

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

25TH NOVEMBER, 2014

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 25TH NOVEMBER, 2014 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

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

Councillors Phil Cole, John Cooke, Charlie Hogarth, Deborah Hutchinson, Hilary McNamee and Sue Wilkinson'

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nuala Fennelly, Kevin Rodgers and Dave Shaw.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

5. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE HELD ON 29TH JULY 2014

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meeting held on 29th July 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

6. ELECTORAL REVIEW – NEW WARD BOUNDARIES

The Committee received a report which outlined the latest position with regard to the Electoral Review being carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE), including details of the proposed electoral cycle in Doncaster from 2015 through to 2021.

In introducing the report, the Senior Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that the LGBCE's final recommendations had been published today, based on a reduced Council size of 55 Councillors, and she was able to confirm that these largely mirrored the LGBCE's revised draft recommendations issued earlier in the year, subject to some minor changes to a small number of wards. A schedule extracted from the LGBCE's report listing the final ward boundary recommendations was then tabled for Members' information.

The Senior Policy and Performance Officer then summarised the salient points in the ward boundary proposals, highlighting minor modifications made to the Bentley, Conisbrough and Roman Ridge wards, none of which had any significant impact on electoral variances in those areas. Members noted that a draft Order would now be laid before Parliament for approval for a period of 40 days. The Order would provide for the new electoral arrangements for the

Council to be implemented at the local elections in May 2015.

In response to a question, the Senior Policy and Performance Officer stated that details of the polling districts were still awaited from the Boundary Commission, but that these were expected in the next few days.

During discussion, Members were pleased to acknowledge that the Boundary Commission had altered its own recommendations in response to this Council's proposals.

After the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services had stated that a copy of the LGBCE's report would be sent electronically to all Members for their information and would also be made available on the Council's website, it was

RESOLVED to note the latest position of the Electoral Review carried out by the LGBCE, including the Commission's final recommendations relating to ward boundaries and the election timetable set out in the report.

7. ELECTORAL SERVICES UPDATE ON KEY ISSUES REPORT

The Committee received a report which provided an update on a number of key work streams being undertaken by the Electoral Services Team in relation to Individual Electoral Registration (IER), the Polling District, Places and Stations Review and preparations for the Parliamentary, General and Local Government Elections in May 2015.

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2014

The Electoral Services Manager began by referring to the following documents which had been tabled at the meeting for Members' information:-

- Example of Public Notice of Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations;
- Sample Review sheet for Balby Ward; and
- Summary of Review process.

The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that although the Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations would start based on the current electoral boundaries, it would also have regard to, and anticipate, any new boundaries arising from the Electoral Review, even though they were not yet in force. In outlining the provisional timeframe for conducting the Review, the Electoral Services Manager advised that the Review must be completed by 31st January 2015. Prior to this, it was proposed that the findings of the Review would be reported to an Extraordinary Meeting of this Committee on 20th January 2015 (date to be confirmed) following the close of the consultation period on 9th January 2015. Regarding the consultation exercise, the Electoral Services Manager requested Members to forward the details of any local community or voluntary groups in their respective wards that might wish to be consulted as part of the Review. The Electoral Services Manager explained that workshop sessions for Members, where maps would be available to view, could also be arranged if desired, to assist in the Review.

In response to a query, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the Council had responsibility for reviewing polling districts. On this issue, a Member commented that it was important that the review of polling districts considered the distances between polling places, as geography was a major factor which influenced voter turnouts at Elections. Having outlined the factors to be taken into account in reviewing polling places, the Electoral Services Manager explained that while the Council had responsibility for determining polling districts and polling places, it was up to the Returning Officer to choose the polling stations.

Concerning polling stations, Members noted that the number of electors allocated to any one Station should not exceed 2,500. The Electoral Services Manager advised that the number of Portacabins used as polling stations in the Borough had now been reduced to 7 and every effort was being made to reduce this number further, as these facilities were inadequate on a number of levels, such as offering poor accessibility for voters and insufficient space for Elections staff to operate effectively.

During discussion on the use of schools as polling stations, the Electoral Services Manager advised that the Returning Officer was keen to see schools remaining open when used as polling stations. Details of future Election dates had been circulated to schools to help them plan ahead in this regard. In response to concerns expressed by a Member over the unsuitability of Tornedale Infant School, Rossington as a polling station venue, due to it having poor access for voters who were elderly and those with disabilities, the Electoral Services Manager explained that accessibility of venues was one of a number of factors that were taken into account in choosing locations of polling stations. She pointed out, however, that the choice of suitable venues in a given area was sometimes limited and it was not always possible to avoid having to use either a Portacabin or a venue with access that was less than ideal. The Officers advised that they would welcome input from Members where they were aware of potential alternative venues to use as polling stations in their wards which offered improved facilities, particularly in those areas where Portacabins were currently being used. To this end, it was suggested that details of the current locations where Portacabins were being used as polling stations should be circulated to Members as part of the review, to assist them in identifying more suitable premises in those areas.

A Member expressed the view that, as far as possible, there should be a presumption towards using existing polling stations, with the exception of Portacabins, as people tended to automatically travel to their usual polling stations to vote, and if venues changed, this might result in confusion and, as a consequence, fewer voters turning out on the day. He added that schools were useful venues as polling stations, as they offered a number of options as regards suitable rooms and were well known locations within the local communities.

In reply to a question from a Member as to how the Council helped partially sighted people to vote, either in person or by post, the Electoral Services Manager explained that Presiding Officers were permitted to assist voters with disabilities to vote at polling stations, and devices were also available in each station which were designed to assist voters whose sight was impaired. With regard to postal votes, voters with sight impairments could apply for a waiver to preclude them from having to provide a signature when completing a postal

vote.

Individual Electoral Registration

In updating Members on Individual Electoral Registration, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the personal canvassers would shortly begin visiting those households which had not responded to the invitations to register or the household enquiry forms. She also advised that the option of printing the Register of Electors in December, with a view to publishing the Register in January 2015, was currently being explored, while noting that there was an option to delay the publication of the Register until February 2015, due to the delay to the commencement of the personal canvass caused by the recent Police and Crime Commissioner Election.

In response to a comment by a Member with regard to the proportion of properties where no one was registered to vote at all, the Electoral Services Manager explained that void property figures would be available in the statistics. The reasons for void properties might be because the property is empty, or because the residents of the property might be ineligible to vote. Void properties might also include properties waiting to be demolished or to be built.

Parliamentary and Local Government Elections

In response to a question regarding the verification and count arrangements for the Parliamentary, Borough and Parish Council Elections in May 2015, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that verification of ballot papers for all three elections had to take place before any counting could commence. She added that no decision had been taken yet by the Returning Officer as to precisely when the counts for the Borough and Parish Council elections would be carried out, following the Parliamentary count on the night of the Elections. The Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services pointed out that it would be preferable to delay commencement of the count for the Borough elections until the afternoon of Friday 8th May, to allow staff a rest period.

In reply to a suggestion by a Member that bank tellers be recruited for the Parliamentary count on Thursday 7th May 2015, so that DMBC staff would be available to count on the following day, the Electoral Services Manager explained that the recruitment of bank staff to assist at Elections was no longer common practice amongst local authorities and that it was difficult to attract the necessary numbers of people with the current levels of fees that were paid.

During further discussion, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that he wished to give credit to the Electoral Services Manager for the significant improvements and efficiencies she had made to the Council's elections arrangements, citing as examples the improved 'dropping off' arrangements for the delivery of ballot boxes at the Count at the last two elections held, and the fact that Doncaster had been the first Local Authority to declare in South Yorkshire following the Police and Crime Commissioner elections held on 30 October 2014.

A Member expressed the view that it would be helpful on the night of the Count to keep all those present fully informed of what was happening at each

stage of the process, so that they understood the reasons for apparent lulls in activity on the counting tables. In reply, the officers explained that they would seek to ensure that effective communications were in place at the Counts.

In response to a request by a Member for ticketing to be generous to allow individuals involved in the elections, such as Party volunteers, to attend the Counts to observe, the officers pointed out that the number of agents and visitors permitted to attend Counts with candidates was prescribed by law. The officers stated that they would check the precise details of the legislation in this respect and advise Members accordingly.

RESOLVED that, subject to the Officers providing clarification to Members in relation to the numbers of agents/visitors permitted to attend Counts with Candidates, the report be noted

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