

# Councillor Enquiry System



**Report to:** Scrutiny Committee

**Date:** 12 March 2024

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor James Leppard, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance

**Lead Officer:** Simon Hill, Director of Corporate and Governance Services (01279) 446099

**Contributing Officer:** Janet Jackson, Corporate and Governance Support Manager (01279) 446004

## Recommended that:

- A** The Committee considers the progress on the review.
- B** The Committee requests that the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Governance implement the following changes as set out in greater detail in paragraph 18 of the report:
- a) To introduce another stage proposed as the 'follow up work' stage to identify if a members request has been added to a separate work programme
  - b) To explore if existing enquiries can be re-opened on the system once closed.
  - b) That response emails be adjusted to include the original enquiry, which will give greater clarity to the enquiry details and make the target date clearer;
  - c) That a triage system be introduced where 'Urgent' or 'Standard' is selected by the Corporate and Governance Support Team when the enquiry is submitted
  - e) Further training on the Councillor Portal be provided to members;
  - f) That a further review of a more visual use of address mapping and potential improvements to the address lookup;
- C** The Committee requests an update report will be brought back to the Committee in September 2024.

## **Background**

1. The council uses a Councillor Enquiry System to deal with matters raised by Councillors. Following recommendations from the Peer Review in 2015, the initial system was introduced in 2016 and goes through the following stages:
  - a) Enquiry is raised by Councillor;
  - b) Enquiry is logged and assigned to a department by Corporate and Governance Support;
  - c) Draft response is prepared by the department and sent back to Corporate and Governance Support;
  - d) The response is checked and a final response is sent to the Councillor.
2. The council uses software to facilitate this process. Previously, all enquiries were raised via email to the Corporate and Governance Support Team, who then raised the case on the system. The council introduced a Councillor Portal in early 2023, which Councillors can raise enquiries through, making the process seamless and saving time on re-entering information onto the system. This allows Councillors to log work when they are out and about doing their ward inspections and/or canvassing and for their enquiries to go through to officers more quickly. The Portal also provides a central point for Councillors to raise issues that fall outside of the Enquiry system, such as dumped rubbish. There is also a benefit for Councillors to be able to access information such as the Safety Register, ECC Highways information and Essex Police statistics.
3. The Committee has requested that the system is reviewed. A copy of the submission form is attached as Appendix A.

## **Issues/Proposals**

4. On 8 February 2024, Officers from departments who deal with the most enquiries were asked for their views on the current system and how it could be improved. The main points from this meeting were:
  - a) The current system generally worked well;
  - b) There was support for a system that enabled Councillors to be advised of when longer works would be completed and to receive an update when it was completed;
  - c) The system should enable Councillors to reopen a previous enquiry where the work had not been completed;

- d) The system was being used to raise matters that should be raised elsewhere internally, or to an external organisation such as the County Council.
  - e) Issues were being caused by Councillors trying to bypass the system by contacting officers directly, including difficulty managing workload. This in itself causes issues with slowing down the response times and a lack of accountability.
5. On 20 February, a meeting was held with Councillors to understand how they felt about the system and the portal. It was noted that:
- a) The portal seems to create more work than the previous system;
  - b) Portal is confusing and clunky;
  - c) 10 working days target seemed too long and it had worked faster previously. The deadline did not meet resident expectations;
  - d) There is a need to re-open some enquiries and add more information whilst an enquiry is active;
  - e) The system does not remember memorable words for enquiries;
  - f) Responses do not always provide the necessary information;
  - g) The portal is effective as issues can be logged through phones while out and about;
  - h) The system enables the council to effectively manage the casework of 33 Councillors.
6. Officers have asked neighbouring councils what systems they use to monitor Councillor enquiries. None of the respondents had a system that was semi-automated. Most have an email based system, with the majority of these having a central team that triages responses to the correct team. One uses departmental email inboxes, which are managed by a senior officer within the department. There is little or no monitoring or accountability with these systems.
7. The council, in effect, uses a more sophisticated version of these systems, which enables it to understand what types of issues are being reported. There is also greater transparency as Councillors can see what stage enquiries have reached. The Portal also provides access to a wide range of information that is helpful to Councillors.
8. Whilst the Portal does have some drawbacks, the current system is equitable to all Councillors, and allows the council to analyse the enquiries it receives.

## **Response Times**

9. There is a misconception that the introduction of the Portal changed other elements of the Councillor Enquiry process including the response times for enquiries. However, the 10 working day timeframe has been in place for a considerable period of time.
10. Appendix B to the report provides comparison data for enquiries received in 2022/23 with the old Councillor enquiry system and in 2023/24 when the Councillor Portal was introduced. From May 2022 to April 2023, 1,113 enquiries were received. On average, they were completed within 8.1 days, with 76.1% of enquiries responded to within target. From May 2023 to Feb 2024, 1,416 enquiries were received. On average, they were completed within 7.7 days, with 78% responded to within target. These figures represent an improvement on the previous year.
11. The enquiry system could more effectively filter enquiries so that urgent matters are dealt with more quickly. The council can look at the implementation of a two-tiered system, which could prioritise enquiries appropriately.
12. For some urgent matters, these should be raised through other avenues. For example, urgent housing repairs should be raised directly with HTS rather than raised as a councillor enquiry. There is a training need to ensure that enquiries go through the correct channels.

## **Re-opening Enquiries**

13. There is consensus that the current system does not adequately deal with enquiries that need to be re-opened. Currently a new enquiry has to be opened and this does not benefit Councillors or Officers. Officers can explore how to re-open enquiries through the system and how information can be added more efficiently whilst an enquiry is still open.
14. It has also been noted that currently Councillors aren't updated on progress following the closure of an enquiry. Officers can look at how best to implement a follow up system that will increase the information being given to Councillors and reduce the need for enquiries to be re-opened. This would be accompanied by realistic timescales for completion.

## **Information Provided by and to Councillors**

15. The portal's enquiry form has been designed to reduce the number of incidences where Officers need to ask Councillors for further information before an enquiry can be acted upon. Comments had been made about the flexibility of the address search function and Officers will look at how it can be made more user friendly, and visual in nature.
16. Where Councillors do not feel a response has provided enough information, this can be rectified by allowing the enquiry to be re-opened.

17. When a response is sent, the email notification does not include the wording of the initial enquiry. Officers will change the response notification email so it includes the initial enquiry.

## **Proposed Changes**

18. The following changes are suggested to address some of the issues mentioned above:
  - a) The system can introduce another stage proposed as the 'follow up work' stage. This will be appropriate for enquiries whereby a response has been sent within the 10 working day deadline and the job has been added to a separate work programme e.g. the work will be completed within a three or six month time period. The enquiry will then sit in a separate 'follow up work' stage until the job is completed, at which time a full and final, response will be sent to the Councillor. This will assist with the Councillor issues of re-raising work and progress reports.
  - b) Officers will explore if existing enquiries can be re-opened on the system once closed.
  - c) The response emails will be adjusted to include the original enquiry, which will give greater clarity to the enquiry details. The target date will also be clearer as many enquiries are completed well within the 10 day target as shown in paragraph 10.
  - d) The system can introduce a triage system where 'Urgent' or 'Standard' is selected by the Corporate and Governance Support Team when the enquiry is submitted. Urgent enquiries will be responded to taking into consideration the need of the enquiry up to a max of five working days and standard enquiries will be responded to within ten working days.
  - e) Further training on the Councillor Portal can be provided to ensure that enquiries are raised appropriately and through the correct channels. For instance, some issues should not be raised as a councillor enquiry and should instead be reported using a different work queue. The Portal already provides a central point in which to raise issues which fall outside of the enquiry system. Further training will help to ensure that the enquiry is allocated to the appropriate team in the first instance which avoids any unnecessary delays.
  - f) Officers can look at mapping for a more visual use of addresses and see whether improvements can be made to the address lookup.

## **Next Steps**

19. If the above mentioned changes are recommended by the Committee, the Portfolio Holder, together with Officers will look to implement the changes prior for the start of the next municipal year.

20. Member training on the Councillor Portal will be offered to both existing and new Councillors as part of the Councillor Induction Programme.
21. An update report will be brought to the Committee in September to consider if the changes made have sufficiently dealt with some of the issues highlighted in the original scoping report and any further issues identified as part of this review.

## **Implications**

### **Equalities and Diversity**

None at this stage.

### **Climate Change**

None specific.

### **Communities and Environment**

None specific.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

### **Finance**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Costs to administer the system are included within the Medium term financial plan.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

### **Governance and Corporate Services**

Providing timely responses to member enquiries aids members in their ward work giving clarity to the public that contact them with the expectation that members are able to assist in reporting etc. For the authority, it is similarly important that these requests are dealt with in such a way that none are lost in the process. It is therefore recommended that we enhance the current system and undertake a further review later in the year.

Author: Natasha Terrell, Assistant Director – Governance, HR and Legal

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – Councillor Enquiry Review Submission Form

Appendix B – Enquiries Comparison Dashboard 2022/23 and 2023/24

Appendix C – Councillor Portal Dashboard 2023/24

## **Background Papers**

None

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

None