

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 2ND FEBRUARY, 2021

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the MICROSOFT TEAMS - VIRTUAL MEETING on TUESDAY, 2ND FEBRUARY, 2021, at 10.00 am.

PRESENT:

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

Councillors Pat Haith, Mark Houlbrook, Majid Khan, Andy Pickering, Kevin Rodgers, Derek Smith and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

An apology for absence was received from Councillors Jane Kidd

10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

11 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 24TH NOVEMBER 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meeting held on 24 November, 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

12 ANNUAL CANVASS UPDATE REPORT

Trina Barber, the Electoral Services Manager presented a report which updated the Committee on a number of key work streams being undertaken by the Electoral Services Team, in relation to the Registration of Electors and Annual Canvass, since the Committee's last meeting in November, 2020.

The report outlined the position at the end of the annual canvass 2020, and provided a breakdown of the postal votes and the electorate by ward as at 1st December, 2020, which were attached to the report at Appendices A and B, respectively. The Electoral Services Manager highlighted that since the publication of the report, there had been some changes to the electoral register, due to some electors had been removed from the register, and the Electoral Services Team were still in the process of contacting those people.

It was noted that since completion of the annual canvass, some Care Homes, including private care homes and multiple occupancy properties, had been added to the Register. The Electoral Services Team had achieved a 93% response return rate from Care Homes and multiple occupancy, which fall under Route 3 of the Canvass.

The Electoral Services Manager reported that this year was the first time that the canvass had been carried out under the new Reforms. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic no door canvassing took place to chase up returns, however, with telephone canvassing and data matching, an overall response rate of 94.68% had been achieved, which was higher than that in previous years and in line with neighbouring authorities.

In reporting on completion of the canvass, it was noted that in common with other local authorities, funding support from the Government had reduced from previous years, as it was expected that the Reforms would reduce the cost of the Canvass. However, due to technical issues with the Gov.uk e-mail system more letters had to be posted out than anticipated causing an expected cost. It was noted that in response to the Cabinet Office, the Electoral Services Manager had submitted a bid to obtain additional funding, and would inform the Committee of the outcome at the next meeting.

Following the presentation of the report, the Electoral Services Manager answered a number of questions from Members on the following issues:-

- In response to a query as to whether the Council had in previous years been successful in receiving additional funding from the Government for the annual canvass and whether the Council would be successful this year, the Electoral Services Manager advised that in the past, Doncaster had been successful in applying for funding. She explained that the application process was protracted and was heavily scrutinised by the Cabinet Office and hoped that the Council would again be successful this year.
- In reply to a question as to whether the reason for the increase in the response rate from this year's canvass, was due to people having to stay at home during lockdown, the Electoral Services Manager stated that because the canvass reform had only been introduced this year, it was difficult to say with any certainty, if this was the case. However, it would be possible to benchmark and compare against next year's figures.
- Further to questions in relation to capturing people moving into newly built properties to register to vote, the Electoral Services Manager explained that she works closely with the Planning Department regarding any new proposed housing developments in the Borough and was notified when new houses are built. The Electoral Services Team then write to the new homeowner, asking them to complete and return the form to register names on the electoral register. The Electoral Services team also work closely with the Council Tax department as part of this work.
- In reply to a question as to whether the Electoral Services Team would be sending out reminder letters prior to the May election to the 7,500 outstanding properties (harder to reach groups and newly built properties), the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that household notification letters had been sent out to those people who had not responded, informing them of the upcoming election, and asking them to complete a registration form.
- Further to a query, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that there were a minority of people who did not want their names to be put on the electoral

register with varying reasons, but she gave assurances that the Electoral Services Team endeavoured to encourage people to register. She confirmed that for reasons permitted by law, requests were sometimes received from external and internal agencies, to access details on the electoral register, to prevent fraud. It was noted that failure to register can have an adverse effect on credit ratings.

- In reply to a question regarding how the Electoral Services Team engaged with and kept track of those harder to reach groups who were constantly on the move, including the boating and travelling communities, the Electoral Services Manager explained that although they may travel outside of the Doncaster area if they came back to their main residence, they remained on the register. In relation to empty properties, the Electoral Services Team worked with the Council Tax department to try and establish which properties were empty.

The Committee, in welcoming the report, commended the Electoral Services Manager for an excellent report, and were pleased to observe that Doncaster had achieved a 94.68% response rate in the annual canvass, which compared favourably to that of other neighbouring authorities.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

13 2021 ELECTIONS UPDATE

The Committee considered a report which updated Members on the upcoming elections scheduled for 6th May, 2021.

In presenting the report, Scott Fawcus, Assistant Director for Legal and Democratic Services, confirmed that the elections scheduled on 6th May, 2021, as detailed in paragraph 6 of the report, were to take place unless the Council was notified otherwise by the Government. He reported that the elections would be Covid compliant involving social distancing, restrictions on the number of people entering Polling Stations at any one time and the use of PPE by members of staff and electors. Due to Covid-19, it was expected that there would be an increase in postal vote applications. The Assistant Director for Legal and Democratic Services further reported that there was some challenges booking Polling Stations due to some previously used premises now being used as testing and vaccination centres. It was noted that meetings were taking place with the Council's Assets Team, to address this issue. During the next few weeks, the Electoral Services Team would be recruiting staff to work on the elections, the majority of whom would be Council staff. Jobs would include processing of postal votes, working at Polling Stations and working on the count. The Assistant Director for Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that the count for each election would be held at the Doncaster Racecourse.

Discussion followed, during which a Member asked whether the Electoral Services Team had received guidance from the Government with regard to the requirements/practicalities on how the elections would operate, in particular, highlighting the difficulties of obtaining signatories to stand as a candidate and canvassing during lockdown. The Electoral Services Manager advised that she had recently met with the Cabinet Office, who were working with Ministers on the requirements in relation to the nomination process, campaigning, possible changes to

the restrictions, and if the country was still in lockdown at the time of the elections, what the requirements would be.

In relation to the Mayoral election, clarity was sought whether a political party having a candidate standing in the Mayoral election, would receive a free mail drop for circulation of the candidates booklet to every household. The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that whilst posting out of the booklet was free, the political parties had to pay a contribution towards the costs for the printing of the booklet. In relation to the Police and Crime Commissioner election, information would be provided on the Police and Crime Commissioners website and Barnsley Council's website as lead authority and it would be linked from the Electoral Services website.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the date of when candidates would need to obtain the necessary forms for the local elections and the closing date for submission of the forms, it was confirmed that the Electoral Services Team had a timetable of key dates. It was noted that the receipt of nominations opened on 23rd March, 2021, and the date for the closure of nominations was 4.00pm on 8th April, 2021. The Electoral Services Manager advised that the Electoral Services Team had given earlier notification of the nomination dates for the election this year than previously, due to the number of elections taking place at the same time. It was expected that there would be a large number of nominations forms to process, given the number of elections being held in the Borough. The Electoral Services Manager informed Members that as soon as confirmed guidance was received from Government regarding nominations, this would be sent out to all Members. Information regarding the key election dates and links to the nomination papers from the Electoral Commission, were also available on the Elections website by accessing the web-link, as outlined in the report.

Following a further question, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that following discussions with colleagues at Barnsley Council overseeing the election for the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner, it had been agreed that nominations for this election would also open a week earlier on the 23rd March rather than the last deadline date for the publication of the notice which was 29th March, 2021. It was noted that the dates for opening nominations would differ slightly across the country. Furthermore, the Cabinet Office had requested notification from all local authorities regarding notice of election dates, so they were aware when nominations were to commence, in the hope that they were able to let all local authorities know if the election was to proceed, which would also avoid the need for candidates having to incur costs on printing election materials, such as leaflets. The Association of Administrators and the Electoral Commission had also requested Cabinet Office inform Election teams as early as possible if the elections were to be delayed.

Further to a query regarding the venue for the postal vote verification, it was noted that the Mary Woollett Centre was being used as a testing centre for Covid-19. Therefore an alternative venue would be used, possibly Floor 4 of the Council's Civic Office building. In light of the Coronavirus pandemic and the additional pressures being placed on the Council's services having to deal with concurrent emergencies, such as the recent flooding in the Borough and the added risk of people going to vote with the new variant of Covid-19, Members expressed strong concerns regarding the safety of the public and staff at the election. In view of this, the Chair sought Members views as to whether they felt that the election should take place at this present time. Following further discussion, Members raised concerns about the new Covid-19 variants and that candidates would not be able to campaign effectively, in the lead up to the

election. It was also felt that some parties may, against Government advice, deliver leaflets to the public to achieve a political advantage.

Given the current situation with the Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertainty at this time, Members unanimously held the view that unless the infection rate fell dramatically, it was not safe to hold the elections in May, and that a recommendation should be made to Council that, the Chair of Council should write to the Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution, and the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government requesting that the elections should be postponed until the Autumn, 2021.

The Assistant Director for Legal and Democratic Services pointed out that the next meeting of Council was not until the beginning of March, and that a decision on whether the election should be held needed to be made before that Council meeting. He suggested that the Chief Executive could be asked to write to the Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution, and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government expressing this Committee's views that given the current situation with Covid-19 and for reasons of public safety, the elections should be postponed until a later date.

An alternative proposal was put forward by a Member that an Extraordinary meeting of Council should be convened prior to the meeting of Council in early March. Given the timescales involved, it was subsequently agreed that the Chief Executive write to the Minister for State for the Constitution and Devolution, and the Secretary of State for Housing, asking that the elections be postponed until the Autumn.

RESOLVED that:-

- (1) the report on the 2021 Elections Update, be received and noted; and
- (2) in light of the current national restrictions in England, the emerging situation around the Covid-19 pandemic and in order to reduce further transmission of the Covid-19 infection, and to ensure the safety and well-being of the public attending polling stations and staff running the elections, preserving the integrity of the democratic process, and being mindful of the additional pressures currently faced by local authorities, the Chief Executive write to the Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution, and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting that the Elections scheduled on 6th May, 2021, be postponed until the Autumn of 2021.

CHAIR: _____

DATE: _____