

RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

TO: SCRUTINY AND PETITIONS BOARD

ON: 12 SEPTEMBER 2011

Report
By
Director of Finance and Corporate Services

REVIEW OF PETITIONS PROCESS 2011

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Council at its meeting held on 13th September, 2007 agreed a procedure in relation to the submission of petitions to the Scrutiny & Petitions Board, including parameters for determining valid petitions.
- 1.2 The petitions procedure is part of the Council's commitment to give people a more formal and direct involvement in decision making and to allow them to raise issues in a new and direct way with the Council and potentially influence policy on issues which matter to their communities.
- 1.3 The Council agreed that the Scrutiny & Petitions Board would review this procedure on an annual basis. The procedure was reviewed in 2009 and 2010 as a result of which action plans were developed and implemented and a number of changes were made to improve engagement with and participation of the public in the petitions process.
- 1.4 Consultation was again undertaken between December, 2010 and February, 2011 with local area committee and community council representatives and members of the public via 'survey monkey' to obtain feedback to further improve awareness of, access to and participation in the petitions process. Also, each petitioner is issued with a questionnaire and where responses have been received these have been included in the analysis. In total 36 responses were received compared with 32 in 2010 and 22 in 2009.
- 1.5 In addition, as part of her research into petitions procedures, Catherine Bochel, Principal Lecturer in Policy Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Lincoln considered this Council's and other petition procedures, including that operated by the Scottish Parliament, Stirling and East Lothian Councils. Ms Bochel attended a meeting of the Board at which a petition was heard. Ms Bochel thereafter interviewed four petitioners who had submitted a petition to the Council and details of her analysis are included at paragraph 4.2 of this report.
- 1.6 At the meeting of the Board held on 7th February, 2011, the Board considered a petition which related to the provision in the Council's procedure for dealing with petitions which prohibited petitions about any decision made by the Council, or decisions of a Board, Committee, Joint Committee or officer within the previous six

months. An explanatory report intimating that in terms of the petition procedures such petitions were not valid was attached to any such petition when the petition was submitted to the Board. The Board were advised however that it was for the Board to determine the validity of the petition and whether or not it would be heard, notwithstanding that it may not be valid in terms of the procedures. The Board agreed (a) that a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Board on other local authorities' practices in relation to time limits for consideration of petitions; and (b) that the clarity of the information provided to members of the public in relation to the submission of petitions be reviewed. This is dealt with at paragraph 4.3 of this report.

- 1.7 As a result of the current consultation it is not proposed that there are any further changes to the petitions procedure. However, a new action plan has been developed, which forms the Appendix to the report, to address some of the issues raised. Similar suggestions and comments have been combined as appropriate.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the consultation responses be noted;
- 2.2 That the action plan which forms the appendix to the report be approved
- 2.3 That the next review takes place in 2012.

3 Background

- 3.1 The petitions procedure was introduced in 2007 and reviewed in 2009 and 2010 following which a number of changes were made. No further changes to the procedure are recommended. Suggestions in the main can be addressed by improved communication. A further action plan has been developed and similar suggestions and comments have been combined where appropriate.

4 Consultation

- 4.1 The consultation was based around the undernoted questions. Responses from the 2010 consultation are in brackets.

- (a) **Are you aware of the existence of the Council's petitions process and how could we improve awareness?**

From the responses received 66.6 per cent (59.4 per cent) were aware of the procedure and 100 per cent (69.3) thought it easy to find out about. It is welcome to note the increase in the level of awareness of the process and the significant increase in the ease of finding out about it. Suggestions received to further improve awareness are similar to previous years and include leaflet drops, publicity in local press, and better use of the Council's website. Following consultation in 2009, the 'get involved' campaign was introduced and this featured prominently on the Council's website. In addition the community council forum was given a presentation on the petitions process and it was highlighted in information given to the Council's

public services panel. This information was refreshed as appropriate following the 2010 consultation and the details on the Council's website updated; leaflets were given to elected members for their surgeries and were made available at local area committee meetings.

With a view to engaging with younger people, leaflets were issued to pupil and parent councils and head teachers and to college and university student organisations. In addition, the leaflet was issued with correspondence sent to 'attainers' young people approaching their 17th and 18th birthdays, reminding them to register to vote. This process continues.

(b) **How helpful, understandable and accessible did you find the information about the process and how could we improve the information we make available?**

From the responses received, it is again welcome to note that once the information about the process has been accessed 93.7 per cent (72.8 per cent) found the information helpful; 92.3 per cent (80 per cent) found it accessible; and 92.8 per cent (63.7 per cent) found in understandable. A leaflet for petitioners, in a question and answer format, using simple, jargon-free language and the procedure for petitions have been awarded the Crystal Mark by the Plain English Campaign. Advice to petitioners on the process is also available from committee services.

Further to the decision of the meeting held on 7th February, 2011 that the clarity of the information provided to members of the public in relation to the submission of petitions be reviewed, this has been done and a revised leaflet has been prepared which explains in more detail that it is the Board that determines the validity of the petition and whether or not it will be heard, notwithstanding that it may not be valid in terms of the procedures.

(c) **How can we improve processing of petitions, including the use of ICT (Information Communication Technology) and has anything hindered your access to the process?**

Comments referred to (i) ease of navigation on the Council's website; (ii) not everyone having access to or being familiar with ICT; (iii) that the 'six-month' rule meant that issues which had short time factors couldn't be considered; (iv) that it was a protracted process; (v) that it would have been helpful if they had been asked to put in a written submission; (vi) the usefulness of the process; and (vii) that not all Board members asked a question.

Comments on each of these issues are set out below:

- (i) **Ease of navigation on the Council's website:** this is being discussed with the Council's communications team.
- (ii) **Not everyone has access to or is familiar with ICT:** improvements to the processing of petitions via ICT will not preclude petitions being received and being processed in their present format. One helpful suggestion received was that the petitions form on the website should be interactive and this has been implemented.

- (iii) **'six month' rule:** as detailed in paragraph 4.1(b) above, further to the decision of the meeting held on 7th February, 2011 that the clarity of the information provided to members of the public in relation to the submission of petitions be reviewed, this has been done and a revised leaflet is being prepared which explains in more detail that it is for the Board to determine the validity of the petition and whether or not it will be heard, notwithstanding that it may not be valid in terms of the procedures.
- (iv) **protracted process:** this is similar to comments received in the 2010 consultation. When petitions are received they are submitted to the first available meeting of the Board and this practice will continue. If the Board then seeks further information in relation to the petition this information, together with the petition, is again submitted to the next available meeting. Information on the length of time a petition may take to be considered will be included in the revised leaflet. A 'mail in' box has been introduced which will help to reduce the time taken for petitions to be received in the Council.
- (v) **written submissions:** the petitions form advises that written submissions may accompany the petition but should be no more than four A4 pages. Reference to this will be included in the leaflet.
- (vi) **usefulness:** again similar comments were received in the 2010 consultation. The submission of a petition allows members of the public to have direct access to the Council and to raise awareness of a particular issue and stimulate debate and discussion regardless of the outcome of the petition. Research by the Scottish Parliament identified that people saw petitioning as 'a positive way of getting something done and making their voices heard'. Some petitioners may achieve all that the petitioner asks for, some only part of what they want, and some may not get what they want. However, the important point is to have the process which allows petitioners to raise a particular issue.
- (vii) **Board member questioning:** the leaflet advises that "We [the Board] will invite you to make a statement..... We may ask you questions." The letter which is issued to petitioners inviting them to attend the meeting will clarify that members may ask questions but that this may not always be the case.

4.2 **Research by School of Social Sciences, University of Lincoln**

- (a) As indicated in paragraph 1.5 above, Catherine Bochel, Principal Lecturer in Policy Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Lincoln, interviewed four petitioners who had submitted a petition to the Council and details of her analysis are given below:
 - All found it easy to submit a petition
 - Three felt that their petition had been dealt with fairly

- Three felt that the system could be publicised more and that awareness required to be raised
 - Three were happy with the outcome and one was disappointed with the outcome although they indicated that this was not a reflection on the way the system worked which seemed to be 'quite good'
- (b) In terms of whether the petitioners would use the system again, the following comments were made: 'depends on the issue'; 'yes'; 'certainly, knowing that it is there is worthwhile'; 'if I had to'.
- (c) All petitioners were asked how they rated their overall experience of the system on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. One rated the system 4/5 equivalent to 'good/excellent'; three rated the system as 3, equivalent to average/satisfactory. In addition, two felt that decisions had been influenced by party politics
- (d) Ms Bochel has offered the following general comments from the perspective of the interviewer (i) petitioners didn't always appreciate in advance that even in the Board agrees with their petition that the financial resources may not exist to go ahead with the agreed course of action; and (ii) further clarity on what would invalidate a petition is required.
- (e) The comments by the petitioners in relation to awareness raising as detailed in paragraph (a) above will be addressed in terms of the action plan. Ms Bochel's comments as detailed in paragraph (d) above will be addressed, as appropriate, in terms of the revised leaflet.
- 4.3 As agreed by the Board at its meeting held on 7th February, 2011, and as detailed in paragraph 1.6 above, other local authorities were to be asked if they had any time limits in their petitions process. Stirling and East Lothian Councils have a similar procedure to that operated in Renfrewshire but have no six month restriction. However, as detailed in paragraph 1.6, the Board's consideration of petitions is not restricted by the six-month provision as it is for the Board to determine the validity of the petition and whether or not it will be heard, notwithstanding that it may not be valid in terms of the procedures. Accordingly, no change is proposed to the petitions procedure in this regard.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS REPORT

- 1 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS** – none.
- 2 **PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS** - none.
- 3 **COMMUNITY PLAN/COUNCIL PLAN IMPLICATIONS** –

Wealthier and Fairer – the petitions process provides a further avenue for members of the public to engage with the Council on a variety of issues.

Smarter – the Council was the first Scottish local authority to establish such procedures.

Developing our organisation – the petitions process can potentially influence policy on issues which matter to the community.

4 **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS** – none

5 **PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS** - none.

6 **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS** – none for this report but implications may arise from consideration of what further use ICT can play in the procedure.

7 **EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IMPLICATIONS** - none.

8. **HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS** – none.

9. **PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS** – none.

10. **RISK IMPLICATIONS** - none.

11. **COSLA POLICY POSITION** – N/A.

Suggestions received	Proposed action	Completion date
Tell people about it via the website, leaflets through doors, mailshots, letters to schools, publicity in Renfrewshire Magazine, and local press with an explanation of the procedure	Continue to write to 'attainers'.(young people approaching their 17 th and 18 th birthdays, reminding them to register to vote) Discuss increased publicity with the Council's communications team.	May, 2012
Website needs to be easier to navigate – searching the site is neither simple nor easy. Suggest own website, link from the Council's main website	Ongoing discussions with the Council's communications team and IT to improve navigation.	May, 2012
Regular communication and publicity to be sent to community councils who will ensure it is displayed in prominent and appropriate areas within the local community	Consideration to be given to how best this could be achieved, ie via Community Council Forum.	May, 2012
Being invited to present a written submission as well as making a verbal address	The current procedures allow for a written submission to accompany the petition of no more than 4 A4 pages. This will be clarified in the revised leaflet.	December, 2011
A number of councillors did not speak and were not invited to give their views. It would have been better to have had reactions from all members	The letter which is issued to petitioners inviting them to attend the meeting will clarify that members may ask questions but that this may not always be the case.	Immediately
Any improvement survey should ask previous petitioners directly for their opinion	This is currently done. All petitioners are given a questionnaire at the end of the process asking for their views. No further action required.	n/a
On line petitions should be considered as a way of making it simpler and cheaper to administer	Consultation with the Council's IT and communications teams to determine the viability of this suggestion.	May, 2012
Having the forms in electronic format so that they can be filled in and returned by e-mail would be helpful	This has been done. No further action required.	n/a
Processing of petitions could be improved by more face to face discussions and a quicker turnover time	Petitions are currently submitted to the first available Board and this will continue. The letter to petitioners will offer a meeting to discuss their petition if prior to its submission if they wish.	Immediately

The six month rule means something which has short time factors can't be dealt with	The leaflet will clarify that it is for the Board to take a decision on whether to accept a petition notwithstanding that it may not be valid in terms of the procedures.	December, 2011
A brief and simple guide to what topics could be considered and what is not appropriate in a petition	The leaflet already explains what is not acceptable. A number of examples of what could be considered will be included.	December, 2011
Procedure should be available in different languages and Braille	This is currently available on request and will be highlighted on the procedure and in the leaflet	December, 2011
Doubts about its usefulness	The process allows petitioners to raise a particular issue irrespective of the outcome of the petition. No action required.	n/a
Clarity of information provided	Leaflet will be revised to clarify issues in relation to the submission of petitions. Crystal mark will be retained.	December, 2011