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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held
at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Monday, 21st November, 2022 at
2.00 pm

PRESENT: County Councillor David Jones (Chair)

County Councillors: Tomos Davies, Meirion Howells, Penny Jones,
Su McConnell, Maria Stevens, Peter Strong, Armand Watts,
Laura Wright, Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler and Maureen Powell

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

John Pearson
Nicola Perry

Local Democracy Manager
Senior Democracy Officer

1. Declarations of interest

None.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th September 2022 were confirmed as an accurate record. In doing so, the following points were noted:

With regards to a question regarding a tour of the County it was confirmed that officers are looking at options and it could possibly be arranged for the New Year.

Customer Services have updated their policies to reflect the discussions around code of conduct.

Issues around the Welsh Language Commissioner Report would be better placed at a Scrutiny Meeting for consideration.

3. Council Diary - 2023-24

The Local Democracy Manager presented a report in order for the committee to review the diary of meetings for 2023/24 and to recommend the diary to Council for approval. He also sought views on the timing of the AGM of Council.

It was asked that planning site visits are taken into consideration when setting the diary of meetings.

Members agreed that it had been appropriate to hold 2 separate meetings for the AGM this year given the number of new councillors but going forward combining into one meeting would be adequate.

There was a suggestion that the meeting be held on one day, but the day be divided.

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Monday, 21st November, 2022 at 2.00 pm

It was thought appropriate to issue a survey to members to assess opinions on timing of meetings, and this process could be started in the new year. County Councillor Penny Jones pointed out that Council had agreed that the decision on timing of meetings would be revisited in May/June 2023.

Upon being put to a vote the committee resolved:

That the diary of meetings for 2023/2024 be recommended to Council.

That the committee put forward a recommendation to full council that the AGM be held as one meeting.

4. Draft Remuneration Panel Report 2022-23

The Local Democracy Manager presented the report for the Committee to note the contents of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales draft report 2023- 2024.

Headline changes were highlighted as being an increase in basic salary, and small increases in additional salaries.

Views of the committee can be fed back to the Remuneration Panel. The report does no longer go to Full Council.

Concerns were raised that given the current cost of living crisis this was not the right time to implement the increase in salaries. It was suggested that the Council should reflect carefully on the proposals.

On the other hand, it was expressed that to not adequately compensate members could reflect poorly in representation and would not correctly reflect the community. It was also recognised that members are also affected by the cost of living crisis.

There was unease around the increases, given the possibilities of staff redundancies due to budget shortfall.

The importance of this remaining an independent process and it was stated that we should not go down the route of setting own salaries.

The Committee resolved to accept the recommendation:

That Councillors note the determinations of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales.

5. Change of Voting System - Local Elections

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Monday, 21st November, 2022 at 2.00 pm

The Local Democracy Manager presented the report for the Democratic Services Committee to agree methodology for reviewing and gauging members appetite for a change to the voting system for local elections.

Local authorities have until 15th November 2024 to agree to change their voting system however a number of administrative processes are required, including a full electoral review for all of Monmouthshire, following the decision to change the system and ahead of the next election.

A Member Seminar was being proposed to consider the impact of the changes

Members were not keen to support the changes but understood that a seminar would better gauge opinions.

The Local Democracy Manager suggested that he could send a poll to all members to avoid an unnecessary seminar. If the responses required it, then the seminar could go ahead.

The Committee resolved to accept the recommendation:

That Councillors agree to the process set out below for sharing the information on the change with all councillors and determine whether the item should be put to full council.

6. White Paper - Electoral Administration and Reform

The Local Democracy Manager presented the consultation document, highlighting specific aspects that relate to members:

1. To revert to a 4 year council term rather than 5 year;
2. Mandatory training for Councillors.

Under the Local Government and Elections Act, Welsh Government determined that from May 2022 the terms for councils would be 5 years. This was agreed with the backdrop that scheduling elections would not clash. If the Committee considers 5 years too long, we can forward a response.

In terms of what is and what is not mandatory training, in signing the declaration of office member agree to abide by the code of conduct which as such makes this mandatory training. Planning and Licensing also require mandatory training. The paper looks to question who should decide what training should be mandatory.

It was thought the WLGA would be better placed to decide mandatory training.

It was stated that there is a lack in training of legislation around privacy and safeguarding, and access to information, for example, for looked after children.

It was agreed that training is important for all members, and beneficial to receive updates throughout the term.

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Democratic Services Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Monday, 21st November, 2022 at 2.00 pm

A comment was made that from the end of the 3rd year term onwards, time is often taken up by election issues, and therefore a 5 year term enables members to accomplish more.

It was suggested that bitesize chunks of training would be useful.

7. Date of next meeting - 23rd January 2023

Noted.

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm