DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

17 DECEMBER 2014

Present: County Councillor Cowan(Chairperson)
             County Councillors Dilwar Ali, Chaundy, Goddard, Hinchey, Hyde, McKerlich, Lomax and Murphy

Apologies: Councillors Bridges and Thomas

17   :   DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairperson reminded Members of their responsibility under Part III of the Members' Code of Conduct to declare any interest in general terms and to complete personal interest forms at the start of the meeting and then, prior to the commencement of the discussion of the item in question, specify whether it is a personal or prejudicial interest. If the interest is prejudicial, Members would be asked to leave the meeting and if the interest is personal, Members would be invited to stay, speak and vote.

18   :   MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2014 were approved by the Committee as a correct record and were signed by the Chairperson.

Matters Arising

The Monitoring Officer circulated a protocol for the loss of equipment or data, including the loss and damage of tablet devices.

The Committee noted the Member Enquiry Line statistics for November 2014. There had been a significant decrease in the number of Members using the system as more Members were using the 'golden number' (029 2087 2082) to advise of service requests.

The Chairperson indicated that she would write to the Members of the Committee to request expressions of interest from Members interested in participating in a Task and Finish Enquiry into the Member Enquiry Line system.

19   :   MEMBERS ANNUAL REPORTS

The Committee received a report reviewing the Authority's position in relation to enabling and supporting Members to produce and publish an annual report, in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. The report provided an overview of the Statutory Guidance issued by the Welsh Government in May 2013, which was previously considered by the Committee on 19 June 2013.

During its previous consideration of this issue the Committee noted that it was not mandatory for Elected Members to produce an annual report of their activities. The

Committee also noted comments received from the Party Group Whips and approved a method and template for producing annual reports.

Members were advised that the Minister for Public Services, Leighton Andrews AM, on 6 November 2014, wrote to the Leaders of all Welsh Local Authorities highlighting the wide variation in the numbers of annual reports produced by Elected Members across all Welsh Local Authorities in 2013/14. In the letter the Minister believed Members should be encouraged to provided annual reports in order to assist good public engagement. The Committee noted that in Cardiff 5 Members (7%) produced annual reports during the year.

The Committee was invited to give their views on the issued raised in the Minister's letter and the arrangements in place to support Member who wish to produce an annual report.

Members felt that the public were generally aware of the role of Councillors and questioned whether the information provided in an annual report was of any value. Members also considered that it was difficult to balance the contents of the annual report and remain apolitical.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

20   :   MEMBERS ICT PROJECT

The Committee received a report and were asked to consider the closure of the Members ICT Project. Members were advised that 46 Members were participating in the project and 30 Council provided broadband accounts had been terminated. It was projected that the project would save £60k over 3 years. Furthermore, a continued reduction in printing costs would also provide further savings. The Monitoring Officer advised that officers were aware of some technical issues with the tablet devices and these were being monitored. However, on the whole, it was considered that the project was successful.

Members of the Committee requested that prior to the project being closed, a report on the technical issues, and the costs associated, be brought to the next meeting of the Committee. Members of the Committee provided anecdotal examples of some of the technical problems they had experienced associated with the tablet devices. It was accepted that some Members still need additional individualised user training, as some of the problems reported to ICT were 'user errors' as opposed to technical faults with the actual devices.

Officers confirmed that the tablet devices were still under warrantee and the manufacturer were covering the costs of any repairs necessary. Officers were asked to confirm whether, if faults were continuous, it was possible to replace all the devices. The Chairperson agreed to clarify the position with ICT.

The Committee was asked to note the Social Media Handbook guidance attached to the report as Appendix A. The Chairperson introduced Tim Gordon, the newly appointed Head of Communications. Tim Gordon stated that social media was increasingly important and studies had shown that between 70% and 75% of news was now being received via social media. Members were advised that if they wished to communicate and engage with the electorate then they should do so via social

media –communications via social media were instantaneous and there was almost an expectation that Member will do so in some quarters.

Tim Gordon stated that he understood why some Members may be fearful of using social media. However, in his experience, most discussions were reasonable and people are, in the main, well behaved. It was also his experience that many people now prefer to engage via social media rather than face to face or via the telephone.

Members were advised that a Members Development training event would be arranged regarding the use of social media which would be hosted Tim Gordon. Members of the Committee were invited to share their views on social media in order inform the training event programme.

RESOLVED – That:

(1)   the Monitoring Officer present a report summarising the technical issues experienced thus far, and the officer cost incurred, to a future meeting prior to the ICT project being closed;

(2)   Chair agreed to contact ICT to confirm that:

   (a)   Dell devices are under warranty; and that Dell are covering the cost of repairs;
   (b)   seek confirmation that it would be possible for the authority to renew the entire batch of tablets should continuous problems persist;

(3)   the Chair agreed that individualised training should continue to be offered to Members participating in the ICT project;

(4)   the Chair will feedback Members concerns regarding the technical problems to ICT and provide a further update at the March meeting of the Committee;

(5)   the Committee noted the Social Media Handbook.

21   :   MEMBER DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Committee received a report providing an update on the delivery of the Member Development Strategy and Member Development Programme for 2014/15.

Following a survey of all Members in January 2014, the Committee convened a Task and Finish Group with a remit to develop and deliver a Member Development Strategy. The Strategy was agreed by the Committee at its meeting of 2 April 2014. The Strategy provides a framework for ensuring that Members are provided with a full range of development opportunities to enable them to effectively carry out their roles.

The Monitoring Officer stated that the Member Development Programme had been updated. A copy of the updated programme was appended to the report. The Monitoring Officer invited the Committee views on the revised programme.

Members welcomed the revised programme. Members requested that, in line with comments made by Estyn following their most recent inspection, the timings of Members Development courses/seminars be managed to ensure that there were no

clashes with other Council meetings and events. The Monitoring Officer accepted the points raised and stated that there was no dedicated day/time for member development.

The Chief Executive felt that Members had raised an important point. The Chief Executive stated that when Estyn return this is precisely one of the issues they will focus on. The Chief Executive would also argue that the Member Development session on Performance Management required high levels of Member attendance. The Peer Review recognised that Performance Management within the authority needed improvement. Many reports, such as those reports considered by Scrutiny Committees, were 'data heavy' and did not contain enough conclusions.

Members of the Committee concurred with the points raised by the Chief Executive in terms of the how reports are presented. The Committee felt that reports were often overly long. Members suggested that in many instances an Executive Summary, setting out what is to be achieved, a route map of how to get there and the success criteria might be provided instead. It was considered that reports should be distilled into bullet points thus enabling Members to respond in terms of lines of enquiry.

In addition, the Chief Executive stated that extremely long reports and agendas carried with them an overhead and he considered this to be unsustainable. The Chairperson requested the Chief Executive report back to the Committee following consideration of this issue by SMT. The Chief Executive agreed to do so.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

22   :   DEMOCRATIC SERVICES UPDATE

The Monitoring Officer presented a report reviewing the latest position in terms of the provision of the staff, accommodation and resources made available to support Members.

The Monitoring Officer stated that 2014/15 had been a challenging year. Democratic Services were required to make £250k budget savings and this was realised from the deletion of posts, voluntary severance and other means. However, the workload for the service area was increasing. Members were advised that the service had invested in a committee management system which was currently under development. It was anticipated that this investment would enable service improvements and for processes to be streamlined.

During 2015/16 it was projected that an additional £218k budget savings needed to be made. It was anticipated that this would be achieved by undertaking a mini restructure within the service area; from reduction in training budgets; and a reduction in Mayoral expenses. Savings were also expected the Members ICT project. The Committee was reassured that all of the services area's statutory responsibilities will be safeguarded. However, some non-statutory functions will be reduced in light of the authority's financial position.

Members of the Committee requested further details on the proposed restructure. The Monitoring Officer advised that the Protocol Office will be reduced from 4 FTE posts to 2 FTE posts with support supplemented by staff in the Mansion House. One application for voluntary severance had been approved and another vacant post

would be deleted. There would be some transfer of responsibilities back to Committee and Member Services.

Members noted the proposed reduction in the training budget and questioned whether training budget across the authority could be centralised. The Chief Executive stated that whilst all budgets are currently devolved to service areas, a project had been undertaken tasked with considering whether to centralised directorate budgets in order to achieve synergies and identify efficiencies.

The Committee supported the reduction of refreshments. Members noted the high cost of providing tea/coffee in the Members Rooms in City and County Hall and they considered these costs to be excessive. The Chairperson proposed that the tea/coffee machines in the Members Lounges be removed and be replaced with tea/coffee making facilities. The Committee supported this proposal.

Members also requested that the Members Diary be circulated 1 month in advance in order to assist diary management.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

23   :   COMMUNICATION UPDATE

The Chairperson welcomed Tim Gordon, Head of Communications, to the meeting. Tim Gordon introduced himself to the Committee. Members were advised that, although he had only been in post for 10 days, he had 25 years of journalistic experience, including the last 5 years as editor of Wales on Sunday.

Work was being undertaken to formulate a Communications Plan, key to which would be improving internal and external communications and the beneficial use of social media.

The Committee discussed social media platforms in terms of communication and public engagement. Tim Gordon invited all Members to the Member Development training session on 12 January 2015, where Members will be able to gain a better understanding of the more practical uses of social media.

24   :   CHIEF EXECUTIVE Q & A

The Chairperson welcomed Paul Orders, Chief Executive to the meeting. The Chief Executive thanked the Committee for their invitation to attend and stated that he would be happy to attend periodically in the future.

The Chief Executive asked the Committee whether they considered Members were receiving enough briefings on key issues for the Council, such as school performance and transportation. Members considered that an improved reference library and electronic access to Members Briefing materials would be an improvement, as it was not always possible for Members to attend Member Briefing sessions.

Concerns were also expressed that some important issues were not subject to scrutiny. Members stated that Scrutiny Committee spent too much time scrutinising processes, which offered little benefit, whilst some strategic decisions, did not come before scrutiny, e.g. issues relating to the bus station and Eastern High School.

Specifically in relation to Eastern High School, the Committee considered that it was essential that Members gain an understanding of what went wrong, and what lessons can be learned, in order for improvements to be enacted. The Chief Executive agreed and suggested that Members should enter into dialogue with Directors in terms of an improvement agenda in order to target scrutiny to issues where problems exist.

25   :   DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will take place on 17 March 2015 at 4.30pm in Committee Room 4.

The meeting terminated at Time Not Specified