

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE
26 MARCH 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee of Flintshire County Council held in County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 26 March 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Robin Guest (Chairman)

Councillors: Chris Bithell, Clive Carver, David Cox, Ian Dunbar, David Evans, Veronica Gay, Ron Hampson, George Hardcastle, Dave Mackie, Tim Newhouse, Neville Phillips, Owen Thomas, and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGIES: Councillors Glenys Diskin, Paul Shotton and Nigel Steele-Mortimer

SUBSTITUTION: Councillor Glyn Banks for Joe Johnson

IN ATTENDANCE:

Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Democracy and Governance Manager, Member Engagement Manager, and Committee Officer

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

16. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 January 2014, were submitted.

Member Personal Development Reviews

The Democracy and Governance Manager reminded Members of the opportunity to have annual personal development review meetings with their Group Leader or other experienced Member and to let Member Services have a copy of the form which identified their training needs so they could be fed into the Member development programme for the following Council year. He advised that there had been a lack of feedback in this respect from Members to date. It was agreed that the Democracy and Governance Manager would send a written reminder to Group Leaders.

The Democracy and Governance Manager explained that any suggestions from Members for suitable topics for training would be raised in a report to the next meeting of the Committee when consideration would be given to the Member Development training programme for the next year.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the minutes be received, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record; and

- (b) That the Democracy and Governance Manager would send a written reminder to Group Leaders concerning the opportunity for Members to have annual Personal Development review meetings and to identify any training requirements

17. TRIAL OF REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND WEBCASTING

The Democracy and Governance Manager introduced a report to inform Members of the arrangements for remote attendance and webcasting to be trialled at the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee and at the Constitution Committee meeting that was to follow.

The Democracy and Governance Manager provided background information and advised that the final guidance relating to remote attendance had yet to be published by the Welsh Government (WG). He explained that there were no legal provisions relating to the webcasting of meetings but the WG viewed it as a way of making Council meetings more accessible. He said a questionnaire would be distributed to Members following the meeting to seek their views on their experiences of the remote attendance and webcasting of the meetings of the Democratic Services and Constitution Committees held today. The Democracy and Governance Manager advised that a report on the final guidance received from the WG and feedback on the questionnaire would be provided to the next meeting of the Committee.

During discussion Members expressed a number of views which were in support of and against the remote attendance and webcasting of Council meetings.

Members commented on the cost of providing remote attendance and webcasting of meetings and referred to the financial challenges faced by the Authority and the pressure to maintain current services. Councillor George Hardcastle raised concerns around ongoing funding to meet the costs for future provision for the remote attendance and webcasting of meetings. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that Flintshire had received grant funding from the WG to enable it to investigate the use of remote attendance and webcasting of meetings. Conditions had been attached to the grant and failure to meet them would have made the grant repayable to the WG. The Democracy and Governance Manager said he would provide a report to the next meeting of the Committee on the financial implications for the ongoing costs for providing remote attendance and webcasting of the Council's meetings.

In response to a question from Councillor Owen Thomas concerning accessibility to the webcasting of meetings the Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that the webcasting of meetings would be available to the general public on the Council's website. The intention of the WG was to increase accessibility of the workings of local government.

Members raised further queries and concerns around the additional costs of staff time, translation facilities, and quality of sound and visual equipment.

Councillor Arnold Woolley raised concerns around the number of Members who could potentially be in remote attendance at a meeting. He also commented on the issue of substitutions and asked how the necessary paperwork would be submitted before the start of the meeting if a Member was in remote attendance.

Councillor Clive Carver also commented on the possibility of more Members attending a meeting remotely than physically. He also expressed concerns in relation to the possible unofficial recording and webcasting of meetings. In response to the concerns raised around more Members attending a meeting remotely than physically, the Democracy and Governance Manager advised that the quorum rules for meetings had been amended to comply with the legislation that there must be a majority of Members physically present at a meeting for it to be quorate

Officers noted the concerns raised around webcasting of meetings and commented that it was for Members to decide at a future date whether they wished to invest in the provision of remote attendance and webcasting of meetings or not.

RESOLVED:

That the arrangements made for a trial of remote attendance and webcasting at the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee and the Constitution Committee be noted.

18. POSSIBLE REDUCTION IN SIZE OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND CONSTITUTION COMMITTEES

The Democracy and Governance Manager introduced a report to consider recommending a reduction in the size of both the Democratic Services and Constitution Committees. He advised that it had been suggested that the size of both the Committees be reduced from 21 to 15 Members. Appended to the report was a record of attendances at meetings of the Committees over the last 12 months for Members' consideration. Members were advised that if the Committee wished to reduce its size then this would need to be agreed by the Constitution Committee which would also need to consider reducing its own size to correspond.

Councillor Chris Bithell spoke in support of reducing the size of the Committee and also suggested that the number of meetings of the Committee be reduced during the year. The Democracy and Governance Manager explained that he liaised with the Chairman concerning agenda items for the meeting and if there was insufficient business to be conducted the meeting was cancelled.

A number of Members expressed concerns that reducing the size of the Committee to 15 members would have implications on the political balance calculations.

Councillor Owen Thomas expressed the view that less Members on the Committee could create a problem with meetings being quorate. Members also raised the issue of substitutions.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services responded to the concerns raised and explained that if the size of the Committee was reduced then potentially there was the possibility that some Groups would not be represented. He outlined the calculation process to achieve overall political balance.

Councillor David Evans commented on the issue of Members who regularly failed to attend meetings of the Committee. He suggested that the relevant Group Leader be notified of the non-attendance and be asked to raise the matter with the appropriate Member to seek the reason and if possible a replacement nomination. Councillors Arnold Woolley and Veronica Gay concurred with the views expressed by Councillor Evans and said more information was needed about why Members were unable to attend meetings. They said feedback on the outcome of discussions with the Group Leaders should be provided to the Committee for further consideration. It was agreed that the Chairman would raise with the appropriate Group Leaders the issue of non attendance at meetings of the Committee for discussion with the Members concerned.

Councillor Ron Hampson expressed the view that attendance at Council meetings was currently poor and reducing the size of the Democratic and Constitution Committees may create additional difficulties.

Councillors George Hardcastle and Dave Mackie expressed the view that there was no need to change the current arrangements for the membership of the Democratic Services Committee.

Councillor Tim Newhouse spoke in support of a reduction in the size of the Democratic Services Committee and proposed that the membership be reduced from 21 to 15 Members. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Chris Bithell. The Chairman asked Members to vote on the proposal and when put to the vote the proposal was lost.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That there was no need to reduce the size of the Democratic Services Committee; and
- (b) That the Chairman raises the issue of non attendance at meetings of the Committee with the appropriate Group Leaders for discussion with the Member(s) concerned.

19. FEEDBACK ON MEMBER DEVELOPMENT EVENTS

The Democracy and Governance Manager introduced a report to provide feedback on Member development events since last reported to the Committee. Appended to the report was analysis of the feedback on the development events

held during January and February 2014. The Democracy and Governance Manager advised that the feedback had been positive.

Councillor David Evans commented on the difficulty experienced by Members who had work and personal responsibilities which could prevent them from attending daytime events and suggested that training sessions also be held during the evenings or at weekends. He also referred to the number of Council and Committee meetings Members had to attend.

Councillor Chris Bithell commented on the poor attendance at training events and suggested that attendance should be made compulsory, citing corporate parenting as an example. He referred to the cost to the Authority of employing external trainers and acknowledged that for such training it was cost effective to hold sessions consecutively.

Councillor Tim Newhouse suggested that training events where an external trainer was employed could be filmed and made available to Members.

Councillor Arnold Woolley suggested that a questionnaire be sent to Members to identify the reasons why they were unable to attend training events. He commented that those Members who attended the training sessions seemed to be satisfied with the quality of the training provided and the information and knowledge gained.

The Democracy and Governance Manager advised that there was no legal mechanism to make Member training compulsory. He agreed to send a questionnaire to all Members concerning attendance at training events and would provide a report on the feedback obtained to the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the feedback on member development events since last reported to the Committee be noted; and
- (b) That the Democracy and Governance Manager sends a questionnaire to all Members concerning attendance at training events and provides a report on the feedback obtained to the next meeting of the Committee.

20. PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the public or press in attendance.

21. DURATION OF MEETING

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and finished at 3.15 pm.

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Chairman