

CORPORATE SERVICES
DIRECTORATE

**DEMOCRATIC AND CENTRAL
SERVICES**

BUSINESS PLAN 2025-2026

FUNCTIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC AND CENTRAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Democratic Services

- Ensure the management and administration of the democratic process and formal meetings to meet legal and constitutional requirements.
- Provision of support for Mayor and Elected Members and management of Council's civic and ceremonial events.
- Ensure the provision of an efficient corporate support service including the development of Council's customer service framework and complaints tracking process.
- Co-ordination of local elections.

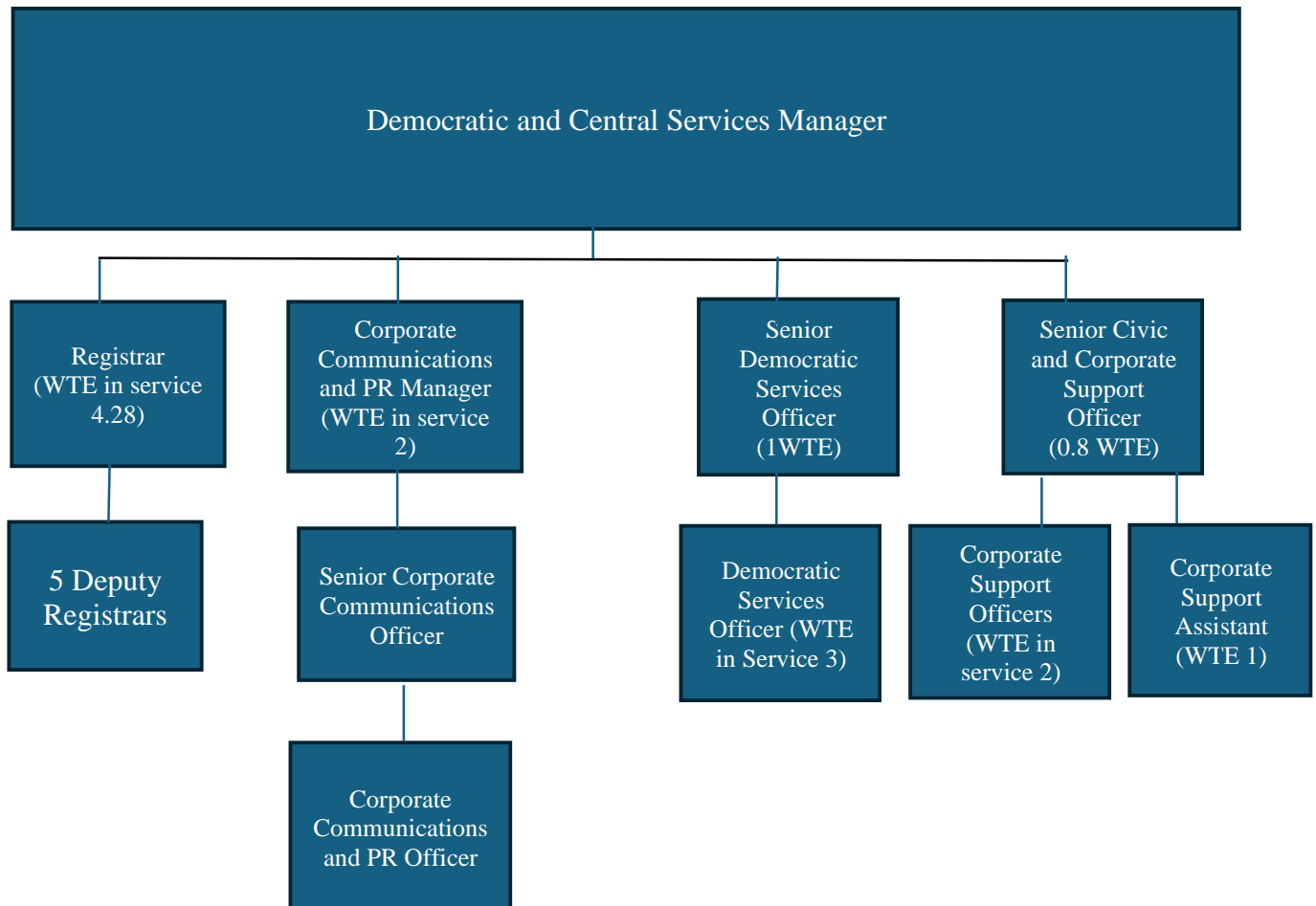
Registration

- Provision of service relating to the conduct of marriages and civil partnerships and the registration of births and deaths

Corporate Communications

- Promote a positive image of the Council through the development and implementation of a Corporate Communication and Engagement Strategy.
- Align the strategy with the Corporate Plan and the People Strategy ensuring integration across the service.

DEMOCRATIC AND CENTRAL SERVICES ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE



STRATEGIC CONTEXT

1. THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE SERVICE ARE TO:

- 1.1 Ensure that the department complies with all statutory and legislative requirements and best practice relating to the governance arrangements for developing and supporting effective decision-making processes, meetings' arrangements and providing advice and support for Elected Members.
- 1.2 Ensure that Elected Members are provided with training and development to build capacity in their democratic role and support strong and transparent local government.
- 1.3 Ensure the creation, development and implementation of policies, procedures and protocols to facilitate the efficient delivery of the internal and external corporate communications function.
- 1.5 Develop, implement and oversee the establishment of a customer service framework and complaints tracking process for the Council.
- 1.6 Oversee the Registration function across the Council area in adherence with legislative requirements and General Registration Office (GRO) guidance.

2. SWOT AND PEST ANALYSIS

- 2.1 A SWOT Analysis illustrating the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in the service was carried out and the results outlined overleaf. The Democratic Services team inputted into this exercise to ensure accuracy of results. An Action Plan will be further developed to address issues raised to further improve the service.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed, loyal, reliable and dedicated team. • Relative stability of team with a number of experienced, skilled and knowledgeable officers. • Flexibility at times of emergency • Good relationship and rapport with elected members and senior officers. • Team Working/Strong team • Diverse Functions/Broad range of services provided corporately. • Quality and consistency of work. • Wide remit of support provided to members. 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering a wide range of civic/corporate services through a small team. • Time taken to implement new structure and new roles revision. • Updates needed on all roles. • I.C.T. functionality has been intermittent. Formalise “on-call” arrangement. • Deadline for Agenda papers (2PM) not being observed by Directors which impacts on the workflow of Committee Clerks. • Additional meetings and subcommittees added impacting on small team resource. • Planning committee meetings arduous and require extensive resource. • Printing papers for members takes up extensive time and resources.
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<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower members by building capacity through member development. • Maximise use of technology/technological improvements e.g Members' Portal, "decisiontime" software or equivalent. • Assisted Technology to help Elected Members avail of papers should be considered. This would free up Committee Clerks for other tasks. • App for Complaints being developed. • Staff capacity building. Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) opportunity for networking and shared ideas. • Point of contact for elected members. • Format of Minutes revision in terms of length - while being mindful of governance requirements. • Audio recording for Planning meetings would cut down on time and resources. • Training for Committee Clerks in I.T. processes could have a positive impact on the smooth running of meetings. 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential legal challenge and reputational damage as a result of council decision making. • Volume of work in all sections. • Untimely receipt of report and agenda items. • Loss of staff through illness or retirement and no succession planning. • Confidential papers being sent in the post/ being left in Chamber – impact on Council papers being leaked. Records management/ data protection breach risk. • Over-reliance on institutional memory. • Attraction of Democratic Services Officers roles for future generations.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observing the 2pm deadline for papers will improve the workflow for Committee Clerks. • Consider software for managing Agendas and Reports allowing for speed of access for queries and integration of historical papers. • Consider impact of AI and how it might potentially be used to aid workflow. 	
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2.2 PEST ANALYSIS

2.2.1 A PEST Analysis illustrating the Political, Economic, Social and Technological forces in the external environment which impacts on the service was carried out and the results outlined below. The Democratic Services team inputted into this exercise to ensure accuracy of results. An Action Plan will be further developed to address issues raised to further improve the service.

PEST ANALYSIS

Political <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomacy in reporting from the team. • Impartiality regarding cross-party working. • Team sensitivity around recordings/ non-recordings of meetings. • Expectation of level of support provided for Members impacts on workload of team. • Awareness of needs of parties/ individuals affects the delivery of service. 	Economic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-election period. Strained resources as meetings took place during purdah. • Emergency Plan affects work in department.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance needed on how Committee and Member Services Officers meet need e.g. use of technology. • Stormont decisions affecting Borough. 	
Social <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NILGA governance impacting on departmental work. • ADSO as an option for shared Officer learning. • APSE stats – performance measurement. • Impact of Extraordinary Audit on negative public perception. • Pressure regarding queries from general public and Press. • Management of the flow of the meeting in terms of decisions being correctly applied/ procedures correctly followed. 	Technological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New technology needed to assist workflow and make meetings publicly available. • Officer level of responsibility regarding technological advances should be acknowledged. • Checks and balances needed re. technological advances. • Impact of public potentially hearing sensitive comments.

3. LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

The functions of the service are shaped primarily by a range of legislative obligations and guidance such as the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and 2014. Other guidance in place includes the following: Standing Orders, the Constitution and the Scheme Of Delegation.

4. INTERNAL CONTEXT

The functions of the Democratic & Central Services department include customer facing front line services (Registration) and a range of corporate functions which

require the co-operation and input of officers across the Council in relation to, for example, the provision of agenda items and reports for Council and Committee meetings, managing the Council's Complaints process in accordance with the Complaints Handling Procedure and information sharing with Corporate Communications for internal and external audiences.

5. EXTERNAL CONTEXT

The Democratic & Central Services function is externally influenced by legislation and by statutory guidance and guidance on best practice issued by the Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). It also requires input from external partners, other voluntary and community organisations and the public.

6. PRE-REQUISITES AND EXTERNAL DEPENDENCIES

The following outlines the pre-requisites and external dependencies which could potentially impact or influence this Business Plan.

Sufficient resources (people and financial) are made available to the Department to enable it to function effectively. With the new structure being agreed in January 2025, plans have been put in place to implement it, including filling vacant posts in accordance with Council's policies and procedures across the Civic and Corporate Office, Democratic Services and Corporate PR and Communications. This has resulted in the recruitment of a Democratic and Central Services Manager in June 2025 and a Civic and Corporate Support Assistant in October 2025.

A Strategic Plan for Corporate PR & Communications will be developed and implemented during FY 2025-2026. This will be based on accurate market insights with input from Elected Members and the Senior Management Team.

Registration remains unchanged as a service provided via an SLA with the General Registrar's Office (GRO) .

Policies which the Department relies on are adopted or reviewed and updated by Council and implemented consistently.

ICT systems support any new technology required to deliver the services of the Department.

7. ASSUMPTIONS

Sufficient resources are in place to enable the Department to function effectively.

Processes required for the management of, for example, the timely receipt of reports for Council and Committee meetings are in place and adhered to.

Processes for receiving responses to media enquiries are in place and adhered to.

8. BUSINESS PLAN RISKS

- Failure to adhere to Standing Orders and NI LG Act 2014 NI in relation to Council and Committee meetings.
- Lack of awareness of members' needs.
- Members do not receive training to enable them to carry out their role.
- Reputational risk of some media reports.
- Ineffective communication with staff.
- Lack of resource in the department which has service implications and decision making processes.
- Inadequate resources and procedures in place in relation to the review of Council's commercial leases.
- Inconsistent implementation of policies, eg complaints handling.
- Lack of cover for essential Registration service.
- Data breach in relation to "in committee" Agenda items.

9. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE SERVICE

- Complete programme of work to modernise and strengthen Democratic Services.
- Ensure the capacity of Elected Members is maximized.
- Deliver improved customer satisfaction by improving communications, complaints processes, adherence to policy, best practice improvements, customer support services and processes and provision of effective communication within Council that generates positive profile on all Council services.

- Ensure that Council delivers its Registration function in accordance with legal requirements and best practice.

Directorate	Corporate Services
Service Area	Democratic and Central Services
Reporting Year	2024/25

Business Plan Objective 1: Democratic Services
Complete programme of work to modernise and strengthen democratic services.
Lead Officer(s):
Democratic and Central Services Manager Senior Civic Support Officer/Senior Democratic Services Officer
Link to Corporate Strategy:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesive Leadership • Improvement and Innovation
Link to Community Plan:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Thriving Economy • A Healthy Safe Community • A Sustainable Accessible Environment
Link to Performance Improvement Plan:
Not applicable

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s) APSE Benchmarking Indicators	Progress	RAG Status
Democratic Services	Provide effective and compliant committee services to support officers and Elected Members in decision making process.	Code 51009	April 2024 to March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore options for upgrade of online access to agendas, papers and members' portal- report presented to Committee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% agendas published at least 5 days prior to date of meeting. 95% minutes published within 5 working days of the date of the meeting. 95% audio recordings uploaded within 2 days 95% Council meeting actions/decisions lists published within 5 working days. 	
	Provide support to officers, Mayor and Elected Members with the provision of specialist support and guidance.	Code 51009	April 2024 to March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member satisfaction survey conducted. Number of Mayoral engagements and Civic Events delivered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes 	

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected Members Chartered Steering Group reactivated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes 	
Risk Management Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:						
As detailed in Democratic and Central Services Risk Register.						

Business Plan Objective 2: Elected Member Development						
Ensure the capacity of Elected Members is maximised.						
Lead Officer(s):						
Democratic and Central Services Manager Civic Support Officer/Committee & Member Services Officer						
Link to Council Strategy:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cohesive Leadership Improvement and Innovation 						
Link to Community Plan:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Thriving Economy A Healthy Safe Community A Sustainable Accessible Environment 						
Link to Performance Improvement Plan:						
Not applicable						

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s) APSE Benchmarking Indicators	Progress	RAG Status
Elected Member Development	Further develop E-Learning that supports a range of member learning styles.	Code 51009	March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% engagement with Elected Member Development Programme¹. 1 day (=6 hours) on average per Elected Member spent on training. 	85%	
	Enhance the three-day induction programme to include the role of the councillor reflective of the 21 st century councillor.		March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced three-day Induction Programme developed. 	Work halted due to staffing. Reactivated Sept 2025	
	Develop an internal mentoring programme.		March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal mentoring programme developed. 	Work halted due to staffing. Reactivated Sept 2025	
Risk Management Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:						
As detailed in Democratic and Central Services Risk Register.						

¹ Source: Corporate Strategy 2021-2025

Business Plan Objective 3: Communications, Comments, Compliments and Complaints. Registration.						
Deliver improved customer satisfaction by improving communications, customer support services, registration and complaints and processes and provision of effective communication within Council that generates positive profile on all Council services.						
Lead Officer(s):						
Democratic and Central Services Manager Corporate Communications and PR Manager						
Link to Corporate Strategy:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader and Champion • Improvement and Innovation 						
Link to Community Plan:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Thriving Economy • A Healthy Safe Community • A Sustainable Accessible Environment 						
Link to Performance Improvement Plan:						
Not applicable						

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s) APSE Benchmarking Indicators	Progress	RAG Status
Corporate Communications	Provide effective media management and communication.	Code 51002		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications Strategy Review completed. 	Paused due to the	

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placements secured = Positive monthly Advertising Value Equivalent figure 	<p>Social media posts average of 90 per month on x3 channels - over target</p> <p>AVE Period 03/24 to 04/25 = +£6.75 million.</p> <p>Positive AVE of +£0.56 million per month.</p>	
Complaints	Effective management of corporate complaints process.	Code 51009		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publication, monitoring and report of complaints implemented. 0.37 complaints received per 1,000 head of population. 18 working days to successfully conclude a complaint. 	<p>By August 2025</p> <p>Stage 1 avg 4.42 days, and stage 2</p>	

	Review existing resources and present business case.	TBC additional resource may be required.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75% of complaints rectified within target time. Identify further training opportunities for staff handling and responding to complaints. Business Case presented to Council. 	avg 20.88 days. Stage 1 73% and stage 2 71%	
Risk Management Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required: As detailed in Democratic and Central Services Risk Register.						

Business Plan Objective 4: Registration	
Ensure that Council delivers its Registration functions in accordance with legal requirements and best practice.	
Lead Officer(s):	
Democratic and Central Services Manager Registrar	
Link to Corporate Strategy:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leader and Champion 	
Link to Community Plan:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Thriving Economy A Healthy Safe Community 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Sustainable Accessible Environment
Link to Performance Improvement Plan:
Not applicable

Work Stream	Actions	Financial Information/ Budget £	Timescale	Performance Indicator(s) APSE Benchmarking Indicators	Progress	RAG Status
Registration of Births, Deaths, Marriages and Civil Partnerships	Provide effective and compliant Registration services in accordance with GRO legislation		Quarterly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of Registration Service per head of population 	APSE benchmarking data applies	
Risk Management Identify Risks and any Mitigating Actions Required:						
As detailed in Democratic and Central Services Risk Register.						

Business Plan Actions 2025-2026

April 2025 – March 2026

Democratic Services							
Activity	Timeline						
	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct '25	Nov '25	Dec '25	Progress	RAG Status
Working Groups							
Elected Members Development Working Group			√		√	Re-established	
Elected Member Development Training Programme			√			Ongoing	
Code Of Conduct Training		04/05 Sept				Complete	
Media Training			06-Oct			Complete	
Re-establish Women's Working Group			√		√	Complete	
Commemoration & Celebratory Sub Committee		03-Sep				Complete	
Best Practice Network						Complete	
Best practice Network Report 1	End Aug '25					Complete	
Best practice Network Report 2		End Sept'25				Complete	
Best practice Network Report 3				√		Complete	
Business Plan				√		Complete	
Unreasonable Behaviour Policy					√	TBA December	
Recruitment							

Job Spec Committee Member Services Officer/DSO				√		Complete	
Job Spec Senior Committee Member Services Officer/SDSO				√		Complete	
Training							
NIPSO Resources On Service User Vulnerability					√	TBA December	
Civic and Corporate Support							
Activity	Timeline					Progress	RAG Status
	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct '25	Nov '25	Dec '25		
Recruit CSA	Mid Aug '25					Complete	
CSA Starts		√				Complete	
Job Spec Senior CCS Officer		√	√	√		Complete	
Senior CCO In post					√	Progressed	
Job Spec CCS Officer			√			Complete	
External recruitment					√	TBA December	
Complaints App	√	√	√	√	√	Progressed	

PR & Comms							
Activity	Timeline						
	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct '25	Nov '25	Dec '25	Progress	RAG Status
1st Draft Comms/PR Strategic Priority Plan 2026-2028			√	√		Progressed	
Corporate Comms Manager Revised JD			√	√		Progressed	
Senior Corporate Comms Officer Revised JD			√	√		Progressed	
Corporate Comms Officer Revised JD					√	TBA December	
Online digital video campaign				√	√	Complete	

Registration							
Activity	Timeline						
	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct '25	Nov '25	Dec '25	Progress	RAG Status
Roll out Registration function across Borough	√	√	√	√	√	Progressed	

Business Plan Actions 2025-2026

January – March 2026

Democratic Services					
Activity	Timeline			Progress	RAG Status
	Jan '26	Feb '26	Mar '26		
Working Groups					
Elected Members Development Working Group		√		Ongoing	
Elected Member Development Training Programme	√			Ongoing	
Women's Working Group		√		Ongoing	
Commemoration & Celebratory Sub Committee		√		Ongoing	
Best Practice Network					
Best Practice End Of Year Report				TBA April '26	
Recruitment					
Committee Member Services Officer/DSO JDs agreed	√			TBA	
Senior Committee Member Services Officer in role			√	TBA	

Civic and Corporate Support					
Activity	Timeline			Progress	RAG Status
	Jan '26	Feb '26	Mar '26		
CCS Officer In Post			√	TBA	
Complaints App	√	√	√	Progressed	

PR & Comms					
Activity	Timeline				
	Jan '26	Feb '26	Mar '26	Progress	RAG Status
1st Draft Comms/PR Strategic Priority Plan 2026-2028			√	TBA	
Corporate Comms Manager In Post			√	TBA	
Senior Corporate Comms Officer Revised JD Approved		√		TBA	
Corporate Comms Officer Revised JD Approved			√	TBA	
Online digital video campaign	√	√	√	TBA	

Registration					
Activity	Timeline				
	Jan '26	Feb '26	Mar '26	Progress	RAG Status
Roll out Registration function across Borough	√	√	√	TBA	