

Member Enquiries – Officer Engagement Session and Heads of Service Feedback Summary

Triaging

Officers raised issues regarding the perceived lack of triaging which takes place at the first point of entry i.e. when a member enquiry is logged via the Democratic Services Unit. These sentiments were also echoed by Heads of Service who provided feedback. It is felt that an improved triaging system would serve many purposes and have many benefits;

- To ensure that enquiries are directed to the right department/service area, which would in turn limit the number of enquiries which are re-directed. This is especially pertinent when an enquiry may require the involvement of more than one department/service area.
- Increased signposting to resources already available on the corporate website which would (in some instances) limit the requirement for enquiries to be passed onto departments.
- To categorise what is a member enquiry and what is a service request. This would ensure that service requests are logged via the contact centre and enquiries rightly continue through the member enquiry process.
- To determine the nature of the enquiry through more direct sense-checking at the point of entry. This would determine whether an enquiry is already in the system and therefore being dealt with or whether an enquiry has already been dealt with, but the outcome has not met the member's expectations and is therefore being raised again.

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. This is another example of where improved triaging could have a positive effect, with enquiries being checked for completeness at the point of entry.

In addition, on many occasions one enquiry may contain several different queries which relate to a number of different service areas. Enquiries of this nature require co-ordination across teams which adds a further layer of complexity. Effective triaging at the point of entry would serve to limit this occurrence.

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. If members had an increased understanding it would serve to manage the expectations of both the member and (in some cases) the resident.

Heads of Service also indicated that members on occasion question the statutory processes in place and that certain service areas are governed by legal statutes which effects how enquiries are dealt with. This extends to a perceived lack of understanding from members regarding consent and what information can and can't be shared.

It was felt that increased signposting or information sharing could alleviate some of these issues. This would include strengthening the website and the information held on it to ensure that members have access to up-to-date information.

In addition, greater signposting to the 'Report an issue' function would serve to reduce the volume of enquiries received, as on occasion there is duplication.

Volume of Enquiries

Sentiments regarding the volume of enquiries received were mixed. In the main, the volume of enquiries received is not unmanageable, however there needs to be an appreciation that the complexity of some enquiries means that it is not possible to address them within the mandatory time frame.

Forward Planning/Work Programmes

Similarly to proposed increased signposting to policies and procedures, it was felt by some officers that it would help to share forward work programmes and schedules of work with members. This could be done at ward level. It was noted, however, that some service areas would find it challenging to produce these and colleagues working in the cleansing team indicated that members are not always receptive to a response referencing a schedule of works.

Where appropriate and possible this increased transparency would help to reduce the number of enquiries received as members would be more informed. This would also serve to reassure members that in many instances officers are already aware of some of the issues raised through enquiries and there are already plans in place to address them.

Specific reference was made to a new system which will allow the cleansing team to plan works far more proactively. In addition, there was an appreciation from officers that more seamless links between gully cleaning and street cleansing would be of benefit to planning works in a more collaborative way.

Working Relationship with Members

A positive working relationship with members was noted as being of importance by officers and Heads of Service. What this looks like varies between service area. Colleagues in housing for example regard members as being a further resource 'on the ground' and officers meet with members monthly to build relationships.

Heads of Service noted that keeping members updated and informed with regards to enquiries is something that works well. It is also the case that in some instances Heads of Service will discuss extensions to the mandatory time frame in which to deal with enquiries directly with members and this also works well.

Reference was made to members making direct contact with officers to log enquiries and bypassing the process entirely. This is also the case for some Heads of Service who indicate that members come through directly to them. Whilst this is arguably an important element of building those working relationships, this unstructured demand can be challenging to manage. The degree to which members' expectations can be managed in this respect is an important consideration. In addition, reference was made by a Head of Service to the sometimes-inappropriate contact junior officers receive from members on certain matters.

A suggested approach to developing working relationships was having regular scheduled meetings between service areas and members. Whilst this was welcomed by the majority, reference was made to the need for this to be managed appropriately to ensure that members see them as information sharing sessions and not as an additional route in which to raise enquiries.

There are examples highlighted by Heads of Service where this approach currently works well. In some services development sessions are held for members and they are introduced to officers. However, there was indication that more regular member sessions should take place as member training is key.

With this being said, it is also clear that meetings between members and staff would not be appropriate for every service area given the nature of the work conducted. Heads of Service in this position have stated that meetings would need to be directed through them if required.

Designated Officer Support

The system reminders are a source of frustration for many officers. It was suggested that allocating a dedicated officer to deal with specific enquiries could be useful. This would provide the member with a direct point of contact of whom they could ask questions and reduce the need for further enquiries to be logged which are merely chasing up previous enquiries. This would also support in building positive working relationships between members and officers. Whilst this would work in some services, there wasn't unanimous agreement to this.

Mandatory 7-day Response Time

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. Colleagues in the Public Health team raised that it is incredibly difficult to respond and fully address enquiries in this time frame.

Consistency

Officers expressed that on occasion they feel undermined by the process and their respective senior team members. Officers stated that whilst they have adhered to the policies and procedures in place when dealing with enquiries, if the response is not to the member's satisfaction it is then escalated to the point where the initial response is disregarded. This undermines the officer, process and policies and procedures in place.

Further Points of Note

Officers raised the need for further guidance around requests which are received 'out of hours' and are therefore recorded as emergencies. In many instances, these requests are not emergencies, and they should not be recorded as such simply because they are not logged within standard working hours.

Some Heads of Service noted that not all enquiries need to go through the current DSU process. This specifically relates to enquiries of an urgent nature which would be better placed going through processes in place with Delta.

In addition, Heads of Service highlighted or showed support for the following areas for consideration;

- FAQ pages for members relating to the most common themes of enquiries logged,
- Development of a member's portal,
- Themed information for members for some service area functions,
- More on-site visits for members (where appropriate),
- Rotate locations of Cabinet/Pre-cabinet,
- Post scrutiny briefing sessions or full council sessions,
- Updating the asset register.