

To: Cross Party Sounding Board

On: 6 June 2018

Report by: Chief Executive

Heading: Elected Member Enquiries - Review

1. Summary

- 1.1 In early 2018, the Head of Policy of Commissioning led an initial review of the process for handling elected member enquiries and related performance.
- 1.2 Current processes and target timescales have been in place for a number of years, whilst the focus and nature of the contacts made by members of the public has continued to evolve.
- 1.3 Flowing from the review, there are several key proposals which are set out within this paper for discussion with elected members. The aim of these proposals is to strengthen the existing process, ensuring that it more effective and efficient for both elected members and services.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that members of the board:
- Note the initial findings from the review undertaken by the Head of Policy and Commissioning; and
 - Consider the proposals that could be implemented to further strengthen and improve the existing process for both elected members and services.

3. Background

3.1 Renfrewshire Council is a customer focused organisation which aims to put customers at the heart of everything it does. It is estimated that services receive somewhere in the region of 3 million contacts annually, whether that is face to face, over the telephone or digitally through the web.

3.2 The key reasons for contacting the Council are varied, ranging from a service request such as a housing repair, to making an appointment to register a birth, death or marriage, or contacting the Council to make a complaint about a service received. In the past year:

- 353,000 calls were made to the contact centre;
- 42500 requests were handled by the customer service centre;
- Over 6300 complaints were responded to by Council services;
- Over 1400 Freedom of Information requests were handled by Council services; and
- In the region of 5900 elected member enquiries were received and responded to.

3.3 From the high-level statistics outlined in the bullets above, it is clear that services work every day to manage a significant number of contacts, enquiries and service or information requests. In addition, critically, the way in which customers are contacting the Council is changing. So-called “digital disruption” is driving the Council to develop the capabilities of staff and services to handle contacts online or through transactional mechanisms such as My Account. The expectations of customers are changing also, with the Council, its service standards and responsiveness being directly compared to that of multinational firms.

3.4 This challenging picture of increasing customer expectation and demand, is also illustrated in the contacts that elected members receive from constituents in their local ward. Interaction with local constituents through social media is playing an increasingly important role, and the number of enquiries that elected members are requested to take forward on behalf of constituents has increased significantly.

3.5 In recognition of the increasing demands on elected members and on services to effectively respond to enquiries, an initial review of the process for handling elected member enquiries has been led by the Head of Policy and Commissioning. Section 4 of this report provides an analysis of current corporate and service level performance in terms of responding to elected members. Section 5 sets out proposals to

strengthen the existing process and associated timescales, for discussions with members of the Cross Party Sounding Board.

4. Performance Overview

- 4.1 An initial review of the current corporate process for handling elected member enquiries was recently conducted by the Head of Policy and Commissioning. Work was undertaken to gather information from each service including Renfrewshire Leisure and Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership, on the number and nature of elected member enquiries received. Services were also asked to confirm the percentage of elected member enquiries which were responded to within target timescales.
- 4.2 The current target for services to respond to elected member enquiries is 5 working days, which has been in place for a number of years. Performance against the 5 day target has not historically been reported to a relevant policy board, although informal monitoring within services has historically taken place.
- 4.3 The review identified that no single system is used by services to monitor performance in terms of recording and monitoring elected member enquiries. In some services, the system used to record and monitor enquiries changed during 2017, and it has therefore not been possible to collate and compare data for each service between 2016/17 and 2017/18. A breakdown of the number of elected member enquiries and where possible the response rate, is provided in Table 1 below for the years 2016/17 and 2017/18.

Table 1

Service	Number of Enquiries Received	
	2016/17	2017/18 (completed within timescales)
Environment & Communities	3955	5034 (64%)
Development and Housing	n/a	541 (79%)
Children's Services	n/a	102 (83%)
Finance and Resources	94	57 (83%)
Chief Executive's	30	31(69%)
Renfrewshire Leisure	n/a	41 (83%)
Health & Social Care Partnership	72	65 (66%)
TOTAL	n/a	5871

- 4.4 In total, 5871 enquiries were received by services during 2017/18. 66% of enquiries were responded to within the 5 working day target. The number of enquiries handled by the Environment and Communities Service increased by 27% between 2016/17 and 2017/18 from 3955 in 2016/17 to 5034).
- 4.5 Performance in terms of the percentage of enquiries responded to within the 5 working day timescale, varied across services in 2017/18(Ranging from between 64% to 83%).
- 4.6 Further work was undertaken with services to explore the reasons for the current level of performance being achieved corporately. Some of the key issues identified through this review process can be identified as follows:
- Many of the enquiries received are complex in nature, and therefore increasingly require more time to investigate and respond than the 5-day timescale;
 - An increasing number of enquiries require site visits to be arranged or for officers to contact other services / agencies / customers which can cause a delay in providing a response if these contacts / visits are not able to be made within the timescales;
 - Some services require written consent to be granted from the customer before information can be provided to an Elected Member;
 - Some customers contact multiple elected members about the same issue and often use multiple channels of communication which can make it difficult to coordinate responses in a timely manner;
 - Some enquires are sent directly to individual officers for a response rather than through identified channels. This can cause difficulties if the officer is off sick or on leave.
- 4.7 From the table above, Environment and Communities handles the largest number of enquiries from elected members. The profile in terms of numbers handled is very similar to that for complaints, and broadly reflects the volume of services being delivered. During 2017/18, Environment & Communities directly received approximately 8,000 enquiries and contacts in the form of service requests, complaints, insurance claims, data protection enquiries from members of the public which required a written response.

- 4.8 The above excludes service requests either direct to the Customer Service Centre (for streetscene, refuse collection, special uplifts, roads & lighting) or from Housing for repairs.
- 4.9 During the same Environment & Communities received over 5,200 enquiries from elected members. The main areas concerned:
- Roads & Transportation
 - Street Scene / Land Services
 - Waste Services
 - Community Safety
 - The above figures excludes services such as warden calls, EHO and Trading Standard cases, road permits etc which are dealt with separately.

5. Proposed process improvements

- 5.1 In terms of key findings flowing from the initial review conducted by the Head of Policy and Commissioning, it is suggested that several key issues require to be addressed in consultation with elected members:

Target to respond within 5 working days

The current 5 day working target for responding to elected member enquiries has been in place for a number of years. The volume, complexity and methods of contact have changed considerably in the intervening period, as have the requirements of elected members and the structure of Council services themselves.

- 5.2 The current approach to handling elected member enquiries is not currently aligned with the Council's complaints procedure, which requires frontline complaints to be resolved within 5 days, whilst more complex matters requiring investigation should be responded to within 20 days. The ability to streamline complaints in this way has promoted more effective and timely complaints handling within the organisation, ensuring resources can be directed to addressing low level complaints quickly, and allowing an appropriate amount of time for investigation to take place in relation to more complex complaints. Applying this type of approach to the handling of elected member enquiries, could ensure that elected members received a more prompt response to enquiries.
- 5.3 In order for a two stage process to be successful, strong communication would be required between officers and elected members. Officers would continue to demonstrate that elected member enquiries were a high priority for the service, and would timeously communicate the anticipated response time to the relevant

elected member and agree next steps. An extended response time would be applicable to those enquiries which were more complex or required investigation by officers. Guidance setting out principles for this approach could be developed to support the process.

Proposal: - Consider introduction of a two-stage process for the handling of elected member enquiries. The first stage would allow for low level enquiries to be responded to within 5 working days. This may include:- a service request or the provision of or signposting to available information. Stage 2 would allow services up to 10 days to investigate complex matters involving specific members of staff, contractors or to conduct site visits. The focus of services would be to respond to members quickly, with up to 10 days allocated to respond where there is necessary through agreement with the relevant member.

Streamlining the process

- 5.3 As noted in section 4.2 above, the review indicated that there are a range of different processes and contact routes for elected members to make enquiries across services. There is no single system used to record and monitor enquiries and related performance. This creates inefficiencies for both elected members and services, and it is clear that a different approach is required to ensure effective and efficient resolution of enquiries. Whilst elected members may wish to contact individual officers in relation to particular issues, at times this can elongate the process and also reduces oversight in terms of monitoring the timescale for response by senior management teams.

It is proposed that work is undertaken to develop options for a single system, including opportunities to link to other systems if this is possible, such as the Caseworker system. Any potential single process or system should facilitate better tracking of enquiries for both elected members and services.

Proposal: - Consider implementation of a single process and system to be used for recording and monitoring elected member enquiries. Specifically this could involve considering the opportunity to establish a single corporate point of contact for elected member enquiries.

Enhancing the level of information available to elected members

- 5.4 A presentation was provided to elected members in April 2018 as part of the member development week on the topic of “Handling Constituent Enquiries”. Within the session, officers discussed some of the

information set out in this report and explored some of the key areas of enquiries from elected members with a focus on supporting the effective resolution of constituent enquiries. It was clear from the discussions that more could be done by services to make information more readily available to elected members, including some of the options that could be used to “self-serve” in terms of addressing enquiries from constituents, where it is appropriate to do so. Examples of this may be submitting online referrals or service requests directly to service teams, promoting the availability of service level information at ward level and providing access to Council policies etc in a central location. There may be opportunities to develop FAQs covering common areas of enquiry for example.

Proposal:- Consider options for enhancing the information available to elected members, signposting to existing resources and exploring further opportunities for elected members to self-serve in terms of directing service requests through specific routes rather than via Directors.

5.5 Members of the board are invited to consider these proposals for discussion.

Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – None
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – None
3. **Community/Council Planning** – None
4. **Legal** – None
5. **Property/Assets** – None
6. **Information Technology** – None
7. **Equality & Human Rights**
 - (a) The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals’ human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report, as it

has been prepared for noting only. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website.

8. **Health & Safety** – none.
9. **Procurement** – none.
10. **Risk** – none
11. **Privacy Impact** – none.
12. **Cosla Policy Position** – none.

List of Background Papers

- (a) n/a

Author: Laura McIntyre, Head of Policy and Commissioning, 0141 618 6807