

Report

Democratic Services Committee

Part 1

Date: 20th February 2020

Item: 6

Subject Support for Councillors in their Ward Work

Purpose To consider the outcome of the review of support for Councillors in their Ward work and make any recommendations to Council regarding Neighbourhood Committees/Ward Meetings.

Author Head of Law and Regulation

Ward All Wards

Summary Democratic Services Committee agreed to review support for Councillors in their ward work as part of the work programme for 2018-19. The Committee agreed the scope of a further review of these support and engagement arrangements in July 2018. The previous research had focused predominantly on the engagement methods themselves, and Neighbourhood Committees / ward meetings in particular. Therefore, the focus of this additional review was specifically in relation to the practical support that Councillors need to undertake their ward work effectively, through all the different methods available to them.

The Committee has received interim presentations on upgrades to Members IT and the development on an on-line members Took-Kit to assist and support Councillors in carrying out their representational roles within their local communities. However, because of changes in key personnel and membership of the Committee, the outcome of the review was never formally concluded and signed-off. In particular, no final conclusions were drawn on whether the Neighbourhood Committees/ward meeting should continue in their current format in the light of the significant developments in other methods of engaging with local communities within individual wards.

Therefore, this Report summaries the outcome of the review of support for Councillors in their Ward work and invites the Committee to consider the options regarding Neighbourhood Committees/Ward Meetings.

Proposal To note the outcome of the review of support for Councillors in their Ward work and to consider any recommendations to Council regarding Neighbourhood Committees/Ward Meetings.

Action by Head of Law and Regulation

Timetable Immediate

This Report was prepared after consultation with:

- Chief Executive
- Head of Finance
- Head of People and Business Change
- Heads of Service and Corporate Management Team.

Background

1. Democratic Services Committee agreed to review support for Councillors in their ward work as part of the work programme for 2018-19. The Annual Report commented that:-

“The Democratic Services team had recently reviewed the guidance for Members on ward meetings. The actual system of ward meeting support for Members was last updated in 2014 and focussed only upon ward meetings, not other ward activity. As few wards hold ward meetings a review was needed of this as well as the general support offered to all Members for ward work. This could also include the issue raised at the Committee’s February meeting, highlighting the need for a protocol regarding enquiries from/about other wards.”
2. The last in-depth research had previously been undertaken in 2011, when the old Neighbourhood Committee system was under review, and the Local Service Board was looking at options for partnership engagement.
3. While there had been many developments since this review, particularly in technology and the ways in which people prefer to communicate, many of the themes and issues facing ward-level engagement were still current. Therefore, the Committee agreed the scope of a further review of these support and engagement arrangements in July 2018. The previous research had focused predominantly on the engagement methods themselves, and Neighbourhood Committees / ward meetings in particular. Therefore, the focus of this additional review was specifically in relation to the practical support that Councillors need to undertake their ward work effectively, through all the different methods available to them.
4. In accordance with the scoping exercise and methodology agreed by Committee, the Democratic Services team then carried out a detailed review of alternative options and best practice for public engagement and the range of tools and other methods available to Councillors to communicate and engage with their local residents. To facilitate and inform this process, detailed consultation was undertaken with both elected members and senior officers
5. In November 2018, the (then) Head of Democratic Services gave a presentation to the Committee outlining progress with the review and the outcome of the initial consultation. A call for evidence survey had been carried out during the summer and 19 responses had been received from elected members. Further discussions had also been held with Heads of Service and Corporate Directors and other senior managers who provide support for ward meetings. The initial responses indicated that other methods of engagement and communication with local residents were considered to be more effective than the quarterly ward meetings, for example ward surgeries, public consultation meetings, the use of social media and newsletters. It was also clear that there was a significant disparity between wards in relation to the frequency and nature of the ward meetings. The Committee asked the officers to undertake more work in relation to these alternative methods of engaging with local residents and how they could be developed and improved.
6. At the Democratic Services Committee meeting in February 2019, the Committee received two further presentations on upgrades to Members IT and the development on an on-line members Took-Kit to assist and support Councillors in carrying out their representational roles within their local communities. As part of the Modernised Council theme, which underpins the delivery of the Corporate Plan, significant enhancements to IT infrastructure were being introduced which would radically change the way in which the Council communicated with its residents and businesses. All computers were being upgraded to the new Windows Office 365 and additional features included Skype for business, voice and video chat and group meetings. The Windows Office suite could also be used on personal devices, with secure access to email using Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) and a secure log-in through a mobile telephone application. These enhancements to Members IT have significantly improved the ability of Councillors to communicate and engage effectively with their local constituents through the use of e-mail and social media. In addition, the development of the Information Station, the Council’s web-site, the

CRM system and the My-Newport Account and application have transformed the way in which residents communicate and conduct business with the Council.

7. The Committee were also advised about proposals to improve support for Members through the development of an online toolkit on the Council's intranet page. Training material, forms and guides would be made available to Members on-line, with a central source of information that is quicker and easier to keep up to date. Councillors will also have access to a wider range of training tools, guides and information to support their development. The "Democratic Process" section of the intranet contains contact information, presentations from seminars and training sessions and contact information for all Councillors. However, this will be enhanced and developed to include additional information and provide a comprehensive "Members Area" on the intranet with more detail on how to deal with queries and key contact points. In terms of supporting Councillors, the Tool-Kit can include answers to frequently asked questions, access to forms, guidance on the use of social media and other relevant information to support members in their ward work. The Committee were supportive of the development of these on-line tools, to improve and increase their options for engaging with residents and carrying out their representational roles.
8. Because of changes in key personnel and membership of the Committee, the outcome of the review was never formally concluded and signed-off. In particular, no final conclusions were drawn on whether the Neighbourhood Committees/ward meeting should continue in their current format in the light of the significant developments in other methods of engaging with local communities within individual wards.

9. Neighbourhood Committees/ward meetings

Neighbourhood Committees were originally introduced by the Council in the 1990's and, at the time, this was an innovative approach to engaging with the public in the local ward areas. The meetings provided an opportunity for consultation and debate on issues affecting the ward. The Neighbourhood meeting were held in every ward on a quarterly basis and they were organised and supported by dedicated Neighbourhood Committee clerks. The meetings were formal in nature and organised on traditional committee lines, with the senior ward member chairing the meeting and published agendas and minutes. However, they were never decision-making bodies and therefore not strictly Council "committees".

10. Over time, the role of the Neighbourhood Committee changed significantly, particularly with the development of Executive governance arrangements and advancements in technology, with more effective ways of communicating and engaging with much larger numbers of local residents. The meetings became preoccupied with individual complaints and matters that could generally be dealt with by way of the City Contact Centre or the Information Station. Attendance at meetings was generally limited and the outcomes were also limited. Analysis of the attendance at Neighbourhood Committees showed a wide disparity in attendance across the city with the most well attended meeting averaging just over 40 residents and the least well attended averaging just 4. Often the people attending were the same individuals at each meeting, indicating that the meetings were failing to reach specific sectors of the community, such as younger people. Evidence from minutes showed that the meetings tended to be dominated by questions on police matters and questions to Councillors on individual complaints.
11. Following the review in 2011, the structured arrangements for quarterly Neighbourhood Committee meetings in each ward were changed to a more flexible approach to ward meetings. There were no longer dedicated Committee Clerks to organise and manage the meetings and they were supported by Heads of Service and senior managers, acting as support officers. The meetings were held at times and at venues agreed with the ward Councillors, who also set the topics for discussion at the public meetings. There were no longer any formal agendas reports or minutes and the ward meetings were conducted on a more informal basis, as a means of engagement and communication with the public. Although there was a limit of three ward

meetings in any calendar year, it was left to the discretion of the members in each ward as to how and when any meetings were arranged, if at all.

12. As the Council had modernised its working patterns, increasingly more opportunities had arisen for the Council to engage with the public, including transactional web opportunities, the City Contact Centre and the Information Station. Many of the complaints that had previously been raised at neighbourhood committees could be more efficiently dealt with through one of these customer service avenues. That enabled ward Councillors to focus on more difficult cases where a higher level of intervention is required. In recognition of this, some ward councillors hold ward surgeries immediately before or after their ward meetings in an effort to direct these queries into a more appropriate forum. However, the ward meetings are no longer used as a means of people raising individual complaints or issues.
13. The ward meetings have been particularly effective as a vehicle for public consultation, for example in relation to the budget, the Local Well-Being Plan, the Local Development Plan and the Community Strategy, or where there are significant local concerns raised about a ward matter. However, even in these cases, attendance and participation has been limited, particularly in certain areas and with certain hard-to-reach sections of the community.
14. Since 2011, and with the advent of new technology and other methods of engagement and communication with the public, the numbers of ward meetings has declined significantly. Some wards hold ward meetings on a regular basis, others only call meetings in response to specific issues, for example as part of a consultation exercise. Some wards do not use ward meetings at all, as they find other communication methods more effective. A ward meeting is only one of a number of tools available to Councillors to engage with their residents. Ward meetings will not suit all wards, and, where used, they are intended to compliment other ward activities, for example:
 - Ward surgeries
 - Meeting with individuals / groups by request
 - Community events
 - Social media
 - Newsletters
 - Blogs
15. Appendix 1 is a table which sets out details of the ward meetings held in each of the wards between 2012 (following the review) and 2018. The Table at Appendix 2 shows the current ward meeting arrangements, the designated Lead and Support officers and the frequency at which they take place. There has been a gradual decline in numbers over the years and, currently, ward meetings are never held in 9 wards, they are arranged infrequently in 3 others and are only held regularly in 8 wards. Even in these 8 wards, attendance is variable.
16. When they were first introduced, neighbourhood committees had a key role in direct relationship building between the Council, Councillors and residents, when few other options were available. Now there are many ways for people to engage and communicate with the Council and their ward members and vice versa. The current practice of more flexible ward meeting is not applied consistently across all wards and a disproportionate amount of officer time is being spent in supporting those wards that still hold these meetings on a regular basis. As part of this current review, the feed-back from the consultation with senior lead and support officers is that the meetings are increasingly difficult to support as they are still largely focussed on specific issues and problems which can, more appropriately, be addressed through other channels of communication. The outcomes of the meetings are more productive where they are focused on a specific consultation exercise, such as the budget or the well-being plan. These public meetings could be arranged on an ad hoc basis when there was a particular need.

Financial Summary

17. There are no significant financial implications as a consequence of this review or the ward meetings. The members' tool-kit will be developed within existing resources. There is no budget for ward meetings but any costs of hiring venues for the meetings and printing posters for circulation by members is met from within the Democratic Services budget. The total costs are no more than £3,000 per annum. However, a significant amount of senior officer time is spent in supporting the meetings.

Risks

18. There are no specific risks arising from the review or in relation to any recommendation regarding Neighbourhood Committee/ward meetings.

Links to Council Policies and Priorities

19. Effective public engagement is a key priority for the Council, underpinning the Corporate Plan and other major policies. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act also places huge emphasis on the importance of public involvement and engagement in all areas of our business. This review has taken into account the wider engagement activity of the Council, and how the work of Councillors both contributes to and can draw from wider intelligence gathering by the Council and its partners.

Proposal

20. To note the outcome of the review of support for Councillors in their Ward work and to consider any recommendations to Council regarding Neighbourhood Committees/Ward Meetings.
21. The options would include cancelling the ward meetings altogether and only convening public meetings in wards on an ad hoc basis when there was a particular need, continuing with the current arrangements or reverting to a more structured basis.

Comments of Chief Financial Officer

22. There are no financial implications

Comments of Monitoring Officer

23. Set out in the Report

Staffing Implications: Comments of Head of People and Business Change

24. There are no staffing or policy implications

Background Papers

None

Dated: 10th February 2020.

Appendix 1 Ward Meetings 2012-2018

Ward Name	Total Ward Meetings	Dates of Meetings Held
Alway	2	12/02/2013 6.30pm 06/10/2014 7pm
Allt-yr-yn	15	18/10/2012 6pm 07/02/2013 10am 06/06/2013 6pm 28/10/2013 10.30am 18/02/2014 10.30am 17/05/2014 6.30pm 30/10/2014 6pm 13/05/2015 10.30am 29/10/2015 6.30pm 13/01/2016 6pm 19/07/2016 10am 21/02/2017 6.30pm 16/01/2018 6.30pm 18/07/2018 10am 20/11/2018 6pm
Beechwood	6	15/04/2013 7pm 09/10/2014 6pm 08/04/2014 6pm 15/10/2015 6pm 18/04/2018 6pm 05/09/2018 6pm
Bettws	1	13/10/2014 (no time)
Caerleon	14	28/01/2012 7pm 11/06/2013 6.30pm 03/10/2013 2.30pm 03/02/2014 6.30pm 03/06/2014 6.30pm 02/10/2014 6.30pm 02/02/2015 6.30pm 01/06/2015 2.30pm 26/10/2015 2.30pm 12/07/2016 6.30pm 16/02/2017 2.30pm 06/02/2018 2.30pm 04/06/2018 6.30pm 15/10/2018 (no time)
Gaer	1	18/10/2016 6.30pm
Graig	No ward meetings	
Langstone	8	19/11/2013 6.30pm 26/03/2014 6.30pm 27/06/2014 6.30pm 11/11/2014 6.30pm 17/03/2015 6.30pm 26/06/2015 6.30pm 06/10/2015 6.30pm 19/04/2016 6.30pm
Llanwern	11	07/05/2014 7pm 21/07/2014 7pm 13/10/2014 7pm 12/01/2015 7.30pm

		13/05/2015 7pm 02/11/2015 6.30pm 08/02/2016 7pm 20/06/2016 7pm 03/10/2016 7pm 13/02/2017 7pm 03/09/2017 6pm
Liswerry	No ward meetings	
Malpas	7	01/07/2013 6pm 02/10/2014 6.30pm 30/03/2015 6.30pm 17/11/2015 7pm 29/11/2016 6pm 14/03/2017 6pm 25/01/2018 6pm
Marshfield	No ward meetings	
Pillgwenlly	1	21/07/2017 6.30pm
Ringland	5	06/11/2012 6.30pm 14/05/2013 6.30pm 10/12/2013 6.30pm 11/11/2014 6.30pm 20/03/2018 6.30pm
Rogerstone	18	27/02/2013 7pm 19/06/2013 7pm 17/09/2013 7pm 10/12/2013 7pm 11/02/2014 7pm 14/05/2014 7pm 18/09/2014 7pm 19/11/2014 7pm 03/03/2015 7.30pm 24/06/2015 7pm 29/10/2015 7pm 29/02/2016 7pm 07/07/2016 7pm 27/10/2016 7pm 09/02/2017 7pm 28/02/2018 7pm 21/06/2018 7pm 24/10/2018 7pm
Shaftesbury	17	25/10/2012 6pm 23/01/2013 6pm 06/03/2013 6pm 12/06/2013 6pm 13/11/2013 6pm 15/01/2014 6pm 16/04/2014 6pm 24/09/2014 6pm 04/02/2015 6pm 09/09/2015 6pm 21/01/2016 6pm 23/03/2016 6pm 15/09/2016 6pm 15/03/2017 6pm 25/01/2018 6pm 17/05/2018 6pm 13/09/2018 6pm

St Julians	13	22/11/2012 6pm 17/04/2013 6.30pm 08/08/2013 6pm 20/11/2013 7pm 27/03/2014 6.30pm 24/07/2014 6.30pm 04/12/2014 6.30pm 01/10/2015 6pm 13/12/2015 6pm 13/03/2018 6pm 03/05/2018 6pm 05/07/2018 6pm 13/11/2018 6pm
Stow Hill	17	04/10/2012 7pm 07/02/2013 7pm 06/06/2013 7pm 10/10/2013 7pm 06/02/2014 7pm 12/06/2014 7pm 09/10/2014 7pm 12/02/2015 7pm 11/06/2015 7pm 08/10/2015 7pm 04/02/2016 7pm 02/06/2016 7pm 06/10/2016 7pm 09/02/2017 7pm 08/02/2018 7pm 14/06/2018 7pm 11/10/2018 7pm
Tredegar	3	26/10/2012 2pm 16/04/2013 6pm 18/08/2014 2pm
Victoria	8	19/11/2012 6.30pm 28/02/2013 6pm 24/06/2013 6.30pm 24/07/2013 6.30pm 20/01/2014 6.30pm 23/07/2014 6.30pm 23/10/2014 6.30pm 20/10/2015 6.30pm

Appendix 2 Current ward meeting arrangements

WARD	LEAD OFFICER	SUPPORT OFFICER	FREQUENCY
Allt Yr Yn	Rhys Cornwall	Shaun Powell	Regular
Alway	Gareth Price	Jonathan Keen	Never
Beechwood	Sally Ann Jenkins	Mary Ryan	Regular
Bettws	Meirion Rushworth	Emma Johnson	Never
Caerleon	Bev Owen	Keir Duffin	Regular
Gaer	Sally Ann Jenkins	Vacancy	Never
Graig	Keir Duffin	David Price	Never
Langstone	Keir Duffin	Lucy Jackson	Infrequent
Lliswerry	Vacancy	Vanessa Griffin	Never
Llanwern	Gareth Price	Vacancy	Infrequent
Malpas	Meirion Rushworth	Owen James	Regular
Marshfield	Paul Jones	Leanne Rowlands	Never
Pillgwenlly	Rhys Cornwall	Rachael Davies	Never
Ringland	Sarah Morgan	Andrew Powles	Infrequent
Rogerstone	Chris Humphrey	Lucy Jackson	Regular
Shaftesbury	Paul Jones	Tracy McKim	Regular
St Julians	Vacancy	Vacancy	Regular
Stow Hill	Vacancy	Dan Jones	Regular
Tredegar Park	Bev Owen	Tracey Brooks	Never
Victoria	Chris Humphrey	Silvia Gonzalez-Lopez	Never