Item 4

29th February 2024

Glasgow City Council

Wellbeing, Equalities, Communities, Culture and Engagement City Policy Committee

Report by Director of Legal and Administration

Contact: Mairi Millar Ext: 75509

Outcome of Review of Public Petitions Process and Guidance

Purpose of Report:

To advise Committee on the findings of the cross party elected member working on the review of the public petitions process and guidance.

Recommendations:

The Wellbeing, Equalities, Communities, Culture and Engagement City Policy Committee is asked to:

(1) note this report and the work carried out by the cross party elected member working group to review the public petitions process;
(2) note the updated guidance that has been produced along with the actions that are being developed in order to improve accessibility and transparency in the petitions process;
(3) agree that an annual report on petitions will be included in the workplan for this Committee, which will include information on any agreed outcomes and further actions taken to address issues in petitions; and
(4) continue to support the petitions process and its ongoing promotion.

Ward No(s): Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ☐ consulted: Yes ☐ No ☐

1 Background

1.1 Glasgow City Council introduced a public petitions process in 2012 in order to give members of the public further opportunities to raise issues which directly affect them and their local communities. A process was designed and implemented which allowed the public to set up a petition and to gather signatures from other Glasgow residents, which, after reaching a set number (25 signatures), would be put forward for consideration at the Petitions Committee.

1.2 Following the establishment of the new committee structure in 2017, petitions are now heard by the Wellbeing, Equalities, Communities, Culture and Engagement City Policy Committee ("the WECCE"). A number of reviews have been undertaken in order to continue to improve the process and to ensure that the guidance assists members of the public to submit petitions.

1.3 At its meeting on 2 March 2023, the WECCE agreed that a further review of the public petitions process and guidance should now be undertaken. As part of the review, it was agreed that a working group should be established comprising cross party elected members, community council representatives and relevant council officers.

2 The Cross-Party Working Group

2.1 Meetings of the cross-party working group were chaired by Bailie Roza Salih and were attended by Bailie Anthony Carroll as well as three community council representatives and council officers from the Chief Executive's Department and NRS.

2.2 The working group considered various reports setting out details of petitions submitted in the period since the last review in 2019 through to 2023, with a particular focus on reviewing the outcomes and further actions taken on those petitions that were heard by Committee.

2.3 The working group also examined the reasons why a number of petitions had been rejected in order to consider what improvements might be made to the guidance.

2.4 Having carried out this initial analysis, the working group agreed to look at the following issues:-

- Ensuring that information is more easily available in order to allow members of the public an opportunity to engage directly with elected members or council officers in order to try and resolve an issue of concern without necessarily having to resort to the public petitions process;

- Reviewing the guidance to make it easier to understand and to provide better information as to what factors the WECCE would take into account in considering a petition;
- Improving access to information on the outcome of petitions and ensuring that there is a system in place to monitor further actions taken in relation to petitions heard at the WECCE; and
- Providing more information to petitioners on the reason why a petition has been rejected.

3 Benchmarking Exercise

3.1 The working group also undertook a benchmarking exercise of the petition processes at other councils and parliaments to establish any examples of good practice that might help inform the recommendations to be put forward by the working group.

3.2 The benchmarking exercise primarily focussed on the petitions processes at other Scottish local authorities, but also included a general overview of the petition procedures used by local authorities in England as well as the Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament.

3.3 As part of the benchmarking exercise, the following issues were considered:-

- the terms of any published guidance
- the format in which petitions can be submitted
- the criteria for submitting a petition
- the number of signatures required in support in order to trigger a hearing
- the committee framework for dealing with petitions
- the options available to the committee hearing a petition and the guidance given to petitioners regarding possible outcomes
- any annual reporting requirements and arrangements for review

3.4 Overall the findings from the benchmarking exercise reinforced that local authorities across Scotland have very similar processes in place to deal with petitions. It was also clear that in terms of actions, the committee hearing the petition is unlikely to have any decision making powers but instead can make recommendations to senior officers or to another appropriate committee. This is similar to the process in Glasgow.

3.5 It was also notable that despite being the largest local authority in Scotland, the threshold for valid signatures in order for a petition to be taken forward to committee for a hearing in Glasgow is generally lower than those looked at as part of the review. However, the working group determined that the current threshold of 25 signatures remained appropriate in order to maintain accessibility to the process, particularly where the issue of concern was a local issue where it may be more difficult to reach higher levels of support.

3.6 It was also noted by the working group that where petition processes have been more recently reviewed, there has been a greater emphasis placed on taking into account the financial implications of what is being proposed as well as taking into account the terms of any existing policies. The working group considered that reference to these issues in the guidance may help manage expectations as to what can be achieved through the petitions process.

3.7 It was also evident that in a number of petition processes, it was often difficult to determine what had been the final outcome in relation to a petition and this was a particular issue that the working group wished to see improved in Glasgow.

4 Survey Findings

4.1 As part of the review, the working group also agreed that it was important to capture the views of previous petitioners in order to take into account their experiences of the process and what, if anything, they consider could be improved.

4.2 Surveys were issued to principal petitioners who has submitted reviews in the period since the last review was undertaken in 2019 through to 2023 which were intended to seek views on the following issues:-

- How they became aware of the petitions process
- Ease, or otherwise, of the process
- Experience at the Committee
- Support and help provided
- Gathering support
- Future improvements

4.3 A total of 3 responses were received to the survey sent to those who had a petition taken to committee during the relevant period. 5 responses were received to the survey sent to those who had a petition that was not taken forward during this period. Full details of the responses received were set out in a report to members of the working group.

4.4 While a number of the issues raised in the responses to the surveys were fairly specific to the respondent's particular petition, there were a number of common themes around frustration at the disconnect between what they expected to gain from having their petition heard and the actions taken thereafter.

4.5 There were also a number of responses that noted the lack of information available as to outcomes of petitions and that the guidance could be improved by making the criteria for a petition to be accepted easier to understand.

4.6 It was also evident that respondents felt that more information should be provided to explain the reasons why a petition has been rejected. A number of

respondents also noted that there was a need for greater support or information to be provided by council officers.

4.7 The responses received to the surveys were an important factor in the working group's discussions on the changes it felt were necessary in relation to both the terms of the guidance available to members of the public and to the process for dealing with petitions.

5 Updated Guidance

5.1 Taking into account the terms of the discussions and findings made by the working group, updated guidance has been developed and agreed by the working group which is attached at the appendix to this report.

5.2 The main changes made to the guidance are intended to provide petitioners with a greater understanding of what the petition process can achieve in bringing attention to causes of concern. The updated guidance makes it clearer to petitioners that while the petitions process does not necessarily guarantee that the action sought will be taken, it is nonetheless an important tool in raising awareness of issues and allows an opportunity to have an open debate on issues of concern that can help shape future policy or decision making.

5.3 The updated guidance also sets out in clearer terms what other steps a member of the public should consider taking before they proceed to submit a petition, including raising the issue with the council directly by emailing the relevant service or by submitting a comment or complaint.

5.4 Rather than including examples of specific topics for petitions, the updated guidance instead includes a link to previous petitions which will show which petitions have been taken forward to committee and which ones have been rejected.

5.5 Easily accessible links to other parts of the council's website, including committee agendas, minutes and reports and the complaints and comments system have been embedded within the guidance. Links to information about how to contact local elected members, MPs and MSPs, as well as community councils, has also been embedded in the guidance.

5.6 The updated guidance also reflects the opportunity for relevant officers to engage with the petitioner before the petition is taken forward in order to identify if there are actions which can be taken that may meet their issue of concern without the need for the petition to proceed.

5.7 The updated guidance also sets out what issues the committee will take into account in considering a petition, which includes whether there are financial or budgetary considerations and whether the aims of the petition are contrary to a current council policy. Where appropriate this will include information as to when the policy was adopted and how recently it was reviewed and whether there is national guidance or legislation underpinning the policy.

5.8 The updated guidance also provides that where a petition is to be rejected, the petitioner will be given reasons for rejection and that, where appropriate, advice and guidance will be given of alternative ways in which they could pursue achieving the aims of their petition – for example by writing to their MSP or MP if it relates to a proposed change in legislation of the Scottish or UK Parliament.

6 Agreed Actions and Recommendations

6.1 In addition to improving the guidance, the working group have also agreed the following actions and recommendations:-

Discussion Point	**Agreed Action/Recommendations**
Following the petition being presented to WECCE, any actions to be carried out should be followed up and recorded.	A tracker system will be developed to follow up on agreed actions from Committee, with updates sought from relevant officers.
Needs to be more scrutiny into our own internal engagement e.g. where a multi-agency approach is required to resolve an issue, that the Neighbourhoods Liaison Team could be considered to engage with all relevant parties.	Internal processes will be developed in order to improve direct engagement with the petitioner from relevant officers.
More information to be included in our response to a petitioner once a petition has been concluded.	The introduction of the tracker system will help ensure that follow up actions are taken and that updates are reported back to the principal petitioner.
Signatories to a petition should receive all relevant updates.	A system is to be developed that will allow signatories to a petition to indicate if they wish to receive updates on the outcomes of the petition. Information on follow up actions will also be enhanced on the petitions hub in order to allow

	everyone to more easily access this information.
An annual report should be produced on further actions that have been taken in relation to petitions	It is recommended that an annual report on petitions will be included on the workplan for the WECCE, which will include information on outcomes and any further actions taken.
Relevant training to be provided to elected members	A training session on the petitions process, reflecting agreed changes to the guidance and processes, will be developed and will be offered to all elected members.
Elected members should be made aware of petitions received for issues raised in their wards	Notification will be given to local elected members where a petition on a ward specific issues is to be considered at committee.

6.2 In order to implement and monitor these actions, an officers group will be established with relevant officers from the Chief Executive's Department and NRS, overseen by the Director of Legal and Administration.

7 Policy and Resource Implications

Resource Implications:

Financial: There are no new financial implications from this report.

Legal: There are no new legal issues from this report.

Personnel: There are no new personnel implications from this report.

Procurement: There are no procurement issues from this report.

Council Strategic Plan: Grand Challenge 4: Enable staff to deliver essential services in a sustainable, innovative and efficient way for our communities. Mission

	2: Run an open, well governed council in partnership with all our communities.

Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2021-25? Please specify.	Outcome 3: Service users are provided with information accessible to them on services provided by the Council Family particularly, those who face barriers through disability, language and digital exclusion.
What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?	Improving accessibility has been a key factor in this review, ensuring that service users with protected characteristics are provided with targeted, more accessible information about the services provided by the Council Family.
Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage.	The review has highlighted the need to ensure that all citizens in Glasgow are able to access the process more easily and that there are improved procedures in place to make the petitions process more accessible and transparent for everyone.

Climate Impacts:

Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions? Please specify:	N/A.
What are the potential climate impacts as a result of this proposal?	N/A
Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?	N/A

Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:

Are there any potential data protection impacts as a result of this report Y/N	Further work will be undertaken to ensure that changes to the process to allow the retention of contact details for signatories to petitions to be provided with updates are GDPR compliant.

If Yes, please confirm that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been carried out	A DPIA will be carried out if required.

8 Recommendations

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8.3 agree that an annual report on petitions will be included in the workplan for this Committee, which will include information on any agreed outcomes and further actions taken to address issues in petitions; and

8.4 continue to support the petitions process and its ongoing promotion.