

Central Bedfordshire Council

General Purposes

28 March 2019

Protocol for Member/Officer communication

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Purpose of this report

This report sets out the Council's proposed response to a recent survey of Members on their experience of raising queries with officers, requested at a previous meeting.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to note the activity outlined at paras (11-14) in response to the comments of Members.

Background

1. The Council's Constitution at Part 5D states that officers would make every effort to make a substantive response to Member enquiries within 2 working days but if a substantive response could not be provided, officers would acknowledge receipt of the enquiry and aim to provide a substantive response within 5 working days.
2. At their meeting on 7th December 2017, the Committee expressed concern over variation in response times experienced by Members to their enquiries. In addition, it was recognised that while officers should provide responses in line with the Constitution it was equally important for Members to allow officers sufficient time to respond to their enquiries and that an overzealous approach to chasing those responses was inappropriate and counterproductive.
3. Members requested that the Minutes of the meeting be provided to the Chief Executive and the Monitoring Officer to ensure that they were aware of Members' concerns regarding the variation in the time taken by officers to respond to Member enquiries and the protocol set out in Part 5D of the Constitution which applies to this issue.
4. In order to understand the current experience of Members a survey was sent to all elected Members, providing them with the opportunity to feedback on their experience and to propose areas for improvement.

Current experience

5. A total of 21 responses were provided, the summary of which is set out in the appendix to this report. The survey demonstrates that the majority of contact between Members and Officers occurs weekly and that the majority of enquiries relate to services within the Regeneration and Business and Community Services directorates. Queries are typically addressed at various levels of seniority with a very similar balance of queries directed at all levels from Assistant Director down to staff below service manager level.
6. The majority of responses were positive in nature, saying that when the question or request was clear, an informative and helpful responses was provided within the timescales set out in the Constitution.
7. Whilst there were many positive comments about the speed of response provided to some queries, the responses do confirm that there is inconsistency across Council services and the speed with which officers in some areas respond to queries. Members recognise that officers are under pressure but say that often an acknowledgement is not provided and responses do not always adhere to the timeframe set out in the Constitution. In particular, where responses take more than 2 working days, a holding response is often not sent.
8. Members were asked to provide specific examples where they felt the information they had been provided was unhelpful or was not provided appropriately. The majority of respondents did not cite specific examples of problems they have experienced, either because they had not experienced any or because they chose not to. However, where examples were provided these typically related to Planning or Highways, which suggests that a significant improvement is necessary in those two service areas specifically.
9. Some Members responded that there had been a few cases where the responses they received appeared 'official' in nature and were not entirely helpful.
10. The survey highlights that experience is generally positive although there are some isolated examples of poor experience, particularly in Planning and Highways teams where an improvement is necessary.

Planned activity

11. In light of the comments provided by Members through this survey, the activity set out below is planned to deliver the required improvement-
 - 11.1 Senior Managers in the areas of Highways and Planning to be made aware of the concerns raised by Members and reminded of the Constitutional requirements and duties on managers to respond to queries from Members in a timely fashion.
 - 11.2 From 2019 the induction programme for Members will include guidance on what Members can expect from officers in terms of responses to queries and guidance on how to ensure they receive suitable responses.
 - 11.3 Guidance and training is currently being developed for officers to enhance their understanding of working in a political environment and the role of Members. This is currently out to tender and will commence delivery for officers early in 2019. In particular this guidance will remind officers of the

protocol for responding to queries and stress the need for timely, helpful and information responses. Following the initial face to face training this could be turned into an e-learning module that is available to staff at all times.

- 11.4 Phone-call data from the Council's STORM system will continue to enable managers to monitor call responsiveness and address any concerns in specific areas with regard to speed of response to all queries. Although not disaggregated, this would include queries from Members.
12. In addition to the above, a meeting has already taken place with the Planning Delivery Team, and a subsequent meeting will take place with the Strategic Planning Team to highlight the importance of achieving significant improvements in those areas in light of the feedback from Members. In-house training has also recently been delivered to Planning trainees on the role of the Members' protocol for communication, Officer/Member relations and expectations. This training will be updated to reflect the outcomes of the survey and will be rolled out to all other Officers in the Planning Delivery team alongside the corporate training.
13. An internal review has also taken place within Community Services, that focuses on the administration process for all correspondence, identifying challenges and areas for improvement to enable a more robust administration process and more effective outcomes. Recommendations identify the need to put more robust management procedures in place in the short-term in addition to clarifying expectations for responding to any queries. Once implemented the recommendations of this review will significantly improve Highways responsiveness by focusing on continuous improvement and customer responsiveness.
14. Finally, the Council will consider where there are examples of good practice that can be utilised to improve contact with Members across all Directorates. There is a strong customer communications approach in Building Control and a review will be undertaken to understand what can be transferred from this approach to other areas. This may require establishing different means of first contact and using resources in a different way and therefore a wider discussion on the corporate approach might be necessary in order to achieve the timescales set out in the Constitution.

Reason/s for decision

15. The planned activity set out in this report will enable the Council to respond to the comments of Members with a view to addressing the concerns that have been raised by Members.

Council Priorities

16. The planned activity set out in this report will enable the Council to deliver on the priority of a more efficient and responsive Council.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

17. Part 5D 'Protocol for Member/Officer Relations' of the Constitution governs the issues raised in this report including the basic principles of member/officer relations, expectations, member enquiries and complaints. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Financial and Risk Implications

18. There are no financial implications as a result of the activity proposed in this report.

Equalities Implications

19. The Council strives to ensure that it responds to all residents in a timely and effective fashion, including responding to the queries of Members. The recommendations contained in this report will support the Council in ensuring that all queries are responded to in a consistent fashion.

Conclusion and next Steps

20. The recommendations contained in this report are currently under development and will be delivered early in 2019 in order to improve performance across the Council.

Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of responses to the Member survey

Background Papers

None

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