

**To the Chair and Members of the
ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE**

**COMBINED LOCAL (DISTRICT AND PARISH COUNCIL) ELECTIONS AND
REFERENDUM ON VOTING SYSTEM AT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS –
5TH MAY 2011 – POST ELECTION EVALUATION REPORT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Local Election, both District and Parish Council, and the Referendum on the Voting System to be used at Parliamentary General Elections took place on the 5th May 2011. The purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the elections and referendum for information and comment by members.

RECOMMENDATION

2. The Committee is asked to consider and approve the report subject to any comments it wishes to make.

BACKGROUND

3. Following the Parliamentary Election on the 6th May 2010 the Government announced its intention to hold a Referendum allowing people to make a choice on the voting system to be used at Parliamentary Elections. The Referendum took place on the 5th May 2011 the same day as the District and Parish Council elections. As a consequence of this there were three significant events taking place at the same time creating a significant and complex project.
4. Whilst the Elections as a whole were delivered successfully, with any project of this nature it is inevitable that there will be some areas where things do not operate as planned or as intended. In looking at such issues to identify areas of improvement there will be events that were controllable and uncontrollable with the controllable events likely to yield the greatest opportunities for improvement.
5. An additional factor is that for the Referendum the legislation provides that the lead officer – Chief Counting Officer – is the Chair of the Electoral Commission with the Returning Officers of Local Councils being appointed as Regional and Local Counting Officers in their respective areas. The Regional Counting Officer for Yorkshire and the Humber was the Chief Executive and Returning Officer of Wakefield.
6. The Chair of the Electoral Commission was understandably keen to ensure

that there were consistent standards of practice applied nationally for the Referendum and issued extensive directions to ensure this. This resulted in a complex management process with some loss of local flexibility to deal with issues and, to some extent, the Local Elections being overshadowed by the referendum requirements.

7. Given the particular circumstances it is considered that the most effective way to undertake the evaluation is to consider issues arising locally, those attributable to the direction of the Electoral Commission and any that might be considered unavoidable or uncontrollable.
8. The following key learning points in these three areas have been identified: -

Local

- Additional dedicated personnel required to assist with the receipt and delivery of ballot boxes and other equipment from polling station staff at the count.
- Additional personnel/implementation of contingency arrangements to deal with the higher than normal volume of postal votes arriving from polling stations and through the late Royal Mail delivery at the close of poll. ~~(Need to add a sentence re expected / actual numbers)~~ The number of postal votes to be opened after the close of polling varies but is usually around 200. This year there were 600 from Royal Mail and 400 from polling stations, giving a total of 1000.
- Additional announcements during the count to advise of progress.
- There has also been some suggestion that separate ballot boxes should have been used. This was considered and whilst this would have offered some benefit in avoiding the need to separate ballot papers it would have considerably increased the logistical issues of issuing and returning ballot boxes as identified above. In addition it would have required the use of up to 600 ballot boxes and the acquisition of a possible further 350 ballot boxes for this election. Although some polling stations were issued a second box the majority only needed one and on balance the approach taken was felt to be appropriate.

Electoral Commission

- As outlined above the Commission issued detailed directions and instructions for the conduct of the referendum. This documentation had to be read in addition to legislation. The volume of these documents and timing of their issue and subsequent updates where changes were not highlighted created a considerable burden at an already busy time. In response to concern, a series of bulletins was introduced and whilst the intention of these is acknowledged it effectively increased the burden.
- There is a general perception that the Commission prioritised the referendum failing to recognise fully the implications locally for the delivery of district and parish council elections.
- The level of staffing prescribed by the Commission in response to the

problems that occurred elsewhere in a small number of highly publicised instances was higher-felt to be higher than necessary.

- The requirement to prioritise the referendum at the verification led to delays in progressing the counting of votes for the Doncaster Council elections.
- Similar issues have been raised in other areas.

Uncontrollable

- The considerable number of postal votes delivered in the late Royal Mail delivery (600) and brought in from polling stations (400) which had to be opened and security checked before the verification could be completed. ~~(Compare with normal experience + time required to update all 3 + scale of Parish counts in Doncaster)~~ As already identified the expected receipt of postal votes at this time is approximately 200, this represents a delivery 5 times greater than the anticipated amount, significantly greater than the anticipated potential variance and requiring additional time to process and produce totals for the 3 different postal elections.
- As a Metropolitan District Doncaster has a larger than usual number of Parish Councils some of which are warded and a significant number of contested parishes requiring a large scale Parish count with a commensurate impact on timings and workloads generally.

9. Whilst there are some clearly identified learning points from the recent elections it should be acknowledged that this year's was unusual in having three events taking place on the same day. A comparison has been drawn with other authorities and completion times for various activities including the completion of the counting of votes were similar. However in doing this it must be remembered that the nature of individual authorities differs, not least the number and size of parishes likely to be contested.
10. All these issues were taken into account when determining the timing of the different events from commencing the verification to the Referendum count which had to start at 4.00pm on Friday the 6th May 2011. The arrangements put in place provided for the effective delivery and completion of each stage ready for the next taking account of local variables.
11. Since the Elections there have been opportunities for feedback through the Regional and other networks and identified issues have been included in responses. There is a significant degree of commonality in the issues experienced and those experienced in Doncaster have been raised widely with the Electoral Commission. The Commission will be producing a report on the referendum and will be considering any observations received.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED

12. The elections and referendum are a statutory duty and must be carried out in accordance with statutory requirements.

IMPACT ON THE COUNCIL'S KEY OBJECTIVES

13. Elections are a major statutory responsibility for the Council which rely on the support from within the Council particularly that of the individual personnel who undertake the various tasks required to deliver this major project. The combination of multiple elections on one day is likely to continue, with the strict statutory procedural requirements contributing to the prospects that counts will inevitably take longer. The need to manage these circumstances to minimise the impact on personnel will have an impact on the Council's objective's particularly in the current period of severe budgetary restraint.
14. In May 2012 the Council will have its own Local Elections along with the Referendum on proposed change to a Leader and Cabinet in addition there are the proposals for the introduction of Elected Police Commissioners which may still be introduced at those elections.

~~(Impact of timescales on staff and counting agents / agents / candidates plus para re 2012 elections – prospects for long count actions arising from this analysis)~~
Given the prospect of multiple elections next year, we will need to consider how best to manage the impact on all personnel involved in the process including staff, candidates and agents.

Doncaster Priorities	Implications of this initiative
A Prosperous Place	The democratic process contributes directly to the well being and prosperity of the area
Skills & Lifelong Learning	See note in Prosperous Place
Healthy & Caring	See note in Prosperous Place
Safer, Cleaner & Greener	See note in Prosperous Place
Equality of Opportunity (Cross-Cutting)	See note in Prosperous Place
Improving Neighbourhoods Together (Cross-cutting)	See note in Prosperous Place
Protecting The Environment (Cross-cutting)	See note in Prosperous Place
Achieving Excellence	See note in Prosperous Place

RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

16. The delivery of an election is a significant and complex undertaking with strict statutory deadlines. Planning is a key component in reducing or eliminating risks.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

17. The provisions for the conduct of the Local election are contained in the Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006, the Local Elections (Parishes and Communities) (England and Wales) Rules 2006 and the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. These regulations

set detailed requirements for the conduct of the elections and referendum subject to the requirements of primary legislation. In addition the authority has a statutory duty relating to the provision of resources to the Returning Officer for the conduct of the Local Elections under section 35 of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

18. The cost of the District election is met by the Council, Parish Council elections are charged to the respective parishes whilst funding for the Referendum is met by the Government. The combination of the elections and the sharing of costs will reduce the overall cost burden of the elections to all parties. Provision has been made within the 2011 budget for the cost of the Local election.

CONSULTATION

19. Consultation is not undertaken in connection with elections, however activities will be undertaken at a national and local level to raise awareness and promote participation.

REPORT AUTHOR AND CONTRIBUTORS

Tony Machin, Head of Elections and Democratic Renewal
Tel: 01302 734649
E-mail: tony.machin@doncaster.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

File – Local Elections – 5th May 2011

**ROB VINCENT
RETURNING OFFICER AND
LOCAL COUNTING OFFICER**