

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

10TH JULY, 2012

A meeting of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the MANSION HOUSE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 10TH JULY, 2012 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair – Councillor Kevin Rodgers
Vice-Chair Councillor Sue Wilkinson

Councillors Patricia Bartlett, Phil Cole, Nuala Fennelly, Moira Hood, Deborah Hutchinson, John McHale, Bill Mordue and Jane Nightingale.

Also in attendance:

Barbara Lines, Electoral Commission.

APOLOGIES:

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Eric Tatton-Kelly.

1. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL OR PREJUDICIAL INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE HELD ON 20TH MARCH, 2012

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee held on 20th March, 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. LOCAL ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM ON CHANGE IN THE COUNCIL'S GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS – 3RD MAY 2012: EVALUATION AND OUTCOMES OF INVESTIGATION INTO DISTRIBUTION OF POSTAL VOTES AND POLL CARDS

The Committee considered a report which provided an evaluation of the Elections and Referendum held on 3rd May 2012, along with outcomes of a review of problems associated with the delivery of postal votes and poll cards in some areas.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that the election and referendum had both been successfully delivered, with the exception of two areas of particular concern – postal vote delivery and poll card delivery. It was reported that, specifically, the Electoral Commission had advised that the Council had complied with all of the Commission's Performance Standards with the exception of:-

- the element relating to postal voting because of the initial failure to print and deliver some postal votes; and
- poll card delivery because there were insufficient measures in place to monitor delivery problems.

The Assistant Director explained that, with regard to the non-delivery of poll cards in certain areas of the Borough, meetings held after the elections with Royal Mail and the printers (Print Image) had proved inconclusive in terms of identifying why poll cards had not been delivered in some areas. He stated that whilst the printers had been able to provide evidence to support that they had completed the printing work successfully, Royal Mail were not able to provide conclusive evidence that the handover of all of the poll cards had been complete, as they only counted the number of packages they had collected from the printers for the poll card delivery and carried out sample checks. As the sample checks had been satisfactory, no further checks had been carried out when the poll cards were collected from the printers. Royal Mail were unable to provide any further supporting evidence other than the sampling checks. The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services explained that it was very difficult to pinpoint where any problems with the delivery of poll cards might have occurred in talking to Royal Mail. However, Royal Mail had given assurances regarding their willingness to work towards improvements for the future.

Members noted that a number of improvements had been identified by the Post-Election Review and were now proposed. The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services explained that it was acknowledged that there was a need for the Council to improve the way in which it built up a wider, and more timely, picture of where problems might be arising with delivery of postal votes/poll cards in future elections. Therefore, the proposed improvements included establishing the Council's own system of checking the prompt delivery of poll cards and postal votes by asking strategically located staff across the Borough to report delivery to a central data base.

Discussion followed, during which the Officers answered a wide range of questions from Members on the circumstances surrounding the problems experienced during this year's elections. In particular, the Officers answered questions on the nature of the contract with Royal Mail for delivering poll cards and explained that because the period of time available for delivering the cards was relatively narrow, it was not

practical for the Council to deliver the poll cards itself.

Barbara Lines of the Electoral Commission explained that similar problems had occurred in a few other Local Authority areas during the elections and stressed that Doncaster was not alone in experiencing such difficulties. She advised that it was a matter for each Returning Officer to agree on their local arrangements for ensuring the delivery of poll cards and stated, for example, that Manchester City Council was currently looking at alternative ways of delivering poll cards in the light of rising Royal Mail charges.

Further discussion ensued, during which Councillor Phil Cole expressed the view that if Royal Mail was unable to guarantee a satisfactory standard of service in terms of delivering poll cards, then the Council should look to using private sector companies in the future. However, another Member felt that other companies might struggle to provide an acceptable level of service given the very large quantity of mail requiring delivery. Barbara Lines added that there was a risk in giving work to external companies to deliver poll cards within the prescribed timescales.

In response to a question as to whether the error made in the operation of the Electoral Management system was a software issue or training issue, the Head of Democratic Services confirmed that this was a training issue and that, accordingly, refresher training for staff on the use of the Electoral Management system was being arranged and this would be carried out by the software provider. Arising from a comment by Councillor Phil Cole that this incident appeared to show that there were data maintenance/management issues needing to be addressed, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that this was a fair point and would be picked up as part of the review of the Council's elections processes.

In reply to a query, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that a review of Polling Stations was included in this Committee's proposed Work Plan for 2012/13, which Members were due to consider under a separate agenda item at today's meeting (see minute number 4). He pointed out that a small number of Portacabins and Youth Service camper vans had been utilised as temporary polling stations in the Elections in Wards where suitable permanent facilities had not been found. In the event, the camper vans had proved to be unsuitable and Officers were not minded to use them again in future. Similarly, the use of Portacabins was costly and involved compromises for both the staff and the electorate and Officers were of the view that these should only be used as a last resort. The Assistant Director explained that Officers would be liaising further with schools and owners of other buildings, such as private businesses, in those areas with a view to identifying suitable premises to use as Polling Stations in future Elections.

It was then

RESOLVED to:

- (a) note the outcome of the review in respect of undelivered postal votes and polling cards in some areas of the Borough;
- (b) note the arrangements being put in place, as detailed at paragraph 14 of the report, to strengthen the processes and procedures for future elections; and
- (c) note that future reports will be presented to the Committee on progress being made implementing the improvements for running future elections.

4. ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE –
WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13

The Committee considered a report which outlined a proposed Work Programme for the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee for the 2012/13 Municipal year.

During discussion, the Chair stated that there was a need to complete a Polling District Review prior to the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in November, therefore he proposed that a report on this subject be brought to this Committee's meeting in September 2012.

The Chair suggested that it might be useful for this Committee to receive a report on the merits of establishing Statutory Area Committees in Doncaster, given that the Council was currently in the process of re-shaping its services under the present climate. The Chair explained that the purpose of the proposed report would be to look at establishing Area Committees as a counter balance to Executive Arrangements, by delegating powers to such Committees, which might, for example, be aligned to the existing Area Management structure operating in the Borough.

In response, Councillor Phil Cole queried whether this would include looking at ways of delegating powers to Parish Councils in the Borough. He referred to the 'Quality Status' scheme for Parish Councils, which involved local councils having to pass various tests in order to deem them competent enough to be delegated additional powers. He stated that he would like to see a report at a future meeting on the extent of the powers which Doncaster Council delegated down to the Quality Parish Councils within its Borough. In response, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that a report on this issue could be brought to a future meeting. In reply to a comment by Councillor John McHale that this was a strategic issue which should be discussed by the Full Council, the Chair explained that it was intended to bring the matter to this Committee in the first instance to examine the various options

available, but any final decision would rest with the Full Council.

At the suggestion of Councillor Phil Cole, the Committee agreed to add a further item to its Work Programme on the impact of the proposed change from household registration to individual electoral registration, which the Government was planning to introduce from summer 2014.

After the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services had pointed out that it might be necessary to put back the date of the EDSC meeting in September 2012 by a few weeks in order to allow time for the outcome of the public consultation exercise on the proposed spitting byelaw to be evaluated, it was

RESOLVED to agree that the following items should form this Committee's Work Programme for 2012/13:

ITEM	DATE TO BE CONSIDERED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polling District Review. • Update on arrangements for Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in November, including mini-review of Polling Stations. • Proposed Spitting Byelaw – Outcome of Public Consultation Exercise. 	11th September 2012
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory Area Committees and 'Quality Status' Scheme for Parish Councils. 	20th November 2012
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update on arrangements for Mayoral Election in May 2013. • Individual Electoral Registration. 	12th February 2013

***NOTE:** Following the meeting, it was agreed by the Chair to re-schedule the date of the meeting originally set for 11th September 2012 to 8th October 2012 in order to accommodate the timeframe for the consultation period

regarding the proposed spitting byelaw.

5. TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Chair informed Members that he had received a request from Councillor Phil Cole that this Committee consider changing the start time of its meetings.

During discussion, Councillor Cole explained that he was requesting that the time of EDSC meetings be moved to either the beginning or the end of the working day, as opposed to the current time of 10.00 a.m., as this would benefit those Members who had daytime jobs and be consistent with arrangements in many other local authorities. He felt that, at present, Doncaster Council meetings/seminars and other Member events were all geared to suit Officers rather than Councillors or members of the public and suggested that one reason for the low public attendance at Overview and Scrutiny meetings was because meetings were held in the daytime.

However, in reply to Councillor Cole's comments, other Members stated that they would be opposed to moving the time of Committee meetings to later in the day, as these would then clash with numerous other evening meetings which they already had to attend, such as community meetings held in their local wards.

On being put to the vote, with 8 Members voting for, 2 against, it was

RESOLVED that meetings of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee continue to be held at 10.00 a.m.