

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

20TH NOVEMBER, 2012

A meeting of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the MANSION HOUSE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 20TH NOVEMBER, 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, Jane Nightingale and Eric Tatton-Kelly.

10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

11. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE HELD ON 8TH OCTOBER, 2012

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee held on 8th October, 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

With regard to minute number 8 of the above minutes (Update on arrangements for Police & Crime Commissioner (PCC) Elections in November – Oral Presentation), the Head of Democratic Services reported on the outcome of the PCC Elections held on 15th November, 2012, for the Committee's information. He informed Members that there had been an overall turnout of 14.93% in the South Yorkshire region. In Doncaster, there had been a turnout of 15.64%, of which 12.02% comprised postal voters; this equated to less than 3% of non-postal voters participating in the Election. He confirmed that the use of strategic drop-off points across the Borough for receiving ballot boxes after close of poll had worked very well, and that the Racecourse had proved to be a good venue for the count, which had been conducted accurately, with no re-counts being necessary. The Elections Project Team, which had been established to co-ordinate arrangements for the Election and included external partners such as Royal Mail and the printing company, had proved to be useful and would continue to meet in the future.

Discussion followed, during which Members requested statistics in relation to turnout levels per Ward/Constituency, the rate of spoilt ballot papers and the number of postal votes that were unreturned in the PCC Elections. Members were advised that it was not possible to provide a breakdown of the results regarding turnout levels per Wards, as postal votes were not counted on a

Ward basis. However, in respect of returns per polling station this information would be circulated to Members when available.

The Chair stated that he had recently been contacted by some blind voters who had referred to previous informal arrangements whereby staff from the Council had assisted them in completing their postal votes. These arrangements were no longer in place. The Chair felt that as there were approximately 2000 residents in the Borough with sight impairments, the Council should consider ways in which these voters could be assisted by the Council to participate in future elections and asked that a report be brought to this Committee outlining the options available. In response, the Head of Democratic Services explained that he had checked with the Elections Team and they had not provided such assistance to blind voters in the past, but it was possible that other Council staff, such as the Neighbourhood Teams, had helped people in their homes.

12. STATUTORY AREA COMMITTEES

The Committee considered a report which provided information on Statutory Area Committees in terms of their composition and functions, including examples of the various models currently being operated by other local authorities. Members' views were sought on whether the Council should consider establishing some form of Area Committee structure in Doncaster in the future.

The Chair explained that Area Forums had previously been in place in Doncaster, prior to the introduction of Mayoral Governance in May 2002. In recalling the previous forums, a Member stated that he would only favour Area Committees if their membership comprised solely of Elected Members, and he stressed the importance of ensuring that, if such a structure was to be introduced, it would serve a meaningful purpose. Other Members expressed concerns that there were already too many consultative bodies and 'talking shops' in existence and that further bodies should not be introduced unless they were given a meaningful role to play in the Council's decision making process. A view was also expressed that the introduction of Area Committees would be too costly, at a time when the Council was having to make significant cuts in its spending.

With regard to decision making powers, the Chair explained that in other local authority areas, some Area Committees were given significant budgets to manage, that provided for the discharge of executive functions. Some Members felt that the current Flexible Budgets which were allocated and managed at Ward level in the Borough worked effectively and, therefore, did not consider it appropriate at the present time for the Council to be considering the introduction of Statutory Area Committees.

Concerning the geographical options for Area Committees if they were established, a Member expressed the opinion that such Committees should have coterminous boundaries with either towns or parishes/wards, as opposed to the larger neighbourhood management areas in the Borough, as smaller areas would help the Committees to focus on natural communities,

rather than larger areas.

During further discussion, a Member felt that if Area Committees were established and, in turn, the Mayor agreed to delegate some executive functions to those Committees, this would give Ward Members a more meaningful role.

Other Members commented that they would rather see the flexible budgets increased instead of creating additional infrastructure such as Area Committees.

It was then proposed by Councillor Phil Cole, seconded by Councillor John McHale, that the Council should not proceed with further work on establishing Statutory Area Committees as part of its committee structure. On being put to the vote, with 8 Members voting for, 3 against, it was

RESOLVED not to proceed with the establishment of Statutory Area Committees as part of the Council's committee structure.