



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**10<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2020**

### **ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20**

#### **REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

#### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Democratic Services Committee with the opportunity to consider the Annual Report for the Municipal Year 2019/20:

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that the Members:

- 2.1 Review the draft Annual report at Appendix 1.
- 2.2 Subject to 2.1, agree for the Chair of Democratic Services to endorse the Democratic Services Committee Annual Report 2019/20 to the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Council on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

#### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To provide to Council a summary in respect of the work of the Democratic Services Committee during the Municipal year.

#### **4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 The purpose of the annual reports is to provide a summary of the work undertaken by the Committee throughout the Municipal Year and for this to be reported to the Annual General Meeting of the Council.
- 4.2 The achievements listed in the Annual Report are not exhaustive but reflect some of the successful projects over the last year. Notable examples are given of how the individual Committees have worked to tackle important issues in a collaborative and efficient way.

## **5. CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

- 5.1 The Democratic Services Committee has continued to focus on a number of important areas relating to democratic functions and support for Members; Despite the initial lockdown and the suspension of formal committees, the improvements that the Committee have considered and supported to deliver enhancements have progressed e.g. the webcasting provision and digitalisation of the Council Chamber and Members Portal and E-Learning.
- 5.2 The introduction of remote software has enabled Members of the Democratic Services to undertake a preview of the Annual Report in advance of the Council AGM.
- 5.3 The Statutory report of the Head of Democratic Services, will be presented to the next scheduled meeting of the committee.

## **6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not needed because the contents of the report are for information purposes only.

## **7. CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the Chair of the Democratic Services Committee and members of the Democratic Services Committee.

## **8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

- 8.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

- 9.1 The report has been prepared in accordance with Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's constitution.

## **10. LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/ FUTURE GENERATIONS – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.**

- 10.1 The work of all Committee encompasses all of the Councils priorities and provision of an Annual report allows the Committee to highlight the work undertaken and items for future consideration in line with the corporate priorities.

10.2 The work of the Committee also takes forward the principals and wellbeing goals of the Well-being and Future Generations Act, linked to the Committee's Terms of Reference.

**11. CONCLUSION**

11.1 The Annual report outlines the work of the Committee in the 2019/2020 Municipal Year.

# **Democratic Services Committee Annual Report**

**2019-2020**



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## Chairperson of the Democratic Services Committee

Following the conclusion of my municipal year in the role of Democratic Services Chair, I am pleased to present the Committee's Annual Report for 2019/20. It represents an opportunity to highlight what the Committee has considered throughout the year and the important recommendations it has implemented. For the Committee, it is an element of good practice, to be able to present to Full Council a progress report in relation to member support and demonstrating the Council is ensuring the support and expertise is available to support non-executive members of the Council to discharge their role whilst developing an appropriate measure to support member development and wider democratic engagement.

Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, the Democratic Services Committee is responsible for, amongst other matters, appointing a Head of Democratic Services on behalf of the Local Authority. At our meeting held on the 17th July 2019, Mr Christian Hanagan, Service Director, Democratic Services & Communications was permanently designated as the Council's Statutory Head of Democratic Services (one of the four key statutory local government posts) following an interim period which allowed the committee and the wider Council to evaluate the effectiveness of the new support arrangement available to members.

The Committee has focused on a number of important areas relating to democratic functions and support for members; following our meeting in January 2020 the Coronavirus Pandemic hit and necessitated the suspension of our future committee and our work programme for the remainder of the 2019/20 municipal year. Despite this set back, the improvements we have considered and supported to deliver enhancements in members facilities have been progressed, with the delivering of chamber improvements currently taking place. Through this period both the vice-chair and I have been in regular dialogue with the Head of Democratic Services around this development. The need to move to virtual meetings has also enhanced our position to employ the opportunities which will be available in a more digitally-able chamber to enhance engagement with the public and improve the range of opportunities for members to engage in the democratic process on behalf of their residents. The committee will need to consider this as part of any future work to enhance participations in the 2022 local government elections.

While the attention of my fellow colleagues has been directed to the communities and residents of RCT to support them through these unprecedented times, I have continued to

monitor the support available to Members, and the progress being made with the Members' Portal and communications with members and future enhancements in these areas will need to be incorporated into the work programme for 2020/21.

What I hope we have captured in the following report is a demonstration of the tangible improvements which have been made on behalf of members, as a result of the greater staff resilience and expertise which now support Members, whilst ensuring that we are all accessing the best development opportunities possible. I would like to extend my gratitude to my Vice Chair, Councillor M. Webber for her support (and to all Members who have sat on the Democratic Services Committee this Municipal Year) for their dedication and involvement and I look forward to progressing our work as soon as is safely possible. I would also like to thank my predecessor Cllr Geraint Davies, for providing strong foundations in the previous municipal year for the committee to build upon.

**Cllr Mike Diamond**

# MEMBERS OF THE DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE



Cllr L. M. Adams



Cllr J. Bonetto



Cllr J. Brencher



Cllr G. Caple



Cllr M. Diamond  
**(Chair)**



Cllr J. Edwards



Cllr H. Fychan



Cllr K. Morgan



Cllr S. Powderhill



Cllr S. Rees



Cllr J. Edwards



Cllr W. Treeby



Cllr M. Webber



Cllr L. Walker

**(Vice Chair)**

## Terms of Reference for the Democratic Services Committee

- ◆ Carry out the local authority's function of designating the Head of Democratic Services;
- ◆ Keep under review the provision of staff, accommodation and other resources made available to the Head of Democratic Services, in order to ensure that it is adequate for the responsibilities of the post;
- ◆ Make reports to the full Council in relation to these matters;
- ◆ Each Member of the Democratic Services Committee must be a Member of the Council.
- ◆ No more than one Member of the Committee must be a Member of the Executive (which Executive Member must not be the Leader);
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee is a body to which Section 15 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (duty to allocate seats to political groups) applies;
- ◆ The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee must not be a member of the Executive Group;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee may appoint one or more sub-committees, and may arrange for the discharge of any of its functions by such a sub-committee;
- ◆ Any sub-committee of the Democratic Services Committee may not discharge functions other than those conferred on it;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee is to appoint the person who is to Chair any sub-committee of such a committee;
- ◆ All Members of the Democratic Services Committee, or of a sub-committee of the Committee, may vote on any question that falls to be decided by the Committee;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee may require Members and officers of the Council to attend before it to answer questions such Members and Officers having a duty to comply with but are not obliged to answer any questions which they would be entitled to refuse to answer in court proceedings in England and Wales. The Democratic Services Committee may invite other persons to attend meetings of the Committee;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee must meet at least once in every calendar year.

- ◆ The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee must secure that meetings are held in accordance with the requirements set out in these terms of reference;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee must consider any report or recommendation sent to its Members any report prepared by the Head of Democratic Services under Section 9(1)(h) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 at a meeting held not more than three months after copies of the report are first sent to Members of the Committee;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee must as soon as practicable after it has prepared a report or made a recommendation under Section 11(1)(c) of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 arrange for a copy of it to be sent to each Member of the Council who is not a Member of the Committee;
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee will have overall responsibility for deciding what should be regarded as reasonable training and development opportunities as part of its function of providing support to Members to carry out their functions. In addition to the list set out below, the Democratic Services Committee may add some policy areas for which training is considered essential, such as planning or licensing:
  - ◇ Induction
  - ◇ Role and functions of the Executive, the Council and its Officers
  - ◇ Overview and Scrutiny
  - ◇ Information Technology
  - ◇ Code of Conduct
  - ◇ The role of a Councillor as a local Member
  - ◇ Public Engagement
  - ◇ Equality and Diversity training
- ◆ The agreed training and development opportunities will be contained within a published development strategy; The WLGA's Charter for Member Support and Development ("the Charter") will be used for guidance purposes in maintaining the award of the "Advanced Charter";
- ◆ The Democratic Services Committee will propose the appropriate level of funding to be made available for the purchase of external training, should there be the case that the reasonable training and development needs of the Council cannot be met in-house.

# The Council Business Unit Resources

In [July 2019](#) the Head of Democratic Services presented his report in respect of the provision of staff, resources and accommodation available to support Members in their role as set out within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 (the “Measure”) with particular reference to the new and unprecedented availability of scrutiny research.

At that time the coming together of the two service areas of Democratic Services and the Executive & Regulatory Business Unit created the ‘Council Business Unit’ which represented a reinforced support mechanism for all Elected Members. The merger also brought together the knowledge and experience of the two teams, to significantly enhance the range of provision available to members, in-line with the approach taken in other local authorities since the creation of the measure in 2011. In addition, the team also acquired the added provision of a Graduate Research Scrutiny Officer who, for the first time in this role, would be able to undertake research for non-executive members to support their scrutiny role. A criteria was developed for any non-executive member to be able to request this research facility. I am pleased that funding has been provide to make this post a permanent addition to the support arrangements available to members alongside additional resources to support democratic engagement and participation by new a generation of 16 and 17 year old voters from 2021 in democracy in Wales.

## **Council Business Resources**

The team consists of the following Members:-

- Council Business Manager
- Principal Scrutiny Officer
- Senior Democratic & Scrutiny Officer
- Senior Democratic Services Officer
- Senior Executive & Regulatory Business Officer
- Democratic Services & Engagement Officer
- Members’ Researcher & Scrutiny Officer
- Democratic Services Officer

Committee Services supports the Full Council and its Committees, the formal decision-making and good governance of the Council. This includes preparation of agendas, minutes & reports packs using the Modern. Gov committee administration system as well as the Contensis system for publishing to the Council website, supporting all Councillors through a comprehensive induction programme and an ongoing programme of training and development to enable them to fulfil their role as a community representative. Members Services offers a comprehensive support to Members such as office accommodation (such as members' rooms, meeting rooms), secretarial services, communications facilities - phones, PCs or lap- tops, email and the support to maintain such facilities.

### **Supporting Community Councils**

During 2011, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, along with 11 Community Councils and 1 Town Council signed up to a shared Charter, following guidance received from Welsh Government in respect of 'Relationship Building Measures and Charters for Unitary Authorities and Town and Community Councils'. Since that time a number of revisions have been made to the Charter to incorporate the principles and wellbeing goals of the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. Representatives from the Council, Town and Community Councils have attended meetings of the Community Liaison Committee to strengthen partnership working with the local authority and in order to further strengthen these arrangements the recently appointed Democratic & Scrutiny Officer now provides a dedicated resource and offers substantial support to the Community Councils.

Staff from the Council Business Unit also attend and participate in National officer networks where they can develop good practice and share information which ultimately helps to improve the provision of support the unit offers the Elected Members of RCT. These include the National Scrutiny Network and the South East Wales Regional Scrutiny Network.

### **Dedicated Welsh Translation Service**

To assist the Council Business Unit in delivering support to all Members through both the medium of Welsh and English 2 dedicated translation officer posts have been providing dedicated support to the unit on behalf of Members. This provides the Unit with prompt and timely translations which importantly frees up capacity for the Council Business Unit to focus upon supporting Members and scrutiny functions.

As reported to the Committee on the [18th November 2019](#) the resources in place offer a substantial support mechanism to the Council's Elected Members through its Council Business Unit. The roll out of the Modern. Gov system and paper light approach is also forging the way to a more efficient process for conducting council business. The additional resources in place via the Council's Graduate scheme has presented the opportunity for a dedicated research facility for the first time in the Council's history and for the Graduate Engagement Officer to progress the Members' portal and webcasting provision (more of which later in the report).

## Member Development

To ensure that the ICT and training provision provided to Elected Members is sufficient and effective and to achieve a number of outcomes such as progressing the paper light approach, initially with the Chairs and Vice Chairs and ensure that training sessions (including induction sessions) are appropriate and well attended, the Democratic Services Committee established a working group to progress these matters. In total, the Working Group agreed 7 [recommendations](#) which support the need for all Members to have equal access to support.

Following presentation of its final report to the Democratic Services Committee on the [19th March 2019](#), Members agreed to develop an implementation plan detailing the actions required to take forward the approved recommendations.

The action plan has been regularly reviewed and progressed with some of the original recommendations being further developed, such as the 'Review of Chamber facilities including costings which has advanced into a webcasting facilities project. (More on this matter in greater detail under the heading 'Webcasting'). The action plan has put in place key IT requirements which will be reviewed in a timely manner.

During the Member Induction period, all Members are provided with an appropriate device with which to carry out their duties effectively. At the handover stage, every Member receives a comprehensive one-to-one training session with a dedicated IT officer. At any point requests can be made via the Council's Business Unit to receive further one-to-one sessions or through their individual Personal Development Review (PDR).

### Paperless approach & Modern .Gov

In May 2016 and in an effort to reduce the costs associated with printing, Cabinet resolved to trial 'paperless' working through the Modern. Gov application for Cabinet meetings and Cabinet Sub-Committee meetings. This was a commitment to maximising opportunities to make efficiency savings and to reduce the Carbon footprint of the Authority. Since then the Democratic Services Committee has supported the phased adoption of 'paper-light meetings' approach to all Committees of the Council.

Modern. Gov software allows Committee agendas and reports to be collated and "pushed out" via an app which can be accessed through tablets and laptops set up and available to those on the prescribed distribution list. In addition to publication of Committee papers, the Modern. Gov system assists with the recording of Member attendance, declarations of interest, forward plans and the registering of interests and training information. The Modern. Gov application is available in both Welsh and English, with Members being able to choose which language they wish to utilise when accessing Committee documents.

The Business Unit has offered all Elected Members (and Co-opted Members) the opportunity to undertake training on Modern.Gov so that they can support the paper light approach. This is conducted on a one-to-one basis so that the support is provided to suit the individual Member's pace of learning.

The current percentage of Members utilising the Modern.Gov application at the Council's Committees is outlined below:

<b>Cabinet</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Scrutiny Chairs &amp; Vice Chairs</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Planning &amp; Development Committee</b>	<b>82%</b>
<b>Licensing Committee</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Council</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Democratic Services Committee</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Public Service Delivery, Communities &amp; Prosperity Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Finance &amp; Performance Committee</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Children &amp; Young People Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Health &amp; Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Standards Committee</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>VER</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Appeals</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>LEA</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Appointments</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Audit Committee</b>	<b>71%</b>

In addition a number of Members and Co-opted Members have also indicated they wish to be paperless and no longer wish to receive hard copies of committee papers. Co-opted Members have also been approached to progress the Council's paper light approach and have been very receptive. At its meeting on the [18th November 2019](#) the Democratic Services Committee considered and agreed to the Co-opted Member – ICT Acceptable Use Policy which they are currently being asked to sign up to. Members are also currently remunerated for costs associated with the provision of home broadband to allow them to undertake their roles, in line with the IRP requirements,

#### Office 365

This is the latest version of Microsoft Outlook and includes Word, Excel and PowerPoint as well as hosting a wealth of other benefits such as creating digital notebooks and instant video calls. The Democratic Services Committee received a presentation on the 'Innovate RCT' which is driving forward the Council's digital transformation programme and its future roll out to all Elected Members.

#### Personal Development Reviews (PDR's)

PDR's are confidential and offer the chance to advance Members' personal development in conjunction with the Head of Democratic Services and the Council Business team. Based on the PDR results, the Member Development Programme was developed to progress an individual and

collective learning pool from internal and external resources.

Some training such as the Refresher Code of Conduct training is always readily available to Members on a one to one basis as and when requested. This year and with the agreement of Committee Chairs, open training to all Members has also been undertaken during Committee meeting settings – where the training specifically relates to a terms of reference of a Committee i.e. Treasury Management training at the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

Following a concerted effort to promote the availability of advice to members, there has been a significant rise in the number of members taking advantage of 121 sessions with Democratic Services Officers on a range of issues, including Group Leader discussions with the Head of Democratic Services on matters relating to Council Business.

Training	Date	Internal/External	Remarks
		Training	
Treasury Management Training	19.06.19	Internal Training	Training before Full Council
Scrutiny Chair & Vice Chairs Training	05.08.19	External Training	WLGA
Social Media Training	14.10.19	Internal Training	Pilot Session
Dementia Friendly Training	21.10.19	Internal Training	
Scrutiny Training	25.10.19	External Training	Dr Dave McKenna
Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Training	04.11.19	Internal Training	Training held before Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee
Disability Toolkit	24.02.20	External Training	Equalities Officer to attend in order to progress future training to Officers of the Council

There have been a number of other sessions both available to all Elected Members and just tailored to individual needs. Some are held as and when required, which are unique to the specific committee, e.g. new Members to the Licensing Committee and Planning Committee automatically receive individual training before they can sit and consider the business of that Committee.

## **Members' Portal & E-Learning**

The Democratic Services Committee first discussed the requirement for a dedicated Members' Portal supported by the Council Business Unit and the Council's ICT unit at its meeting held on the 19th March 2019. E-Learning is currently available to all Elected Members via the RCT Source but having the dedicated site would provide a platform for E-Learning modules to be completed and tailored to Members' needs. They would replace the traditional face-to-face training which can prove difficult for many Members due to work/personal commitments. The results of any E-Learning modules will be monitored by the Head of Democratic Services and shared accordingly with results of training modules helping to inform other areas of council work and identify gaps in development.

The portal will complement the advancement of Members conducting council business via their electronic devices and the roll-out of the paper light initiative. In time, the portal can be further developed to incorporate interactive sections and offer a whole host of information, messages and links to other useful sites. Mock designs of the Members' portal will be tested with Councillors, to ascertain if this new addition to the support arrangements provided for members, enhances the ability for them to undertake their role, engage in the democratic processes of the Council and receive information relevant to their role or electoral division.

The Portal, will provide statistical information, compiled from the Council's customer reporting system ('The CRM'). Information on what issues are being reported, such as dog fouling or pot-holes, will be compiled on a ward by ward basis, alongside information on the resolution of these complaints. The new facility will also provide information on the latest business of the council being considered and matters such as planning applications which relate to that members electoral division.

## **Lone Working Policy**

Following concerns raised by some Members in respect of the personal safety of Councillors when conducting their Council business, the Democratic Services Committee instructed officers to produce a lone working policy. This policy provides presents councillors with a concise, easy to use policy advising them on how to assess and manage risk within their communities, whilst conducting their day-to-day council business. In consultation with other Members and consideration of similar examples from other local authorities, a draft copy of the policy was developed by officers from the Human Resources Department and a draft copy reported to the Democratic Services Committee on the [18th November 2019](#).

Members agreed the draft policy provided all the necessary advice on how to be accessible to constituents whilst being mindful of potential threats to their personal safety subject to including reference to 'public houses' within the policy as a place where Members may be at risk. Following circulation of the policy to all Elected Members, a face-to-face training session was held at the **Council Headquarters on the 30th January 2020 at 5pm for all Elected Members.**

For any other issues of concern, the Council Business Unit is on hand to offer support and advice on how to proceed and mitigate any further risk to Members and their families. This range of support may include of provision of more interactive safety devices.

### **Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW)**

The Annual Meeting of the IRPW with the Chairs of Democratic Services Committee and the Heads of Democratic Services took place on 29th October 2019. Discussions included the schedule of remuneration; reimbursement of the Cost of Care and personal safety of Elected Members and this was relayed to the Democratic Services Committee. Members supported the need to further promote the remuneration framework to ensure Members are not financially disadvantaged in undertaking their roles. The final IRPW report for 2020/21 was published in February 2020.

Recently the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRP) reviewed its current arrangements for the provision of financial support for members in respect of care needs. All members of the Democratic Services Committee were invited to forward their comments and views regarding the proposal by the IRPW so that the Council's Statutory Head of Democratic Services could formulate a response by the deadline of the 14th August 2020. The results of the informal consultation will be reported to the next virtual Democratic Services Committee to be held in September 2020.

## Petitions Guidance

The Democratic Services Committee agreed to develop a criteria for the publication of petitions on the council website. The petitions policy would formalise the current council process, offer members of the public a more structured guidance on how to submit their petition and further engage members of the public with Council business. On the [18th November 2019](#), Members agreed the template for drafting a petition and the privacy notice for publication to the Council website as well as the development of a set of guidance for the residents of RCT.

## Advanced Charter

The role of the Democratic Services Committee encompasses the development of the Members' Charter which includes all aspects of Member support including constitutional arrangements, a strategic and practical framework for member development, member services and member facilities.

In order to recognise achievement and progression the award has three levels:-

The Charter/ Advanced Charter (more challenging and is designed to be achieved a year or so after the Charter) and the Excellence Award (requires sophisticated support and tangible outcomes in place). Each of the awards are renewed on a three year basis.

In 2007 Rhondda Cynon Taf Council was awarded the Charter and in 2010 was the first Authority in Wales to receive the Advanced Charter. In 2014 the Council received 'The Good Practice and Innovation Award for Member Support and Development' due to the provision of support made available to Members through the Occupational Health Unit. The Council is currently out of date with its Charter compliance. A review was due to completed in the summer of 2020 but unfortunately the current circumstances have prevented this from taking, however discussions have been undertaken with the WLGA whilst the Council evaluates its internal arrangements with regards to the Member's Portal; the support provision within the Member library which requires review and the room allocation to each of the political groups has been addressed. A draft submission will be developed in due course and when the Head of Democratic Services determines that the requirements are in place i.e. Member Development, Member Support and Member Facilities.

## Webcasting Provision

The Democratic Services Committee has been instrumental in progressing and supporting the Council's webcasting provision in Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, in line with the potential proposals within the Local Government Elections Bill, which deliver upon 'in principal' support provided by members previously to broadcast Council meetings.

In 2014, following Welsh Government funding a pilot of webcasting was undertaken by the Authority in respect of its then titled 'Development Control Committee'. Following the cessation of the funding and due to the costs associated with Webcasting this provision was not progressed by the Council. Currently Councils are not legally required to webcast meetings, although it is strongly supported by Welsh Government and is linked to goals in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to strengthen local democracy and encourage public participation. [The Local Government and Elections Bill \(Wales\) includes](#) promotion of webcasting and the requirement for this provision to be mandatory across all public meetings.

In [January 2020](#) The Head of Democratic Services presented his report in respect of identifying which audio/recording/furniture and translation upgrades would be necessary to progress the webcasting provision in the Council Chamber.

The advantages of webcasting meetings are well versed and provide local residents who cannot attend meetings with an opportunity to play a part in the local democratic process, and to get involved in the decisions affecting their lives. It can also ensure the accuracy of recording of meetings including recording of decisions, voting and attendance and strengthen the Council's paper light approach. There have been consistent updates to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Democratic Services as well as discussions held by a number of Council Committees such as Council, Cabinet, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, the Corporate Governance and Constitution Committee, formal meetings of Chairs & Vice-Chairs in progressing the provision.

## **Virtual Meetings**

The Coronavirus Pandemic meant that Council priorities have and rightly so, been invested elsewhere to deal with the national crisis and staff have been deployed to those critical frontline service areas. New ways of working are being undertaken by Elected Members following emergency regulations passed by Welsh Government to ensure that decisions can still be made during this uncertain time.

The Council undertook an incremental approach to the roll out of committee meetings on a virtual basis. This approach has provided the opportunity for Members and officers to gain experience operating virtually and for the zoom applications to be made accessible for all members. As Members became familiar with the new technology to allow them to engage remotely it also represented an opportunity to pilot approaches for the future webcasting provision.

In consultation with Group Leaders Members supported the proposal presented by the Head of Democratic Services, to prioritise the Cabinet, Planning & Development Committee and Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the first phase of committee functions to be rolled-out virtually. This was quickly followed by a subsequent phase which saw the implementation of a large number of other committees and joint committees held in a virtual setting, which have supported the re-introduction of the Council's democratic arrangements.

Public participation has remained a priority for the Council at this time to enable consistent and robust governance across the Authority. Full consideration has been given to providing opportunities for the public to participate in the virtual meetings through discussions between the Head of Democratic Services and the respective Chairs. Engagement has been fully undertaken within the Planning and Development Committee from an early stage and consideration is ongoing as to how the Council would facilitate the provisions which are provided for the public to engage, within the Council's constitution, in other committee settings, in this new virtual way.

Provision for Welsh translation arrangements within a virtual setting were quickly established and following thorough testing with internal council services, our Welsh speaking Members and with the support of Group Leaders, the facility was successfully piloted at the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on the 26th June and continues to be used where appropriate.

The extended municipal year 2019/20 has meant that the work programmes of the Cabinet, Council and Overview & Scrutiny Committee have been set over a three month period with key consideration given to the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency and comprehensive updates having been provided by the Council's Leader and Senior Leadership Team.

Throughout the virtual process Members have been fully supported by the Council's ICT Service and the Council Business Unit. A simple user guidance was developed in conjunction with group/individual training sessions and ICT support was and still is available to all Members within the virtual setting. For this reason and to facilitate the process, all meetings had a start time of 3pm. As part of the statutory responsibilities of the Head of Democratic Services, the Council is required to survey the views of members in relation to the calendar of meetings and

the provision of support and resources to non-executive members. In advance of the 2019/20 Municipal Year the Council sought the views of members in areas not statutorily required to ensure that the Council was provided the appropriate support to all Elected Members. The Head of Democratic Services will survey the views of members in advance of 2020/21 municipal year. This will assist in the production of the Calendar of meetings for consideration at the AGM in September and for the Council Business Unit to establish the most convenient time for Members to conduct their formal business. The survey will also capture information about the support provided to Members to assist them in undertaking their role and identify areas where the Council Business Unit can improve or change current arrangements.

The webcasting provision has progressed to assist the digitalisation of the Chamber, to support the broadcasting of committees in the future, and to continue delivering the Council's 'paper-light approach' to committee management and importantly to enhance access opportunities. In the meantime communication with Group Leaders and the wider membership of the Council has been consistent in order to establish how our future committee arrangements will look. One option may be how the Council may approach facilitating hybrid meeting arrangements in the future. Approaches will seek to ensure that the considerable progress that has been made to date will be further developed as part of how the Council operates as a democratic organisation.

## Forward Plan for 2020/2021

The Council Business Unit has a number of matters that it will progress during the 2020/2021 Municipal Year (which will be for the Democratic Services Committee to monitor and consider)

- ◆ The Local Government Bill was published on 18 November 2019 and includes a number of topics which will have a direct impact on the Council Business Unit. These include:
  - ⇒ The requirement for petition and e-petition schemes
  - ⇒ Reducing the minimum voting age for the National Assembly for Wales elections to 16;
  - ⇒ Establishing a Participation Strategy;
- ◆ Progress and launch the webcasting provision;
- ◆ Progress the Members' Charter;
- ◆ Develop and launch the Members' Portal;
- ◆ Continue to improve public engagement via social media channels;
- ◆ Progress and Review of the WAO – Fit for the Future Action Plan (Scrutiny);

