

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

**LOCAL ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM ON CHANGE IN GOVERNANCE
ARRANGEMENTS – 3rd May 2012 – EVALUATION AND OUTCOME OF REVIEW OF
THE DISTRIBUTION OF POSTAL VOTES AND POLL CARDS.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the Elections and Referendum held on 3rd May, along with outcomes of a review of problems associated with the delivery of postal votes and poll cards in some areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The Committee is asked to:
 - (i) Note the outcome of the review in respect of undelivered postal votes and polling cards in some areas of the Borough;
 - (ii) Note the arrangements being put in place, detailed at paragraph 14 to strengthen the processes and procedures for future elections ; and
 - (iii) Note that future reports will be presented to the Committee on progress being made implementing the improvements for running future elections.

BACKGROUND

3. The organisation and conduct of an election is a large and complex project. For the Election and Referendum held on 3rd May the Council operated 183 polling stations for an eligible electorate of 223,000, 60,000 of which receive postal votes. More than 400 members of staff were involved in operating the polling stations and count with many more providing valuable assistance behind the scenes. All staff involved in the process were very committed and hard working.
4. A post election/referendum evaluation was undertaken utilising a questionnaire to candidates/agents and elected members; feedback from the general public [via both the Council's Website and hard copies of a questionnaire in public buildings]; meetings with Royal Mail, the external print company (Print Image), the Electoral Services Team, the Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators and a cross section of staff involved in the election.

5. The election and referendum were both successfully delivered save for two areas of particular concern- postal vote delivery and poll card delivery. Both issues are reflected in the 6 replies received as part of the Review. Given the concerns generated by these issues and raised at the Council meeting on 18th May 2012 it was agreed that a report would be submitted to this meeting on the circumstances surrounding the failure to issue a number of postal votes and the delivery failure of a significant number of poll cards in several areas across the borough. Since the Council meeting the Electoral Commission has advised that the Council 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 the
 - poll card delivery because there were insufficient measures in place to monitor delivery problems

Postal Votes

6. The polling cards and postal votes are produced by an external printer [Print Image] from data provided by Council. Once printed, the postal votes and poll cards are collected from the printer by Royal Mail and delivered through Royal Mail's "Walk Sort" system. Due to a misunderstanding on the operation of the Electoral Management system on how to manipulate data fields, the data sent to the Print Image excluded 684 postal votes on the initial print run that were delivered by Royal Mail from 20th April onwards. The areas principally affected were parts of Sprotbrough, Conisbrough Parks, Hatfield Woodhouse and Moss. When this problem became apparent on 30th April arrangements were put in place to hand deliver these postal votes. On 2nd May a letter was hand delivered by staff on 2nd. The letter explained that three main options were open to those wishing to use their postal vote. The postal vote could be completed there and then and given to the member of staff, it could be completed and returned to the nearest polling station or, because of the special arrangements the Council has with Royal Mail, could be posted within Doncaster before 4:00pm on Election Day,

Poll Cards

7. Borough wide poll card delivery commenced on 20th March and should have been completed by 29th March. It became apparent from late April that from the number of calls received by the Election Team that there had been a problem with delivery of poll cards in pockets across the Borough. In particular, areas of Norton, Cantley, Branton, Askern, Sprotborough, Mexborough, Micklebring, Stainton, Armthorpe, the Moss Road area of Askern and in the Central Ward.
8. Contact was made with both Print Image and Royal Mail to investigate delivery issues. Print Image advised that they had printed 223,000 poll cards and their records showed that Royal Mail had collected the poll cards and signed to confirm receipt of 223,000 poll cards. The response from Royal Mail was that there had been no problems with delivery and all of the cards they had collected from the printer had been delivered as required.

9. At this stage it was considered that the problem affecting postal votes may also have affected the poll cards for those areas. In light of this, arrangements were put in place to print and deliver duplicate poll cards for those areas where problems had been clearly defined, namely parts of Armthorpe, part of Cantley, the Moss Road area of Askern and all of Branton.
10. In early May it became apparent that there was a significant problem in the Mexborough area and on the 2nd May arrangements were made to deliver a letter to all households in Mexborough advising occupants of the fact that we had experienced problems in Mexborough with poll card delivery and informing voters that they could vote as normal at their usual polling station without a polling card, provided they were on the electoral roll.

Royal Mail and Print Image

11. Following the elections, meetings were held with Royal Mail on 17th May and Print Image on 11th June, 2012. From these meetings it has not been possible to absolutely identify why poll cards had not been delivered in some areas. There is common agreement by all parties that the data supplied by the Council was correct albeit it was necessary to re-issue further data following identification of the problem referred to at paragraph 6 above. The discussions with, and supporting documentation supplied by, the printer, support that the production of all poll cards has taken place.
12. The printers have also investigated their production processes and interviewed production staff. Print image has sophisticated data and records, including the ability to quickly and correctly produce an image of poll cards where we have received notification of non-delivery and have therefore been able to produce images of cards that we know have not been delivered. Whilst this can only support the production and handover of all poll cards, it is not conclusive evidence. Royal Mail confirms that they collected the correct number of packages for the poll card delivery but do not certify this handover as complete because they only count these packages and carry out sample checks. As the sample checks were satisfactory, no further checks were carried out when Doncaster poll cards were collected from the printer. Royal Mail are unable to provide any supporting evidence other than the sampling checks.
13. In conclusion whilst the balance of evidence indicates that the full delivery of poll cards was handed to Royal Mail it is not possible to confirm this conclusively. The printers have however been able to provide evidence to support that they completed the work successfully. In the interim Royal Mail has given assurances regarding their willingness to work towards improvements for the future.

Further improvements identified by Post-Election Review

14. The general review has highlighted a number of areas that would benefit from further consideration and urgent action in the case of mobile polling stations.
 - i The running of the Election will be regarded as a corporate project. To ensure wider access to corporate resources, a Council and partner

wide project team is being established [see below for suggested membership]. Awareness amongst senior managers will be increased by a presentation to the Council's leadership team.

- ii A Project Group of key partners (internal and external – e.g. S.Y. Police, Print Image, Royal Mail, IT, key venues, security, Emergency Planning, Transport, Communications) is being established to support the delivery of future elections;
- iii A small number of Portacabins and three of the Youth Service camper vans were utilised as polling stations where suitable permanent facilities had not been identified. The camper vans did not prove to be suitable at all and should not be used in future. Portacabins are expensive at a total cost of approximately £3,000 each, involve compromises for both the staff and the electorate and should only be used as a last resort when more suitable alternatives cannot be found. Further liaison needs to be undertaken with schools and owners of other buildings within the relevant locations to establish more suitable premises for use as polling stations. A number of head teachers have indicated that they would prefer their schools to remain open on polling day if at all possible and this is something that can be looked at as part of a wider review of polling stations.
- iv. Council staff are vital to the whole process. In addition to the visible roles at polling stations and the count, huge reliance is placed on staff to carry out the widest range of roles from the processing of postal votes through to delivery of polling booths and associated equipment to the polling stations. Staff also cover for colleagues that are taken away from normal duties to undertake roles on the election. There has been some confusion amongst managers as to the basis on which staff are released with some erroneously believing that staff should take leave in order to assist with the election. This is not the case, although it is clearly necessary for managers to approve absence. For the staff involved on election day, and at the following count, there is a need for formal training which is a further time constraint. In order to ensure that staff are released, wider and earlier briefings for managers will take place and managers will be actively encouraged to make staff available wherever possible.
- v. The facilities at Copley House for the processing of postal votes are cramped and the arrangements did impact on the effective running of the Elections Team which is located in the same room. Arrangements are in hand to make use of the extensive facilities available at the Carr House Centre for the Police and Crime Commissioners' Elections in November 2012. A wider review of the logistical arrangements for future elections, particularly in the context of the planned move of Legal and Democratic Services to the CCQ, will also be undertaken.
- vi An action/project plan based on the Electoral Commission template incorporating key activities and deadlines will be produced and monitored. This will also include a review of the suitability of polling stations;

- vii A procedures manual for the Elections Team is to be created;
- viii Refresher training is to be provided for all members of the Elections Team on the use of the Election software package;
- ix The Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators has been asked to carry out a review of the Council's election arrangements. His recommendations will be incorporated into future planning for elections;
- x Arrangements for the delivery of poll cards at future elections will be reviewed; and
- xi The possibility of creating our own system of checking the timely delivery of poll cards and postal votes by asking strategically located staff to report delivery to a central data base will be explored.

RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

- 15. A comprehensive risk assessment is undertaken for each election and issues arising from this report will be included in future risk assessments.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 16. The provisions for the conduct of the Local election are contained in the Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006, and the Local Authority (Conduct of Referendums) (England) Regulations 2012. 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

- 17. The cost of the District Election and Referendum is met by the Council. Provision has been made within the 2012/13 budget for the cost of the Local Election and Referendum.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18. File - Local Elections 2012

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