
REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

MEMBERS ENQUIRY SERVICE (MES) UPDATE

Reason for this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Democratic Services Committee of the progress being made to develop the use of the Member Enquiries System (MES).

Background

Role of the Democratic Services Committee

2. The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, Part 1, Chapter 2, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/mwa/2011/4/part/1/chapter/2> requires local authorities to appoint a Democratic Services Committee to oversee the Democratic Services functions of the Council, ensure that the work is adequately resourced and report to the full Council accordingly. The Democratic Services functions include Members' Services, Committee Services and Scrutiny Services, but not Cabinet Support Services.
3. The Members Enquiry System (MES) is an important tool to effectively manage the issues raised by residents with their Councillor as part of their ward casework. Issues raised may include:
 - Request for Service
 - Complex housing cases
 - Social services issues
 - Requests for residents/disabled parking
 - Failed/repeated requests for service queries
 - Road Safety / Traffic calming
 - Council Tax / benefits queries
4. A Service Level Agreement (SLA) was established to provide a full response to member enquiries within 10 working days although with many of the complex cases that are received this is not always possible.
5. Members Services team have operational responsibility for the Members Enquiry System (MES) which includes logging enquiries and to escalate issues to managers and provide Senior Managers with monthly performance updates.

6. The HALO system was introduced to provide additional functionality for the MES which offered the opportunity to improve the facilities provided to Elected Members.
7. A report was submitted to the Democratic Services Committee on 29 November 2021 outlining the planned improvements to the MES using HALO prior to the Local Government Elections in May 2022. The committee was subsequently updated on 28 November 2022 regarding the implementation of the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Enquiries Management system and its impact on the implementation of improvements for the MES.
8. On 6 February 2023 the Democratic Services Committee requested that opportunities for the improvement to the MES be explored which would include:
 - a. increasing the 10 day Service Level Agreement (SLA) for routine enquiries to 15 days; and
 - b. introducing a 5 day or urgent SLA for key issues relating to the immediate wellbeing of constituents e.g. homelessness.

Issues

9. Until recently the MES has primarily been a stand-alone system using Halo which with its most recent developments has provided a system suitable to support the enquiries raised by Elected Members. Since the previous meeting of the Democratic Services Committee meeting a number of activities have been undertaken to identify and deliver these and other improvements which could then be implemented into the corporate Complaints, Compliments and Enquiries Management system.

Evaluation of the MES by Customer Services

10. As part of the Customer Services review, the MES and its portal has been evaluated by the Head of Customer Services and colleagues from Connect 2 Cardiff (C2C) with the intention of determining whether the software and user interface could be improved.
11. The evaluation identified several minor improvements to enhance the user experience which have subsequently been implemented and include:
 - a. The re-ordering of the portal page to display the key information at the top of the portal home screen without the need to scroll the page.
 - b. The search categories could be improved with the addition of the Cardiff.gov keyword into the category selection facility.
12. Other additional improvements were identified but will require further development before being implemented:
 - a. Additional fields could be brought into the capture form to assist with identifying a location e.g. maps.
 - b. Amending the "My Ticket" summary view to bring in additional information including Service level agreement target, status and target date.

- c. Further consideration of secure external access to the MES Portal.
13. The summary of the observations identified by the Head of Customer Services are as follows:
 - a. The system is simple to use and uses conventional navigation and fields.
 - b. The views are uncluttered and allow users to easily access existing tickets, view any updates and add additional notes and correspondence.
 - c. The log in process and restrictions around the devices used needs to be reviewed to make sure that process is as simple as possible.
 - d. The portal functions well on a mobile device and resizes to the screen.
 - e. Additional fields within the form to raise a new enquiry may benefit the data capture.
 - f. Some expansion of the view for existing tickets may benefit the user when searching their tickets.

Discussions with Service Area Officers

14. Discussions were held with service area officers to identify the challenges and barriers to the 10-day SLA and its potential reduction. It was acknowledged that having separate systems for the MES and the management of operational matters led to some duplication which could be reduced with the implementation of the Complaints, Compliments and Enquiries Management system.
15. Each service area had differing challenges and statutory requirements for managing issues raised not only with the MES but with customer related reports from other channels e.g. via C2C or other stakeholders.
16. Suggestions for a light touch approach for some requests for service were proposed but this would not provide the accountability required by Elected Members.

Discussions with Group Whips

17. The Head of Democratic Services met with the majority of political group whips to identify any improvements of the MES that would enhance the effectiveness of the MES for their casework. The general consensus was that the 10-day SLA should not be increased for routine enquiries and that for some key issues a possible reduction in the SLA or the development of urgent enquiries should be considered.
18. There was no consensus on the topics for a reduced SLA or which matters should be considered as an urgent enquiry. Further discussions with a wide group of elected members and senior managers would be needed to develop a suitable consensus regarding urgent enquiries and to progress the identification of MES improvements and to ensure that adequate resources are in place to do so.

Implementation of the of Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Enquiries Management system

19. The implementation of a system for corporately managing complaints, compliments and enquiries has been progressing since its procurement in 2022. Its aim is to create and embed a centralised, streamlined approach to the management of complaints, members, and cabinet enquiries. The new system will improve the handling process, increase efficiency, and provide corporate oversight of enquiries across the organisation.
20. The key benefits of the new enquiries system are to:
 - Provide good quality, consistent responses for all enquiries.
 - Improve the enquiries processes to enable a more joined up way of working by eliminating inefficient processes, such as multiple handovers, double keying, duplication etc. consuming valuable staff time.
 - Introduce an approval process at service area level to ensure the timeliness and quality of responses is achieved.
 - Respond to enquiries within the required SLAs.
 - Record good quality data and the ability to report quickly and easily on performance
 - Have a corporate overview of cabinet & members enquiries at any one moment in time.
21. The Members and Cabinet Enquiries elements of the new system were implemented in August 2023 and a period of proofing on the live system has been undertaken. A further period to fully embed the new system will be required to ensure that the updated processes deliver the anticipated benefits. A further update on the implementation of the new system will be provided at a subsequent meeting of the Committee.

Ongoing development

22. The existing development work has considered the user interface, system functionality, and process standardisation of the MES. Further work is needed to develop the processes that support the requirements of the elected member when undertaking casework. Members have previously indicated that their constituents receive a better customer service from C2C and services areas compared to the MES.
23. To address this disparity, better align the services provided to Elected Members and C2C customers and to improve existing MES processes, a member workshop is being planned to be held later this year. This will be co-ordinated as part of the main customer services review and may include some independent research and evaluation. Members will be advised of the dates of the workshop(s) and encouraged to participate to ensure that a wide range of views and concerns are considered before determining an ongoing improvement programme.

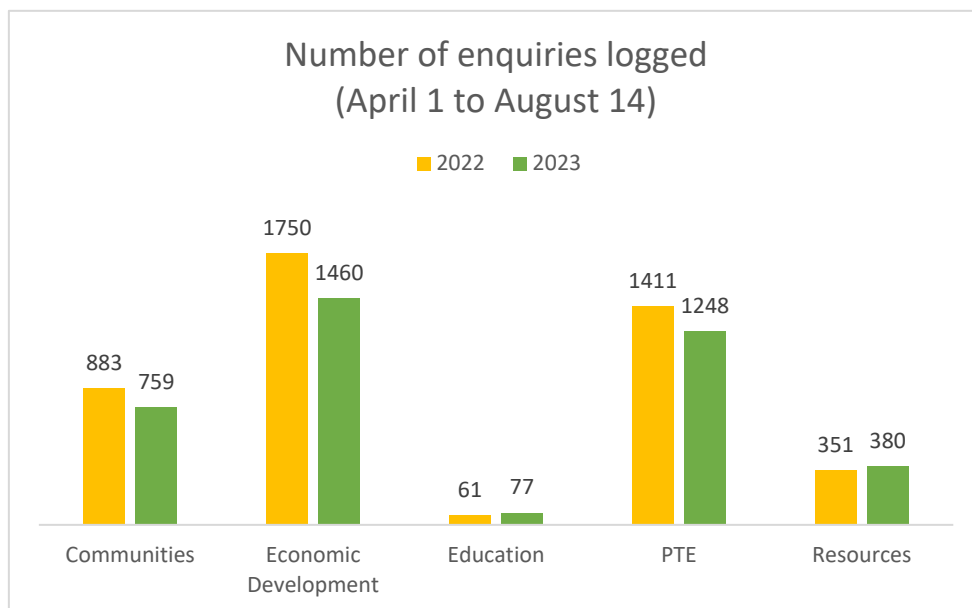
Performance Update

Number of Enquiries

24. Between 1 April and 14 August 2023, 3924 Member Enquiries were logged. This compares with 4456 logged in a similar period in the previous year.

Number of Enquiries by Directorate

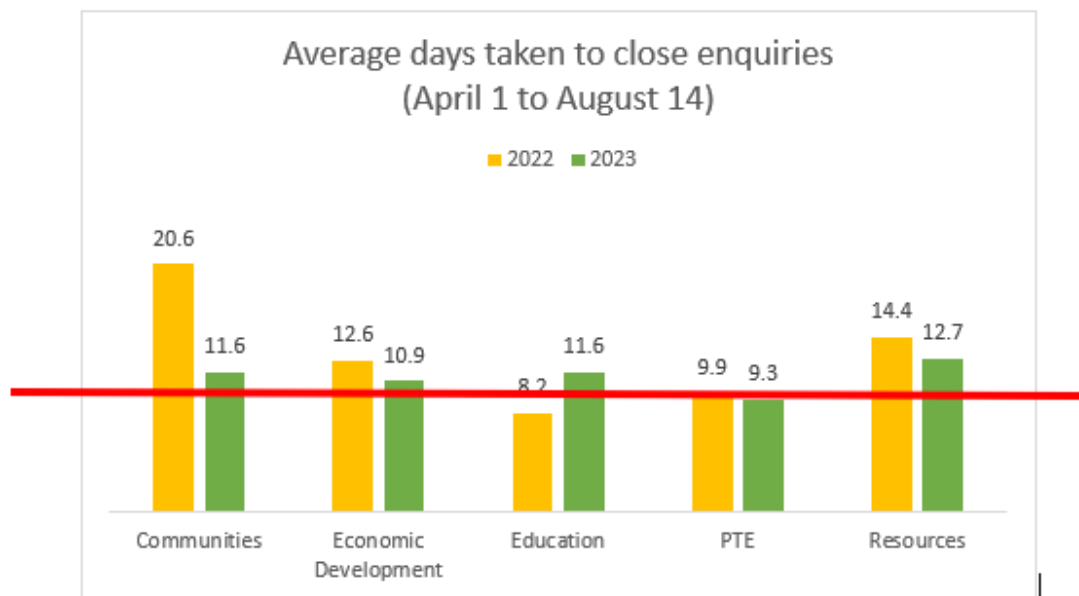
25. The following diagram shows the level of enquiries which have been received by each Directorate since 01 April 2023.



There has been an overall reduction in the total number of enquiries that have been logged during this period although a small increase was recorded with enquiries for the Education and Resources directorates. This may be reflect that some Elected Members may be going directly to officers with their enquiries which are not necessarily being recorded on the system.

Average working Days taken

26. The average number of days taken to complete enquiries logged between April and August in 2023 and the comparable period in 2022 is shown in the diagram below.



The data shows that there is a general improvement in the time taken to complete enquiries with a significant improvement being made by the Communities Directorate in achieving the 10-day Service Level Agreement as indicated by the red line in the diagram.

Financial Implications

27. The body of the report provides details of the requirements for and sources of funding in respect of Members Enquiries Service and the HALO system. Sources of funding include the Democratic and Members Services budgets and reserves, with the agreement of the Director of Governance and Legal Services.
28. All costs of the activities and services support are to be monitored and contained within the respective funding sources and budgets, and any new costs will require an identified source of funding.

Legal Implications

29. Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, Part 1, the Democratic Services Committee is responsible for overseeing the democratic services functions of the Council, ensuring this work is adequately resourced; and reporting to full Council accordingly.
30. The definition of 'Democratic Services functions' includes the provision of support and advice to each member of the authority in carrying out the role of member of the authority.
31. In determining how to exercise its functions, the Committee must have regard to the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers: [Statutory and non-statutory guidance on democracy within principal councils: governance and scrutiny \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) which has recently been updated and incorporated within consolidated guidance on democracy within principal councils.

32. Under the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018, anyone processing personal data (information about an identifiable living individual) must have a 'lawful basis' for processing. One of the potential lawful bases is the consent of the individual concerned. Members may be able to rely on implied consent for processing the personal data of their constituents for casework enquiries, but in certain circumstances, for example, when dealing with safeguarding matters or when there is any doubt about the wishes of the individuals concerned, the explicit written consent of the individual/s will be requested by the Council. A proforma consent form has been prepared to assist Members, along with advice on when explicit consent should be obtained; and will need to be incorporated within the new MES forms and processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

33. The Committee is requested to note:

- a. the consultation and evaluations that have been undertaken to improve the MES
- b. the implementation of the Member Enquiries element of the corporate Complaints, Compliments and Enquiries Management system.
- c. the plans to deliver further improvements to the Members Enquiries Service.
- d. the current performance data from the MES
- e. that a further update on the implementation of the new system will be provided at a subsequent meeting of the Committee.

GARY JONES
HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
29 AUGUST 2023

Background Papers:

[Members Enquiries Service Update](#) report to Democratic Services Committee dated 28 November 2022.

[Members Enquiries Service Update](#) report to Democratic Services Committee dated 29 November 2021.