

REPORT TO CABINET

Open/Exempt		Would any decisions proposed :		
Any especially affected Wards	Mandatory/	Be entirely within Cabinet's powers to decide	YES/NO	
	Discretionary /	Need to be recommendations to Council	YES/NO	
	Operational	Is it a Key Decision	YES/NO	
Lead Member: Cllr Stuart Dark (Leader) E-mail: cllr.stuart.dark@west-norfolk.gov.uk		Other Cabinet Members consulted:		
		Other Members consulted: All members		
Lead Officer: Lorraine Gore E-mail: lorraine.gore@west-norfolk.gov.uk Direct Dial: 01553 616345		Other Officers consulted: Monitoring Officer Management Team Assistant Directors		
Financial Implications YES/NO	Policy/Personnel Implications YES/NO	Statutory Implications YES/NO	Equal Impact Assessment YES/NO If YES: Pre-screening/ Full Assessment	Risk Management Implications YES/NO

Date of meeting: 3rd August 2021

MEMBERS ENQUIRIES EMAIL INBOX

Summary

In August 2020, due to resource constraints caused by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the council introduced the Members Inbox to coordinate responses to enquiries from Members. Its purpose was to free up senior officer time to focus on their covid response work, ensuring that Members still received timely responses to their queries. The new process was agreed by all group leaders and their deputies and was an informal change and not reflected in the Council's Constitution. The agreement and goodwill of Members using the service was essential for the service to run effectively.

Recommendation

Following consultation with Members and Officers, agreement is sought from Cabinet to amend the council's constitution to retain the Members Inbox as a permanent measure to respond to general Member enquiries to enable them to carry out their roles within their constituencies.

Reason for Decision

To continue to provide a forum for Members to ask questions and receive responses in a timely manner.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Members Enquiries Inbox was introduced in August 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The arrangement was put into place with the agreement of the Leader of the Council and Opposition Leaders and their Deputies to help alleviate the numbers of questions addressed to officers by members, given that officers capacity was significantly reduced due to the response to COVID-19. Officers reported that they found it difficult to carry out the research necessary to respond to Members in a timely manner. Members were finding this increasingly frustrating.
- 1.2 Cabinet will recall that it was clearly stated that any enquiries relating to political or policy matters still needed to be directed to the Leader or Portfolio Holder or a request made that the enquiry be bought before one of the Policy Review and Development Panels. Members Enquiries did not extend to debating responses provided because the Member did not agree with it.

2. Options Considered

- 2.1 The table below outlines the volume of emails received by members into the Inbox between Sept 2020 – May 2021.

Table 1

Month	Number	Month	Number
September 2020	128	February 2021	209
October 2020	95	March 2021	189
November 2020	115	April 2021	128
December 2020	138	May 2021	76
January 2021	166	Total	1,244

Average 138 emails a month or 6 per working day

- 2.2 With the agreement of all group leaders and their deputies, the Members Enquiries procedure has been extended until the end of September 2021.
- 2.3 A review of the service has taken place to consider the options for the most effective and efficient method of responding to Members questions after the current date expires. Any change to the process as laid out in the Member/Officer protocol will need to be bought to Cabinet and full council for agreement before it can be implemented.
- 2.4 In the initial communication to Members in respect of the Members Enquiries inbox, it was reiterated to all Members that:
1. Emails to the Member Enquiries Inbox will be acknowledged within 2 working days and a response provided within 10 working days

2. An enquiry relating to an ongoing planning application in a Members own Ward should be sent to the allocated case officer and they should receive a response within 5 working days
 3. Requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 should be directed to FreedomofInformation.KingsLynn@north-norfolk.gov.uk
 4. Queries relating to council meetings, assistance with accessing Zoom meetings or information on the democratic process should be sent directly to Democratic Services
 5. Any questions relating to a political or policy matter should be directed to the Leader and/or Portfolio Holder
- 2.5 The inbox is managed by the Assistant to the Chief Executive, assisted by the Chief Executive and Leader PA and the Policy and Performance team. The inbox is monitored hourly and cover is provided for annual leave and sickness.
- 2.6 To gather opinions from both Members and Officers on their perception of the service and its effectiveness, a consultation exercise has been taken. The questions they were asked to provide feedback are detailed below:
1. Have you used the Members Enquiries inbox since its launch in August 2020?
 2. If you have used the service, how satisfied were you with the service you received?
 3. Were you satisfied with the response time to your enquiry?
 4. If a response took longer than expected, were you kept updated of its progress?
 5. Do you have any suggestions of how the service may be improved?
 6. Please provide any other comments you think are relevant.

A summary of the results of the consultation are shown in Appendix A.

- 2.7 Approximately 25% of members responded to the consultation. The views of members were overall very positive with two negative comments, included at Appendix A.
- 2.8 The responses from officers were supportive of the process and they felt that a central system for logging enquiries was useful. This excludes planning enquiries where the guidance is to contact the planning officer in respect of an ongoing application.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 It is recommended to Cabinet that the Constitution is changed to permanently retain the Members Enquiries Inbox. This will enable responses to questions to be collated and responded to in a timely manner in consultation with the appropriate officers.

3.2 Following member feedback, statistics on response times will start to be logged and reported on.

4. Policy Implications

4.1 The decision will require a change to the Member/Officer protocol. This is to be agreed by Cabinet/Council. The updated Member/Officer protocol is attached at Appendix B.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no financial implications.

6. Personnel Implications

6.1 There are no personnel implications

7. Statutory Considerations

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Pre-screening attached.

8. Risk Management Implications

8.1 There are no risk management implications.

9. Environmental Considerations

9.1 There are no environmental considerations

10. Declarations of Interest / Dispensations Granted

10.1 None

Background Papers

Email communications to Members/Officers



**Pre-Screening Equality Impact
Assessment**

Name of policy/service/function	Members Enquiries Inbox				
Is this a new or existing policy/ service/function?	New / Existing (delete as appropriate)				
Brief summary/description of the main aims of the policy/service/function being screened. Please state if this policy/service rigidly constrained by statutory obligations	Requesting Members direct all questions to the Members Enquiry Inbox instead of emailing individual officers. This will centralise the process allowing statistics on response rates and questions asked to be recorded				
Question	Answer				
<p>1. Is there any reason to believe that the policy/service/function could have a specific impact on people from one or more of the following groups according to their different protected characteristic, for example, because they have particular needs, experiences, issues or priorities or in terms of ability to access the service?</p> <p>Please tick the relevant box for each group.</p> <p>NB. Equality neutral means no negative impact on any group.</p>		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Unsure
	Age			X	
	Disability			X	
	Gender			X	
	Gender Re-assignment			X	
	Marriage/civil partnership			X	
	Pregnancy & maternity			X	
	Race			X	
	Religion or belief			X	
	Sexual orientation			X	
Other (eg low income)			X		
Question	Answer	Comments			
2. Is the proposed policy/service likely to affect relations between certain equality communities or to damage relations between the equality communities and the Council, for example because it is seen as favoring a particular community or denying opportunities to another?	Yes / No	Does not impact on customers			
3. Could this policy/service be perceived as impacting on communities differently?	Yes / No				
4. Is the policy/service specifically designed to tackle evidence of disadvantage or potential discrimination?	Yes / No				
<p>5. Are any impacts identified above minor and if so, can these be eliminated or reduced by minor actions? If yes, please agree actions with a member of the Corporate Equalities Working Group and list agreed actions in the comments section</p>	Yes / No	Actions:			
		Actions agreed by EWG member:			
Assessment completed by: Name	Honor Howell				
Job title: Assistant to the Chief Executive	Date 17 June 2021				

Please Note: If there are any positive or negative impacts identified in question 1, or there any 'yes' responses to questions 2 – 4 a full impact assessment will be required.