

Meeting of:	Democratic Services Committee
Date of Meeting:	Monday, 10 February 2025
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Corporate Performance and Resources
Report Title:	Update from Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Heads of Democratic Services Network
Purpose of Report:	To provide Members with an update of key activities being undertaken nationally, co-ordinated by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), within the Heads of Democratic Services' Network.
Report Owner:	James Langridge-Thomas, Head of Democratic Services
Responsible Officer:	James Langridge-Thomas, Head of Democratic Services
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	All Elected Members will be circulated a copy of this information only item.
Policy Framework:	This is a matter for Executive Decision.
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Heads of Democratic Services Network is a WLGA group which is convened on a quarterly basis. This group consists of officers from WLGA, alongside officers delegated Heads of Democratic Services from across all Councils in Wales, which aims to share tools, resources and develop policy to support Council's in discharging their democratic functions. • The purpose of this report is to provide an update from their last meeting held during December 2024 and provide an overview to Committee of areas of work which are being explored nationally in supporting the Democratic Services function. • A number of areas will be explored in further detail within this report; including Vale of Glamorgan's attendance and presentation at a national Video Conference seminar (facilitated by WLGA and VP-AV), upcoming Member training opportunities, electoral reform, and the proposed development of a National Scrutiny Self-Assessment Framework. 	

Recommendation

1. T H A T the Committee notes the contents within the report and agrees for it to be disseminated to all Members to make them aware of various areas of work being undertaken by WLGA Heads of Democratic Services Network.

Reason for Recommendation

1. To ensure that the Committee and all Members are aware of the work being undertaken on a national basis to support the Council in discharging its Democratic Services function.

1. Background

1.1 Video Conference Seminar Update

The Democratic Services Team were invited to present an overview of their video conferencing resources at a National seminar co-ordinated by VP-AV and WLGA, providing an overview of their journey to date with meeting the participative aims of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act, as outlined within the Multi-Location Meeting Policy.

1.2 Electoral Reform

WLGA have been responsible for leading the approach to electoral reform ahead of the next Sennedd election in 2026, with various strands having an impact upon how democracy will be supported within Wales. Areas of specific interest for Democratic Services committee are highlighted below, with a copy of the full briefing note in Appendix B.

1.3 Training Opportunities

WLGA have outlined several training opportunities available to Members available via the Heads of Democratic Services Committee, designed to complement the Council's own Member Development Programme, including Chair Training and the Progressive Community Leadership Programme (Appendix A).

1.4 Scrutiny Self-Evaluation Framework

WLGA are seeking feedback surrounding the development of a Scrutiny self-evaluation framework, which is currently in design, to allow Council's to consider how well they are discharging their functions across a range of legislative functions.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

2.1 VPAV Seminar update

2.2 On the 8th of November 2024, the Vale of Glamorgan Council was invited to present at a regional seminar on the topics of Audio Visual, Hybrid and Streaming Technologies for Meetings, hosted by VP-AV Sound Advice Ltd at the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority Brecon.

2.3 The Vale of Glamorgan Democratic Services Team were specifically invited to present given their positive and well-established working relationship with VP-AV, who had implemented the Hybrid Meeting Solution for the Vale of Glamorgan Council. VP-AV had witnessed the Vale of Glamorgan Hybrid Meeting transition and felt that other Local Authorities could benefit from hearing about the Vale of Glamorgan Council's journey and experiences thus far. VP-AV were also mindful of the fact that the Vale of Glamorgan Council operated a hybrid meeting system that was not limited by working process and/or associated costs related to other public sector software programmes.

2.4 Amy Rudman from the Democratic Services Team was in attendance at the event and supported VP-AV colleagues with facilitating a seminar, providing a presentation and subsequent discussion on the following topics from the specific point of view of the Vale of Glamorgan Council:

- The political context and level of Democratic Services support,
- Implementation of Sections 46 and 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021,
- The Council's Multi-Location Meetings Policy including processes around Welsh Translation, Broadcasting and Electronic Voting,
- The technical/equipment infrastructure,
- The corporate wide approach for implementing and educating users on the Hybrid Meeting Solution,
- Challenges faced whilst embedding the solution during the first year of the contract with VP-AV, and
- Future objectives to further develop and maintain the solution in partnership with VP-AV.

2.5 The Local Authorities in attendance were Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Powys, Swansea, Merthyr, Caerphilly, and Monmouthshire. Two National Park Authorities were also represented; Pembrokeshire and Bannau Brycheiniog. From verbal feedback received at the seminar, other Local Authorities were grateful for the Vale's input to the event in terms of demonstrating what could eventually be achieved and for providing a framework to start comparative discussions amongst the authorities. Attendees were also impressed with how far the Vale of Glamorgan Council were in terms of embedding a solution that was fully compliant with legislation.

2.6 An invitation was extended to all Local Authorities in attendance to visit the Vale of Glamorgan Council Chamber and Democratic Services Section to explore further, on a one-to-one basis, the practicalities of providing a Hybrid Meeting Solution.

2.7 Electoral Reform

2.2.1 The Automatic Registration Pilots Working Group is continuing its preparations for the pilots to be held in 2025, comprising the four pilot authorities and the Welsh Government with support from the AEA and the Electoral Commission. There are three pilots – testing whether the register can be recreated using local data without adding people to the register and adding people to the register that have been identified, verified and notified – with and without additional outreach work. To make the necessary legal changes to allow the pilots. The pilots must conclude by September 2025, following which the Electoral Commission will evaluate them. Welsh Ministers will then have to decide next steps on a national roll-out of automatic registration in light of the evaluation.

2.7.2 Consultation on Diversity and Inclusion Guidance for Political Parties Draft Diversity and Inclusion Guidance for Political Parties was published for consultation on 12 November. It aims to support political parties in ensuring that candidates for Welsh elections better reflect Wales's diverse population. The voluntary guidance aims to encourage registered political parties to:

- Develop, publish, implement and regularly review diversity and inclusion strategies for Welsh elections (Part 1);
- Voluntarily collect and publish diversity information about their candidates for Senedd elections (Part 2); and
- Consider steps they may take in relation to voluntary quotas for women (Part 3).

The consultation period closes on 7 January. Responses to the consultation will then be considered, with a view to publishing the final guidance in spring 2025, well ahead of the 2026 Senedd election.

2.7.3 Support Schemes to increase diversity of candidates standing in Welsh Elections. The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024 requires the Welsh Ministers to put a fund in place to support disabled candidates standing in Welsh elections. Welsh Government are currently preparing the regulations required to underpin this new duty building on feedback from the pilot Access to Elected Office Fund which provided support to disabled people standing in the 2021 Senedd elections and the 2022 local government elections. They will consult on the draft regulations early in 2025. We will also be contacting interested parties next year for help with design of financial and non - financial schemes to support people with other protected characteristics and socio-economic challenges stand for elected office

2.8 Training Opportunities – Progressive Community Leadership Training Programme

2.8.1 WLGA shared details of its Progressive Community Leadership Training Programme (Appendix A), which is due to take place in February-March 2025 and is open to all Members.

- 2.8.2 The programme covers the difference between progressive community leadership and traditional models of community engagement. It explores the barriers to successfully leading communities and offering strategies for overcoming them. It includes practical methods and techniques for public engagement, participation, and empowerment with a step-by-step framework to build sustainable and resilient communities. Participants have access to a portal of information and resources for practical support for community leadership.
- 2.8.3 The programme comprises three modules
- 2.8.4 (2.5 hours each), all of which will be delivered virtually via Microsoft Teams.
- 2.8.5 This training programme is designed to enable you to lead the development of resilient and sustainable communities, while cultivating a culture of empowerment and participative decision-making
- 2.8.6 A communication was sent to all Members from the Heads of Democratic Services to all Members on 14th January 2025 to encourage applications, with a follow up reminder. One Vale of Glamorgan Councillor, Cllr Sivagnaham, has enrolled upon this cohort.

2.9 Training Opportunities – Chairs Training

- 2.9.1 WLGA have been approached to provide training to Committee Chairs surrounding areas including the role of the Chair, consider useful practice, develop individual approaches and discuss solutions to challenging situations.
- 2.9.2 As later outlined within the Learning Needs Analysis Self-Assessment Exercise outcome agenda item, this has been commissioned to be delivered in February to March 2025.

2.10 Scrutiny Self-Evaluation Framework

- 2.10.1 WLGA Heads of Democratic Services network identified and agreed upon the need for a draft national framework to allow for Council's to reflect upon their existing arrangements and identify areas for improvement, alongside the sharing of good practice with other Council's nationally.
- 2.10.2 A draft has been circulated, which has been compiled from a range of supporting documents, such as Good Scrutiny Good Question - Audit Wales, CFPS Good Scrutiny guide and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance
- 2.10.3 The framework is currently based upon the following themes:
 - Culture
 - Non-political
 - Councillor led
 - Public Engagement
 - Meetings
 - Chairs

Contribution to decision making
Contribution to policy development
Contribution to improvement
Co-option
Outcomes
Relevance and Balance
Work programming
Reviews
Task and Finish
Recommendations
Training
Evaluation
Call for Action
Joint Scrutiny
Resourcing

2.10.4 Members of Democratic Services have provided initial feedback to the WLGA, identifying strengths, weaknesses and opportunities within the framework.

2.10.5 The Head of Democratic Services has been asked by WLGA to be involved in the working group to develop this resource moving forward.
Once finalised, the Self-Evaluation Framework will be shared with Committee ahead of any implementation within the Council.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

3.1 The Council's involvement in this network allows it to take a longer-term view of the Democratic Services landscape and its improvement journey and seeks to collectively prevent challenges. The use of shared, collaborative resources allows for the Council to consider how they can work with other bodies in an integrated manner to improve the discharging of its duties.

4. Climate Change and Nature Implications

4.1 There are no direct Climate Change and Nature implications to this report. However, this has been considered when reflecting upon the mediums used to participate and facilitate activities, such as using digital technology.

5. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

5.1 The update outlines a range of opportunities available to the Council, which will incur no additional cost as they have been included as part of the Council's annual membership fees to WLGA. Any additional activities and related

expenditure identified because of any of the areas included in the above will be subject to the Council's usual finance processes.

Employment

- 5.2 The main implication will be in terms of Officer time to co-ordinate and/or facilitate sessions and/or resources.

Legal (Including Equalities)

- 5.3 Member Training and development is required by the Local Government Act 2000 and Local Government Measure (Wales) 2011.
- 5.4 The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 places new duties on Local Government in relation to Member knowledge and development.

A determination within the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) Annual Report 2024-2025 states that " Each authority, through its Democratic Services Committee or other appropriate committee, must ensure that all its elected members are given as much support as is necessary to enable them to fulfil their duties effectively."

6. Background Papers

[WLGA – Local Democratic and Member Development](#)

[Statutory and non-statutory guidance on democracy within principal councils](#)

[Multi Location Meetings Policy](#)



Rhaglen Welliant
Improvement Programme

Building Resilient and Sustainable Communities

Progressive Community Leadership Training
for Councillors in Wales



Overview

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The programme covers the difference between progressive community leadership and traditional models of community engagement. It explores the barriers to successfully leading communities and offering strategies for overcoming them. It includes practical methods and techniques for public engagement, participation, and empowerment with a step-by-step framework to build sustainable and resilient communities.

Participants have access to a portal of information and resources for practical support for community leadership.

How is the programme structured?

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The programme comprises three modules (2.5 hours each), all of which will be delivered virtually via Microsoft Teams.

This training programme is designed to enable you to lead the development of resilient and sustainable communities, while cultivating a culture of empowerment and participative decision-making.

When will it be run?

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Please see below the dates.

Programme 6 – February and March 2025

- Module 1: 20 February 2025, Tuesday Afternoon 14:00 - 16:30
- Module 2: 27 February 2025, Tuesday Afternoon 14:00 - 16:30
- Module 3: 13 March 2025, Tuesday Afternoon 14:00 - 16:30

Feedback

Feedback from the first 4 programmes has been excellent. 91% of those who provided feedback gave the highest possible score. Members said:

“A well facilitated and informative programme providing participants with the opportunity to share experiences and ideas. Supported by first class materials which will be invaluable in helping me develop and improve my approach to community leadership.”

“Excellent course all round, I particularly enjoyed the breakout sessions and I intend to keep in touch with the other members of the group I was assigned.”

“The time frame was good - spread over three meetings, made it manageable to attend, and sessions spread over just the right amount of time.”

“The facilitators were all very knowledgeable, and fully understood the day-to-day issues and problems that are part of a Councillor's role.”

“I have definitely changed my leadership style. When I first was elected, I was more of a doer and going forward I now tend to look at how community groups/individuals could be more involved and have an active role in turn.”

“This course has helped in enormously in the way I view engagement with my community. It has also helped me 'convince' other councillors that this is the way forward. Definitely more of an enabler now!”

Ready to rise to the challenge of redefining community leadership in Wales?



Please book your place on the programme through your Head of Democratic Services. Please supply your name, council, position on the council and email address.

Each module includes the opportunity for smaller group discussion in either Welsh or English. Please also state your language preference when booking.

The deadline for bookings is 31st January 2025

By booking your place you are confirming that you will be available to attend all three modules in your chosen programme. The booking information will be used only by the WLGA and the programme facilitators to register you on the programme and on an online portal which will provide access to learning materials for the duration of the programme.



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Welsh Government Newsletter

December 2024

Dear Stakeholder,

Welcome to the December edition of the Welsh Government Elections Newsletter which outlines progress with delivery of our programme of Senedd and electoral reform and preparations for the Senedd election in 2026.

Consultation on the draft Senedd Cymru (Representation of the People) Order

The consultation on the draft Senedd Cymru (Representation of the People) Order (known as “the Conduct Order”) was published on 25 November. The draft Order consolidates and largely restates the law as part of an accessible, bilingual framework for the first time, using modern and clear language. It reflects wider developments since the 2021 Senedd election, reflecting changes resulting from the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Act 2024 as well as any necessary changes from the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024.

We would be very interested in your feedback on the draft Order. The consultation will close on 17 February. The consultation paper, draft Order and draft explanatory memorandum can be accessed via the following link: [Draft Senedd Cymru \(Representation of the People\) Order | GOV.WALES](#). A big thank you to those stakeholders who have been involved in developing the Order, your contribution has been invaluable.

In January we will be delivering a general briefing on the draft Order to Returning Officers and Electoral Service Managers, a specific session on postal voting statement correction procedures and a wider stakeholder event. If you would like to register your interest in any of these events, please send an email to: Etholiadau.Elections@gov.wales.

Oral Statement on Electoral Administration and Electoral Reform

Jayne Bryant MS, Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government, gave [an oral statement on 19 November](#) to update Senedd Members on the work being undertaken by the Welsh Government and partners to progress electoral reform to support greater engagement and modernised electoral administration. Underpinning her statement was gratitude to the many stakeholders and administrators involved in supporting Wales's democracy, which was echoed in the questions that followed.

Automatic Registration Pilots

The Automatic Registration Pilots Working Group is continuing its preparations for the pilots to be held in 2025, comprising the four pilot authorities and the Welsh Government with support from the AEA and the Electoral Commission. There are three pilots – testing whether the register can be recreated using local data without adding people to the register and adding people to the register that have been identified, verified and notified – with and without additional outreach work.

To make the necessary legal changes to allow the pilots, [The Representation of the People \(Electoral Registration without Applications\) \(Pilot Scheme\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2025](#) ([explanatory memorandum here](#)) were laid on 3 December and will be debated in the Senedd on 14 January 2025.

The pilots must conclude by September 2025, following which the Electoral Commission will evaluate them. Welsh Ministers will then have to decide next steps on a national roll-out of automatic registration in light of the evaluation.

In December, we held two workshops with organisations representing vulnerable people to set out how automatic registration will work. While primarily relevant to those working with vulnerable people in Gwynedd, Newport and Powys, do get in touch if you know of an organisation that would like to see a recording of the sessions – etholiadau.elections@gov.wales

Elections Information Platform

We are preparing the regulations for the Elections Information Platform and expect to lay them in the Senedd in early 2025.

While the Platform will not be hosted by the Welsh Government, we have been progressing its design to ensure the regulations are adequate and to support the procurement, intended to be by the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru in their role as host of the Electoral Management Board. As key principles in that design, we are identifying how the Platform can be clearly independent and authoritative, use available material as far as possible, avoid burdens on local authority elections teams, and not dilute accountability for the content of electoral statements.

We would like to invite electoral administrators to join a working group on how the platform will operate, the first meeting will be held the week of 20 January. Please contact etholiadau.elections@gov.wales to join the group.

Single Transferable Vote

No local authorities have decided to adopt the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) at the 2027 elections as provided for in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government wrote to the three authorities that consulted on adopting STV to ask for their reflections from having considering the option closely. The next opportunity to consider the change will be for the local authorities elected in May 2027, in advance of the 2032 elections.

Online Absent Voting

A [Private Member's Bill has been introduced to the House of Commons](#) that if passed would enable voters in Wales and Scotland to apply for postal votes for devolved elections using the UK Government's online service. This bill will be first debated on Friday 17 January, and is supported by the Welsh, Scottish and UK Governments.

A lot of work is underway between the governments to ensure the legislation works well and the technical functionality is in place for both the online portal and Electoral Management Software systems. There will also need to be secondary legislation made in Wales to support the process - this is a really positive step, but there's still a lot of work ahead to deliver the change for the 2026 elections.

Electoral Management Board

Following a public appointments process, Karen Jones – the former Chief Executive of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council – was appointed as the chair of the Electoral Management Board, which will start its work in early 2025. The Welsh Government stands ready to support the work of the independent EMB and is confident the new body will strengthen collaboration and mutual support in delivering elections in Wales.

The EMB builds on the strong foundations of the voluntary Wales Electoral Coordination Board – thanks to the participation of the administrators, Returning Officers, the WLGA, AEA and Electoral Commission over many years. Particular thanks go to Colin Everett for his years of service and leadership for the electoral community in Wales.

Accessibility of Elections

The draft Conduct Order published last month reflects the legal arrangement for reserved elections in Wales, which requires Returning Officers to consider Electoral Commission guidance in considering how to make elections accessible to disabled voters.

We also working with the RNIB, Cardiff Council and other stakeholders on trialling different solutions to help blind and partially sighted voters. Once the user-testing is complete, the findings will be shared with Returning Officers and Electoral Services Managers to help their preparations to ensure their preparations for the accessibility of elections are as user-friendly and efficient as possible.

Electoral Management Software

We remain in regular engagement with the providers of Electoral Management Software systems in Wales to ensure the adaptations required by legislative changes are in place in good time for elections in 2026 and 2027.

Cross Boundary Workshop

Following the [Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru's publication of the second set of proposals for Wales's 16 Senedd constituencies](#), the Welsh Government will look to arrange a workshop with interested Returning Officers and Electoral Administrators to consider the implications of cross-boundary working. This will help the EMB's work, but also the Welsh Government's work to identify constituency returning officers and their deputies and the preparation of a new Returning Officer Charges Order for 2026. If you would like to join the workshop, please email Etholiadau.elections@gov.wales

Changes to Political Party Expenses for Senedd Elections

The Welsh Government consultation on changes to the system governing political party expenses incurred during Senedd election campaigns has now closed. Consultation responses to the proposals, which would take effect for the 2026 Senedd elections, are being currently being considered.

The changes are needed to reflect the move to a fully proportional, list-based, electoral system. The changes proposed in the consultation would mean that as of 2026, party candidates will no longer incur election expenditure themselves, instead each political party will have one national limit for all of their election expenditure. Any changes to the system will require the agreement of the Senedd and consent of the Electoral Commission.

The Senedd Cymru (Electoral Candidate Lists) Bill

The Senedd Cymru (Electoral Candidate Lists) Bill was withdrawn in September. We remain committed to a gender-balanced Senedd and getting more women into politics but have decided to focus on developing Diversity and Inclusion guidance for political parties as the best way of achieving practical change for the 2026 Senedd election. This guidance is now open for consultation with further information below.

Consultation on Diversity and Inclusion Guidance for Political Parties

Draft Diversity and Inclusion Guidance for Political Parties was published for consultation on 12 November. It aims to support political parties in ensuring that candidates for Welsh elections better reflect Wales's diverse population.

The voluntary guidance aims to encourage registered political parties to:

- Develop, publish, implement and regularly review diversity and inclusion strategies for Welsh elections (Part 1);

- Voluntarily collect and publish diversity information about their candidates for Senedd elections (Part 2); and
- Consider steps they may take in relation to voluntary quotas for women (Part 3).

The consultation period closes on 7 January. Responses to the consultation will then be considered, with a view to publishing the final guidance in spring 2025, well ahead of the 2026 Senedd election.

The Welsh Government will review the guidance at regular intervals to ensure it continues to meet its objectives of supporting political parties in fostering greater diversity and inclusion in Welsh political life.

Consultation documents, including Easy Read and BSL versions, can be accessed at <https://www.gov.wales/diversity-and-inclusion-guidance-for-registered-political-parties>.

Access to Politics Grassroots Network for disabled people

On 3 December, the UN's International Day of Disabled People, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government launched the Access to Politics Grassroots Network for disabled people. The aim of the network is to provide disabled people interested in participating in democracy with an opportunity to discuss the role of elected members. Managed and delivered by Disability Wales, the network aims to be inclusive and non-partisan. It will provide a forum to explore what would be expected of them, how they are able to influence policy and delivery of services and what is expected in terms of case management. Local authorities have a range of knowledge and experience that might prove beneficial to network events and should contact Disability Wales if they feel they have a contribution to make.

Job share arrangements in principal councils

Job sharing allows two individuals to share the responsibilities and remuneration of a single role, typically on a 50/50 basis, though other arrangements can be made. This approach not only supports work-life balance but also brings a broader range of skills and experiences to the role, potentially leading to more effective governance.

There are already arrangements to enable job sharing in local authority executives. We have recently consulted on the potential benefits and challenges of extending job share provisions to non-executive roles, such as committee chairs and are currently considering the responses to this consultation which will inform the approach we take in the new year.

Support Schemes to increase diversity of candidates standing in Welsh Elections

The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024 requires the Welsh Ministers to put a fund in place to support disabled candidates standing in Welsh elections. We are currently preparing the regulations required to underpin this new duty building on feedback from the pilot Access to Elected Office Fund which provided support to

disabled people standing in the 2021 Senedd elections and the 2022 local government elections. We will consult on the draft regulations early in 2025.

We will also be contacting interested parties next year for help with design of financial and non - financial schemes to support people with other protected characteristics and socio-economic challenges stand for elected office. We have commissioned Alma Economics to undertake research into socio-economic barriers faced by individuals seeking elected office which will inform further work in this area. There will be opportunities to contribute to this research in the new year.

We hope you find this newsletter interesting and insightful. If require any further information or would like to let us know what you think of the newsletter, please contact Etholiadau.Elections@gov.wales



We would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a Merry Christmas and we very much look forward to working with you in 2025.