

8<sup>th</sup> October 2020

**'Getting the Basics Right' – Performance Update**

**Ward(s)**                      All

**Portfolios:**    Cllr Bird - Leader

**Executive Summary:**

This report has been prepared to provide councillors with an initial review of the response to councillor enquiries and to assess whether we are 'getting the basics right' as outlined in correspondence issued to staff and councillors in July 2019.

This marks the next stage in a wider review of customer communication as part of the PROUD Customer Access Management (CAM) programme which underpins the improvements that are being made in relation to customer services.

The data that is available shows that generally the requirements, outlined in 'getting the basics right' are being met, however, the information available is not robust enough to provide full assurance that processes, and expectations are understood, or being met in all cases. It should be noted there is currently no agreed standard for directorates to follow about how to record this information and we do not routinely monitor our performance in this regard across the Council.

The report outlines a number of short terms measures that will be taken to immediately strengthen the processes in this area and provide assurance that expectations are being met on an ongoing basis. It also outlines more medium term actions that will be undertaken to strengthen and improve communication both with residents and councillors.

**It is recommended that councillors note that performance in this area is generally good and that processes and data collection is being improved to provide further assurance in the future. It is also recommended that Councillors note that this work is part of a wider review of customer communication that is taking place as part of the Customer Access Management (CAM) programme.**

**Reason for scrutiny:**

In July 2019, a letter was issued to councillors and senior staff outlining the requirements for staff to respond with enquiries from councillors within five working days.

It is now 12 months on, and there is a requirement to review how effective the processes have been and where there is further room for improvement. This is also an area of focus of the PROUD Customer Access Management (CAM) programme and is being reviewed alongside the priorities for that piece of work.

The report has been produced to demonstrate current performance against the agreed requirements for responding to councillors enquiries. It should be noted there is currently no agreed standard for directorates to follow about how to record this information and we do not routinely monitor our performance in this regard across the Council. The report therefore outlines potential next steps in making short term improvements to the monitoring arrangements for councillor enquiries and the actions that will be taken in the medium term to further improve communication with councillors and residents.

**Recommendations:****That:**

- 1. Councillors note that performance against the expectations outlined in the July 2019 letter are generally good, recognising that data collection around performance against the expectations is being improved.*
- 2. Councillors note the plans to strengthen processes in this area and provide ongoing assurance.*
- 3. Councillors confirm their capacity to be involved in the ongoing review.*

**Background papers:**

Letter to senior staff “Getting the basics right” – 15<sup>th</sup> July 2019  
Letter to councillors – “Getting the basics right” – 15<sup>th</sup> July 2019  
WPP CAM Members Workshop Summary – October 2019

**Resource and legal considerations:**

None

**Council Corporate Plan Priorities:**

Internal Focus: All council services are efficient and effective.

**Citizen impact:**

Councillor enquiries are often as a result of concerns raised by citizens within their wards. Any delay in responding to enquiries may impact on the citizens who have raised the concern.

**Environmental impact:**

There is no environmental impact for this report

**Performance management:**

This is an area where some performance management already takes place to some degree, however, performance management processes will be strengthened to provide councillors with ongoing assurance that the requirements of 'getting the basics right' are being met.

**Reducing inequalities:**

There is no impact on equalities in relation to this report.

**Consultation:**

All service areas provided their records for councillor enquiries so that this report could be produced.

**Contact Officer:**

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## **1. Getting the basics right**

- 1.1. In July 2019 both councillors and senior staff were written to, outlining how the response to councillor enquiries would be managed from 01<sup>st</sup> August 2019 and the expectations for officers in responding to enquiries in a professional and timely manner.
- 1.2. The requirements for responding to enquiries included:
- Confirming receipt of the enquiry or passing it onto the appropriate member of staff as soon as possible
  - All enquiries will be acknowledged within 24 hours and you will either:
    - Answer a question and/or provide the information either by phone or e-mail if it is a simple request – e.g. providing a link to a report to a Council committee or other document which has been published or readily accessible.
    - Confirm that a response will be provided to them by no later than 5 working days from the date of the acknowledgment providing the date for clarity
  - Or
  - Confirm that the enquiry will take a little longer than 5 working days to respond and that you will provide a response by a specific date.
  - Any request for additional time should have a specific timescale for that response, and the reasons why more than 5 days are required to reply (for example, the information needs to be collated from a number of sources, liaison with other service areas or partner agencies).
- 1.3. 12 months on, this report has been prepared to begin a review of the effectiveness and impact of the processes and demonstrate performance against the expectations laid out in July 2019.

## **2. Why are reviewing 'getting the basics right' now?**

- 2.1. Now is the right time to review whether we are getting the basics right. It is 12 months since the new guidance was introduced – in the short term, this should now be reviewed to understand the understanding, effectiveness and impact of the processes, and implement any immediate improvements to support councillors and officers.
- 2.2. It is also an appropriate time to review this area as the Customer Access Management programme enters its next phase of implementation. This links to councillor enquiries in two ways:
- When making enquiries, councillors themselves are customers, so ensuring that their experience meets the required standards and expectations is key to providing them with a good customer experience.

- Following a workshop held with councillors in October 2019, we know that a large proportion of councillor enquiries are as a result of concerns raised by Walsall residents, usually when they have difficulty locating the information they need or being able to contact the relevant officers within the council. Having a thorough understanding of the detail of, and response to, enquiries will be a key source of intelligence to direct officers towards which areas which should be prioritised to help deliver an improved customer experience..

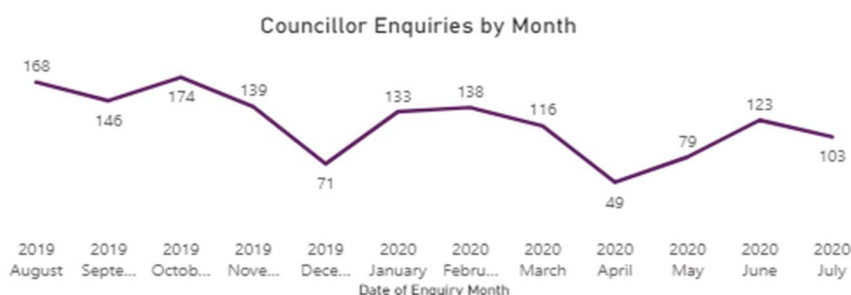
2.3. As part of the review, we are looking at the data that is available, to understand what we know about compliance with the current process. We will have conversations with staff to identify where there may be gaps in the understanding around the required processes and we will have further conversations with councillors to understand their concerns and through them, the concerns of residents. This will link directly into the wider CAM work.

### 3. What do we know?

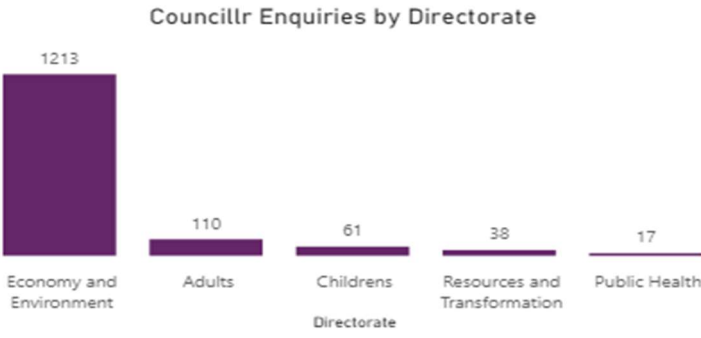
3.1. All directorates have maintained a spreadsheet to record councillor enquiries. However, the way data has been collected is not consistent, so there are some caveats to the data available, including:

- In 11% of recorded enquiries response dates have not been recorded, so it is not possible at this time to know whether the enquiry was responded to on time.
- In some cases, a single issue will result in multiple enquiries from different councillors – if these have been recorded separately, they are counted as individual enquiries. Where they have been recorded as a joint enquiry, the first named councillor has been assumed to have made the enquiry.
- There is no consistent way of recording the reason for the enquiry – an attempt has been made to group enquiries into themes based on the service dealing with the enquiry or where there is an obvious reference to an issue – however, this should only be used to provide an indicative idea of which issues receive the most enquiries. Where there are multiple areas of query or it is not clear, ‘Localities’ has been recorded.

3.2. Between 01<sup>st</sup> August 2019 and 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020 there have been 1,439 enquiries from councillors:



3.3. 1,213, 84.3% of these enquiries have been to the Economy and Environment directorate.

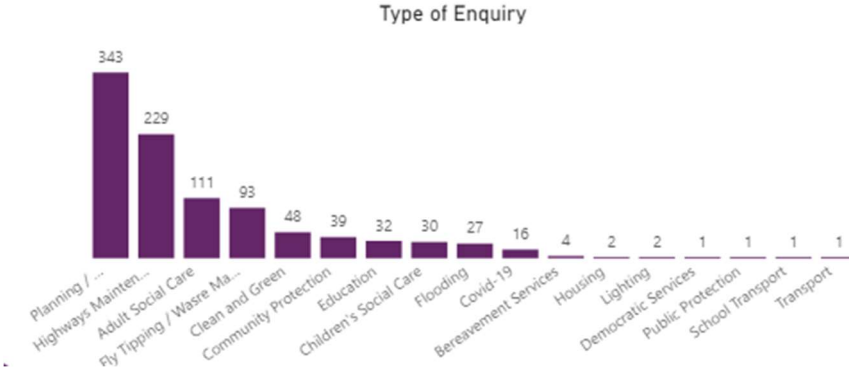


3.4. 56 of Walsall’s 60 councillors have made at least one enquiry:

- 19 made fewer than 10 enquiries
- 21 made between 10 and 30 enquiries
- 6 made between 30 and 50 enquiries
- 10 made 50 or more enquiries

3.5. The 10 councillors who made 50 or more enquiries are responsible for 55% of all enquiries made in the period

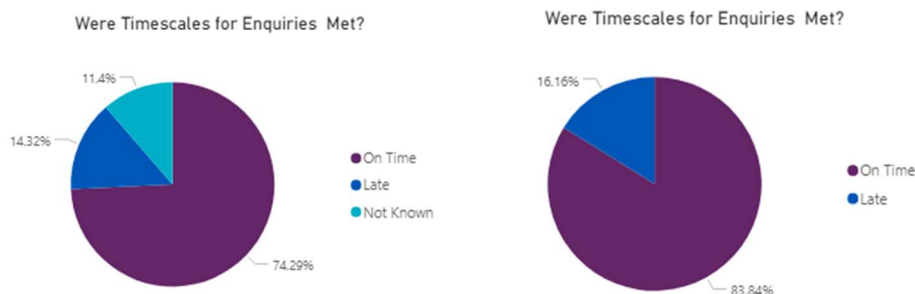
3.6. 459 (32%) of enquiries have been labelled as ‘Localities’ because they are general enquiries about an area or it has not been possible to confidently identify the nature of the enquiry. These have been removed from the graph below:



3.7. The most common identifiable reason for an enquiry is Planning or Building Regulation which account for 24% of all enquiries, followed by highways maintenance and traffic related issues which account for 16% of all enquiries. All of the remaining 408 enquiries account for just 28% of the total.

3.8. The data suggests that the timeliness of response to councillor enquiries, generally meets the 5 working day standard for replies with 74% of all enquiries known to be met within timescales.

3.9. When the 164 enquiries for which there is no recorded reply date are removed, this rises to 84% of enquiries completed within the five working day timescale.



3.10. It is not currently possible to provide data in relation to whether the 24 hour timescale for acknowledgement is being met, however, measures are being put in place to ensure that this is routinely capture in the future.

#### 4. Ensuring that we ‘get the basics right’ in the future – next steps

4.1. While the data that is available is useful to provide an idea of how well councillor enquiries are responded to, it is not robust enough to provide strong evidence that customer expectations are being met and it is clear that it does not capture all councillor enquiries that are currently made. In particular, it is likely that there is a significant gap in the capturing of Portfolio Holder enquiries, as these are more likely to be addressed on a day to day basis through the necessary working relationships that Portfolio Holders have with officers.

4.2. In the short term, some immediate actions will be undertaken:

- The data that is available will be shared with Directorates to support them to better understand where improvements can be made in this area.
- The processes will be reviewed to provide clarification and these will be communicated with officers to ensure that everyone is aware of the processes and the standards that need to be maintained.
- Monitoring and data collection methods will be improved to strengthen oversight by senior leaders and enable councillors to be provided with regular assurance in the future. This will include a performance dashboard which will be shared with CMT, DMTs and councillors.

4.3. In the medium term, further conversations will be held with councillors, and additional analysis will be undertaken about the types of enquiries that are made. This will feed into the development of a new Customer Experience Strategy for the Council and will be used to help identify which areas should be prioritised within the CAM implementation plan which already includes:

- The development of new ‘service standards’ and measures to provide greater clarity about the service offer and our effectiveness in meeting customer and member expectations;
- Improvements and developments to the Council’s website (helping customers to find the information they need more easily, providing self-serve opportunities and delivering automation of some processes to improve efficiency and reduce costs);

- A new Customer Relationship Management system which will help us to join up all our records across the Council (so that we can offer a more personalised service based on resident's needs);
- Improved communications with residents and customers both within specific service areas and more generally (in the future we want to proactively contact customers with relevant information before they have to contact us).