

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

22ND SEPTEMBER, 2009

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the MANSION HOUSE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY 22ND SEPTEMBER, 2009 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair – Councillor Moira Hood
Vice-Chair – Councillor Bob Ford

Councillors Kevin Abell, Paul Bissett, Marilyn Green, Ken Keegan and Ray Mullis.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Peter Davies, Mayor of Doncaster and Councillors Ken Knight and Bill Mordue.

7. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTEREST

There were no declarations made at the meeting.

8. MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 21ST JULY, 2009

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meeting held on 21st July, 2009 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

9. MAYORAL ELECTIONS – 4TH JUNE, 2009: EVALUATION REPORT (Minute No. 4 – 21st July 2009)

Further to the above Minute, the Committee considered a second evaluation report on the Mayoral election held on 4th June 2009, in the light of concerns expressed at the Committee's last meeting with regard to the level of spoilt ballot papers received, with a view to considering the merits of lobbying the Government and the Electoral Commission for a change in the voting system used at Mayoral elections from a supplementary or second preference vote system to the 'first past the post' system used at most English elections.

In presenting the report, the Electoral and Democratic Renewal Consultant advised that it was not possible to conclude from the recorded evidence available that the level of spoilt ballot papers received in the Mayoral election was directly attributable to a lack of understanding of the voting system by voters. In the light of this, he explained that there was not a strong case to put to the Minister which would be considered sufficient to warrant the time required to make a change to the legislation in order to alter the voting system

currently used for Mayoral elections, especially with the prospect of a Parliamentary Election on the horizon. The Chief Executive added that there was anecdotal evidence that some of the Mayoral candidates had encouraged voters to vote twice for them using their first and second preference votes, which had proved to be confusing to voters.

The Electoral and Democratic Renewal Consultant then answered various questions from Members and explained that the supplementary or second preference vote system was generally viewed as being a more democratic method of voting, as the winner was the candidate with the overall greater share of all votes cast in the election. He advised that if the Committee decided to make representations on this issue, it was likely that focusing on voter education would be a more effective and appropriate response than changing the voting system itself. In response to a question as to why the supplementary vote system was only used for Mayoral elections, the Electoral and Democratic Renewal Consultant suggested that when the Mayoral model of governance was introduced, the Government had also had an opportunity to implement a different method of voting.

In answer to a further question regarding how the figure of 4.4% for total spoilt papers in the Mayoral election compared with the levels received in normal Borough elections, the officers advised that this figure would be less than 1% in normal elections, but they stressed that the reasons for the high levels of spoilt papers in the Mayoral election could only be ascertained by speaking directly to the voters concerned, not by examining the ballot papers. They added that they were not aware of other Mayoral authorities having experienced any problems with the use of the supplementary voting system.

During subsequent discussion, some Members expressed the view that the second preference voting system was confusing to the electorate and that the 'first past the post' method should be used for Mayoral elections instead, whilst others felt that the second preference system had worked well on two previous occasions and that it was worthy of being given another chance.

It was then

RESOLVED that:-

- (1) a letter be sent to the Government and the Electoral Commission calling for the supplementary or second preference voting system to be replaced by the 'first past the post' method at Mayoral elections in the future; and
- (2) in the meantime, this Council supports the Electoral Registration Officer/Returning Officer to ensure that he is able to fulfil his statutory duty to educate the electorate and promote participation in the democratic process.

10. DRAFTING OF A LOCAL CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE FOR DONCASTER

Members considered a report which sought the views of the Committee on a draft Local Code of Corporate Governance for Doncaster, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, together with a supporting framework document as detailed in Appendix 2, prior to subsequent consideration by the Standards Committee and then adoption by Full Council.

It was reported that national guidance on good practice recommended that all Councils should establish a formal Local Code of Governance thereby demonstrating their commitment and intent to delivering good governance to their local communities. Such a Code would also serve to create a standard for governance by which the local community could assess their local Council, as well as providing the means to the Council of reviewing its own governance arrangements internally, and assisting it in the production of its Annual Governance Statement for 2009/10 and thereafter.

During discussion, a Member drew attention to the reference in Principle 4 of the Code to ensuring that Full Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings take place in open forum (to the public and media) and that decisions are published on the Council's website, and pointed out that this might give the impression to members of the public that they could attend any meeting and view any committee papers.

After the Director of Resources had informed the Committee that he would take responsibility for ensuring that the Council's progress in following the principles of good governance set out in the Local Code was monitored on a frequent basis, it was

RESOLVED that, subject to the views of the Standards Committee, the Council be recommended to approve the draft Local Code of Corporate Governance for Doncaster.