



## **COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 11 October 2023 at 6.00 pm in E201, Telford College, Haybridge Road, Wellington, TF1 2NP**

**Present:** Councillors E Davies (Chair), A D McClements and P J Scott

**In Attendance:** A Lowe (Director: Policy & Governance), F Mercer (Director: Communities, Customer & Commercial Services), R Phillips (Service Delivery Manager: Legal & Democracy), D Sidaway (Chief Executive), L Stanway (Interim Service Delivery Manager: Community Services) and L Gordon (Mayor & Member Support Officer)

**Apologies:** Councillor E Aston, S Handley, R Sahota and G Thomas

#### **COMSC8 Declarations of Interest**

None.

#### **COMSC9 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting 28 June 2023 be noted by the Committee.

#### **COMSC10 Equality and Diversity Strategy**

The Director: Communities, Customer & Commercial Services provided the Committee with an update on the progress made on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and Action Plan and the Council's Equality Objectives under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

The Committee heard that over a period of 18 months research and engagement had been undertaken with local community groups, partners and Council employees. The first 4 year Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy was launched in July 2022, but the Interim Service Delivery Manager: Community Services assured Members that all teams involved had been kept up to date and the plan was monitored to ensure it was being delivered as agreed. The Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Service also noted that the glossary of terms included in the strategy was also constantly evolving in order to promote understanding.



Members were informed of the positive steps that had been taken over the past 12 months, which included the EDI being considered as part of the decision making processes, the implementation of employee led groups which meet regularly, EDI focus on recruitment and selection and the engagement with the deaf community. The Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Service advised that in the long term, a new diversity calendar was to be launched and an inclusive recruitment champion scheme would be delivered. This was in addition to the new Armed Forces Outreach Worker who had recently been appointed.

The Interim Service Delivery Manager: Community Services requested that the Communities Scrutiny Committee look at one of the four main objectives of the strategy in more detail, highlighting Member development as a suggestion. The Committee were informed that Member turnout at previous EDI training sessions had been low so the Committee's support in endorsing it would be beneficial. The Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Service noted that making the EDI training a compulsory module for Members could be considered.

Members of the Committee welcomed the report and the work and dedication to celebrate diversity across the Borough. There was a discussion around how best to engage Councillors, with the Committee endorsing making EDI training compulsory for Members. It was agreed that this would be recommended to the Governance Committee for consideration.

**RESOLVED – that:**

**a) the progress the Council has made over the last 12 months with regards to its 4-year Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and Action Plan be noted;**

**b) That it is recommended that the Governance Committee review Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training as part of Councillor's required learning**

**COMSC11 Elections Review - Scene Setting**

The Returning Officer (Chief Executive) and the Director: Governance and Policy provided Members of the Committee with a verbal update regarding the role of the Returning Officer, the election in May 2023 and lessons learnt, and an overview of preparations already underway for future elections.

The role of the Returning Officer was described as being completely independent of the Council, and had no affiliation to the Returning Officer's additional position of Chief Executive. Members heard that the sole focus of the Returning Officer was to ensure the effective conduct of a lawful election



process, and that sufficient resources must be provided to ensure this. The Committee were assured by the Returning Officer that such resources were provided to them from the nomination period to the declaration of results, through both the Election Team and a wider virtual team. The Returning Officer advised that their position was subject to a number of legal requirements that must be adhered to, especially for combined elections.

The Committee were informed that prior to the Returning Officer's declaration of the results there were two key stages that must take place; the verification and the count. During these stages transparency and accuracy were vital. In order to assure this, the Returning Officer advised the Committee that preparation was always ongoing, and included regular meetings with all areas of the Council. Following the election, the Director: Policy and Governance informed Members that the counting of votes had to begin as soon as practical after the close of the polls, and that all poll boxes must be verified simultaneously before the count commenced. The requirement to carry out verification on all boxes was set out in the legislation and ensured that there was no cross contamination of votes.

In preparation for the election and the count it was important for the Council to recruit and train the correct number of confident and skilled staff members. Prior to the May 2023 election this involved training 344 member of staff over a period of 12 hours in order to ensure that the process was fully understood. The Director: Policy and Governance explained that the training and processes had been developed as a result of learning from two mock elections that were carried out during 2022. Members heard that there were a number of key considerations when recruiting staff to take part in the election process given the nature of the long hours and accuracy required. This process was aided by long standing staff, comprised of prominently current and ex Council staff, who understood the complexity of the process.

The Director: Policy and Governance informed the Committee that layout plans of the verification and count venue were prepared at early stage and were included in the count plan. This plan also included all the necessary procedures that took place, detailing when and how ballots be verified and counted from each of the electoral areas, in addition to contingencies and an evacuation plan for emergencies. The Director: Policy and Governance noted that this plan was kept under regularly reviews throughout the verification and count, and that communication between staff, candidates, agents and the returning officer had been key to ensuring clarity. The Committee were advised that another key component on the evening of the verification and count was the security of the ballot boxes. All necessary steps were taken to ensure the security of the ballot papers and relevant stations from the close of the poll through to the declaration of the result. In the instances where papers were held over for a later count the sealed ballot boxes were stored under the watch of CCTV and security staff.



The Committee heard that verification process served two main purposes. The first was to ensure and demonstrate that all ballot papers issued at polling stations, and all returned postal ballot papers had been brought to the count. The second was to provide the figure with which the count outcome should reconcile. The count could not commence until this was established. The Director: Policy and Governance advised Members that there were a number of different recognised count methods used for single and multi-member wards. These included grass skirts, kangaroo boards and count sheets. Members heard that the method used was determined by testing, the number of vacancies and predictions regarding how these votes may block into political groups. The Director: Policy and Governance explained that multi-member and multi-candidate wards tended to take longer to count, but there were a number of other factors that could slow down the process, including the supplementary voting, the thickness of the paper and doubtful adjudications. The Returning Officer added that once they were happy with the provisional results they would then be discussed with the candidates, and at this stage a recount can be requested by any candidate or agent. Once the declaration was made by the Returning Officer, what was announced became final.

The Committee were informed that soon after the election was completed, meetings took place to discuss any issues or areas for improvement that could be incorporated into the count plan moving forward. The Director: Policy and Governance noted that the improvement cycle was ongoing and the team were always actively seeking best practice and lessons that could be learned internally and from other councils. The Returning Officer advised the Committee that in an effort to continue further learning and best practice, the Council had engaged a recognised expert, Mark Heath, to undertake a review alongside the Committee.

Members of the Committee thanked the Returning Officer and Director: Policy and Governance and noted that they found it very useful to have an insight to the amount of background work included in the preparation and the processes involved in the election, particularly in relation to the timescales required for the verification and count.

During the discussion, Members raised the following questions:

*Would staggering the count staff's breaks be beneficial in streamlining the process further?*

Breaks for staff are necessary but there is potential for further improvement regarding staff downtime and the time taken prior to the declarations. This can be reviewed further under the advice of Mark Heath.

*How long were the Council required to store ballot papers prior to destruction?*



The Council were required to safely store ballot papers for one year before confidentially destroying them.

*Is there legacy planning for count staff in place or is that something that will need to be reviewed?*

We try to pair the more experienced count staff with those who have less experience in order for them to be supported and learn the process in order to replace the more experienced staff when required to. As a Council we actively encourage younger people to get involved in the democratic process.

### **COMSC12 Work Programme Review**

The Director: Policy and Governance advised that it was a standing item on the agenda to review the work programme at each meeting. Members heard that the work programme was set over a two year period and was a working document.

It was noted that there were currently two remote working group sessions due to take place in November.

### **COMSC13 Chair's Update**

None.

The meeting ended at 7.33 pm

**Chairman:** .....

**Date:** Thursday 1 February 2024