

# Member Enquiries Review

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## Purpose of Review

Carmarthenshire County Council has 75 elected Members of the Council, Their role is to govern the Council through policy making and to represent the interests of their constituents both individually and collectively. Members are the lynchpin of local democratic accountability, the link between the users of community services and the Council. In fulfilling their role as policy makers and community representatives, Members need to interact with Council departments to find out information about services, to make enquiries on behalf of their constituents and to report problems with services on the ground.

Elected Members of Carmarthenshire County Council make on average 5,000 enquiries per year via what is known as the DSU Member Enquiry Process. Following feedback from elected Members the Review of Member enquiries will investigate whether the administration and procedures in place are working effectively and to investigate what improvements can be made. The Terms of Reference for the review were approved by the Chief Executive on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2022

Key Objectives of the Review were :

1. To investigate perceived difficulties with Member's enquiries and identify underlying problems.
2. To identify current standards laid down and performance against these.
3. To investigate Member Enquiry performance issues within and across different departments.
4. To investigate how matters can be improved for officers and consult with officers in high demand services areas
5. To find out if different kinds of Member enquiries have different performance issues.
6. To investigate and take into account Member contact with the Contact Centre.
7. To put forward recommendations to improve the Member Enquiries process to include.
  - a. Agree definition
  - b. Agree Process
  - c. Agree Guidance
  - d. Agree Digital Solution

## Method and Scope

The Review Group will :

- Engage with
  - Elected Members
  - Directors and Heads of Service
  - Front line Operational staff
  - Democratic Services Unit
- Collate and analyse all relevant data associated with the performance of the current Member Enquiry Process since May 9<sup>th</sup> 2022
- Review best practise across Welsh Local Authorities and Welsh Government
- Review options for Digital solutions to facilitate and support the Member Enquiry process.

## Engagement Feedback

The Review Group set out to engage with all Elected Members, Heads of Service and key officers. We also engaged with other Welsh Local Authorities to understand how they managed Member enquiries.

We provided all elected members with the opportunity to attend one of two workshops arranged. The first seminar was held on December 9<sup>th</sup> and was attended by 16 Members whilst the second seminar was held on December 13<sup>th</sup> and attended by 12 members. Feedback from these two seminars was collated and a summary report produced ( **Appendix 1** ) that themed the comments under the following headings :

- Democratic Service Unit Staff
- Delays in Response
- Following up with Officers
- Categorisation of requests
- Delta Wellbeing
- New Members
- Other Findings

All elected members were asked to complete a survey regarding Member enquiries and a total of 41 members took advantage of this opportunity to share their views with us. The survey responses have been analysed and a summary report produced of the findings that can be found in **Appendix 2.0**

We also review best practise across Welsh Local Authorities and Welsh Government. A total of 5 Local Authority's responded to the survey. They were Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff, Ceredigion, Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan.

We asked all Heads of Service for their observations on the Member Enquiry process via teams meetings and it has to be recognised that the impact on Heads of Service varies significantly depending on the service. We know from our analysis of the Member enquiry data between May 5<sup>th</sup> 2022 and December 31<sup>st</sup> 2022 that 5 of the service areas receive 88% of all member enquiries.

We also engaged with key officers from these top 5 service areas in a collective face to face meeting in County Hall. This gave us an insight into how these service areas handled member enquiries and they also provided suggestions for improvement which we have incorporated into our recommendations. The feedback can be found in **Appendix 4**.

## Enquiries by Service

The table below provides a breakdown of enquiries received by service area.

Service Area	Number of Enquiries	Proportion of Total Enquiries
Transportation and Highways	824	27%
Homes and Safer Communities	750	25%
Waste and Environmental Services	454	15%
Place and Sustainability	376	12%
Property	265	9%
Regeneration	102	3%
Leisure	61	2%
Corporate Services	60	2%
School Effectiveness	47	2%
Integrated Services	35	1%
Adult Social Care	16	0.5%
Access to Education	10	0.3%
Media and Marketing	10	0.3%
Property Maintenance	9	0.3%
ICT & Corporate Policy	6	0.2%
Children's Services	5	0.2%
People Management	4	0.1%
Administration & Law	4	0.1%
Curriculum & Wellbeing	3	0.1%
Electoral Services	2	0.1%
Education & Inclusion Services	1	0.03%
Performance, Analysis & Systems	1	0.03%
Revenues & Financial Compliance	1	0.03%

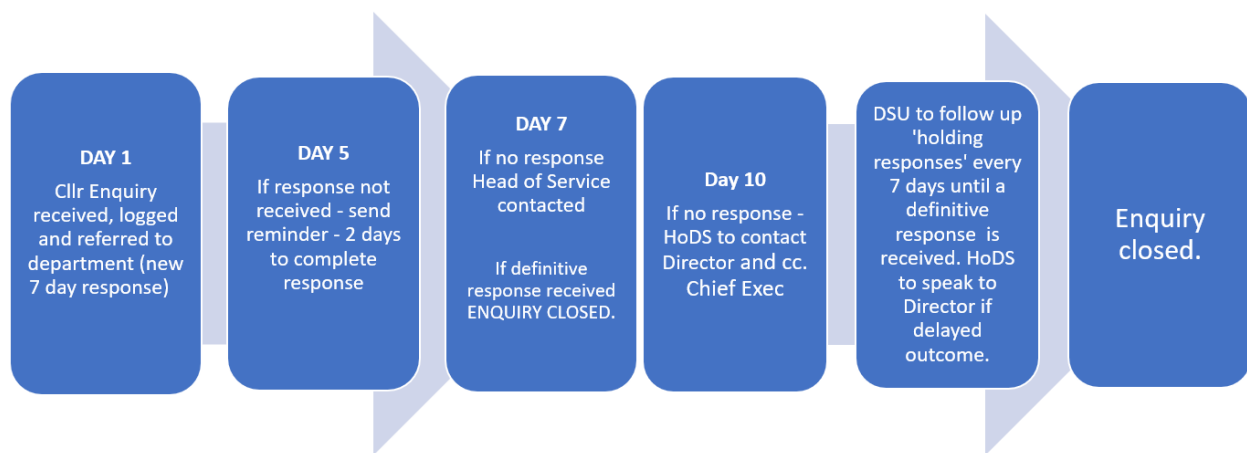
The objectives of this review were set out in an agreed Terms of Reference and can be found on Page 3 of this report.

**Objective 1** – “To investigate perceived difficulties with Member's enquiries and identify underlying problems.”

Significant Engagement was carried out and this has been set out above under ‘Engagement’ heading. The findings and feedback has been articulated and analysed within the attached Appendices 1 & 2

**Objective 2** - “ To identify current standards laid down and performance against these”

The current standards in place for handling Member Enquiries are as follows :



It has been possible to establish performance against Member Enquiries for the period analysed between May 9<sup>th</sup> 2022 and January 30<sup>th</sup> 2023. A total of 3,046 enquiries were logged with 87% of these enquiries were addressed on time. It has not been possible to analyse the quality of these responses and whether they were deemed to be satisfactory with Elected Members.

**Objective 3** - “ To investigate Member Enquiry performance issues within and across different departments”

In terms of reviewing actual performance against Member Enquiries this aligns with the findings of Objective 2.

Our engagement with elected Members also allowed us to identify key areas of concern for them with the process and performance. The detailed analysis can be found in Appendix 1 & 2 attached but the key findings were based on 41 members responding to the electronic survey disseminated via the Councillor Newsletter and 27 Members attended one of the two seminars organised to discuss Member Enquiries are as follows :

Of the 41 member survey responses :

- No members reported that they are 'very dissatisfied' with the response received to enquiries raised.
- Only two members reported dissatisfaction which translates to 5% of the 41 responses received.
- The largest proportion indicated either 'satisfied' (41%) or very satisfied (32%). A further 9 members (22%) indicated that they are 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'.

In addition and analysed from comments made via the survey and from the Member engagement seminars these key areas were raised regarding process and responses received :

- Closing the Loop - Several members made comments relating to the process and its efficiency in terms of 'closing the loop'. A source of frustration is the difficulty in following up or clarifying something in an original enquiry.
- Members indicated issues with the fact that they are unable to keep a log of the enquiries that they have raised and which of those have been actioned or closed. In some instances, 'actioned' could suggest that a 'holding email' has been sent by an officer within the 7-day window which would translate in the system as a 'closed' enquiry. This creates issues for members but also for DSU, as it results in increased 'chasing' and frustration.
- Members noted that a lack detail in the response is a further issue as members normally receive a 1-line response.
- Trying to manage all member enquiries made via email or phone was hugely problematic for many members and not being able to view in one place.

**Objective 4** – “To investigate how matters can be improved for officers and consult with officers in high demand services areas”

Detailed analysis can be found in Appendix 4 attached – the key findings from the engagement with officers was :

- **Triaging** - Officers raised issues regarding the lack of information received for triage at the first point of entry i.e. when a member enquiry is logged via the Democratic Services Unit
- **Content of Enquiries** - Officers highlighted that some enquiries lack sufficient content and context which makes some difficult to address. This causes additional pressure for the officers and makes it more challenging to effectively deal with the request within the mandatory 7-day window.
- **Member Awareness and Understanding** - It is felt that some members lack an awareness and understanding of the policies and procedures different service areas are governed by and must adhere to. Many of the policies and procedures ultimately affect the way that enquiries are responded to and the outcome.
- **Mandatory 7 day response** - The 7-day window for responses is a further source of frustration for several officers. The lack of consistency between the 10-day response time for public enquiries was specifically raised.

- **Working Relationship with Members** - A positive working relationship with members was noted as being of importance by officers and Heads of Service. Further work can be done to build these positive relationships between Officers and Members.

**Objective 5** – “To find out if different kinds of Member enquiries have different performance issues.”

Due to the way the data is captured and responses recorded it has not been possible to establish other than by listening to anecdotal comments whether different kinds of Member enquiries have different performance issues.

It was noted that in some instances where Members acknowledge the complexity of their enquiry they are also willing to accept following discussion with the officer that it will be answered outside of the 7 day response timescale. Enquiries that were multi-faceted and required a co-ordinated response from several service areas were also noted to often fall outside the 7 day response timescale.

**Objective 7** – “To investigate and take into account Member contact with the Contact Centre”

The contact centre itself has very little engagement with elected members as the majority of enquiries do go through to the DSU. The DSU staff will then determine whether the Member Enquiry should actually be classed as a ‘Service Request’ and these could relate to missed bins collections, potholes, fly tipping etc... These service requests are then emailed to the Contact Centre who log as a service request and then forward to the relevant service area to action.

These service requests are dealt with by the service area but at present there is no feedback provided to the Member on most service requests with the exception being on bulky waste and potholes as the service area has an IT system in place that allows them to close the loop and keep elected members informed together with members of the public. Failure to close the loop on the other service requests does result in the DSU receiving numerous requests from Members for follow up.

It is pleasing to note that with the current implementation of the new ALLOY system within the Place & Infrastructure department will ensure that all service requests from elected members and residents will be actioned and feedback provided as to when the request has been completed. This will significantly improve the experience for elected members and address a number of the issues raised throughout our engagement with them.



# Recommendations

Our recommendations are being proposed in light of all the evidence gathered via the extensive engagement carried out as part of this review

**Recommendation 1 – Implementation of an Online Members Portal ( [Councillor Links](#) )** ensuring that within six months of being launched that all Member Enquiries are logged via this online portal.

The Democratic Service Unit officers would advise and support elected members in this transition which would eventually allow these officers to provide greater support to members and add value. Currently these officers have to transcribe member enquiries received via email or phone into online forms and emails that are then forwarded. The existing on-line system is rarely used.

**Phase 1** would see the implementation of a specific Members Intranet landing page that would include access to a general Member Enquiry online form together with the following 'service request' forms that already exist for members of the public. These forms could be adapted to allow elected members to log enquiries on behalf of their ward residents :

- Report Missed Bin Collection
- Report Fly Tipping
- Report an abandoned vehicle
- Report a Litter Problem
- Report a Faulty streetlight
- Report a Problem on the Road
- Report a breach of planning
- Request a Repair

In addition there would be a link to Delta Wellbeing Out of Hrs emergency and general enquiries.

**Phase 2** – Enhance the Member Portal to include ward level dashboards displaying key ward data to elected members, access to online consultations and feedback from public consultations which would eventually act as a 'One Stop Shop' for Members.

## **Benefits of this portal to the Councillor**

- **24/7 Self-Service Access.**
- **Personalized Portal.** Giving access to Ward specific and their Committee information.
- **One-Stop-Shop for access to all Councillor Services.**
- **Single View of all their Interactions.**
- **Track their Cases & Outcomes.** The ability to raise & track cases on behalf of their constituents or on behalf of themselves).

- **Ability to create and access Councillor specific processes** i.e. consultations, feedback, surveys, forms targeted at councillors etc.
- **Champion Online Services and help drive Channel Shift** towards Digital Service Delivery and transition away from costly and inefficient channels such as telephone and email.

### **Recommendation 2 - Introduce a pro-active rolling programme of Member service awareness sessions**

Improved communication with elected members is critical to ensure we pro-actively keep them well informed regarding the services we deliver. These could be used to inform Members of the work taking place in their wards, the service challenges being faced from both a financial and human resource perspective.

Initially the 5 service areas that receive 88% of all Member enquiries to establish these sessions to commence from **April 1<sup>st</sup> 2023**

### **Recommendation 3 - Inform Members of Planned Works per ward**

A significant amount of planned works take place within the wards of Carmarthenshire. The Members Ward profiles would include but not limited to :

- Planned Highways works e.g gully cleaning, road re-surfacing, pot holes, grass verge cutting, weed spraying.
- Waste Environment Services e.g street cleansing rounds, updated recycling scheme informations.
- Planning – Members already informed of any planning applications within their wards but this could be provided directly from the Planning system and updated into the Member Portal ward profiles.
- Police & Crime data per ward.

### **Recommendation 4 – Improve Officer response to Member Enquiries**

To address the observations made by elected member regarding the quality of responses provided by officers it is recommended that key officers attend training sessions facilitated by the Media & Marketing team on how to construct appropriate responses to member enquiries and how to engage pro-actively with Members ensuring they are kept informed of service matters.

### **Recommendation 5 – Introduce Standard Replies To Member Queries**

It is accepted that certain Member Enquiries relate to areas whereby there are statutory process in place that officers have to adhere by and a standard consistent response should be provided. It is recommended that enquiries made regarding the following areas receive a standard response from the Democratic Services Team.

## Standard Replies to :

- School transport entitlement requests and school admission appeals for provision outside CCC policy and statutory requirements
- Speeding – this is the responsibility of enforcement agencies I.e. Police and Go Safe
- Parking offences. The Traffic Management Act make clears that Members must not interfere with the statutory process.
- General requests for service where a decision has been made to reduce or remove a service as part of the budget setting process.
- Adoption of highways where developer has chosen not to enter into a Section 38 agreement , the road servicing the residential development is not public highway .

### **Recommendation 6 –** Re-design of email template used to respond to Member Enquiries.

Although recommendation 1 looks to move away entirely from the use of emails for member enquiries it has to be accepted that if approved there will be a transition period. In the meantime there is a need to review and simplify the wording of the email used. This will be re-designed between Media and Marketing and Democratic Service Unit.

### **Recommendation 7 -** Progress with pace the implementation of key Digital systems to enable ‘Closing the Loop’ on all Member enquiries

As previously stated 88% of all Member enquiries relate to 5 service areas. Currently there are two ICT systems that are being implemented and when completed it will be possible for all service requests and member enquiries logged to be informed when the work will be and has been completed.

ALLOY is being implemented within the Place and Infrastructure department and once completed will transform the way the services are delivered and on their ability to keep customers informed.

TOTAL CONNECT is being implemented within Property Maintenance for both Housing and non Housing works. This new system will once again transform the way customers and Members interact with the service and will ensure all customers are kept informed on planned works and housing repairs.

### **Recommendation 8 -** Role & Responsibility of Democratic Services Unit/Service Department

- DSU Responsibility to educate, encourage and support Members on the use of online forms and the revised Member Portal. This includes encouraging members to provide sufficient detail in their enquiry in order for Member Enquiries and Service requests to be triaged and responded to correctly.
- DSU will only process Enquiry/ ‘Service Request on behalf of a member if all relevant information is received as per the on-line form.

- DSU to take ownership for follow ups with officers.
- Service departments to quality assurance officer responses prior to response being provided to Members.
- Service Department/Marketing and Media to provide DSU with the standard replies for their respective service areas as per recommendation 5.
- Service Department to update DSU of any re-organisation or re-allocation of responsibilities so that enquiries are triaged correctly.
- Service Departments to re-direct enquiries within 1 day if they have been triaged incorrectly.