

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held
at Council Chamber - Council Chamber on Monday, 26th September, 2022 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: County Councillor David Jones (Chair)
County Councillor Peter Strong (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Louise Brown, Tomos Davies, Meirion Howells,
Penny Jones, Angela Sandles, Maria Stevens, Armand Watts,
Laura Wright and Tony Easson (substitute for Su McConnel)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Matt Phillips	Chief Officer People and Governance and Monitoring Officer
John Pearson	Local Democracy Manager
Nicola Perry	Senior Democracy Officer

APOLOGIES:

Councillors Su McConnel

1. Declarations of interest

None.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th June 2022 were approved as a correct record.

3. Code of Conduct/Standards of Practice - public/officers and public/members

County Councillor Louise Brown was invited to introduce the discussion. In doing so we heard that the request for the discussion was based on the idea that the constitution covers the code of conduct between members and officers, but there is no code of conduct or agreed policy for interactions between members of the public and officers or members. It was suggested that a policy would be useful when controversial matters arise.

Members were invited to highlight concerns.

County Councillor Armand Watts highlighted that MCC do not allow officers to attend events alone, for example, a polling station or consultation events. He added that in terms of best practice we should look at the responsiveness of officers to requests from the public.

It was stated that, overall, where there have been issues between officer/members and members of the public the Monitoring Officer has done a great job of providing advice.

County Councillor Peter Strong referenced issues with social media, and the fine line between interaction and intimidation.

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County Councillor Maria Stevens highlighted issues around anti-social behaviour in her ward which had left her feeling vulnerable, in turn she had removed her personal details from public view.

The Head of People and Governance and Monitoring Officer explained that MCC have a corporate complaint process which is where members of the public can report complaints about the Council. Within that framework there is the ability to deal with individuals who have exhausted the complaints process.

County Councillor Brown expressed that more should be done and referred to emails she had provided with suggested guidelines and how these had not been looked into.

It was suggested that raising awareness and behaviour notices in public spaces could be useful.

The seriousness of the subject was acknowledged, and suggestion made to add this to a future agenda, with a view to look at best practice in other authorities.

It was noted that issues were not frequent, and a sense of perspective should be maintained.

4. Members Support/Information

County Councillor Peter Strong raised an issue brought to him by members regarding how best to proceed with casework, including contacting and raising issues with officers. He added that this was in no way a criticism but rather identifying if the system could improve.

It was thought that the pandemic had been disruptive and had created distance, affecting communication between officers and members. It may be useful to reintroduce members to officers.

It was suggested that a timeline be introduced for officers dealing with member requests.

There were comments regarding MyMonmouthshire, particularly that the MonMaps is a difficult system to use. The Local Democracy Manager would refer the issues to the digital team.

The Local Democracy Manager highlighted that following the election in May we had held meet and greet sessions with officers. He agreed there was a need to raise awareness of officer responsibility. A list of key services and contact details had been circulated to all members in May 2022. He added that the Democratic Services team are always available to help.

It was agreed that further discussion on face to face interactions with officers and a County tour would be brought to the next meeting.

5. Elections Act 2022 - Voter ID

The Local Democracy Manager explained that the government legislation around voter ID is coming into effect for English local elections in May 2023, but at any point between now and

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2025 can come into force in Wales for a general election. It was brought to the meeting to raise awareness of potential impacts.

Voters will be required to attend their polling station with identification, there will be an extensive list of acceptable photographic ID, also a list of exempt items. This could have an impact on the number of voters being turned away for not having the required ID.

Those without ID can apply for a certificate to use in place of photographic ID.

Also highlighted:

- Restricting the handling on postal votes
- Removing the 15 year limit on overseas voters
- Administering checks within polling stations

The potential of snap general election could cause challenges and bad news stories.

County Councillor Penny Jones noted that the demographic of Monmouthshire would impact the issue. She also noted that administration of voter ID would have impact on the service Democratic Services provide for members. She suggested that members be involved and provide information to residents when canvassing.

County Councillor Armand Watts highlighted the groups who would be disenfranchised and suggested that we write to the Minister and ask them to refocus on the problems that could be encountered.

County Councillor Tomos Davies sympathised with the impact on officers but supported the legislation adding that polling stations are vulnerable to voter fraud and voters should feel confident when expressing their democratic opinion

The Local Democracy Manager explained that the potential of a negative effect in the press would have a negative impact on members.

6. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the forward planner. To add to the meeting on 21st November 2022

- Code of Conduct
- Contact Sheet
- Discussion on the potential to change the councils voting system to STV from first past the point
- Draft diary 2023/24

It was thought the timing of Council meetings should be discussed earlier than June 2023.

7. Next Meeting - 21st November 2022

Noted.

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The meeting ended at Time Not Specified