

# **NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**17th April 2023**

### **Report of the Head of Democratic Services**

#### **Matter for Decision**

**Wards Affected:** All wards

#### **Democratic Services – Assessment of Resources to support the Democratic Services Function**

#### **Purpose of the Report:**

1. To report the outcome of an assessment of the adequacy of resources to support the Democratic Services Function.

#### **Background:**

2. The Head of Democratic Services has a statutory responsibility to organise the discharge of the “democratic services functions” in accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, which includes:
  - The production of reports, as required, on the number of staff required to support democratic services and how the staff should be organised to ensure the Council, the Cabinet and Committees receive high-level support in the discharge of its democratic functions.

3. The structure chart in Appendix 1 sets out the current structure of the Democratic Services Team.
4. Since March 2022, there have been a number of changes / developments that have affected the workload of Democratic Services:
  - a. The local government elections of May 2022 resulted in a large number of new members and a change to the Council's administration. The administrative, training and induction requirements surrounding this were extensive and are ongoing.
  - b. The introduction of legislated hybrid meetings following the Covid-19 emergency has had and continues to have a direct impact on the workload of Democratic Services. Use of remote technologies is requiring all those involved in supporting, chairing or participating in meetings to learn and maintain new skills. Direct support has been provided by Democratic Services to elected members and officers and it continues to significantly impact on the workload of the team. The preparations for meetings has increased significantly as well as the support required during the meetings.
  - c. IT support to Members and Officers now forms a significant part of the role of the Democratic Services Team.
  - d. Simultaneous Welsh translation at Council meetings has been introduced.
  - e. Turnover in staffing in the Scrutiny Team, resulting in ongoing recruitment and induction.
  - f. The Senior Scrutiny and Project Management Officer will be taking Maternity Leave in June 2023 and cover will be ring-fenced to the Democratic Services Team.

- g. The subsequent vacant post will be advertised, however recruiting to a temporary post can be problematic.
  - h. Audit Wales will be conducting a review into the Scrutiny Arrangements of the Council in April 2023, the findings of which could have a significant impact on the workload of the team.
- 5. In addition to the above, significant new duties have accompanied the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 including: mandatory webcasting of all Council meetings; mandatory petition schemes; a duty to create a public participation scheme that will strengthen public involvement in the democratic process; and further development of family absence provisions for elected members.
- 6. The Democratic Services function of the South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee is being undertaken by Neath Port Talbot as well the ongoing work supporting the Swansea Bay City Region Joint Scrutiny Committee. The logistics and practicalities of supporting joint and regional committees with members across separate Councils and other agencies is proving resource intensive and administratively challenging.
- 7. The Forward Work Planning mechanisms of the Council have been significantly enhanced to ensure robust and planned decision making which has resulted in a sharp increase to the workload to support the administrative requirements surrounding this.
- 8. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) have in addition launched their own programme of work, including their Diversity in Democracy Programme that will impact on the work of the Democratic Services Team.

9. Following the Local Government Elections in May 2022, focus has now moved from induction to the development of a member-training programme, which is facilitated by the Democratic Services Team.
10. Neath Port Talbot has a number of significant projects within the County Borough ongoing at present, such as the Afan Valley Adventure Resort, GCRE and has recently been successful in its Freeport bid. Any forums and meetings within these projects will bring with it its own governance framework and it is highly likely the Democratic Services Team will be asked to support the administration of such meetings. Therefore, ongoing consideration must be given to the resourcing of such meetings and future reports will be brought to members in the event of any decisions required in respect of resource allocations
11. As part of the Annual Survey, Members will be asked for feedback on the support received and any feedback will be built into service improvement, which could impact the workload of the Democratic Services Team.
12. Taken together, these developments will continue to increase the workload of Democratic Services and include ongoing changes to the role of the team.

## **Assessment of Resources**

13. The structure of the Democratic Services Team is attached at appendix 1.
14. The Grade 5 post is vacant and will remain to allow for a vacancy management budget contribution.

15. There has been some disruption due to short and medium term sickness absence. The Democratic Services Team is responsible for the facilitation of statutory Council meetings so in the case of sickness absence, the work must be covered by another member of the team which adds to already significant workloads. This is currently proactively managed but ongoing pressure could result in increased instances of staff absences which exacerbates the issue.
16. It is the view of the Head of Democratic Services that the workload and demand on the team is consistent and increasing. Whilst there is sufficient support within the team to support the Democratic Services Function at present, the ongoing pressure to support additional areas of work is unsustainable. The Team are working at capacity and the pressure of further added responsibilities will have a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing and potential increased levels of sickness absence. The quality of existing work is also likely to suffer which will have a detrimental impact on the standard of legal documents such as minutes and decision notices supporting the soundness of Council decisions.

### **Financial Impact:**

17. The financial costs of the Democratic Services Team are met within existing salary budgets across the responsibilities of the Chief Executive's Directorate.

### **Integrated Impact Assessment:**

18. No impact.

### **Workforce Impact:**

19. This report states the current workload of the Democratic Services Team.

### **Risk Management:**

20. Continued pressure on the Democratic Services Team could lead to work related stress and the ongoing pace could result in the quality of the work undertaken diminishing.

### **Legal Powers:**

21. Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011.  
Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

### **Consultation:**

22. There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

### **Recommendations:**

23. That the Democratic Services Committee endorse the Democratic Services structure set out in Appendix 1 and notes the report.

### **Reason for Decision**

24. To enable the Head of Democratic Services to discharge the statutory duty placed upon her as set out in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011

### **Appendices:**

25. Appendix 1 – Current structure chart - March 2023

## **List of Background Papers:**

26 None

### **Officer Contact:**

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