



Agenda Item 8

Scrutiny Plan: The Role of Elected Members in Engaging in the Complaints Process

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Falkirk Council

Title: Scrutiny Plan: The Role of Elected Members in Engaging in the Complaints Process
Meeting: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 30 November 2017
Submitted By: Director of Corporate and Housing Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is (a) to present information on the role of elected Members in engaging in the complaints process; (b) to outline the developments of the Customer First system and online complaints submission process to give Members greater access to information on constituent complaints and enquiries, and (c) to suggest further changes to the Customer First system for consideration.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

- (1) note the role of elected Members in engaging in the complaints process on behalf of constituents, and**
- (2) note the development of the Customer First system and the associated training proposals.**

3. Background

- 3.1. Concerns were raised at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 17 August 2017 (minute references S8 and S9) about the lack of clarity on the role of elected Members in advising and assisting constituents on their complaints and enquiries. The issues related in particular to (a) the processes in place to support Member involvement in raising and monitoring complaints and enquiries and (b) the restrictions on the Customer First system which prevented Members from knowing whether previous contact had been made by the constituent before contacting the Member now involved.
- 3.2. The Scrutiny Committee agreed that the role of elected Members in engaging in the complaints process was a potential topic for inclusion in the Council's Scrutiny Plan and requested a report on this topic for its consideration.

- 3.3. Historically, Members have submitted constituent complaints and enquiries to individual Services direct or via Members' Services. The lead Service responsible for co-ordinating the response to the issue(s) raised replies direct to the Councillor concerned, who in turn responds to the constituent.
- 3.4. The introduction of the Customer First system has enabled constituent complaints and enquiries to be uploaded electronically and centrally, forwarded to the relevant complaints officer (of which there are several across the various Council Services) for onward direction, acknowledgement and action as appropriate.
- 3.5. In addition, the development of an online web-based form for the submission of complaints and enquiries has been introduced. The form, which can be accessed while Members are, for instance, attending surgeries, is completed online and sent electronically direct to the Customer First team, where it is directed to the relevant complaints officer and the local Member's details noted for the response.
- 3.6. The Customer First system was not widely used by the elected Members serving Falkirk Council prior to the May 2017 local government elections. The election of a high number of new Members to the Council brought with it the opportunity to raise awareness of both the Customer First system and the electronic online form, as well as enhancing the role of Members' Services officers in producing reports at the request of Members.
- 3.7. The increased use of Customer First, while a welcome step, also highlighted flaws in the system, such as the absence of a section on the online submission form noting that the response should to be sent direct to the Member concerned. In addition, the online submission process did not have the facility to issue an automated email to Members confirming that the case they had submitted was now logged.
- 3.8. These concerns were raised with the officers tasked with ongoing development of the Customer First system, along with requests gathered from Members over recent months for other changes to the system. The result is that there is now a checkbox on the online form with a clear description, enabling Members to request a copy of the response when being issued; the dropdown list of names has been sorted alphabetically by surname, followed by first name; Members now receive an automated email confirming that a case has been logged, displaying the constituent details and providing the Customer First case number for reference, and each case is now identified as either an enquiry or a complaint, as appropriate.

4. Considerations

- 4.1. One key area for consideration is the need to differentiate between (a) the Customer First system, which is the electronic complaints and enquiries tracking system used by officers for logging all cases, including the "back-

office” documentation produced during the course of the case being actioned, and for producing statistics as required, and (b) the Customer First team, which is based at The Forum and was formerly referred to as the “Contact Centre”. This appears to have caused some confusion in recent months.

- 4.2. It is clear that Members deal with constituent complaints and enquiries in different ways, some using the Customer First system, some preferring to approach Services direct, some continuing to process the work via Members’ Services staff. It is unlikely that a consistent approach will be adopted in the short term. Instead, it is essential that the various practices and processes currently used are supported by officers across the Council, ensuring that the Customer First system is used for the logging of all cases regardless of the means of them getting there. This would provide a consistency of recording of cases but would reduce or remove the likelihood of duplication of effort and/or contradictory responses being issued.
- 4.3. The point has been made that some Members prefer to email the lead Service or, in some cases, officer direct. Instead of contacting the Service direct, it has been suggested that Members be given a generic email address which could be used from any location with email access and would take all cases direct to the Customer First team, without the need to use the online form outlined in section 3 above. This would be helpful for Members unable to access the online form from surgeries, or for whom the use of tablets and mobile phones is restrictive.
- 4.4. It would also be helpful if officers applied a consistent approach when receiving cases for action, sent or submitted on behalf constituents. Although the facility is now in place for Members to request a copy of the response when being issued, this practice is not always applied, which means that responses are being sent to the constituent direct without the Member, who submitted the case, being advised. The Member is therefore excluded from their engagement in the complaints process.
- 4.5. In addition, while the Customer First system allows for cross-referencing of details, this is not always applied by officers, resulting in duplication of effort and the risk of inconsistencies by way of responses being issued. With Multi-Member Wards, constituents have the opportunity to raise issues with three or four Members. It is therefore essential that cross-referencing is carried out when cases are being added to the system, thereby ensuring consistent practice and response and reducing the risk of contradictory responses being issued.
- 4.6. Another concern is the restricted access to Customer First by Members. Members’ Services staff can produce reports from Customer First, providing summaries of cases dealt with by the individual Member over a specified period, sorting cases into topics, geographic areas, particular constituents etc. Members have no direct access to the system and are therefore unable to check the status of individual cases without involving officers in the process.

- 4.7. Improvement officers have been involved in developing the Customer First system since its inception and it is recognised that the restricted access initially given to Members now requires to be expanded. One option would be to give Members direct access to a portal to see certain details of their cases. If this was to be progressed, a specification would require to be drawn up for a Members' area in Customer First.
- 4.8. Another option suggested is to focus on what information can be provided by Members' Services staff, making sure that all Members are making full use of this approach to get access to their information. For example, Members could be given the name of the lead officer dealing with their case as soon as it is created, to enable them to communicate with the officer direct. This could be included in the report produced by Members' Services officers along with the details of the constituent and the case in question.
- 4.9. Training was given to Members' Services officers to facilitate the production of reports from Customer First, at the request of Members, a process that has been used on a number of occasions over the past six months. Training would be provided for Members, if the option outlined in 4.7 above is taken forward.

5. Consultation

- 5.1. No consultation has been carried out on the report's proposals.

6. Implications

Financial

- 6.1. There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations.

Resources

- 6.2. Staff time would be required for the development of the Customer First system and the delivery of training. This would not be expected to be significant and would be undertaken during business hours.

Legal

- 6.3. There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations. All elected Members are registered data controllers.

Risk

- 6.4. There are no known risk implications arising from this report.

Equalities

- 6.5. No equality and poverty impact assessment was required.

Sustainability/Environmental Impact

- 6.6. No sustainability assessment has been completed as part of compiling the report and the main findings.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1. The report provides information on the role of elected Members in engaging in the complaints process and their access to the Customer First system, with a view to developing meaningful, consistent and useful systems and processes.

Director of Corporate and Housing Services

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Date: 8 November 2017

Appendices

- None

List of Background Papers:

The following papers were relied on in the preparation of this report in terms of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973:

- None