

Report for: Overview and Scrutiny Committee 29th April 2019

Title: Member Enquiries

Report authorised by: Richard Grice: Director of Customers, Transformation and Resources

Lead Officer: Elaine Prado: Head of Business Change
Tel: 020 8489 4607
Email: elaine.prado@haringey.gov.uk

Ward(s) affected: All

Report for Key/
Non Key Decision: N/A – report for noting

1. Describe the issue under consideration

The Complaints and Member Enquiries Annual Report 2017/18 was presented to this Committee on 25th March 2019. At the OSC on 25th March 2019, further questions were asked in relation to case studies. These will not be provided in this report.

This report provides further information about Member Enquiries, the process and future developments.

2. Input Requested from O&S

It is requested that O&S note the contents of the report.

3. Background

In March the 2017/18 figures for Member Enquiries were reported to this Committee (2,249 Member Enquiries with a response rate of 89% within 10 days).

The number of Member Enquiries has risen in the past year. In 2018/19 2,764 Member enquiries were logged into Respond (response rate of 93% in 10 days), however, to process these enquiries 27,093 related emails were received. Each email, whether directly relating to an enquiry, or where emails are copied to colleagues for information, need to be read and manually logged against each case to provide a complete audit trail. The additional volume of emails received adds avoidable demand to the Feedback team.

The table below shows the volume of Member Enquiries, with related email volumes and targeted completion rates compared to the previous year. This shows an improvement in service alongside a substantial increase in volume of enquiries.

| Year | Member Enquiries | % within 10 days | Emails | Average emails per case |
|---------|------------------|------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| 2017/18 | 2249 | 89% | 18921 | 8.4 |
| 2018/19 | 2764 | 93% | 27093 | 9.8 |

Since 2010, there has been a 45% reduction in the number of officers working in the Council (from approx. 3,500 to approx. 2,000), however demand for services continues at previous levels, and for some services has increased. The reduction in staffing has resulted in fewer officers maintaining service delivery and has also reduced the pool of officers who can respond to formal enquiries, including Member Enquiries.

4. Benchmarking

We have undertaken a benchmarking exercise among other local authorities to understand Haringey's position regarding our current target response time.

| London Borough response times | Days |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Barking and Dagenham | 10 |
| Ealing | 10 |
| Enfield | 10 |
| Haringey | 10 |
| Havering | 10 |
| Hillingdon | 10 |
| Westminster | 10 |
| City of London | 10 |
| Lewisham | 10 |
| Redbridge | 10 |
| Bexley | 15 |
| Hackney | 15 |
| H&F | 15 |
| Harrow | 15 |
| Hounslow | 15 |
| Kingston | 15 |
| Richmond | 15 |
| Southwark | 15 |
| Brent | 20 |
| Bromley | 20 |
| Camden | 20 |
| Croydon | 20 |
| Lambeth | 20 |
| Merton | 20 |
| Newham | 20 |
| Sutton | 20 |
| Tower Hamlets | 20 |
| Waltham Forest | 20 |
| Islington | 21 |
| Barnet * | undisclosed |
| Greenwich ** | undisclosed |
| Wandsworth *** | undisclosed |

*Barnet does not mention timescales

**Greenwich states 'may take differing times'

***Wandsworth does not mention timescales

Of the 32 London Boroughs, 10 authorities, including Haringey, have a target response time of 10 days; the other 22 authorities have a longer or undisclosed target response time. No authority has a shorter target response time than 10 working days.

The Local Government Ombudsman guidelines for responding to formal enquiries is 20 working days.

5. Quality of responses

When Member Enquiries are received to the mailbox, they are logged into Respond and then sent to the relevant responding officer. The team who administer the requests see the final response when it is sent to the requestor, when they are copied into the response to close the case on the system. This limits the opportunity to conduct quality checks.

Once a case has been logged and acknowledged, responses to Member Enquiries are investigated by designated officers within the service where the enquiry is centred. This can often be a complex investigation; however, officers are asked to respond within the 10-working day target. Good practice is to respond as early as possible.

Responsibility for the quality of responses lies with the Head of Service where the enquiry is centred. The Member Enquiry process stipulates that the relevant Head of Service should approve each response prior to it being sent: This must happen within the 10-working day timeframe. Sometimes this does not happen, which can result in poor quality and incomplete responses being sent. If Councillors are unhappy with the quality of the response they receive, this should be raised with the responsible Head of Service in the first instance.

If a Councillor receives an incomplete response to their enquiry, this should preferably be raised with the Feedback team via the Member Enquiry mailbox, who will re-open the incomplete case and contact the responding officer for a full response.

6. Best use of the Member Enquiry process

The Feedback team will record each Member Enquiry received to the mailbox and send an acknowledgement within two working days.

If the Member Enquiry is urgent (e.g. a benefits query where bailiff action is imminent) we ask that this is clearly indicated in the subject header of the email. The Feedback team will ask the responding officer to prioritise that enquiry as part of the logging process.

We understand that residents with language difficulties, digital exclusion, or other difficulty accessing our services will approach Councillors to assist them with making service requests (e.g. a request to clear some dumped rubbish, report a possible benefit fraud). These requests will be dealt with as a service request by the appropriate service team. To ensure the quickest resolution to these issues, the recommended route for Councillors is to use the "Report a Problem" eform on the website. In this way, the request is received directly by the service, without the need

for additional logging, and will be dealt with within the timescale for requests of that type (often far quicker than the 10-working day Member Enquiry timescale).

If, however a Councillor makes a request for what could be deemed as a 'service request' on behalf of a resident but is as a result of a failure of the Council to deliver that service, then this will be treated as a Member Enquiry through the formal process, because the service failure will require investigation and resolution.

On occasion, Councillors will ask additional questions as a result of the response they have received, because they now have a clearer understanding of the issue in question. Additional questions directly relating to the case will be passed to the responding service using the same reference number and will not be subject to a further 10-day response time. Again, good practice is for the responding officer to reply expediently. Should the Councillors further questions not be directly related to the case, a new reference number will be assigned to capture the newly raised issue and will be subject to the normal 10-day response time.

Two Member training session were held last year, to introduce the Member Enquiry process (particularly for new) Councillors. The sessions were not very well attended. We have also received feedback that the sessions were not well received, as there was too much detail with many topics being covered and did not address the practical use of the process. Therefore, with the assistance of the Member Support team, a further training session has been scheduled for 17th July 2019, which all Councillors are invited to attend.

7. Disclosure of personal details

On occasion, when dealing with Member Enquiry requests, there may be relevant information relating to a case that Councillors are not entitled to, such as personal or sensitive personal information.

Sensitive personal information is defined in law and will therefore not be disclosed within a Member Enquiry unless the explicit consent of the constituent has been obtained.

8. Future improvements

As described in section 3, a high number of emails per case are received. Each email needs to be read before being manually logged against the related case to capture the complete view in case of audit.

The IT system currently used to manage Member Enquiries is a market leading case management tool (Respond), however in recent years the tool has not received the necessary investment to take advantage of available improvements. One of the projects that the FOBO programme will deliver is system automation at the start of the Member Enquiry process. The benefit of this is anticipated to be that responding services will receive enquiries rapidly after they have been submitted, that will enable a faster response to be sent. This improvement will be delivered by October 2019.

It is anticipated that to accommodate the improved processing which automation will enable, the Complaints and Member Enquiries policy will need to be updated, therefore this will be brought to Cabinet for approval in the autumn.

There is no proposal to reduce the target response time for Member Enquiries, however we recognise that there are some service areas that struggle to respond to Member Enquiries within a reasonable timeframe. These services are likely to continue in this vein even after process improvements have been introduced. Once capacity has been released through the automation of Member Enquiry logging, we plan to approach services that have been identified as struggling to meet the response times to offer resources to assist with responses.

We will also offer advice and guidance to assist with case management and creating responses. We anticipate this will bring poorer-performing services back into line with responding on time.

As mentioned in section 5, the Feedback team currently have no opportunity to conduct quality checks, or to ensure the query has been fully responded to. The resources that will be released through the system automation project, will be tasked with reviewing responses, to then give feedback or deliver training to responding officers to improve the quality of responses that Councillors receive. We expect to use the learning that is gathered to address recurring issues within our services, so that we can deliver an improved offer to our residents.

We have improved on our response rate from the previous year, but due to the increased volume of contacts that we receive, the quality of responses, and speed of response given by our responding officers varies. As part of the work under the FOBO programme to establish Shared Practices across the Council, (including improving the customer experience), training will be offered to responding officers to understand their responsibilities under the Complaints and Member Enquiry process and to further improve responses. Training on letter writing skills and communicating with customers will also be available.

The planned improvements to the Member Enquiries process are intended to improve the overall experience for Councillors, so they can best support residents seeking their assistance.