members at other Local Authorities receive different levels of additional financial support. This should be looked into and debated by the next Council.
- Members were surprised that the carers allowance had not been increased. The IRP response was that they thought this had been carefully considered. It was thought that being known as 'Costs of Care' could be considered a stigma.
- The Members allowance is not to be increased and is no longer linked to the average wage. It was expressed that there was a need to advise on what basis the levels had been set.
- There is a need for better public understanding surrounding Members expenses.

7. Plans for Councillor Induction

The Local Democracy Manager provided a draft timetable for the upcoming Councillor Induction programme.

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Members expressed concern that some training events coincided with half term.

It was suggested that the training sessions should be recorded.

It was requested that, when agreed, the diary is shared with outside bodies.

We heard that guidance would be available in a newly developed Members area on the Hub.

8. Candidate Guides

The Local Democracy Manager advised that an election guide for candidates has been developed, and would be circulated at the upcoming briefing sessions. The information will also be available on the website.

With regards to new Councillors, a 'new starter' pack would be handed out on the night of count. This will include a paper copy of the WLGA New Councillor's Guide, timetable of induction and agendas for the training sessions. Information will be available on the Hub.

Members questioned if there was an adequate number of staff in the election office. It was suggested that assurance be sought from the Returning Officer prior to the next meeting.

9. Wales Audit Office Governance Report

The Policy and Performance Manager presented the Wales Audit Office Governance Report.

The report had already been considered by Audit Committee who have overall responsibility for the performance management arrangements. However there are issues that will be of particular interest to the Democratic Services Committee.

The report concluded that "The Council has made progress in improving its governance arrangements although more work is needed to strengthen the transparency of decision making and recording."

The issues of particular relevance to this committee highlighted in the report include:

- YouTube streaming of meetings increase the transparency of meetings.
- Cabinet meetings are not minuted, this is compliant with in accordance with its Constitution and the Local Government Act 1972. However WAO considers a written record of proceedings to be good governance and practice.
- Poor use of the microphones the chamber results in parts of the records being inaudible.
- The report stressed the importance of minutes being signed at the next suitable meeting in accordance with the Council's Constitution.
- There are positive examples of scrutiny holding Cabinet to account. However the report also includes an example that suggests scrutiny is not always able to effectively fulfil its role
- The relationship between Cabinet and select committees is generally positive.
- Select committees follow an agreed work programme and 'call in' decisions made by Cabinet as appropriate.

The four new proposals for improvement made within the report were:

- Further improve the clarity of reports that members receive to ensure they have access to appropriate and timely information in a format that is easy to read and understand.

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- Ensure that decisions are clearly and consistently recorded to provide a reliable, transparent and easily accessible decision-making trail.
- Strengthen scrutiny's impact, status and effectiveness including: formally recording Cabinet responses to scrutiny recommendations and observations and better co-ordination of Cabinet and select committee forward work programmes.
- Ensure that information on the Council's website is accurate, complete and up to date.

Members were invited to comment and the following points were noted:

Members expressed disappointment with the live streaming system and added that issues with the microphones in the Council Chamber need to be addressed. It was suggested that they are checked prior to meetings. The Local Democracy Manager highlighted that Monmouthshire is the only Authority to live stream all their meetings held in the Chamber.

A Member expressed that recording of minutes had improved, providing a clear conclusion and action list.

A question was raised why Cabinet were reluctant to record minutes. It would be of interest to know if other Councils record their Cabinet meetings. We noted that we are more transparent than the report infers.

A Member requested that the report be forwarded to all Members and be further discussed at Coordinating Board. It was noted that the report had been presented to Audit Committee.

A Member suggested that meetings should be shown on televisions in reception area. We noted that this may be a disruption to reception but conversations could be held with IT colleagues to discuss.

It was requested that Member attendance at committees be addressed at the next meeting.

The Local Democracy Manager highlighted areas of progression within the report. In terms of Modern Gov. an extra section is due to be rolled out for officer use. This is on hold and is expected to be rolled out following the election. With regards to live streaming, we live stream more than other authorities, and can stream any meeting held in the Chamber. The library on you tube allows access to all meetings since we began live streaming. Since the introduction of Modern. Gov there has been improvements to the website, but still ongoing improvement.

The Chair concluded:

- We would look at improvements to the quality of sound in the Chamber, eg. Chairs to remind people at the start of meetings, check microphones prior to start of meeting.
- The Policy and Performance Manager would look into the streaming of meetings in the reception area, and respond at next meeting.
- Issues could be addressed at Coordinating Board.
- Responses from Cabinet Members to scrutiny recommendations, as well as recording outcomes of motions and petitions at Council should be considered.

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10. **To note the date and time of next meeting as Monday 3rd April 2017 at 2.00pm**

The meeting ended at 3.50 pm

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