

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 2nd March, 2026.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

The Meeting recording is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor Dr. I.J. Johnson (Chair); Councillor N.C. Thomas (Vice-Chair); Councillors G. Bruce, G.D.D. Carroll, S. Hanks, K.P. Mahoney and J. Protheroe.

Also present: Councillor I.R. Buckley.

689 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Principal Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

690 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillors G.M. Ball and S. Perkes.

691 MINUTES –

RESOLVED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 17th November, 2025 be approved as a correct record.

692 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interests were received.

693 INTERNAL AUDIT REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S MULTI LOCATION MEETING ARRANGEMENTS (HDS) –

The Head of Democratic Services presented the findings of the two audit reports undertaken by the Internal Audit service, with one focusing upon how the Council was delivery its Multi-Location Meetings Policy and the other around the technology itself and technical infrastructure. They passed on thanks to Members who contributed to the audit and advised that whilst there may feel like a disconnect between some Members' experiences and the audits' findings, the Democratic Services team were supporting many queries before meetings and worked with the supplier to track and monitor issues. They advised that the outcome of the both audits was substantial assurance, meaning that a sound system of governance, risk

management and control existed, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited and that the audit identified four recommendations for improvement, which were all low and had been accepted to take forward, so the Council would be looking at back up storage arrangements for its recordings based on the wider geopolitical solution, updating procedure documentation to reflect the nuances of various Committee meetings and data protection impact assessments and working with the solution provider to enhance the Welsh language functionality.

Councillor Dr. Johnson noted the importance of the Welsh language and the need for the Council to meet the aspiration of the Welsh Language Standards and ensuring that Welsh was not treated less favourably and welcomed the recommendation as they felt the issue required resolution.

Councillor Thomas agreed with the recommendations provided and welcomed the proposed solutions but sought to understand the cost of enhancing Welsh Language provision within meetings, with the Head of Democratic Services advising that whilst they were not able to disclose a cost due to commercial sensitivities, technological enhancements had been secured within the existing Democratic Services budget so no further funding was being sought at this stage. They noted that the pilot being undertaken imminently would lead to a wider update to Cabinet and this Committee.

Councillor Carroll noted that whilst his experience of using the hybrid meeting system was largely positive, they were aware that some Members experienced issues in joining meetings and also raised the issue of not being completely assured that Members were present and attending meetings after they had joined, and the potential impact that this had upon the public perception of the Council. The Head of Democratic Services responded that they were working with the supplier surrounding mosaic functionality to increase the number of visible Members on screen, but no solution had been forthcoming yet. The Principal Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer further added that when their team supported a meeting, they checked with individual Members beforehand to ensure they were present and could be seen and heard, and that meeting invites were only shared with Council e-mails and known personal e-mail addresses. Councillor Thomas queried if measures should be put in place to encourage people to join meetings sooner, to which they responded that this was the currently policy and that people were available to test thirty minutes before the start of any meetings, and that if a Member joined at the start of the meeting, it limited opportunities to provide support. Councillor Dr. Johnson stated that there was no evidence of anyone trying to deceive in terms of attendance, and that Councillor Carroll should raise any concerns with the Monitoring Officer.

Councillor Protheroe queried if the recommendations raised were aligned to what was happening nationally, with the Head of the Regional Internal Audit Service responding that on this occasion, the audit focused upon the Vale's circumstances and did not consider the wider context. The Head of Democratic Services responded that Welsh Language streaming was an issue that nearly all public bodies subject to the requirements were dealing with, and that they were in contact with those who were more advanced in this space to share learning.

RESOLVED –

- (1) T H A T the Council's Internal Audit Report reviewing its Multi-Location Meeting arrangements be noted.
- (2) T H A T the management response to the Internal Audit findings as outlined within Appendix C to the report be endorsed.

Reason for decisions

- (1) To ensure Members were apprised of internal audits findings surrounding the discharge of the Council's Multi-Location Meeting arrangements
- (2) To advise Members of the response to the external audits exercise.

694 MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME – PHASE 4 PROGRESS UPDATE (HDS) –

The Head of Democratic Services provided an update on the Member Development Programme, which had previously been agreed by the Committee last year. They noted that several sessions had been delivered this year as detailed within section 2.3 of the report, including the new additional Member Briefings, with all sessions recorded and available on MemberNet to be viewed as individual desired. They also highlighted upcoming sessions in March including child exploitation and community cohesion for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, alongside longer-term items for consideration. They shared that the number of attendees had ranged between eleven and twenty three people, with an average of eighteen people attending, with information recorded on individual's training record and that following training, feedback was invited and it had been largely positive, with nearly all responses indicating they were "excellent" or "very good" considering topic, theme and materials.

Councillor Hanks stated that they believed the new MemberNet was working very well, and that it was a shame that not all Members attended the training sessions offered as they were a great help, and highlighted the recent session delivered by Glamorgan Voluntary Service as excellent.

RESOLVED –

- (1) T H A T the progress made to date in delivering Phase 4 of the Member Development Plan be noted
- (2) T H A T the areas outstanding to still be relevant to be delivered be agreed.

Reason for decisions

(1&2) To support the continued scheduling and dissemination of the Member Development Programme, ensuring that development topics identified by Elected and Co-opted Members were addressed in advance of the 2027 Local Government

Election.

695 AMENDMENTS TO THE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO INFORMATION TO SUPPORT DECISION MAKING AND GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS (HDS) –

The Head of Democratic Services presented the report outlining proposed revisions to the Council's formal governance documentation relating to committee reports, agendas and minutes, which the Council were seeking to go live on at the start of the next Municipal year and clarified these matters were for local choice in ensuring the Council satisfied a range of legislative requirements, but a comparison exercise had been undertaken as shown in Appendix A to the report.

They shared that Members would be aware of these proposals as the Committee were made aware of them as part of the agenda item 21st Century Democratic Services Committee, and reflected that the existing documents had not been updated in a number of years, and the decision to review had been based upon the need to modernise, improve accessibility and simplify language used in decision making, in line with Vale 2030 and the Council's Tone of Voice guidance.

They then provided an overview of the changes being proposed, starting with Committee reports and highlighted the example document in Appendix B. They highlighted that the proposed changes to this document were detailed within section 2.7 of the report, including structuring changes to improve officer experience alongside content changes to improve the readability of the report and hopefully more easily enable people to understand how a decision was being formed. They further noted that due to the fluid nature of local government decision making, it would be impossible to have a hard changeover in terms of templates, so there would be a gradual implementation as reports worked their way through various governance cycle and that there would be supporting guidance materials to support individuals in completing and understanding revised templates.

They then shared the proposed agenda templates to be used moving forward, and signposted Members to Appendices E and F, highlighting that this area had not been radically transformed, but changes included branding, simplification of formatting and language, such as removing the technical jargon.

They finally shared around Decision Notices and Minutes, as this was the area with the most significant changes being proposed, with the proposed approach merging the Minutes and Decision Notice into a singular document and publishing within 5 days, highlighting that there was currently a lot of process duplication and inefficiency in producing both as-is, with the content focusing upon the statutory requirements, and then when considering items, being provided an overview of the item based upon its presentation, hyperlinking to the relevant meeting section of the YouTube recording in place of "he said, she said" debate and then closing with recommendations and the reasons for them. They indicated that Members would also probably recognise that long form minutes were becoming increasingly redundant, with many choosing to revisit recordings rather than minutes to see what happened during a debate, and that intelligence from the Communications team

indicated that 75-80% of people who accessed the Vale website did so through a mobile device.

They shared that a variety of minute examples had been included within the appendices to understand how this approach would look in practice for the Council's various Committee styles, including Cabinet, Council, Planning, Scrutiny and other Committees, and that there were meetings which were not available on YouTube, which would continue to operate using the existing long form process, with this also being the fall-back process in the event of technology failure, and that the Council had been engaging the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office, reflecting upon the earlier internal audit findings, and they had not raised any objections, and a similar approach was already in place in a number of Councils across Wales, such as Newport and Monmouthshire.

Councillor Dr. Johnson reflected that these were important things to consider as the Council really needed to easily convey how decisions were made to residents.

Councillor Thomas welcomed the proposed changes, and highlighted how the approach for recommendations provided clarity, and believed that the approach could improve accessibility, noting that it was important to ensure that information was written in plain language and without abbreviations where possible. Councillor Bruce agreed with this sentiment, and Councillor Dr. Johnson reflected that there was a fine balance in plain language versus technical requirements.

RESOLVED –

- (1) T H A T the Committee Report Template (Appendix B to the report) be agreed and introduced in the 2026/27 Municipal year for all meetings of the Council.
- (2) T H A T the revisions to the Council's Agenda Template (Appendices E and F to the report) be agreed and introduced in the 2026/27 Municipal year for all meetings of the Council.
- (3) T H A T the minutes styles (Appendices G – K to the report) be adopted in the 2026/27 Municipal year for all meetings of the Council that were livestreamed and available to watch verbatim on demand.

Reasons for decisions

- (1) To allow for the Committee Report Template to be updated and available to all Council Staff, to reflect the Council's latest policy framework and new Corporate Plan, Vale 2030.
- (2) To improve accessibility to the Council's decision-making processes.
- (3) To allow the Council to undertake a new approach to minute production aligned with the Council's Corporate Objectives, Digital Strategy, Advancements in Technology and Expectations of the General Public.

696 DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME (HDS) –

The Head of Democratic Services shared that this was a standard item looking at the forward work programme including standard items which featured at all meetings, cyclical ones which happened on a regular basis and other items which occurred on an ad hoc basis. They highlighted the changing of frequency of reporting for the WLGA Heads of Democratic Services network due to the current focus upon the 2027 induction and asked the Committee to consider if there were any other areas they would like explored.

RESOLVED – T H A T the provisional Democratic Services Committee Forward Work Programme for the 2025/2026 Municipal year be agreed.

Reason for decision

Having regard to the contents of the report to allow for the Committee to have a clearly structured programme of work to support their ongoing work.