

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2017

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held in Room 008, CIVIC OFFICE on TUESDAY, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2017, at 10.00 am.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Phil Cole
Vice-Chair - Councillor Nick Allen

Councillors Pat Haith, David Hughes, Sue McGuinness, Jane Nightingale, Kevin Rodgers and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sean Gibbons, Majid Khan and Tina Reid.

5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY.

There were no declarations made at the meeting.

6 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 11TH JULY, 2017

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee held on 11 July, 2017, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

7 DONCASTER DEVOLUTION COMMUNITY POLL

The Committee received a report, which updated Members on the 'Community Poll' taking place to seek the views of the Doncaster Electorate about the next stages in Devolution proposals.

In presenting the report, the Monitoring Officer reported that following the extraordinary Council meeting on Thursday, 9th November, 2017, Council had agreed that Doncaster Council would hold a Community Poll in December, seeking the views of Doncaster's electorate as to whether they would prefer Doncaster to pursue a Devolution deal based upon either a Wider Yorkshire area or upon the Sheffield City Region arrangement. The Local Government Act 2003 provides that Councils can carry out a Community Poll of their inhabitants on issues regarding the delivery of services. The Act provides that the Returning Officer of the Council can decide the means used to take the views of its residents. It was noted that whilst the results of the poll are not legally binding, the Council has agreed to do its best to respect the outcome of the Poll.

The Monitoring Officer advised that for reasons of efficiency, costs and practicalities, the Council was to carry out a postal vote exercise to those persons registered on the

electoral roll, who would receive a voting pack in the first week of December, comprising of an introductory letter from the Mayor, a leaflet providing information about both devolution options, a ballot paper and a return envelope. People would be given the option to either complete returns on-line or by post. There will be no polling stations utilised for this Poll. The ballot paper would be marked with a unique identifying code for security purposes, but would not require the voter's signature. It was noted that the cost of the community poll was estimated to be in the region of £120,000, which would include costs for postage and printing. Costs may vary, dependent upon the number of postal vote returns. There is a significant saving if voters use the on-line option. It was explained that the higher the turnout the more expensive it would be.

It was further reported that the election process is to be carried out by the Electoral Reform Services (ERS). ERS are leading experts in this area and have previously carried out devolution ballots in other local authorities. The Council's internal Electoral Services Team would not be involved to a great extent, but would provide ERS with data, deal with the more complicated telephone enquiries and provide general support to the process. It was further reported that postal vote returns would go directly to an ERS address, were they are opened securely and then scanned and the scanner reads the results. ERS have given an undertaking to turn around the postal vote results within 24 hours when the poll closes on 1200 noon on 20th December 2017.

Discussion followed, during which the Electoral Services Manager and Monitoring Officer responded to various questions from Members and clarification was provided in respect of the following issues:-

- The counting of postal vote returns would be carried out by the Electoral Reform Services.
- Voting packs were to be sent out to the electorate on 1st December 2017 and it was expected that people would be in receipt of the packs on 2nd or 3rd December
- The Council will be using social media channels to encourage people to submit returns on line in order to reduce costs to the authority and publicise the options available to them for voting.
- As with general and local elections, only those people on the electoral register that are aged 18 years or above on the date of the community poll will be eligible to vote.
- It was noted that the Council were actively encouraging people not currently on the register to be included on the electoral register. This was to ensure that as many people as possible would be eligible to vote. The deadline for the receipt of information to ERS was Friday, 24 November.
- In respect of the inclusion of 'None of the above' question on the ballot paper, it was noted that this was not an option at this point in time. "None of the above" is not generally an option on ballot papers in any event. Doncaster Council have previously committed itself to devolution. The purpose of this poll is to seek views on whether or not the residents of Doncaster favoured a wider Yorkshire arrangement or the Sheffield City Region option. Members were

advised that the wording of the questions on the ballot paper had been drafted following advice from Counsel.

A wider discussion on devolution was then held by members of the Committee.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee, thanked the Electoral Services Manager for her work in compiling the report.

RESOLVED that the Committee in noting the report, welcomed the Democratic initiative taken by the Council in respect of this issue.

8 ANNUAL CANVASS UPDATE

The Electoral Services Manager submitted a report, which provided an update on a number of key work streams being undertaken by the Electoral Services Team, in relation to the Register of Electors Annual Canvass.

The Electoral Services Manager summarised the key points in the report and tabled for Members' information, an updated copy of Appendix A to the report, which provided a breakdown of the Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) by return method in comparison to 2015 and 2016. It was explained that the HEFs were sent out to the property and not the electors. Members noted that at the start of the canvass, HEFs had been sent out to approximately 137,000 properties. Of the first letters that were sent out, there had been a 57% response rate from households, which were either responded to on-line, by phone, by text and by post. It was noted that further to the second reminder being sent out, a good response was received. A third reminder was subsequently sent out to chase up responses from those properties which hadn't responded. The Electoral Services Team employed canvass staff to visit properties to try and obtain a response. In addition to visiting properties they were also contacting people by telephone and social media and the One Stop Shop, the Councils Contact Centre and Council Tax departments were also trying to obtain a response when a member of the public contacted them.

It was reported that throughout the canvass, it had resulted in 13,073 people being sent an invitation to register, (ITR) form and the Council had obtained new people that had since been added to the register. The Electoral Services Manager explained that these people had either moved or had reached the age of 18, 16-17 year old attainer's, or people who had moved into the Borough that hadn't completed the HEF s on line automatically. It was further reported that the Council was currently investigating 7,712 electors on the register to identify if they may have been duplicated, due to a change of name. It was reported that the Electoral Services Team endeavoured to encourage people to respond to the HEFs.

The Electoral Services Manager then outlined the activities taking place to help increase the response to the annual canvass and increase the number of electors on the register which included telephone canvassing, dedicated personal visits to care homes and HMO's, targeting hard to reach/unapproachable areas, working with schools and colleges and social media. It was noted that the annual canvass would end this week and the annual electoral register would be published on 1st December, 2017.

In referring to the statistics, Members were pleased to note that the total percentage return rate had increased from 71.58% in 2015 to 82.87% in 2016. The Electoral

Services Manager reported that Doncaster was currently at the same response rate to that of last year's figures, with an additional £2,500 properties been added to the register and she hoped that it would increase up to another 5% once the canvass came to a close.

During discussion, Members raised a few queries and commented on various aspects of the report. It was noted that:-

- the Electoral Services Team liaised with south and west Yorkshire local authorities in order to ascertain information regarding returns achieved and shared and considered best practice. At the beginning of September, Doncaster was achieving the same response rate as neighbouring authorities.
- 8-12 people were employed to carry out the telephone canvass, who worked in the Council's Contact Centre, and were very efficient and experienced in this type of work. It was noted that both personal visiting canvassers and telephone canvassers were paid by return results.
- In relation to the targeting of those people who were not registered, it was noted that the most cost effective and efficient way to get to those individuals on the register was by canvassers visiting their homes, rather than sending out a number of reminders by post.
- In accordance with legislation, the Electoral Services Team were able to register people by telephone. However, like any registration the information provided had to be verified by the Department of Works and Pensions.
- The Council targeted people living in shared houses and amend the register of electors in terms of the number of people living in each room.
- In relation to the response to the canvass, Electors were able to respond to the Household Enquiry Form via the Short Message Service (SMS), provided that there is no changes to the property.
- The Council was not legally able to remove non-responders from the register of electors. It was explained that the Council was unable to remove a person from the register, unless they had received notification and had been provided with two valid reasons to remove a person.

During further discussion, regarding completion of the annual canvass in December, the Electoral Services Manager gave an undertaking to provide the Committee with details on the number of electors that had been obtained by canvassers knocking on doors and also to provide Members with a further update on the canvass statistics.

At the close of debate, the Chair on behalf of the Committee thanked the Electoral Services Manager and the Electoral Services Team and staff involved for their work in delivering the annual canvass, commenting that the electoral registration efforts were commendable.

RESOLVED that the report on the Register of Electors Annual Canvass, be noted.

9 ELECTIONS/BY-ELECTIONS UPDATE

Members received a report, introduced by the Electoral Services Manager, which provided an update on recent Elections that had taken place since the last meeting of the Committee, in relation to Thorne Moorends Town Council, held on 13th July, 2017.

A by-election was held in the Thorne Town ward on 13th July 2017, as a result of a casual vacancy occurring due to the death of Town Councillor. It was reported that out of 9,261 eligible electors to vote in the Thorne Town ward election, 1,498 electors cast their vote, marking a turnout of 16.18%

In addition, a further vacancy had recently occurred due to a Councillor resigning and it was not called by electors for the vacancy to be filled by an election. Therefore, on the 6th November 2017 the Clerk was notified to arrange for the casual vacancy to be filled by co-option.

The Electoral Services Manager reported that currently there were two casual vacancies that had been advertised in Bawtry Town Council, which was due to close on 7th December and Cantley with Branton Parish, Council which was due to close on 5th December.

A short question and answer session followed seeking points of clarification on matters referred to in the report. Members noted that the costs for Parish/Town Councils elections were paid for by Parish/Town Councils. The costs varied and were dependent upon the number of electors, postal vote electors and the number of polling stations required. The next all out Parish Council elections were to take place in 2021, which would coincide with the Mayoral and Borough elections.

RESOLVED that the report on the Elections/By-Elections update, be noted.

10 BOUNDARY COMMISSION PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARY REVIEW 2018 - REVISED PROPOSALS

The Committee considered a report, presented by the Electoral Services Manager, which provided an update on the revised proposals for new 2018 Parliamentary constituency boundaries for Doncaster. The Electoral Services Manager reported that she had sent an email to Members regarding the revised proposals.

The Electoral Services Manager summarised the key points within the report and drew Members' attention to the Boundary Commission's revised proposals for the new Parliamentary constituency boundaries, which were set out in paragraphs 7 to 9 of the report. The Electoral Services Manager explained that the figures in the report were based on 2015's electorate. It was noted that consultation on the Boundary Commissions revised proposals was to take place from 17th October to 11th December 2017. A detailed copy of the report in relation to the revised proposals could be accessed via the Boundary Commissions website, as set out within paragraph 11 of the report. It was reported that the Boundary Commission have received responses to the proposals from Councillors, members of the public, and MP's and those comments have been taken on board. New Mappings of the ward boundaries were available to view at the Council's One Stop Shop.

During discussion on this item, a Member sought confirmation of when the revised proposals would come into effect. It was noted that the next cycle of Parliamentary

elections was 2022 and the proposals for new 2018 Parliamentary constituency boundaries were currently out for consultation. When the boundaries were finalised, they would be presented to Parliament for endorsement prior to implementation.

Members discussed the revisions to the Parliamentary boundaries and the consequence of the Dearne South ward being moved from the Borough of Barnsley to the Doncaster North constituency. Whilst it was felt that the proposals were an improvement on the initial proposed constituencies, Members raised some concern regarding communities from a neighbouring Borough being divided and transferred to another area. Members discussed the implications for Doncaster and how this would impact on the election process in terms of verification and the counting of ballot papers.

RESOLVED that the report, be noted.

CHAIR:_____

DATE:_____