

Regulatory and Audit Committee

Title:	Petitions Review
Date:	26 July 2017
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Local members affected:	All

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Background

The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 placed a duty on local authorities to respond to petitions from local people. The purpose was to ensure all authorities considered petitions and for local people to have a way of seeking action to address local concerns. The duty required all local authorities to have a scheme for handling petitions made to the authority.

Buckinghamshire County Council's scheme was developed through the Regulatory & Audit Committee during 2010 and approved by Council. In 2012 the Government withdrew the legal requirements for schemes, with the aim of providing more discretion and reducing bureaucracy. This allows local authorities to develop their own procedure for dealing with petitions.

Buckinghamshire County Council reviewed its scheme and adopted changes again through the Regulatory and Audit Committee in 2013. The updated Petitions Protocol was approved by Council in April 2014.

Reviewing the Scheme

Over the past twelve months, Member Services has been asked for clarification on a number of issues relating to petitions. These issues are not directly addressed in the Protocol as it currently stands. The issues have included:

- Ensuring the timeliness of responses to local issues where Local Area Forum meetings do not meet issue deadlines
- The potential effect of consultation petitions on consultation periods and decision timelines
- Responding to petitions for the Council to take action on non-Council services and the place-shaping role of the Council
- Data protection and the sharing of petitions with local County Councillors
- Responding to petitions in the pre-election period

In addition, since its original adoption in 2010 although minor changes have been made to the process for petitions, the scheme has not been assessed to understand whether it works satisfactorily for local Members or Buckinghamshire residents.

Over the past year, 24 petitions have been submitted and accepted by the Council. Although this in itself is not a high number, the total number of signatories to these petitions was nearly 12,000 people. Approximately 90% of petitions relate to parking or traffic management issues.

Options

To ensure Buckinghamshire County Council's petitions scheme is fit for purpose, it is proposed to undertake a short but in-depth review during 2017. Two options for the review have been identified:

Option 1: Undertake a short, in-depth review of the Scheme

This option would involve a review of both the petitions process and the effectiveness of the scheme in enabling local people to raise issues of concern with the Council.

The review would involve desktop analysis of other authorities to benchmark the Council's current approach and the identification of options for improvement.

Option 1 also provides an opportunity to review the effectiveness of the Scheme from a user's perspective. To do this, the Project Officer would also seek the views of key stakeholders, including Local Members, Petition Organisers and Officers, to evaluate the effectiveness of the petition scheme in enabling local people to have their say and secure resolution to matters of concern.

The outcome of Option 1 would be updated guidance documentation, an updated petitions process which works efficiently, and assurance or recommendations for changes to ensure the Scheme is effective in providing a genuine opportunity for local people to seek action.

Option 2: Undertake a short review of the Petitions process

Option 2 would be to undertake an internal review of the Petitions process. This would involve desk-top research to benchmark the current scheme against other local authorities and a review of how the process works from an organisational perspective.

The outcome of Option 2 would be updated documentation and processes which would improve, if necessary, the efficiency of the Scheme.

Reporting

The outcome of the review, together with any recommendations for change, would be reported to the Regulatory and Audit Committee in the autumn of 2017 for consideration. Any changes to the Scheme would need to be approved by Council.

Recommendations

That the Committee agrees Option 1, a short in-depth review of the County Council's Petitions Scheme.

Resource implications

The review would be undertaken within current resources.

Legal implications

None

Other implications/issues

None

Feedback from consultation, Local Area Forums and Local Member views (if relevant)

None

Background Papers

Current Petitions Protocol and website information:

<https://democracy.buckscc.gov.uk/mgepetitionlistdisplay.aspx?VM=2&bcr=1>
