

## Regulatory and Audit Committee

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<b>Title:</b>	Petitions Process Review
<b>Date:</b>	8 November 2017
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<b>Local members affected:</b>	All

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### Summary

The purpose of this report is to set out the findings of a review of the Council's petition process. This short process review was undertaken as agreed by the Regulatory and Audit Committee at its meeting on 26 July 2017.

### Recommendation

#### To ask the Committee to:

1. **NOTE** the review findings.
2. **COMMENT** on the management actions proposed to improve the experience of petitioners and effectiveness of the scheme.
3. **AGREE** the principle of introducing a time limit on the maximum length of time for the Council to respond to a petition and for a detailed proposal to come back to the Regulatory & Audit Committee on how this could be implemented.

### Background

The short operational review took place between August – September 2017 led by an Internal Audit Contractor, Mark Lockyer, with oversight of the exercise by Clare Capjon, Acting Head of Member Services, and subsequently Sara Turnbull, Head of Member Services. The review scope included examining:

- The fitness for purpose of the Council's website;
- The end-to-end process from submission to outcome/result;
- Lead Petitioner and Councillor feedback;
- Benchmarking activities against other local authorities.

#### The methodology of the review included:

- 10 recent test cases were selected to review. Recent petitions were chosen in order to enable easy access to the petitioner and other parties involved. This case approach was the main methodology used to explore issues in depth through following petition

journeys from submission to the end/result. Through this approach discussions took place with the lead petitioner and local councillors involved.

- In addition, all Councillors were invited to provide feedback on 10 August and informed of the review.
- Desktop research on best practice elsewhere.
- Discussions with officers involved in the petitions process in Member Services and Localities Team.

A copy of the Council's current petitions protocol can be viewed [here](https://democracy.buckscc.gov.uk/documents/s49187/Petitions%20Protocol.pdf).  
<https://democracy.buckscc.gov.uk/documents/s49187/Petitions%20Protocol.pdf>

## **Key Findings**

A table of the key findings and management actions arising are set out in Appendix 1.

The review found that there were many aspects of practice which are functioning well and identified some areas for improvements.

The key findings were:

- The Council's current petition's protocol is overall fit for purpose; there are some adjustments which could be considered for clarity, as well as to bring it in line with national practice.
- The Council's website could be improved to make it easier for the public to find information on petitions, and to provide increased authenticity checks so that the Council can have confidence in the accuracy of petition numbers.
- There are many positive outcomes as a result of petitions being raised to the Council and there is an opportunity for the Council to improve communications on these. The Localities Team undertook a piece of work which has identified that between 2013-2017 of the 85 petitions received by LAFs, 52 were positively resolved, for instance through the LAF helping to find match funding to support local projects.
- The way in which petitions are handled by the Council varies significantly in terms of the length of time for a response and the type of response provided.

## **Resource implications**

The recommendations relate to process improvements that can be made by staff within existing resources. There are no additional financial implications.

## **Legal implications**

None.

## **Other implications/issues**

None identified.

## Appendix 1 – Detailed Review Findings, Recommendation & Management Action

No.	Review Finding	Proposed Management Action
1	<p>Review of the current BCC Petitions Scheme identified two cases where the document referenced “(Insert...)” rather than the figure/link which was required.</p> <p>The current petitions scheme explains the different ways in which local and corporate issues are handled. This could be made clear to the public so that they understand the different routes for petitions.</p>	<p><b>That the Council’s website information on the Petitions Scheme is updated to include missing links.</b></p> <p><b>That the Council’s website information includes examples of local vs corporate petition issues to explain the difference.</b></p>
2	<p>Petitions are currently uploaded onto the petitions website automatically by the responsible officer. Councillors are automatically notified of a petition once it is published online.</p> <p>Feedback from one councillor was that they wished to be more involved in helping to find a local solution at an earlier stage in the process to avoid unnecessary petitions.</p>	<p><b>That the Council’s website (Petitions landing page) is updated to signpost the public to engage with their local councillor to try and seek a resolution to their issue prior to submitting an e-petition.</b></p>
3	<p>There are currently no verification checks on petition signatures, other than a request to complete a text field of what is shown on the screen to confirm they are not a robot.</p> <p>Petitions can currently be signed with the following details: First Name: A; Surname: A, Email: A; THISISNOT</p>	<p><b>There should be a validation of the signatories name/email address through a confirmation link sent via email. This should be acknowledged before a signature is added to the petition.</b></p>



	<p>MYNAME.</p> <p>Where the details provided cannot be validated, there is a risk that the petitions process may be taken advance of, including mass signatures from a single person with invalid email addresses. This may question the integrity of petitions submitted to the Council.</p>	<p><b>Validation through Mod Gov software which is used successfully by other Councils. Action to test and then switch on system.</b></p>
4	<p>The current scheme requires petitioners to live, work or study in Buckinghamshire. There is currently no requirement for the signatory to confirm this information to validate their ability to sign the petition.</p> <p>Where the demographic of signatories is not collected, petitions may be open to abuse and/or error.</p>	<p><b>When signing an e-petition, the petitioner should be requested to state if the signatory works, lives, or studies in Bucks. This will help to identify the demographic of signatories and allow for a better oversight on the types of people signing petitions.</b></p> <p><b>Input field to be made mandatory in Mod Gov software.</b></p>
5	<p>The Council is not in line with other authorities in terms of signatory thresholds. The original legislation suggested that the verification number should be 5% of the local government electors.</p> <p>The Council's current threshold is 20 signatures for local issues and 1,000 for corporate issues; in comparison other local authorities have thresholds of 500 and 5,000. However, Buckinghamshire receives on average the same number of petitions as other authorities.</p>	<p><b>None. No evidence that there is an excessive number of petitions currently and therefore no need demonstrated for policy change.</b></p>

6	<p>In the test cases examined lead petitioners did not present their case to the LAF and in one case was not invited.</p> <p>Petitioners may not feel their voices are being appropriately acknowledged, impacting on the reputation of the Council and their petitions process.</p>	<p><b>Lead Petitioners should be invited to the LAF to present their petition, including being sent the agenda notifications, and copy of the minutes.</b></p>
7	<p>Review of 10 petitions identified four cases where the LAF minutes were unavailable to confirm the outcome of a petition. This included one petition with 3,412 signatories, where the LAF was cancelled, and no evidence to confirm where it had been presented and discussed.</p>	<p><b>A single central tracking log should be set up, actively maintained and monitored to ensure that all petitions are considered in a timely manner with a written response given to the lead petitioner.</b></p>
8	<p>Currently there is no system in place to actively monitor petitions centrally. One of the impacts of this is that it is difficult to judge the effectiveness and impact of petitions as this data is not held.</p> <p>The public may not have confidence that their voices will be heard if information is not available on the outcomes of petitions.</p> <p>The way in which petitions are handled by the Council varies significantly in terms of the level of seniority of officer responding in the cases when a written response is provided; as well as the approach taken.</p> <p>When petitions are discussed at a LAF the minutes record the discussion, however the outcome may not always be clear and a specific response may not provided to the</p>	<p><b>A written response should always be provided to the lead petitioner/signatories from a designated officer stating the outcome of their petition, and what action will be taken (where appropriate), including a timeline of events.</b></p> <p><b>The petitions website should be updated to include a working link to the LAF where the petition was presented, and a summary paragraph of the resulting action published to close off the petition and provide a clear audit trail.</b></p>

	petitioner.	
9	<p>Petitions are often on key themes, such as parking and traffic calming. A response to each petition is requested from the Transport for Bucks (TfB) team but often responses vary in detail dependent on the staff member presenting the response.</p> <p>There are a number of similar petitions where it would be beneficial to share best practice internally which will improve the quality of the response to the petitioner as well as avoid duplication of effort.</p>	<p><b>To develop template responses to common themed petitions, for example parking and traffic calming, in order to reduce duplication and share best practice.</b></p>
10	<p>The experience of petitioners is mixed. One petitioner reported a very positive experience of the petitions process and in particular praised how they had been kept updated by their local councillor. Another felt that they had not been informed of an outcome or kept updated.</p> <p>The Localities Team have completed a desktop exercise which they found showed that the majority of petitions considered by LAFs have resulted in some positive action.</p>	<p><b>In addition to a centralised tracker of petitions, a process flow chart of who is responsible for what internally would help ensure there is clear ownership for updating the petitioner and ensuring a response is set to them.</b></p> <p><b>All LAFs to be invited to consider how they might publicise the successful resolution of petitions as part of their work.</b></p>
11	<p>The current URL for the petitions site is long and complex, users must first search the website before they are able to review e-petitions.</p> <p>Local Residents may not gain access to visit the site without knowing where to go in the search functions.</p>	<p><b>Petitions URL be adjusted for ease in case local residents wish to search and view. E.g. <a href="http://www.bucksc.gov.uk/petitions">www.bucksc.gov.uk/petitions</a> (action complete)</b></p>

12	<p>The Council has no maximum time limit on the length of time to provide a response to a petitioner or guidelines around an appropriate response time. The majority of petitions are on local issues and as such are discussed at LAFs. LAFs meet 3 or 4 times a year. In one case it took 9 months from a petition being submitted to receiving an outcome.</p>	<p><b>To ensure that when an e-petition is first submitted that notification is given to the local councillor, relevant service &amp; localities officers, and Cabinet Member. This may assist in helping to ensure a timely resolution on issues.</b></p> <p><b>A maximum time length should be considered being introduced for the Council responding to petitioners.</b></p> <p><b>Introducing a time limit would require a change in the petitions protocol and as such the detail of how this would work in practice and a revised petitions protocol would need to come back to the Regulatory Committee &amp; full Council.</b></p>
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