

Draft Minutes

Democratic Services Committee

Date: 21 February 2023

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillor D. Fouweather (Chair), T Watkins, K Thomas, A Sterry, P Hourahine, T Harvey, A Pimm, M Spencer and E Stowell-Corten.

In Attendance: Leanne Rowlands (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Taylor Strange (Governance Officer), Emily Mayger (Governance Officer)

1. Apologies

None.

Declarations of interests

None.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on the 27th of January 2023

The Minutes of the previous meeting were held as a true and proper record.

Councillor Hourahine queried the context of the support to be provided in ward meetings, however the Chair clarified what was covered.

All members agreed with the clarification.

3. Voter ID

This item was presented by the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager.

- The Elections Act 2022 has brought about some key changes with the biggest of those being the introduction of Voter ID. There are also changes in other areas such as EU voters and those overseas, however, the focus of the presentation is on Voter ID.
- The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities state that the aim of Voter ID is to reduce the risk of voter fraud as well as make the electoral process fairer. The Voter ID will also prevent the electoral offence known as personation but there has been some criticism in relation to voter ID creating an obstacle for some to vote.
- From 4th May 2023 the rules will apply to parliamentary elections as well as Police and Crime Commission elections.
- In England it will also apply to local elections and referendums, but not to local elections in Wales.

- There are 23 accepted forms of existing photo ID include passports and driving licenses; expired forms of photo ID can also be accepted if there is a likeness.
- If a person does not have a valid ID, they can apply for Voter ID through their local authority at no cost.
- Voter ID will be provided free from the Electoral Register Office; research carried out by the Electoral Commission expected that around 5% of voters will apply for Voter ID.
- In Wales Voter ID was not being publicised yet but in England it has been publicised due to elections taking place in May 2022 in England first.
- The Application can either be done online or be supported in person.
- A centralised fulfilment centre currently exists however this could potential move to more local fulfilment in the future.
- The physical Voter ID will be an A4 document and will have some security measures such as those used within legal currency.
- The Electoral Commission will publicise the need for the Voter ID before the voting is scheduled to take place as well as providing materials to local councils in order for them to distribute to residents as part of a local communication plan.
- In addition, polling stations must have an appropriate space for people to show their Voter ID in private; grant funding for materials that may be needed for this space will be provided through grants from the Department of Levelling U
- The Presiding Officer within the polling station has the right to refuse a voter if they don't have valid ID, or if they feel the ID provided is not legitimate. The decision to refuse is final, however these refusals can be subject to a post-election review.
- There will be challenges such as raising awareness in order for the residents to have adequate notice and time to get their Voter ID.
- The Electoral Commission is focused on making sure no communities are disenfranchised.
- Further funding will be available in April 2023 and April 2024.

Questions:

A Committee Member queried how many cases of election fraud were reported in Newport.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that there were 266 cases reported UK wide when the last national figures were published, but none of the cases that were prosecuted involved personation. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed there were none in Newport in the last election, but as they were not part of the election team prior to that the information would be confirmed.

A Committee Member asked what would happen if there were to be a Snap Election.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted that the risk had been considered, as this would be challenging, and that measures have been taken to mitigate in the case of such an event.

A Committee Member questioned whether the photo on the Voter ID would be the same quality as other forms of Photo ID.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager highlighted that the key requirement was that the photo showed a likeness to the person.

A Committee Member queried that due to the process of applying for Voter ID being online, why couldn't the resident be emailed the ID.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager explained that the document will be a physical document that will be issued via Royal Mail to the registered address directly from the fulfilment centre. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that a person can apply for voter ID as early as they want to counter any issues with delivery dates, however there will be guidelines on how close to an election a person may apply for one and there are also specific rules around how it is replaced if the document is lost.

A Committee Member requested that the Committee received the PowerPoint slides.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed they would be sent out to all members of the Committee.

A Committee Member noted that the deadline for registering before an election was 5pm 6 days before, and questioned whether the DWP would be able to meet the demand of verifying Voter ID.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager highlighted that due to England undertaking the use of Voter ID first, that this would give indicator of any issues.

The Chair asked if a person has no form of ID how would they register.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted that a person needed to be on the Electoral Register as well as highlighting that there would be a national database that was checked to confirm the person is who they say they are.

The Chair highlighted that he felt the passport system of being able to take photos in booths and uploading them via a code would be better suited for gaining the photo aspect of the photo ID

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager affirmed that the England elections would give information regarding successes and drawbacks of the scheme.

The Chair highlighted that there may be confusion due to some elections requiring Voter ID and some not.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted that these concerns have been fed back into the consultation.

A Committee Member raised that the issues should be directed through the appropriate channels, as officers are tasked with implementing the national legislation.

The Chair highlighted that with Wales having some elections with Voter ID and some without that it may lead to confusion.

A Committee Member asked whether there was a process to see if residents were deterred from voting due to the Voter ID.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager detailed that this would be scrutinised nationally.

A Committee Member queried the impact on postal votes.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that postal vote signatures would be updated more frequently but that no ID would be needed to vote by post.

A Committee Member asked for clarity regarding the timescales for signature renewal of postal votes.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that they would provide the Committee with a response in relation to the specific time gaps for renewal.

The Chair queried the length of the renewal period for postal votes.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that there may be 2 concurrent postal vote periods in place supporting local and parliamentary elections.

A Committee Member questioned whether political candidates could support residents in their Voter ID applications.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager informed the Committee that they would confirm a response on that matter.

A Committee Member asked whether those without an address could vote.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager informed the member that there were measures in place to support those who were homeless being eligible to vote.

A Committee Member asked who came up with the guidance.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager informed the Committee that the legislation was implemented by the UK government, and the implementation was being overseen by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Electoral Commission was supporting administrators through the production of guidance supporting the legislative changes.

A Committee Member noted that training may be needed for members, and another Committee Member highlighted that Newport had the lowest interest in voting.

A Committee Member asked whether there had been much research into whether it had deterred voters.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the Committee would receive a further update following the publication of any studies or analysis following the elections in England in May 2023.

4. Member Training

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager presented this topic.

- The Democratic Services Committee was responsible for making sure Members have reasonable training and development.
- The goal of the training and support was to help councillors in performing their duties.
- The focus was to give members information when needed so that they would not be overwhelmed.
- The sessions were designed to be interactive as well as providing expertise from both within and outside the council.

- An example was given whereby members were given financial training during December due to the budget consultation.
- Most training sessions were recorded, with those recordings stored in a shared file on teams.
- IT drop-in sessions were also arranged to help members with any technical issues.
- Details of attendance for the training was provided to the members.
- There have also been other training modules run such as those on Violence against Women.
- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager asked whether the committee would like a general survey to be carried out on the training provided.

Questions

The Chair asked if members of the Licencing and Planning Committee were required to complete their respective training.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager informed the chair that they would check to see if all Members had completed the training.

A Committee Member highlighted that there were 6 Members that had yet to complete their code of conduct training and asked were they enrolled on the next available course.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the 6 members were registered to complete the final session of training for Code of Conduct.

A Committee Member asked whether the Members could be reminded of the Code of Conduct training course they had at further opportunities. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager confirmed that this was being looked at in terms of how this could be supported through the development of e-learning modules for the future.

A Committee Member noted that Councillors were often asked by the public to advocate for them regarding housing issues and requested training on how best to advise them.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager stated that this could be accommodated and a further member training session would be arranged.

A Committee Member felt that not a lot of people undertook the Carbon Literacy Training.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager clarified to the member that numbers were limited to 15 places on each course, further course for members would be offered in the next few months.

5. Update on Appointments to Regional Scrutiny Committee for the Gwent Public Services Board

Presented by the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager

- The Committee would focus on the work of the Gwent Public Service Board as stated in section 35 of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015.
- In the November Partnerships Scrutiny Committee, the terms of reference for the committee were resolved, with 2 representatives recommended to full Council.
- The Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015 came into force in April 2016, to improve the Social Economic, Environmental, and Cultural Wellbeing of Wales. The goal was to develop a plan to meet the needs of Wales in current times without hindering the potential needs of the future generations.

- The Gwent PSB accepted terms in a report drafted by Blaenau Gwent Council.
- The members recommended for these positions could not hold Executive or Cabinet roles.
- Under the Councils Constitution appointment of representatives to outside bodies must go through full Council unless the appointment was an Executive function.
- Reflecting the political proportionality, the two member representatives would be nominated from the Labour Party.

Agreed:

The Members of the Committee agreed with the recommendations of the report.

Forward Work Programme

The Chair noted that they would like the procedure of the Leaders absence in Council as it relates to Question and Answer session within Council to be brought to the next meeting. Other queries around Standing Orders raised in the previous Council meeting will also be brought to the next committee meeting.

Further updates on legislative queries raised in the meeting that took place today would be brought to the following meeting.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager also noted bringing back the feedback from the first year of the participation strategy to a meeting later in the year.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager also noted bringing information on democratic services staffing to the following meeting.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted further updates on legislation concerning elections can be brought to a later meeting.

Questions

The Chair reminded the members to consider any items they feel would be important to raise for future meetings.

A Committee Member queried whether training sessions could have E-Learning Modules online to aid councillors who were not able to attend the meeting in person.

- The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted this good point and that this was an item that was currently being discussed.

Date of Next Meeting

27th of April at 10am-Committee Room 1.