

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

29TH JULY, 2014

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 29TH JULY, 2014 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Jane Nightingale
Vice-Chair - Councillor Alan Smith

Councillors John Cooke, Charlie Hogarth, Hilary McNamee, Kevin Rodgers, Dave Shaw and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Phil Cole, Nuala Fennelly and Deborah Hutchinson.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

2. MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 11TH MARCH, 2014

Cllr Hilary McNamee pointed out that the minutes of the meeting held on 11th March, 2014 showed her as being present, while also recording that she had submitted an apology for absence. Councillor McNamee stated that she believed she had not been in attendance for that particular meeting and therefore requested that the minutes be amended accordingly.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above amendment, the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meeting held on 11th March, 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS HELD ON 22ND MAY, 2014 AND PROGRESS OF THE INTRODUCTION OF INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION.

The Committee considered a report which provided an evaluation of the European and Local Government Elections which took place on 22nd May 2014 and highlighted the key processes for improvement to be incorporated into the 2015 elections project plan. The report also updated Members on the progress of local data matching for the transition to Individual Electoral Registration.

Election Review

In presenting the report, the Electoral Services Manager referred to Appendix 1 which outlined the key processes for improvement identified for the combined 2015 elections, following a review of the elections held in May 2014. The Electoral Services Manager summarised each item in turn, and discussion took place on the following issues:-

- **Project planning** – it was noted that a significant amount of planning would be required to prepare for the three elections next year, i.e. Parliamentary election combined with all out ward elections and all out parish elections.
- **Polling places/stations** – a review of polling stations would commence as soon as the boundary review was finalised, with a completion deadline of the end of January 2015.

In response to a comment by Councillor Hilary McNamee about an unsatisfactory polling station at a school in her ward in the last election, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that selection criteria were used in identifying suitable polling station venues. The Electoral Services Manager asked the Councillor to send details of the venue so that she could investigate further. She added that the review of polling stations would pick up any issues such as accessibility at venues, and it was noted that schools would be contacted with a view to arranging site visits to ascertain if polls could be held without the need to close the schools.

- **Software performance** – it was noted that the use of the Express software had resulted in a noticeable increase in performance particularly in relation to the production of notices and the transfer of data.
- **Effectiveness of other Council departments** – in response to a query, the Electoral Services Manager gave further details of the difficulties encountered with regard to the collection of election stationery from the Mary Woollett Centre on the Friday following the poll.
- **Processing/handling of queries** – it was noted that the contact centre staff would be given additional training on the election software to enable them to provide more support in handling queries from the public.
- **Resources** – Members noted that the employment of DMBC apprentices over the age of 18 as poll clerks and count assistants was to be explored. A view was expressed that Managers might be reluctant to release apprentices for election duties if they were generating income for their particular service area. In reply, the Electoral Services Manager explained that while it was up to Line Managers to give approval for their staff to work on election duties, all Directorates within the Council had a responsibility to support the Returning Officer by providing the necessary staff when required, so that the Council met its statutory obligations.

- **Verification and count arrangements** – it was reported that the verification and count procedures had been revised to increase efficiency and visibility and the improvements were noticeable, particularly when sorting and counting the votes. Members were pleased to note that positive feedback on the proceedings had been received from the Electoral Commission Observers in attendance at the count venue, together with candidates, agents and others attending the count.

During discussion on the verification/counting process, the Electoral Services Manager explained that the law stated that all ballot papers had to be verified before counting could commence. She pointed out, however, that the Electoral Commission was exploring further with the UK Government whether it was possible to remove the legal requirement to delay counting until after all ballot box contents had been verified, without compromising important audit and accuracy checks.

With regard to the count venue, the Chair expressed the view that security at the Racecourse should be reviewed, as she was aware that a Councillor had had their car stolen from the small car park at the Racecourse, and lighting was poor across the road in the large car park.

Members also discussed the need to review catering arrangements and the provision of refreshments at the Racecourse.

- **Postal vote processing** – the Committee noted that the postal vote processing time had been reduced due to the new election software and procedures.
- **Candidates and agents** – meetings for candidates and agents had been held on 11th April and 25th April 2014 to provide information on the elections process. It was noted that there had been several instances of candidates submitting incomplete or incorrectly completed nomination papers, which had impacted on the processing time. The Electoral Services Manager outlined the proposed actions to be taken to ensure that the nomination process for the elections in May 2015 ran smoothly.

During subsequent discussion, a Member pointed out that he believed that a 'third party' in the form of a campaign group would be actively trying to influence votes in next year's elections. In reply, the Electoral Services Manager explained that the Police were responsible for dealing with any complaints about breaches of the rules that applied to local campaigns.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

The Electoral Services Manager reported that in readiness for the introduction of IER, several initiatives had been introduced at the annual canvass to ensure the register was as accurate as possible. These initiatives had worked well, with a registration return of 88.6% being achieved, compared to 86% the previous year. The confirmation live run result, received on 4th July, showed an 82% match. Local data matching with the Council Tax National Fraud

Initiative data and the Customer Relations Management system data matched an additional 23,278 electors, resulting in a final confirmation match of 93.86%. This was currently the highest match in the region and the Council would shortly be sending out 210,546 confirmation letters and 10,674 invitations to register.

It was noted that electors who did not supply the relevant details would be automatically carried forward from the register published in 2014 to the following year to enable the maximum number of electors to vote in the General and Local Elections in May 2015.

After Members had acknowledged the much improved service now being provided by the Council's Elections Team, it was

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report and approve the key processes for improvement identified for inclusion in the 2015 elections project plan.

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