

Committee: **Democratic Services Committee**
 Date of Meeting: **11 March 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)
	28/02/24	28.02.24		11/03/24			21/03/24	

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To present the annual report of the Head of Democratic Services for 2023-24 and to provide an opinion on the appropriateness and adequacy of the support being provided to Elected Members.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The annual report outlines the comprehensive set of arrangements in place to support Elected Members to enable them to fulfil their roles effectively in a safe and compliant manner.

3. Options for Recommendation

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

Option 2 – The Committee provides comment and amendments to the report of the Head of Democratic Services for consideration by Council.

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

- 4.1 The role of the Head of Democratic Services is a statutory role, following the requirements as outlined by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, and 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 2023-24 was £6,260.87.

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 as outlined by within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

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

5.4.2 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; and
- make reports, at least annually, to the full Council in relation to these matters.

5.4.3 The Head of Democratic Services can 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.

5.4.4 In addition to the Head of Democratic Services, there is comprehensive expertise and support provided by the Deputy Head of Democratic Services (Service Manager, Performance and Democratic) and the Democratic Services Team, who comprise of 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 2023-24 is below.

a) New Democratic & Governance Structure

Following the modernisation and strengthening of the democratic function in the Council following the election, several of the new processes and changes have bedded in and are working well.

- the establishment of the **Presiding Member** position has been well received and in response to a request from Members, an Annual Report outlining the duties and activities conducted by the Presiding Member is presented each year;
- attendance and engagement at **Scrutiny Committees** has been generally good and the cross cutting nature of the Committees is working well. We have revised and expanded the remit of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee to include Gwent Archives and Gwent Crematoria, following a decision by Council;
- a change to **Scrutiny agendas** with a maximum of two items for either Pre-decision or Performance has worked well in most Committees, although further consideration of the Forward Work Programme for Corporate Performance & Overview Scrutiny Committee is needed;
- Reviewed and implemented a revised **evaluation** process for scrutiny which is undertaken after each Scrutiny Committee meeting and any issues raised at the Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting or directly with the Head of Democratic Services or Scrutiny Adviser;
- A further change was made to the **Planning Committee** members and voting structure to ensure enhanced and appropriate ward representation (picking up good practice from elsewhere) – this has been a significant improvement;
- A Young Person has been co-opted onto the People Scrutiny Committee to represent the views of Children and Young People and better inform decision making.

b) Gwent Public Services Board Regional Scrutiny Committee

Blaenau Gwent is the lead authority for hosting the above regional scrutiny committee. The team has worked across the five local authorities and other statutory and non-statutory partners to convene an informal workshop to determine the Terms of Reference, Membership (including Chair & Vice Chair), Forward Work Programme, Timing of Meetings, and other arrangements for the Committee (based on the model used for the Cardiff City Region Joint Scrutiny & Overview Committee led by RCT Council). In addition, we liaised with WLGA to ensure training was provided for all Committee Members on joint scrutiny arrangements and decision making.

c) Member Development Programme & Member Briefings

The role of an Elected Member can be complex and challenging. Constantly changing priorities and legislation require difficult decisions for which Members need to be well informed. It is therefore essential that Members are equipped and supported to allow them to undertake their role confidently.

Following the highly successful Induction Programme for all new and returning Members delivered in 2022-23, we continue to deliver an ongoing **Development Programme** to build up additional knowledge and skills for Members in key areas of Council business. As part of this we have recently revised the **Members Handbook**, to take account of organisational changes.

This is supplemented by a large programme of **Member Briefings** where Members are exercising their right to question and gain further understanding of subjects/issues to allow them to be better equipped and more effective in conducting Council business. Some directorates also have quarterly Member briefing sessions diarised which they are using for updates on key portfolio information.

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.

A suite of Member Development policies have been reviewed and updated including the **Member Development Strategy**, **Members Mentoring Framework** and **Members Personal Development Review** and **Competency Framework**. We have been working with Members who have come forward to be Mentors/Mentees as part of the framework to help improve their skills, knowledge and competencies.

In addition, all Senior Salary Holders have undertaken a Personal Development Review and have Personal Action Plans in place for implementation with a follow up meeting in six months. For all other Members who requested a Personal Development Review, the initial meetings have taken place and Personal Action Plans being developed.

d) Informal Wellbeing Sessions

The Wellbeing Champion continues to Chair these sessions and is working with the Head of Democratic Services Team to get a Forward Work Programme of items that Members want to discuss in 2024-25, incorporating in-person catch ups.

e) Local Bi-Election – February 2024

Information provided for the newly elected Councillor immediately following election count and times for the Orientation Meeting at the General Offices where the Member collected ICT equipment and ordered mobile phones; and received copies of the Members Handbook and the Members Induction Programme.

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

f) New Petitions protocol

The petitions protocol was reviewed in line with the new requirements in legislation and a new protocol (including the use of e-petitions) was adopted and agreed.

g) Family Absence Policy

A policy was developed in line with legislation and existing policies, adopted and agreed to provide for family absences for Elected Members for certain specified

circumstances. The adoption of this policy helps to remove any barriers that individuals might face when considering standing for nomination/election to become a Councillor.

h) Health and Safety

The health and safety of Elected Members is a important and an area that is prioritised including personal safety and self-care, stress management, personal resilience, work-life balance and bullying and harassment, including online abuse.

As part of the Induction Programme for Members, following the election in May 2022, specific sessions were provided on personal safety and Health & Safety at Work.

The WLGA also provide a number of training sessions for Elected Members including sessions designed around specific areas of concern. Resources from the WLGA include:

- [Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors](#)
- [Personal Safety Advice](#)
- [Online Abuse Guidance for Councillors](#)
- [Get Safe Online guidance](#)
- [Recognising the Terrorist Threat Guidance](#)

Elected Members are encouraged to speak to the Council's Health and Safety section and or Head of Democratic Services for support where required.

i) Activity Data

Number of Member Training and/or Briefing sessions	48 sessions (with 13 scheduled for remainder of this cycle)
Number of Council Meetings	1 AGM, 5 Ordinary Meetings, 3 Special Councils
Number of Scrutiny Meetings	17 meetings & 3 Special meetings
Number of Gwent PSB Regional Scrutiny Committee	2 meetings
Chair & Vice Chair Scrutiny Meetings	1 meeting & 1 scheduled
Informal Wellbeing Sessions	2 meetings & 1 scheduled
Personal Development Reviews	14 meetings
Mentoring Framework	2 Mentors & 5 Mentees
WLGA Community Leadership Programme	4 Members since 2022 (current programme concludes in March 2024)
Members Annual Reports	9 Reports

- 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 Development & Briefings programme is aimed to help them build on the solid grounding of the Induction programme by gaining further skills and knowledge across the Council.
- 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***
The Member Development Programme and individual Member Briefings should encompass all 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**
- 7.1 The Head of Democratic Services presents an annual report to Democratic Services Committee and Council.
- 7.2 Evaluation is undertaken after each formal Scrutiny Committee meeting and any comments and considerations can be raised formally at the Chairs and Vice Chairs meetings as necessary or directly with the Head of Democratic Services and/or the Scrutiny Adviser.

- 7.3 Elected Member attendance is collected and monitored for all formal meetings and development sessions. Evaluations are also taken after all member development sessions.
- 7.4 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.
- 7.5 The Head of Democratic Services is keen to look at ways of continually improving the service and the experience of Members and is always happy to receive constructive feedback in ways to take this forward for the benefit of all Members. A Member Survey may be considered in 2024-25 to gather data on all support currently provided from across the Council to see how this could be strengthened and improved.