

Committee: **Council**
 Date of Meeting: **20th July, 2023**
 Report Subject: **Annual Report of the Head of Democratic Services**
 Portfolio Holder: **Councillor S. Thomas, Leader / Cabinet Member**
Corporate Overview & Performance
 Report Submitted by: **Sarah King (Statutory Head of Democratic Services)**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	16/03/23			27/03/23			20/07/23	

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To present the annual report of the Head of Democratic Services for 2022-23 and to confirm the level of support being provided to Elected Members is appropriate.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The annual report outlines the comprehensive range of arrangements in place to support Elected Members to enable them to fulfil their roles in an effective and compliant manner.

3. Options for Recommendation

- 3.1 Option 1 – The Council approves the report on the basis that it is satisfied there is a sufficient level of support for Elected Members.

Option 2 – The Council provides comment and amendments to the report of the Head of Democratic Services prior to approval.

Democratic Services Committee endorsed the report on 27th March, 2023 and recommended that it be referred to Council for consideration.

4. Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

The role of the Head of Democratic Services is set out in the Council's Constitution.

5. Implications Against Each Option

5.1 *Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)*

The Council must provide the Head of Democratic Services with resources that, in its opinion, are sufficient to allow the function of the role set out in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to be discharged.

The Member Development Budget for 2022-23 was £6260.00.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

There are potential risks if the levels of support arrangements for Elected Members are deemed by Council to be not sufficient. The Democratic Services Committee can recommend to Council a review of resources and/or support, if appropriate.

5.3 ***Legal***

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 requires the Council to designate an officer to the post of Head of Democratic Services. The role is set out in the Council's Constitution as a statutory function.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

The Head of Governance & Partnerships is the appointed Head of Democratic Services.

The role of the Head of Democratic Services is to:-

- carry out the Local Authority's function of designated Head of Democratic Services
- keep under review the adequacy of provision of staff, accommodation and other resources made available to discharge the democratic services functions of the Authority
- make reports, at least annually, to the full Council in relation to these matters.

The Head of Democratic Services is able to make recommendations including with regard to the appointment, organisation and management of staff discharging democratic functions. They may arrange for the discharge of democratic functions by staff and can delegate functions to staff as they feel appropriate.

The Democratic Services Team comprises 5 members of staff providing member services, committee secretariat and support to the Leadership, Cabinet and Presiding Member. There is also 1 Scrutiny Adviser.

6. ***Supporting Evidence***

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

A summary of the key areas and main changes to existing support arrangements for Elected Members which have been implemented in 2022-23 is below.

a) May 2022 Elections

Information provided for all newly elected Councillors at the Election Count – including details and times for the Orientation Day at the General Offices where Members collected ICT equipment and mobile phones; copies of the new Members Handbook and the Members Induction Programme.

An ICT Drop In session was put in place to provide support and guidance for Members on the set up, access and usage of their Council ICT equipment.

b) Member Induction/Development Programme

A comprehensive Induction Programme was implemented for all new and returning Members covering all the essential information and knowledge needed to fulfil the role of Councillor in an effective and compliant way. Sessions were delivered by a mix of Council Officers and/or external providers, where appropriate. Positive feedback has been received from Members and external organisations on the Programme.

We have collated statistics on attendance against the Induction Programme and formal Committee meetings and in future, to be consistent with other authorities across Wales and to improve transparency, we will look to publish that data. Overall, engagement from Members has been good with the Induction Programme and this continues with the ongoing Development Programme. The Member Development Programme seeks to build up additional knowledge and skills for Members in key areas of Council business.

c) New Democratic & Governance Structure

As a result of the reduction in Elected Members from 42 to 33, we carried out a comprehensive desk top research exercise to consider where the democratic function of the Council could be strengthened and modernised.

From the research a number of findings and proposals were put forward and a new approach agreed by Council in May 2022 for implementation for the 2022 cycle, which included:-

- the establishment of a **Presiding Member** position (based on the role set out in the Local Government (Democracy) (Wales) Act 2013
- a change to the **number of and remit of Scrutiny Committees** – People, Place, Partnerships and Corporate & Performance
- a reduction in the **number of Members sitting on committees**
- a change to **Scrutiny agendas** with a maximum of two items for either Pre-decision or Performance
- a change in the **production of minutes** to record only decisions and/or recommendations due to the statutory requirement to record meetings
- a **timings of meetings** survey was undertaken to determine the Council diary, in line with the requirement for this to be once a term
- re-established the meetings of the **Chairs & Vice Chairs** of Scrutiny Committees

Formal evaluation is undertaken after each Scrutiny Committee meeting and any issues raised at the Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting. A wider evaluation is also underway of the changes made to the democratic and governance structure as was previously agreed, to see if any further changes and/or improvements could be made.

d) Member Briefings

Due to the more succinct and focused agendas for Scrutiny Committees, we have seen an increase in the amount of Member Briefings. However, all of them are appropriate and we have had positive feedback in terms of the level of information and questioning being provided to Members through these sessions. Each directorate also has quarterly all Member briefing sessions diarised which they are using for updates on key portfolio information.

e) Members Library

All sessions as part of the Member Induction and Member Development programmes and all Member Briefing sessions have been recorded. The recordings have been uploaded onto the Members Library for ease of reference and for those who may have been absent. In addition, all of the online training from WLGA has also been deposited in the Library.

f) Informal Wellbeing Sessions

As a result of Members' wellbeing being raised as part of the Health and Safety induction session, a decision was taken to implement informal Wellbeing meetings for Members on a quarterly basis, for those who wish to attend. The initial meeting was well attended and Members wanted to see a Wellbeing Champion role added as part of the Committee Report – this was agreed by Council.

g) Member Development Programme

A suite of Member Development policies have been reviewed and updated including the following:-

- Member Development Strategy
- Members Mentoring Framework
- Members Personal Development Review and Competency Framework

We will be working with Members from 2023-24 to fully implement these policies to further improve their skills, knowledge and competencies.

h) Cabinet/CLT Improvement and Development

External resources were commissioned and funded through the WLGA to work collectively with the new Cabinet and the Corporate Leadership Team on the development of the Corporate Plan 2022-27. Further external resources have been commissioned and funded through the WLGA to start work on a longer term programme of improvement and development.

6.2 *Expected outcome for the public*

By providing a democratic function with sufficient support and resources means Elected Members are provided with the support, guidance and training needed to operate effectively and compliantly. In addition, this will support them in their role within the community and representing their ward.

- 6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***
Opportunities to maximise engagement by Elected Members in the range of training and support available to them will assist in meeting current and future demands of their roles.
- 6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***
Any changes or improvements made to Elected Member support arrangements are done with a view to them being sustainable in the longer term and in recognition of the increasing complexity of the roles Members undertake.
- 6.5 ***Preventative focus***
The content of the Member Induction programme is aimed to give them a solid grounding in preparing them to fulfil their roles and responsibilities in an effective and compliant way. The ongoing Member Development programme then builds additional skills and knowledge across the Council.
- 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***
The Member Development Programme and individual Member Briefings should encompass all of the local, regional and national collaborations and partnerships in place, in which the Council has an interest. Blaenau Gwent Members sit on many outside bodies with other Councillors from across Wales to service these partnerships/bodies.
- 6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***
All Council services are involved with the democratic functions of the Council. Forward Work Programmes and agendas are developed jointly with Elected Members and Officers. The change in the remit of the Scrutiny Committees to be more cross-cutting has also helped to facilitate this.
- 6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***
The modernisation of the democratic arrangements enables Members and officers to attend meetings without the need for travelling.
- 6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IAA)***
No assessment is required for this report.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

The Head of Democratic Services presents an annual report to Democratic Services Committee and Council.

Evaluation is undertaken after each formal Scrutiny Committee meetings and any comments and considerations can be raised formally at the Chairs and Vice Chairs meetings as necessary.

Regular meetings also take place between the Chief Executive, the Monitoring Officer and the Head of Democratic Services to assess and consider the existing arrangements for Elected Members and any issues of improvement and/or compliance.