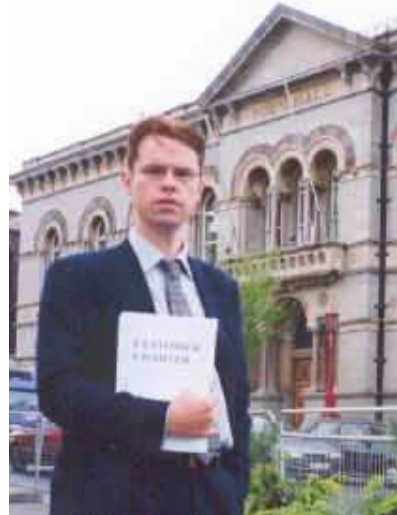


Press Releases - Council acts to reduce democratic deficit - 26/11/00

Customer Charter to be introduced across all Council Departments

A report from the Working Group to review Standing Orders was presented to the Councillors at this month's Council meeting. Standing Orders govern how Council meetings are conducted, how the concerns of citizens can be raised in the Council chamber and how the County Manager and his staff can be held accountable to the public.



Councillor Eoin Costello has voiced disappointment with the report. In his submission to the committee he made seven recommendations. The thrust of these recommendations was to make it easier to get accurate answers for the public and to speed up the conducting of business in the chamber. Among his recommendations were increasing the number of written questions councillors can place to council officials for written reply at Council meetings, a better system for managing motions, the minuting of group leader meetings and the minuting of all official council meetings.

Councillor Costello stated that he was not the only one whose recommendations were shelved. A number of the younger councillors had their submissions put aside. They included a motion from Councillor Barry Andrews that the Council would restrict speaking times for proposers of motions to a reasonable time to allow the Council to get through its agenda more efficiently.

In response to Councillor Costello's comments councillors were told that these suggestions were discussed by the Working Group to review Standing Orders and it was agreed that it would be impractical to incorporate the Councillor's submissions. It is believed that Council officials stated that staff would be unable to deal with any increase in the number of questions Councillors are allowed to place.

On looking at the report that was produced for the Members it would appear that the main recommendations are aimed at ironing out a number of organisational problems that Council officials had identified such as the recent difficulties of

accepting or querying the minutes of area committees.

According to Council officials they are currently working on a customer charter that will lead to considerable improvements in the standard of service the public and the elected representatives receive. This should obviate the need to increase the number of formal questions the Councillors are allowed to place before each meeting. Many members of the public and Councillors have experienced frustration in trying to get responses to matters raised with Council officials, many such people talk of unanswered phones and unanswered letters.

In a Council Strategy Document, "Quality through Partnership", the Council included in its values:

"We will serve all members and sectors of the community in an open, responsive, accountable and fair way.

We are committed to the delivery of a high quality service to all our customers.

We will strive to deliver the best possible service from the resources available to us.

Our strategies revolve around the principle that through consultation and partnership with our customers we aim to maximise the use of our available resources to ensure the delivery of the best possible public services to the people of this County."

These principles are being further developed in the Council's Draft Customer Services Plan. This plan has been produced under the Strategic Management Initiative, which it is hoped will enable Council officials to deliver a responsive, open and accountable service. The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness aims to further develop the Strategic Management Initiative process by requiring local authorities to set challenging service standards using local partnership structures and in consultation with the consumer.

In response to a motion placed by Councillor Costello a formal Customer Charter for the Bin Collection service will be circulated in December with the next edition of the Council's Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Times. The Customer Charter for the Bin Service is to be followed in the New Year by a charter for all Council departments.

Objectives include a target of answering phone calls within 5 rings and acknowledging messages left on the voicemail within 24 hours. With regard to complaints, a formal complaints procedure is being established with a right of appeal to an Appeals Officer. A senior Council official in each department has been appointed to oversee the new complaints procedure.

Councillor Costello welcomed work on the new Customer Services Plan. However drawbacks include there is no mechanism for keeping councillors informed as to which departments are generating the most complaints and what percentage of these are being satisfactorily remedied without recourse to the Appeals Officer. Another drawback is that while the Charter aims to acknowledge all letters received within 7 working days of receipt it only commits to issuing a full reply as soon as possible thereafter which is very similar to the current situation.