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DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 7TH JULY, 2015

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 7TH JULY, 2015, at 10.00 am.

PRESENT:

Chair – Councillor Phil Cole
Vice-Chair – Councillor James Hart

Councillors Pat Haith, Charlie Hogarth, Majid Khan, John McHale, Jane Nightingale and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sean Gibbons and Kevin Rodgers.

1   PERSONAL REFERENCE

In opening the meeting, the Chair stated that he wished to place on record his thanks to Councillor Jane Nightingale for her past work as the former Chair of this Committee. He also thanked all of the former Members of the Committee for the contributions they had made to the work of the Committee during 2014/15, namely Councillors John Cooke, Nuala Fennelly, Deborah Hutchinson, Hilary McNamee and Dave Shaw. The Chair concluded by welcoming Councillor James Hart, the Committee's new Vice-Chair, to the meeting.

2   DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

3   MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 17TH MARCH, 2015

With regard to Minute Number 13 (Electoral Services Update on Key Issues Report) from the meeting held on 17th March 2015, Councillor Charlie Hogarth referred to the seventh bullet pointed paragraph on page 3 and pointed out that this should, in fact, read 'Councillor Charlie Hogarth queried whether the street 'Lawn Garth' could be moved from NH Polling District into the Polling District NA with **Kirkstone Close**, to vote at the Polling Station on Queens Drive. In response, Trina Barber from the Elections Team confirmed that this query would be looked into as part of the Autumn Canvass.

Subject to the above amendment, it was

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meeting held on 17th March 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4   ELECTORAL SERVICES UPDATE ON KEY ISSUES REPORT

The Committee received a report which provided an evaluation of the Parliamentary General, Borough Council and Parish Council elections held on 7 May 2015 and highlighted the key processes for improvements to be incorporated into the Elections Project Plan. The report also updated Members on the on-going implementation of Individual Electoral Registration.

Evaluation of the Parliamentary General, Borough Council and Parish Council elections held on 7 May 2015

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services introduced the report by explaining that feedback from Members on the running of the elections would be welcomed and that this would be taken into account in preparing for future Elections. An internal review had been carried out of the election arrangements and the key recommendations arising from this were detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that the Elections in Doncaster this year had been the largest combination of polls since 1979. It was reported that, overall, the elections had been successfully delivered, and much of this success was due to the huge efforts of the staff in the Elections Team, with a significant contribution also being made by individuals and teams throughout the Council. It was noted, however, that the combination of polls had stretched the Council's resources and there was some evidence that it had led to some confusion on the part of the electorate. It was therefore likely that senior commentators, including some Chief Executives, would be making representations to the Cabinet Office and others, asking them to limit the number of polls that could be combined on a single day.

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services then referred to the review of the May 2015 elections that was being undertaken and summarised the areas identified for improvement together with key recommendations, as detailed in the Appendix to the report, which the Committee was requested to consider and comment on accordingly. Discussion followed, during which Members raised various questions and/or commented on a range of issues in relation to the running of the Elections, as summarised below:-

- Security/integrity – the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that some complaints had been received in the run up to the elections in relation to the use of social media, imprints on printed material and emails and content of election material. While these incidents had not in most cases amounted to breaches of any electoral rules, it was nevertheless important to remind individuals of the need to be careful. In response to a question, the Assistant Director advised that the Police were the responsible body for enforcing such matters.

- In response to a question as to whether the computer software used for scanning postal vote statements was able to recognise inconsistencies in people's signatures, the Officers explained that the final decision on any apparent signature anomalies was made by the staff using the scanning software.

- Councillor Pat Haith advised that she was aware of an instance where a voter had been told by the polling station staff on election day that she did not have a vote in relation to the Parish Council elections, instead of the staff explaining to her that the Parish Council elections in that particular area were uncontested, hence the absence of a ballot paper. She asked if staff could be briefed in future to provide clearer guidance to voters in situations such as this. In reply, the Officers suggested that, in future, a notice could be displayed at polling stations in areas where there were uncontested Parish Council elections so that voters were better informed.

- Software performance – Councillor Charlie Hogarth questioned why the functionality and capacity of the eXpress software system was not being fully utilised, as indicated in the report. In reply, the Assistant Director explained that there was scope for training a wider number of staff on the use of the system, and also there was a need to ensure that the Council made full use of the many functions offered by the software.

- Processing/handling of queries - Councillor Charlie Hogarth stated that he was aware that there had been complaints that some people with queries that were unrelated to the elections had been unable to get through to the contact centre around the time of the elections, due to the staff being busy dealing with election calls. In response, the Officers stated that additional agency staff had been brought in to support the Contact Centre staff in receiving election calls, to help minimise any adverse impact this might have on the Centre's ability to handle non-election queries.

- In answer to a question regarding the proposal to look into the feasibility of having a 'postcode checker' facility on the Council's website allowing the electorate to identify their polling station by typing in their postcode, the Officers confirmed that such a system would allow users to enter other address details instead of a postcode if they preferred.

- Councillor John McHale asked whether details of the relevant polling station could be included on the candidates' copies of the Electoral Register. In reply, the Officers confirmed that this could be implemented by the software supplier, with the most practical solution being to show the polling station address on the front page of the Register.

- Councillor Charlie Hogarth referred to apparent inconsistencies in the wording used in the Electoral Register to describe the date listed next to an elector, indicating when they were eligible to vote and he asked whether this could be clarified. In reply, the Officers stated that the software supplier had been requested to correct this anomaly as a system enhancement and undertook to follow this matter up and update Councillor Hogarth accordingly.

- Councillor Sue Wilkinson advised that she was aware that many people had only voted for one candidate in the Borough Council Elections, and wondered if more could be done to make instructions clearer and better inform voters so that everyone was fully aware of how many votes they were entitled to in the respective elections. The Assistant Director explained that messages could be put out on the Council's website but the content of election literature used in polling stations was prescribed and therefore could not be altered by the

Council. The Chair felt that the recent transition in Doncaster from an 'elections by thirds' system to all-out elections, with the resultant change from voting for one candidate to 2 or 3 candidates in each ward each time, was one factor that may have contributed to greater confusion amongst voters this time. At the invitation of the Chair, Mr Chris Taylor pointed out that he had noticed that in polling stations where the staff explained to voters how many candidates could be voted for, they tended to place more votes than in those stations where the staff did not provide any explanation.

- Members noted the contents of a hand-out tabled at the meeting (see Appendix 1 to these minutes), which provided a breakdown of the costs of the combined Parliamentary, Local and Parish Elections in May 2015.

- The Chair stated that he wished to place on record this Committee's thanks to all of the staff who had contributed to the successful running of the Elections, particularly those in the Elections Team and the Communications Team, and to the Electoral Services Manager Keith Porter, who had been brought in on a consultancy basis for the duration of the Elections.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

Members received and noted the contents of a hand-out (see Appendix 2 to these minutes) which summarised the results of the 2014/15 Canvass, which had commenced in September 2014 and outlined how IER had impacted on the number of persons included on the Register. In particular, it was noted that, as of June 2015, there were 3,720 less people registered than in September 2014. However, this figure included deaths and also people who had moved out of the Borough during this period. It was hoped that the Autumn Canvass, together with new publicity, would return a high response rate in boosting new and re-registering individuals. It was also reported that since June 2014, a total of 31,106 applications had been received, of which the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had verified 24,201 and 5,275 were duplicate applications. The Council had verified 816 by local data matching with Council Tax and 79 applications had provided further evidence. It was noted that as of 2nd July 2015, 735 applications remained unverified and were awaiting evidence or verification from the DWP.

The Officers then answered a range of questions on issues including:-

- the work undertaken in schools to help promote awareness and understanding of electoral registration and the importance of voting amongst young people;

- the correlation between areas of high deprivation in the Borough and a larger proportion of persons who were not registered to vote, and the measures being taken to address this problem;

- the average number of people being added to the Register, which currently stood at approximately 200 per month.

At this point, with the Chair's consent, Mr Ivan Stark addressed the Committee, expressing concern that candidates had been distributing election campaign literature and making door to door visits on Election Day, which he felt was a breach of Election rules and regulations. In reply, the Chair advised Mr Stark that there was no

prohibition on Candidates visiting properties on Election Day, but he offered to discuss the matter further with Mr Stark outside of the meeting.

It was then

> RESOLVED that, subject to the above comments and actions agreed, the evaluation of the Parliamentary General, Local and Parish Elections held on 7th May 2015 and progress on the on-going implementation of IER be noted.

CHAIR:_____   DATE:_____

Combined Parliamentary Local and Parish election costs 2015

(All costs are gross) Parliamentary costs are not VAT recoverable.
This is not and cannot be totalled completely as invoices are still being processed, the accounts have to be clear within 6 months of the election and return to the election claims unit for them to audit.

The Electoral Claims unit will only provide the actual cost associate with the Parliamentary election the combined budget for all the three constituencies is £237,297.

The Local Budget for the cost of running the election is £269,067 (excluding Staffing costs).

The Parish costs will be proportioned by elector so cost will reflect the number in each contested parish.

Poll Cards

Printing	Postage
Parliamentary – £4,036.69	Parliamentary – £20,870.20
Local – £4,036.68	Local – £20,870.20
Parish – £4,036.68	Parish – £20,870.18

Ballot Papers

Parliamentary – £8,029.33
Local – £8,016.07
Parish – £2,783.96

Postal votes

Parliamentary – £19,344.97
Local – £19,344.97
Parish – £13,513.97

Postal Vote Postage

Outgoing Postal vote Postage	Incoming postal vote Postage
Parliamentary – £15,402.72	Parliamentary – £3,813.93
Local – £15,402.72	Local – £3,813.93
Parish- £8,929.10	Parish – £2,579.80

Polling Station costs

£18,718.75 - Schools/Private premises/Community buildings
£9,600 - Portable units

Polling station Staffing

| |
|---|
| £94,159 Presiding Officers/Poll Clerks/Inspectors etc. |

**Count Costs**

Venue	Staffing
Parliamentary -£26,563.80	£23,772.85
Local - £7,380.60	£34,929.15
Parish - £7,137.60	£28,568.50

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Individual Electoral Registration (IER) September 2014 – June 2015

The 2014/15 canvass commenced in September 2014. At that point, there were 133,116 properties in Doncaster and an electorate of 221,589. We received 114,809 responses to the initial Household Enquiry Form [HEF] without any prompting. Those responses came via the internet, post or telephone. A total of 18,307 reminders were subsequently issued. In addition, we also sent canvassers to the door, although not in every case. Approximately 11,689 individuals were removed from the Register as a consequence of a failure to either respond at all or provide the correct information for two consecutive years. We have written to those persons that were removed and invited them to re-register. As a consequence of all of this, 7,969 persons (as at 1st June 2015) had either been re-registered or entered onto the Register for the first time. The electorate now stands at 217,869.
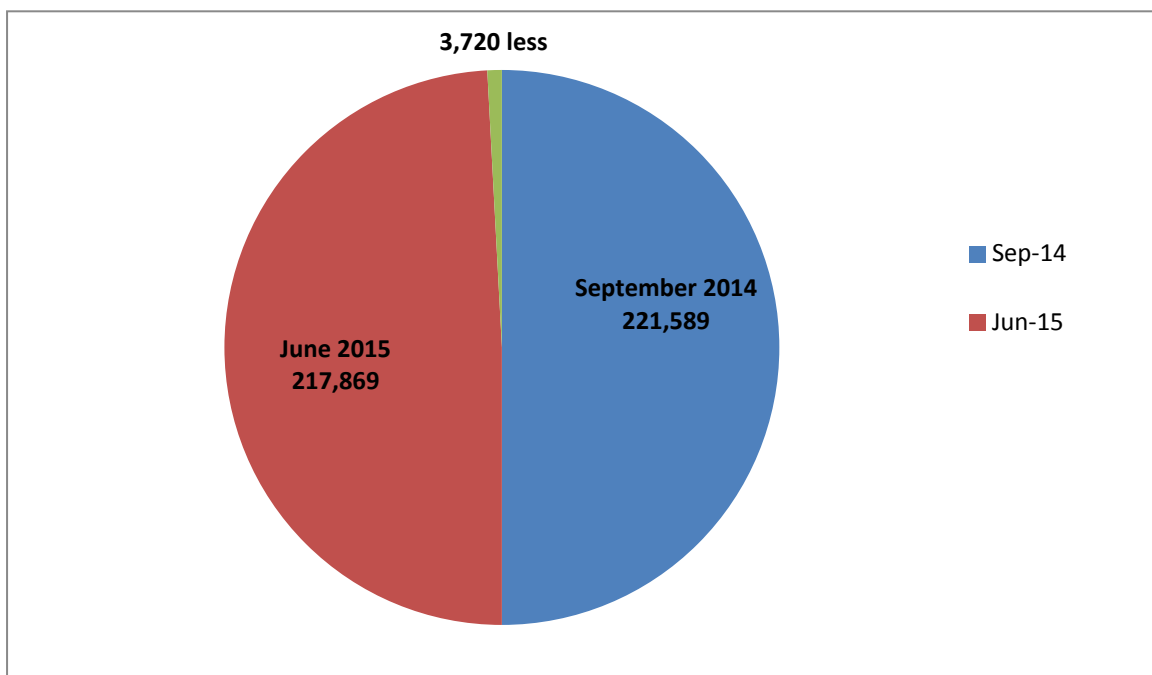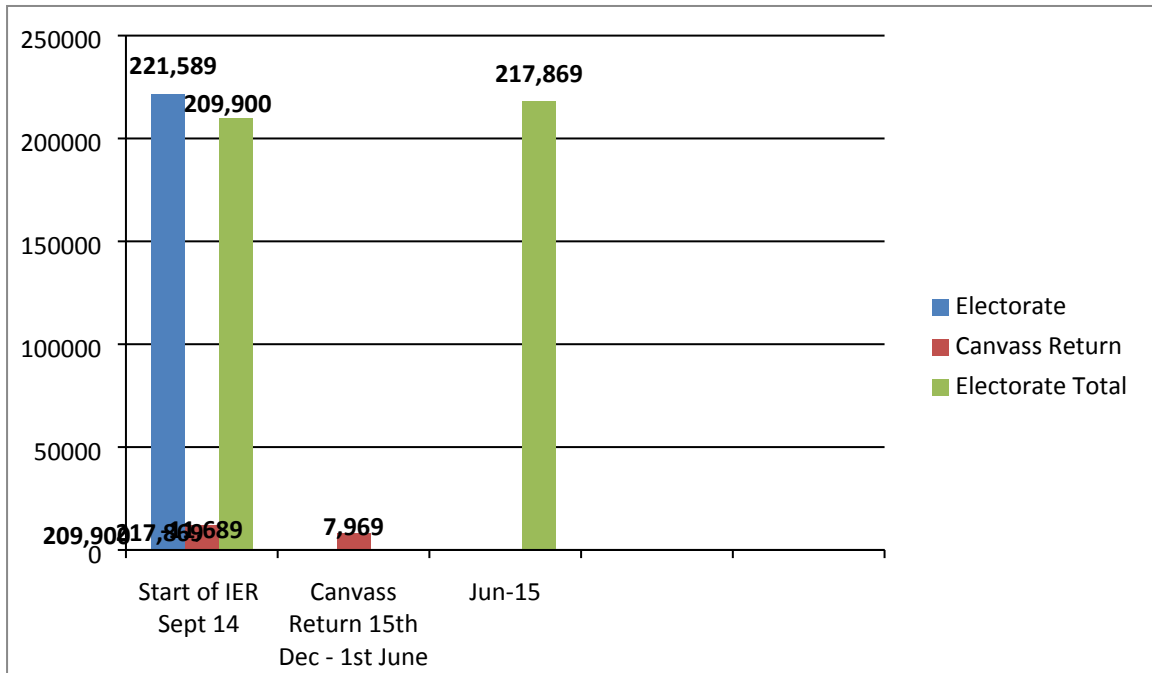
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Method of Application

Pie chart showing Method of Application:
- Online: 22,474
- Duplicates: 5,275
- Form: 1,815
- Phone: 1,275
- Visit to Office: 245
- E-mail: 22

Method of Application

Bar chart showing Applications by Method:
- Online: 22,474
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