

Committee: Standards (Advisory) Committee	Date: 21 October 2014	Classification: Unrestricted	Report No:	Agenda Item:
Report of: Service Head, Democratic Services Originating officer(s) Matthew Mannion, Committee Services Manager and Beverley McKenzie, Members Support Manager		Title: Update on the Democracy and Governance Webpages and related technology Wards Affected: All Wards		

1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 In advance of the Standards (Advisory) Committee meeting held on 8 September 2014, there were some questions asked by Members of the Committee in respect of the information displayed on the Council's website about Councillors and Decision Making in general.
- 1.2 A background note was provided to Members for that meeting setting out a little more detail about the website, recent developments and possible future plans. The briefing note suggested that a full report be prepared for a future meeting to aid a general discussion as to what Committee Members would like to see and to offer guidance on the future direction of this specific part of the website site.
- 1.3 This report is the response to that request. As well as looking at the website, the report also takes the opportunity to update the Committee on other related potential development areas to allow Members to feedback on those as well.
- 1.4 The Standards (Advisory) Committee's Terms of Reference provide for the Committee to consider matters relating to the Ethical Governance arrangements of the Council and Members are requested to consider this report in the light of those responsibilities.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Standards (Advisory) Committee is recommended:-

- 2.1 To note the report.
- 2.2 To feedback any comments on the existing website and on future development priorities.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The provision of information about any Council's decision making and governance is a key factor in ensuring democratic oversight by both Councillors and members of the public.
- 3.2 All councils are required as a minimum to provide basic governance information on their websites such as the Constitution, committee details (such as agendas, minutes and reports) and Member information. However, officers have been working to develop the site well beyond the bare minimum required. This report will set out what has happened in the last couple of years and suggest potential areas of development for the future.
- 3.2 Democratic Services make use of a software system called Modern.gov to prepare and publish the above information. Most potential future development work is focussed on this system and related section of the Tower Hamlets website, however, there are links to the rest of the site as well. The Modern.gov section of the website is available through the 'Council and Democracy' links on the front page, or directly by typing in www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/committee.

4. BODY OF REPORT

Recent Changes

- 4.1 Over the last couple of years officers have worked on a number of different projects to improve the information available to the public and the ways in which it is presented. For example,

Merging Councillor databases (and web pages)

- 4.2 Previous to the May 2014 elections, information about Members was held in two separate databases. One held contact details, surgery information, timesheets, registers of interest and similar whilst the other (modern.gov) held information relating to Committees such as their attendance and decisions made. Officers took advantage of the opportunity arising from the elections and the need to enter a whole new set of information to merge all Member information into the Modern.gov system. This has allowed us to archive one set of Member web pages and so the modern.gov pages now hold all information about Members, including:
- Name, picture, party, ward
 - Contract information and surgery details
 - Committee and Outside body memberships
 - Registers of Interest and Declarations at Meetings
 - Attendance at meetings, timesheets
 - Election Results

- 4.3 The original database will be held in an archive accessible by officers for a period of time yet to be determined.
- 4.4 The move to the new system has gone smoothly in general with the new web pages launching quickly after the election and then gradually being populated with more information as it came in. However, there have been two issues that officers have tackled. The first issue is the search tool on the website which still has a habit of directing visitors to the old pages, the web team are looking to fix this.
- 4.5 The second problem has been with the public version of the timesheets page. It is unusual for a Council to have Councillor timesheets and so our software supplier has had to build this module from scratch specifically for Tower Hamlets. Most of the early development was successful but unfortunately there have been problems with the public pages. This took much longer to solve than had been expected but it has now been fixed.
- 4.6 It is important to note that, although a new system is being used to hold a lot of the information about Members, and officers have had to learn how to operate this system, there have, to date, been no changes to how Members are expected to report relevant information. For example, paper-based Register of Interest and Timesheet forms, in the same format as used before the elections, are the way Democratic Services expect Members to report those sets of information. In addition, as part of the induction process, timesheet forms were provided to Members and officers from Member Support were available to answer questions on how to fill them in.
- 4.7 Therefore, the changes made should have had no impact on Members as yet. However, as set out later on in the report, the new system does offer the ability for members to submit certain information directly via the intranet and this is a likely future development.

Improving the website and decision making information

- 4.8 Efforts have been made to improve the democracy web pages and the guidance to the public on how decisions are made. Work undertaken includes:
- Revamping the 'Committee and Members' website page to better set out the information available.
 - Moving the Forward Plan, Election Results and Constitution from other parts of the website.
 - New web guides including a summary of decision making and a structure chart of committees.
 - New public information sheets in the agendas for the main Council committees. These include general access and attendance information as well as, where relevant, guides on how to speak/take part in the meeting.

Mod.Gov App

- 4.9 Democratic Services have taken advantage of the 'Mod.Gov' app to allow access to public committee papers (agenda, reports, minutes) for anyone who is interested. The constitution is also now available on the app. The app is available for Apple tablets and all Android devices (including Kindle tablets) and is free to all users. A Windows version is in development.

Webcasting

- 4.10 Following the request of Members, Democratic Services have introduced the webcasting of Council and Cabinet meetings via a pilot programme. The webcasts are available through a link from the Democratic Services web pages. As well as being viewable, the webcasts allow viewers to link individual speaker points during the film to their social media accounts, email etc. Should it be decided to formalise the webcasting arrangements, further work can be undertaken to integrate the films into the website.

Current and Future Developments

- 4.11 The above sets out recent developments, the following paragraphs look at a number of potential areas of development and officers would welcome the Committee's input into where its focus should now be.

Member Self Service and Member Web Information

- 4.12 Now that all Councillor information is contained within one system, focus can turn to potential improvements. Particular issues to consider could be:
- Member Self Service – to what extent can Members submit/change details automatically themselves.
 - How should information be displayed on the Councillor's own page on the site and what should be prioritised/highlighted.
 - What is not there that should be (e.g. other contact details such as Twitter, or Expenses information, training details etc).
 - How can Councillor information, especially new/changed information best be highlighted, including on the Democracy home page.
- 4.13 Member Self Service - Modern.gov allows individual users access to edit some of their information via the intranet. For Councillors this means, for example, that they can input their own register of interest changes, timesheets and even decide what contact details are visible on the website. This could be more efficient and free up officer time but does assume that Councillors will not have questions about what they need to include and that they will be comfortable using computers to enter the information themselves.

- 4.14 Currently, officers are working to fix some initial issues with the Timesheets module and after that can look to roll-out self-service options to Members. Members will also be able to submit Register of Interest changes themselves and officers will explore whether any other information sets can also be included.

Highlighting change/what's new/what's important

- 4.15 The website contains a lot of information about the decisions being taken at the Council and if you are looking for something specific (e.g. the next Cabinet agenda) then hopefully it is easy enough to find. However, the web pages are quite static so beyond the basic 'what's new' feed there isn't much indication of new items.
- 4.16 For example, two new tools that have just become available to the system are a 'share' button to link to social media and a 'This Matters' button that allows registered users to indicate their interest in a particular item. In particular the 'This Matters' button could be used to track and highlight items of 'interest'.

Reaching out to communities

- 4.17 A potential approach to Different members of the public obviously have different levels of knowledge about the Council and its activities/decision making. It would be useful to be able to visit community groups and provide them with information on how democratic governance works and how they can get involved and try and collect feedback on how they would like our information presented to them. Democratic Services don't have any particular contacts of our own but we are exploring ideas such as making use of Community Champions/Ward Forums or writing to schools and colleges.

Social Media

- 4.18 The general public increasingly conduct their day to day communications via online tools. This particularly applies to younger people who are often harder to reach from a democratic point of view. Democratic Services have begun tentative discussions with related areas such as Scrutiny and Elections as well as Communications about what could be done to utilise social media to raise awareness about governance and democracy but no decisions have been reached.

Apps/paperless meetings

- 4.19 A number of Councils (such as the London Borough of Brent) have used the Mod.Gov app to deliver paperless meetings whereby all officers and Members attending the meeting have a tablet computer and read/edit the agenda from

that. This system provides quicker and more efficient agenda distribution but it does require Members and officers to be comfortable using tablet computers.

- 4.20 Officers are monitoring the success of this idea at other councils and when the Department for Communities and Local Government enact their draft regulations to clarify the existing rules, it is proposed to offer this facility to Members who have expressed an interest.

Officer decisions

- 4.21 A new feature that is being developed at the moment is the ability for officers to publish decisions taken by them under delegated authority. This is in the early stages of development but it is hoped that this tool will provide an easy way of increasing the oversight and transparency of Council decision making.

Publicity

- 4.22 Democratic Services do not have budgets for publicity, however there are ways that we try and make people aware of the information that is available. For example, the front pages of printed Committee agendas provide details of the web pages (and a QR code to access electronic papers). In addition, the team took advantage of Local Democracy Week (13 – 17 October) to run an information stand in reception at the Town Hall.

5. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

- 5.1 The cost of the website is met through the central communications and ICT budgets whilst the cost of the Modern.gov software is covered through a contract managed via ICT/Agilisys. Webcasting is currently covered by a specific budget allocated for that task.
- 5.2 No further expenditure is proposed as a result of this report and any identified projects would have to be developed using existing resources.

6. LEGAL COMMENTS

- 6.1 The Council currently complies with statutory publication requirements *such as those relating to public access to Council/Committee meetings, agenda, minutes and reports. This report identifies a number of areas where the Council is seeking to improve upon current arrangements and ensure best practice and transparency. As identified in the report it is essential that as the developments are taken forward due regard is given to the corresponding statutory requirements relating to data protection and confidentiality.*
- 6.2 When deciding whether or not to proceed with any of the proposed development the Council must have also have due regard to the need to

eliminate unlawful conduct under the Equality Act 2010, the need to advance equality of opportunity and the need to foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristics and those who do not (the public sector duty). Some form of equality analysis will be required which is proportionate to proposed projects and their potential impacts

7. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 Providing clear and accessible information about the democratic decision making processes at the Council helps to engage with all Members of society.

8. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

- 8.1 None significant impacts are related to this specific report, however, moves towards the adoption of paperless meetings does have the potential to significantly reduce the use of paper.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Most of the above listed projects should reduce the risk to the Council. Providing transparent information about decision making increases the ability of the public to hold the Council to account for its decisions and to highlight areas of concern. However, any move towards new technologies such as tablet apps and web tools does have to ensure it will not result in the accidental publication of confidential information such as exempt reports, personal data and similar. Certain project may therefore require their own risk analysis.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None related to this report.

11. EFFICIENCY STATEMENT

- 11.1 The projects listed are not in the main focussed on efficiency. However there are some small potential efficiency gains from some of them. For example, if Councillors become more self-sufficient in submitting information about themselves then less officer time is required to support that process. Equally, paperless meetings have the potential to be more efficient as papers can be distributed more quickly and officers will not need to collate, print and distribute paper copies.

List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report

Brief description of “background papers” Name and telephone number of holder
and address where open to inspection.

To be completed by author

To be completed by author ext. xxx

None

N/A

12. APPENDICES

None
