

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Chief Executive

Council: 26 April 2006

Subject: Open Line

1. Purpose

- 1.1** As part of its policy of increasing opportunities for local people to hold the Council to account, this report suggests a further avenue for the Council to engage with the Community, in the form of a “phone-in” to the Leader of the Council.

2. Background

- 2.1** The Council has, over recent years, pursued a policy of increasing access by the public to information, to providing a variety of ways for local residents to raise issues with the Council, and to improving accountability on the part of the Council.
- 2.2** Initiatives taken include regular publication of the Council Newspaper which contains regular features on performance and encourages residents to use this information to raise issues of concern, widespread publicity about the Council Complaints Procedure, the introduction of the Open Forum at all Council Meetings, and the availability of the interactive Community Forum on the Council website.
- 2.3** In addition, the Council, in concert with Community Planning partners, has recently revamped the Citizens Panel, while there are regular consultative mechanisms in place, including Customer Panels, youth consultation, and the annual Community Day. The Community Planning Partnership has also launched the West Dunbartonshire Forum for all agencies to debate local issues.
- 2.4** The Council also has as an integral part of its formal structure the Community Participation Committee, which both seeks to consult interest groups on Council policy, but also encourages community representatives to raise concerns as part of each agenda, while the Community Planning Partnership has fifty per cent community representation.

3. Main Issues

A Council Phone In

- 3.1** The Council should always be seeking to increase and develop opportunities for dialogues with the public, and officers have recently been considering web based and telephone options.
- 3.2** Though the introduction of a web based approach is thought to be a useful option, this might be considered not as open to as many people as possible at this stage, as people's familiarity with new technologies is still patchy, particularly among older residents.
- 3.3** It is therefore now suggested that, in addition to the methods described above, the Council should consider the introduction, on a trial basis, of a monthly phone in to the Leader of the Council. This is a method used with considerable success by our twin town of Argenteuil, and recently the Chief Constable of Lothian and Borders Police introduced a similar system.
- 3.4** Clearly, any such innovation will require safeguards, both to ensure that the system is not abused, and that data protection considerations are met. Preliminary thinking suggests that the approach should be tested out on a once a month basis for a period of six months, with a report back to Council on the experience of the experiment. Sessions would last for one hour, and following legal advice on data protection and privacy grounds, calls would not normally be recorded during this trial period. Calls would be fielded through a direct line, with a call back to those wishing to pursue an issue. This would allow any threatening, abusive or inappropriate calls to be screened. It is suggested that a note would be taken of all calls received, those answered in person, and the content of the calls, and that this information would be reported to Members on a regular basis. As with the Open Forum, it is suggested that all callers, whether they speak directly to the Council Leader or not, should receive a written response to their call.

4. Personnel Issues

- 4.1** There are no personnel issues.

5. Financial Issues

- 5.1** There will be some financial costs involved within the set up of the Open Line and the cost of telephone calls but these costs should be relatively modest and can be contained within the budget.

6. Recommendation

- 6.1** Council is asked to consider the introduction of a phone-in on an experimental basis as a means of trying to develop and improve opportunities for local people to raise issues of concern.

Tim Huntingford
Chief Executive

Person to Contact: Angela Clements, Head of Information Systems,
Council Offices, Garshake Road, Dumbarton G82 3PU
Tel: (01389) 737574.

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: All Wards