

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS

PROFORMA

Cabinet Meeting12th January 2012

1. Title of Item/Report

Review of Council's Petition Scheme

2. Record of the Decision

Cabinet considered a report relating to the Council's Petition Scheme.

It was explained that in the period of just over a year following the introduction of the Council's new petition scheme in July 2010, a total of 13 paper petitions had been received.

2 petitions received exceeded the 2000 signature threshold required to trigger debate by full Council. For each of these meetings, additional resources were deployed to ensure the smooth hearing of these petitions. Pre-planning and facilitation of public and petitioner attendance, in addition to technical support where required, ensured that all parties were dealt with successfully. A draft procedure was also produced to assist Council in its consideration of each petition. It was evident however that there was some uncertainty at the conclusion of each debate as to what further action, if any, the Council intended to take on each petition, and this therefore highlighted a need for clarity for future situations to ensure that there was certainty regarding 'what will happen next' to each petition.

As part of the Council's new petition scheme, it was also agreed that an electronic petition scheme be procured and developed. This was completed and made available on the Council's website to the public in December 2010. Whilst no electronic petitions had as yet been received, the facility was utilised to indicate the details of all of the hard copy petitions received by the Council, and stated what action had been taken.

Neighbouring authorities were contacted to enable us to compare the responses they had received since the implementation of their new petition schemes. The number of petitions received by the other Tees Valley Authorities was in the main less than Stockton, with only Middlesbrough having received a similar amount. None of the other Tees Valley authorities had received a petition that exceeded their threshold for triggering a full Council debate.

Members heard that since the introduction of the Council's new Petition Scheme Stockton had seen an increase in the number of petitions submitted. However, the actual number of petitions received was still fairly small in number.

It was also evident that after consideration of the petitions submitted that the quantity of valid signatures received was in some cases low in comparison to the number of people who had signed the petitions. It was highlighted that unless the public visited the information contained on the Council's website prior to commencing their petition and read the guidance, they would not see the criteria a valid petition needed to meet and could often therefore be unaware that the format or content of part of their petition might be invalid. It was suggested that regular advice could be included within Stockton News outlining the conditions and requirements of the Council's Petition Scheme, for information could also be available within the Council's Contact Centre and information could also be featured on the Council's website and Councillor web pages. The promotion of the scheme would also highlight to the public the option available to them for submitting petitions electronically.

From experience gained regarding the handling of the two petitions received that triggered a debate at full Council, difficulties were encountered in determining the number of members of the public who would attend the full Council meetings. This created a dilemma in terms of choice of meeting venue. If it was established that any more than 10 additional persons would be expected to attend full Council, it would be likely in each case that an alternative venue to the Council Chamber would be required to be found in order to accommodate all members, officers and the public. This could therefore result in the hire of a third party venue, with a small financial implication associated.

It was finally noted that to date, no requests had been received from petitioners dissatisfied with the Council's response to their petition, which would give some indication that the scheme was working reasonably well.

RECOMMENDED to Council that:

1. The findings presented from the review of the Council's Petition Scheme be noted.
2. The Council continue to operate the scheme and seek to increase public awareness and understanding of its criteria via the community engagement and promotion initiatives outlined.

3. The further action identified as being necessary to ensure clarity of outcomes arising from a Council debate on a petition, be noted.

3. Reasons for the Decision

To review the Council's Petition Scheme following its first year of operation which was approved by Council in July 2010, and to identify further improvements if required.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

None

6. Details of any Dispensations

Not applicable

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

Not applicable

Proper Officer
17 January 2012