

CITY OF DONCASTER COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2023

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE on TUESDAY, 21<sup>ST</sup> NOVEMBER, 2023, at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Julie Grace  
Vice-Chair - Councillor Nick Allen

Councillors James Church and Ian Pearson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gemma Cobby, Jake Kearsley, Debbie Hutchinson, Thomas Noon and Andy Pickering.

5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

6 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 18TH JULY 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

7 CANVASS UPDATE

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 the preparations for the start of the 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, broken down according to the three routes followed for each property, i.e. Route 1 (matched properties), Route 2 (unmatched properties) and Route 3 (Care Homes and Homes of Multiple Occupancy (HMO)). It was reported that a 100% response rate from Care Homes had now been achieved. Members were informed that an accurate breakdown of the figures per Ward together with other statistics would be provided at the Committee's next meeting.

During subsequent discussion, Councillor Ian Pearson referred to the issuing of new guidance last year with regard to accessibility and taking steps to ensure that disabled people were not excluded from going on the electoral register by error or by ignorance. In light of this, he asked if any special work was being undertaken in conjunction with disabled organisations to ensure that people who were not accessible

by mainstream systems were not excluded from the canvass process. In response, The Electoral Services Manager explained that, at the start of the Canvass, the Electoral Services Team sent emails out to various community groups they held on file asking them to let them know of any individuals who may need additional assistance with registering to vote. In particular, she said that the Team was currently working with one such group to discuss ways of providing additional assistance to people in relation to the Canvass and with voting on election days. The Electoral Services Manager stated that she was due to attend a meeting of the group and would therefore be able to provide an update following this at the Committee's next meeting. She added that the Team provided communications in a range of different formats for people, including braille, with supporting guidance and material also being provided by the Electoral Commission.

In response, Councillor Pearson pointed out that less than 20% of blind people read braille, and most of these were women. He suggested that the talking newspaper, both local and regional, should be used as a means of communication, and that when access to polling stations was reviewed, this took on board not only wheelchair access but also access by people using white canes and guide dogs.

In reply to a question by the Chair, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the figures provided in the report in relation to properties in the Annual Canvass included a small number of properties in approximately 8-10 streets that could not be visited due to incidents of anti-social behaviour being reported.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

## 8 ELECTIONS ACT 2022 UPDATE

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the Elections Act 2022, with a particular focus on the new measures which had recently been implemented since the last meeting and new measures to be introduced early next year. It was noted that the most recent changes related to postal and proxy voting revisions and the implementation of online absent vote applications via the ERO portal which was currently already used to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate (free photo ID).

The Electoral Services Manager gave an overview of the new measures in relation to:-

- Online absent vote applications;
- New identity checking requirements for absent vote applications;
- A new maximum time period of up to 3 years for a voter to hold a postal vote;
- Changes to proxy voting limits – a person was not entitled to vote as proxy in any electoral area on behalf of more than four electors;
- Overseas electors regulations – removal of the 15 year limit on voting rights for British citizens abroad and extension of the overseas franchise to all British citizens who have previously registered or resided in the UK;
- The handling and handing in of postal votes and the secrecy of absent voting;
- EU Citizens' candidacy and voting rights;

- Ballot Secrecy Act 2023 – this legislation would make it an offence at UK parliamentary elections and local elections in England for a person to be with or near another person at a polling booth, with the intention of influencing them; and
- A new requirement to include a digital imprint on any campaign material issued on social media by certain persons, such as a registered party or a candidate.

With regard to processing postal vote applications, the Electoral Services Manager explained that with the new system, staff were no longer able to batch scan 25 postal votes at a time as they now had to be processed one by one. This had resulted in an increase in processing time from being able to scan 25 applications in under 1 minute, to taking up to 9 mins to process one form using the new portal. It was noted, however, that the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) were aware of the administrative issues with the new system and had undertaken to make improvements and changes to update the system in January 2024 to make it more user friendly and efficient for electoral services staff going forward.

Councillor Pearson referred to the change from 5 years down to 3 years in respect of the maximum period that postal votes could be held by electors before having to reapply and asked whether the issue of how this impacted upon local authorities which operated on fixed 4 year period all out elections had been raised with DLUHC. In reply, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that this issue had been raised with DLUHC and the feedback received had been that they recognised that people moved and changed addresses and had to update their postal votes, resulting in postal vote application cycles changing. It was also acknowledged that other elections were held in between the local elections.

In response to a comment by Councillor James Church as regards the potential difficulties in recruiting and retaining an additional 173 Poll Clerks to work on elections as recommended by DLUHC, the Electoral Services Manager explained that an additional Poll Clerk had been employed at Polling Stations during the Covid Pandemic, so it had been done before. However, she stated that it was possible that some staff might be deterred by the additional tasks they would have to perform on election duties in light of the new measures, such as checking voter identities, so the full picture would not be known until recruitment commenced in the new year.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

## 9 ELECTIONS ACTIVITY - ROSSINGTON & BAWTRY BY-ELECTION, STAINFORTH TOWN COUNCIL BY-ELECTION NOVEMBER 16TH 2023

The Committee received a report which provided Members with detailed information and results from the following By-Elections:

- Rossington and Bawtry Ward by-election held on 16 November 2023
- Stainforth Town Council by-election held on 16 November 2023

It was noted that these by-elections were the first in Doncaster to be carried out under the new voter ID requirements and improvements to support accessibility in polling

stations that came into force on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023. It was also reported that, during the by-election timetable, the new Elections Act measures had come into force for postal and proxy voting revisions.

All Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks had undertaken a lengthy training session dedicated to voter ID and accessibility in advance of working on polling stations. All Polling Stations had been supplied with a privacy ID booth, mirror, tactile voting devices, large print elections stationery, pencils with grips and magnifiers to assist the visually impaired.

The Electoral Services Manager summarised the results of both by-elections, including numbers of postal votes issued and returned and total turnout figures. It was reported that for the Rossington and Bawtry ward by-election, 3 postal vote applications and one proxy vote application had been received and successfully processed via the new ERO absent vote portal.

The Committee was informed that there had been no particular issues or problems arising from the new voter ID requirements at either of the by-elections and the process had run smoothly at polling stations. Staff had been briefed on ensuring that there were no accessibility issues for voters at the stations and to make any necessary adjustments if it became apparent on the day that any individuals needed special assistance. On this subject, it was noted that temporary lighting had been put in place at one particular polling station where the ground outside the building was uneven.

Councillor Church stated that he had spoken to a number of residents when out campaigning, three of which had said that they did not intend to vote in the by-election because of the new voter ID requirement. In reply, the officers explained that there would be extensive publicity and information provided for voters for the next elections in May 2024, including national campaign material. This would include the Council disseminating its own publicity information across its social media platforms next year to help spread the word. It was also pointed out that the new requirements did not appear to be having an adverse impact on voter turnout, as the figure for the Rossington and Bawtry by-election of 19% was slightly higher than the turnouts of the last two by-elections held in Doncaster, which had been 18% and 17% respectively.

In response to a question by Councillor Pearson in relation to the costs of providing the Voter Authority Certificates and also the provision of support for those people who might struggle to obtain digital photos/IDs, the Electoral Services Manager explained that the Certificates were sent across to a central printer which then printed and posted out the Certificates, the costs of which were borne by Central Government. Regarding support for people, it was explained that people were able to bring a hard copy printed photo or other photo ID into the Civic Office where staff would digitise it on their behalf and assist them with their online applications. From next year, the Team was also planning to go out to visit people in their communities to explain the new process and provide assistance where needed with photo IDs and online applications for the Voter Authority Certificates.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair announced that she had agreed to move the date of this Committee's meeting in February next year to avoid any potential conflict with the half term school holiday. So, the meeting originally scheduled to be held on Tuesday 13 February 2024 would now be held at **10.00 a.m. on Wednesday 28 February 2024** instead, and the Chair requested that Members note this change in their diaries.

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

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