



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council



NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNCIL DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT

2022-2023

Chair's Foreword

It was my privilege to take forward the role as Chair of the Democratic Services Committee through this important inaugural year for the Democratic Services Committee, following the Local Government Elections in May 2022 and it is with great pleasure that I present this report for the Democratic Services Committee covering the period from June 2022 to May 2023

The election welcomed 19 new Members within the Council and the role of this Democratic Services Committee has been more important than ever, to ensure that we support all new and returning Members to undertake their role.

The publication of the report is an attempt to provide an element of good practice for Members in addition to the production of an appropriate yardstick with which to approach the generation of future reports.

The Democratic Services Committee's forward work programme is agreed by members on a rolling basis. Whilst the Democratic Services Committee takes decisions and provides direction for the Council on several key matters relating to member support and associated issues, Members remain mindful that it is the cabinet and ultimately Council that has overall responsibility for all strategic and far reaching decision making on behalf of Neath Port Talbot Council.

However, Members are also mindful that they are charged with the duty of carrying out all of the statutory requirements provided for this committee under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. In this respect, I am delighted to report on the success of the Democratic Services Committee during this period.

The work and support of the Council's Democratic Services Section should not go unnoticed through the Member Induction Programme and beyond, with the support and advice, training and the provision of technology to assist members. This appreciation was clearly visible through the results of the Members Survey results and our thanks go to the Head of Democratic Services and the dedicated team who continue to go over and above to support all elected members.

We have embraced a dynamic approach as a Democratic Services Committee, being fortunate to build upon the strong foundations of the previous Committee and its former Chairs. We will continue to champion areas previously progressed, in particular the diversity in democracy agenda that the former Democratic Services Committee passionately highlighted through its working group arrangements, but also focus on areas of addressing member intimidation and harassment to ensure all members feel safe in their roles and are supported in various forums. The public perception of the role of the elected member also needs to be built on to encourage anyone in the community to put their name forward as a candidate should they wish to contribute their communities.

As a new Democratic Services Committee Membership there are many areas and opportunities we have committed to take forward over the next Municipal Year to ensure

that each and every Member is given the best opportunity to deliver for their residents and will look to produce a robust forward work programme in the new municipal year to achieve this aim.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank my Vice Chair, Councillor Nathan Goldup-John for his support and advice during my first year as Chair of the Democratic Services Committee and to each of the Members for their attendance, input and positive challenge brought to each and every meeting.

I would also like to place on record my thanks for continued hard work and dedication of the Democratic Services Team.

Cllr Saifur Rahaman (Chair of the Democratic Services Committee)

Members of the Democratic Services Committee

2022-2023

Cllr Saifur Rahaman	Chair
Cllr Nathan Goldup-John	Vice Chair
Cllr Jo Hale	
Cllr Mike Harvey	
Cllr James Henton	
Cllr Alan Lockyer	
Cllr Andy Lodwig	
Cllr Peter Rees	
Cllr Chris Williams	
Cllr Sarah Thomas	

The Democratic Services Committee formally met four times during 2022/23 and meetings were held on a hybrid basis, in the Council Chamber and over the Microsoft Teams platform.

The Chair is a member of and attends regular meetings of the All Wales Network for Member Support and Development where best practice is discussed and useful relationships are formed.

The remit of the Democratic Services Committee

The functions of the Democratic Services Committee are:-

- To exercise the functions of the Council under Section 8(1) (a) Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 (designation of Head of Democratic Services) (as more particularly described in Section 9(1) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011);
- To review the adequacy of provision by the Council of staff, accommodation and other resources to discharge democratic services functions (including but not limited to councillor training, Improvements and innovations to Council democratic practices)
- To make reports and recommendations to the Council in relation to such provision;
- To determine whether or not the Councillors period of family absence should be cancelled in accordance with Regulation 34 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011.
- To determine whether or not to withhold a Councillor's Remuneration should they fail to return following a period of family absence on the date specified in the notice provided
- It is for the Democratic Services Committee to determine how to exercise these functions however the Democratic Services Committee may not exercise any functions other than the functions set out above unless approved by Full Council

The work of the Democratic Services Committee in 2022-2023

Member Induction and Member Development

The Member Induction Programme saw the most extensive programme of training to newly elected and returning Members, over and above the prescribed mandatory training requirements.

During the course of the first municipal year, further general and bespoke sessions were delivered both externally and internally.

The training sessions were undertaken both virtually and through the hybrid approach and at various times to accommodate Members with their personal and business commitments. Where Members were unable to attend, individual 1-1 sessions were arranged.

The Democratic Services Committee is responsible for the training and development opportunities provided to Members by the Council Democratic Services Section and the rest of the Council. Therefore the Democratic Services Committee were keen to embark on a Members Survey to obtain feedback from Members in respect of the Induction programme to ascertain the relevance/length/content of the sessions and where, if any, improvements could be made for future induction training programmes. It was pleasing to note that overall, Members said they were satisfied with the delivery, timings and content of the training.

It is appreciated that for a few Members the programme was difficult to accommodate and the Council Democratic Services team were appreciative of the feedback, to allow them to refine the induction programme for the benefit of future Members.

Going forward, it is important to build on the training foundations of the Induction Programme to ensure Members are further equipped with the skills and further knowledge base to undertake their role and the Committee have supported the Personal Development Review Process undertaken by the members within their political groups but also provide Members with the opportunity to take forward private discussions to establish any additional training needs and also the opportunity to discuss general wellbeing, which as a Committee, we feel is just as important. Members were reminded that, wherever possible, members can have an opportunity to review their training and development needs on an annual basis should they wish to undertake this. Members noted that the Head of Democratic Services would communicate with Group Leaders to consider training for members to undertake personal development reviews with their peers and then invite and encourage wider members to complete a Personal Development Review should they so wish.

Roles and Responsibilities:

Following the Local Government elections, training on the roles and responsibilities of the Democratic Services Committee was given to the committee.

Multi Location Meeting Policy

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 statutory guidance required the Council to develop a policy around multi location meetings. The Democratic Services Committee considered some key issues including; determination of meeting types, standards of behaviour and etiquette. The policy was later ratified at Full Council.

The Democratic Services Committee have been heavily involved in the implementation and roll out of the hybrid meeting system since initial discussions in 2019 with the Democratic Services Committee being pleased to see that members can choose to attend meetings either via attendance at the Council Chamber or through the MS Teams platform. The live streaming / webcasting of full Council meetings is a further approach to engaging with the public, allowing members of the public to watch meetings as they happen from their own setting, rather than having to attend the Council Chamber, which has previously been recognised as a barrier for public participation. The Democratic Services Committee welcomes to uploading of meetings on Youtube as well for individuals to watch.

Other benefits achieved through include:

- A positive demonstration of accountability and transparency;
- Encouraging engagement and debate, by creating more opportunities for the public to access meetings
- Accuracy of recording of meetings including recording of decisions, voting and attendance;
- The opportunity to raise the profile of the work of Councillors, and the discussions behind the decisions of Council and its committees

Councillor Safety and Wellbeing

The welfare and mental health of Members is crucially important and Members need to be aware of the support that is available to them.

The Democratic Services Committee were updated on ongoing issues in relation to Councillor safety and wellbeing, in particular the Local Government Associations' 'Debate not Hate' programme.

Handling Harassment Abuse and Intimidation

The Role of an Elected Member is integral to the running of the Council and as such an important role of an Elected Member is to keep in touch with their residents and communities, which includes communication via telephone, email, social media, virtual meetings and face to face contact with constituents, for example, by holding ward surgeries, making visits to people's homes, or when receiving people at their own homes.

A range of safety provisions available to Members were outlined at the Democratic Services Committee in April and it is important to recognise the effects on Members wellbeing, when a victim of any personal or cyber attack.

The Democratic Services Committee were updated on the Councillor's Guide to Handling Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation led by the Local Government Association (LGA). I wrote to the Chair of the WLGA expressing the committee's concerns, and desire to be part of any working groups going forward.

Annual Survey of Members

The Democratic Services Committee endorsed the content and process of the annual survey of members, which was undertaken in Spring 2023. The findings of which help to determine focus and resource and training for the next Civic Year.

Public Participation Strategy

The Democratic Services committee were asked to be part of the consultation on the Council's Public Participation Strategy, with particular focus on the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 which requires councils to encourage local people to participate in their decision making. The Public Participation Strategy was later ratified at Council.

Democracy is something to be valued and nurtured. At a local government level this means a commitment to listen to all voices, for those voices to be heard and to work together with our communities to explore and resolve issues of concern, promote and recognise achievements and face new challenges together.

Our council is strongly committed to fostering a culture of partnership with local people and communities, encouraging and supporting them to participate in our decision making, and keeping them informed about how their participation has influenced decisions.

The Democratic Services Committee looks forward to supporting the positive work being undertaken in this area.

Independent Remuneration Panel Wales Draft Annual Report

The committee considered the Draft Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales. The committee discussed the proposed changes to be implemented in 2023/2024 and agreed to make a brief response to the consultation.

Members' Annual Report Scheme

Members were reminded of the current policy to support the production of annual reports by members of the Council. Members received and noted the Members' Annual Report Scheme.

Assessment of Resources for the Democratic Services Committee

Following consideration of a report on the outcomes of an assessment of the adequacy of resources within the Democratic Services Team, Members were in support of the recommendations contained within the report.

Diversity in democracy

Members also noted the requirement to promote Diversity in Democracy and how this can be achieved. Members agreed to support further work in these areas and to consider the Diversity in Democracy programme on their Forward Work Programme.

Future Priorities

The Democratic Services Committee regularly reviews its forward work programme and has identified the following priority areas for consideration in 2023-2024 amongst the standing items that we will receive.

- Overseeing a draft training programme for elected members following the recent survey work undertaken;
- Commenting and developing strategies to correspond with Local Democratic Week 2023 and onwards
- Continuing to undertake work to look at harassment, intimidation and the support that can be provided to elected members in this regard
- Diversity in Democracy and how we can do more as a Committee and Council to encourage greater diversity in our candidates for future elections
- Reviewing of participation work such as our E-Petition Schemes and Public Speaking at Council meetings
- Consider the development of a protocol for member support through the work undertaken by the Welsh Local Government Association.
- Further implementation of the Welsh Local Government Association Democracy Handbook