

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 24TH NOVEMBER, 2020

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held as a VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS on TUESDAY, 24TH NOVEMBER, 2020, at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Phil Cole  
Vice-Chair - Councillor Nick Allen

Councillors Pat Haith, Mark Houlbrook, Majid Khan, Derek Smith and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors George Derx and Jane Kidd.

6 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

7 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 7TH JULY 2020

In referring to minute number 3 (Council decision making arrangements in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic), Councillor Mark Houlbrook enquired as to the status of the Member survey proposed for the autumn on the subject of virtual meetings and Members' needs in terms of devices/ICT equipment. In response, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services thanked Councillor Houlbrook for the prompt and stated that the survey would be progressed immediately, following which appropriate feedback would be provided. He added that he would also refer the findings to the Member Development Working Group as the relevant body. In reply to a comment by the Chair with regard to providing support to those Members without suitable devices and who were having to use their mobile phones to connect to remote meetings, the Assistant Director confirmed that all Members had been offered Council laptops to enable them to fully participate in remote meetings. He explained that despite this encouragement, there was a small number of Members who had still not taken up the offer for various reasons, but the support would continue to be offered on an ongoing basis.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above comments, the minutes of the meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Committee received a report which provided an update to Members on a number of key work streams being undertaken by the Electoral Services Team in relation to the Register of Electors and Annual Canvass.

The Electoral Services Manager updated the Committee on the latest figures in relation to the responses received from properties in this year's canvass. It was noted that as a result of canvass reforms this year, only properties where all the electors could not be matched against national and/or local data were required to respond. The aim of the canvass reform was to deliver a more efficient system by which Electoral Registration Officers could maintain their electoral registers with no negative effect on citizens, or on the accuracy and completeness of the registers.

It was reported that since the report's publication, the number of properties outstanding now stood at 14,734 (in relation to un-matched properties that required a response). It was also reported that the Electoral Services Team had been directly contacting those properties defined as Care Homes and Homes of Multiple Occupancy, due to the high turnaround in these types of properties to establish that everything was as up to date as possible.

In the absence of carrying out household visits due to the Covid-19 restrictions in place in Doncaster at the time, the Electoral Services Team had been collecting information in other ways, including a telephone outbound canvass, contacting electors by email and data matching and data mining against Council records. The Council's Communications team was also assisting by sending messages to encourage non-responders to respond.

Discussion followed, during which the officers answered a wide range of questions from Members, including the following:-

- With regard to the various information sources utilised by the team in collecting information for the canvass, the officers gave examples of these, including blue badge information, adult social care, parking services, Council Tax and the Contact Care Centre.
- In reply to a query regarding how Doncaster's response rate in the canvass compared with the other South Yorkshire authorities, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that all were generally around the 90% mark, but the authorities were all at different stages in the canvass, so the final figures would be reported to the Committee's next meeting.
- The Electoral Services Manager explained that the cost savings from the canvass reform measures would be achieved in a number of ways, such as reduced postage costs from not having to chase as many people for responses and a reduced number of properties to visit in the foot canvass.
- With regard to the increase in deaths arising from the current pandemic, the Electoral Services Manager explained that they received weekly death lists so this enabled them to update the Register accordingly.

- In reply to a question regarding those households that did not reply to the canvass, the officers explained that people were not automatically removed from the Register if a response was not received. A household notification letter was sent out in February each year to those properties from which a response had not been received, in order to pick up any changes in the residency of those households that may have taken place.
- The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the foot canvass last year had cost in the region of £25,000. With regard to non-responders, it was noted that there was a power to fine people for not being on the Register, but this would be a time consuming process and any monies received from fines went to the Government, not to the Local Authority.
- The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that landlords were not obliged to provide details of their principal tenants to the local authority. The onus was on residents to keep the local authority informed of changes, not landlords. However, the Electoral Services Team did work closely with St Leger Homes of Doncaster in terms of sharing information on its tenants, and the Team also sought assistance from key holders of buildings with multiple occupancy in order to gain access to these properties when conducting the foot canvass.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

## 9 2021 ELECTIONS

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the upcoming Elections scheduled for 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

Members noted that due to the postponement of elections that had been scheduled to take place in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, these polls and others were all now due to be held in May 2021, which would make it a particularly challenging year.

The polls scheduled to take place in Doncaster on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021 as well as those postponed from 2020 were as follows:

- Borough Elected Mayor
- all-out Borough Councillors
- all-out Town/Parish Councillors
- Police and Crime Commissioner
- Edenthorpe Neighbourhood Planning Referendum

In presenting the report, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services explained that he intended to update all Members after today's meeting on the latest position as regards preparations for the Elections. He advised that as things currently stood, the Elections were expected to go ahead as planned, and there was no expectation that these would be conducted on the basis of 100% postal votes.

The Assistant Director explained that if the Elections were conducted in the usual way, the pandemic would bring additional logistical challenges, such as having to ensure that social distancing could be adhered to, both in polling stations and at the count

venue, ensuring that masks were worn and hand gels were available, and considering other potential safety measures, such as placing key electoral staff in 'bubbles'.

In reply to a comment by a Member, the Assistant Director confirmed that while there was a possibility that the elections might be postponed or cancelled due to the pandemic, in the meantime it was necessary to continue planning for the elections in the normal way. He also explained, with regard to the possibility of the Government stating that the elections should be conducted on the basis of postal voting only, that it was not too late for this to happen, but that it would be a huge administrative challenge.

Members were informed that Risk Assessments would be undertaken to ensure the safety of those staff working and those electors voting in the polling stations, and for the counting of postal votes and the main election counts. Further guidance from the Government was expected as to how to accommodate observers/attendees at the opening of the postal votes and at the Election counts. This could possibly take the form of restricting attendees to candidates and agents only, and not allowing any guests, as would normally be the case.

In reply to a question, the Assistant Director confirmed that it was intended to use the Mary Woollett Centre as usual for the opening of postal votes, but different options would be considered this time, such as employing fewer staff but over longer hours to assist with social distancing, and locating the scanning staff in a different room. Doncaster Racecourse would be used as the count venue.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

CHAIR: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_