

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 26TH NOVEMBER, 2019

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held in Room 007A - CIVIC OFFICE on TUESDAY, 26TH NOVEMBER, 2019, at 10.00 am.

PRESENT:

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

Councillors Steve Cox, Pat Haith, Mark Houlbrook, Kevin Rodgers, Derek Smith and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sean Gibbons.

5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

There were no declarations reported at the meeting.

6 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 9TH JULY 2019

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9th July 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

7 PREPARATIONS FOR PARLIAMENTARY GENERAL ELECTION

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the preparations for the parliamentary general election to be held on 12th December 2019. The report also updated Members on the ongoing review of polling districts and polling places, including a summary of some changes that had been made in preparation for the parliamentary election.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services informed the Committee that Mags Evers, a highly experienced Electoral Services Officer, was providing management support as Interim Electoral Services Manager whilst Trina Barber was on maternity leave.

The Assistant Director reported that the polling places review had commenced in September 2019, but would now need to be deferred until January 2020 in the light of the general election being called at short notice. He pointed out that it was likely that an extraordinary meeting of this Committee would need to be held during January in order to formally agree the recommendations arising from the review. In the meantime, the work undertaken on the review to date and the requirement to prepare for the imminent parliamentary election had led to the identification of a number of new polling venues for this election, the details of which were set out in paragraph 9 of the report. Some of these changes were in order to enable schools to remain open on the election day.

It was noted that all polling stations had been booked for the general election. With regard to the recent flooding in the Borough, it was reported that only one polling station had been affected, at Castle Hills Primary School in Scawthorpe, but arrangements had been made to site a portable unit on the school's car park so that the location could still be used. It was noted that the village hall at Fishlake was unaffected and would be available for use as normal. Information on polling stations had been communicated by the Council via press releases and social media, and the 'Find My Polling Station' application would be available on the Council's website, allowing electors to search for their polling station by typing in a post code or address. Steps were also being taken to ensure that people affected by the floods were still able to cast their votes in the election, This included the setting up of a collection point located at the Post Office in Stainforth by the Royal Mail which would allow voters to pick up their postal vote packs in the event that the Royal Mail were unable to physically deliver the packs to their home addresses due to flooding.

The Committee noted that the normal count venue of Doncaster Racecourse was unavailable due to the election being called at short notice. However, the National College for High Speed Rail had been secured as an alternative venue. There would be a separate election count hall for each of the three parliamentary constituencies in Doncaster. The verification and counts would both take place on the night of the 12th December 2019, to which all Members would be invited to attend. The venue would have all the usual facilities for those attending to observe the proceedings, including breakout areas, television screens displaying the national results as they came in and café facilities. In reply to a query, the Assistant Director advised that Members would be sent a letter inviting them to attend the count, and he explained that it would be helpful if this letter could be brought with them to the count venue to assist with security arrangements on the night.

In reply to a Member's query as to whether the delivery of postal votes was likely to be affected by a national postal strike and the added pressures of Christmas mail at this time of year, the Assistant Director explained that Returning Officers had been advised that the Royal Mail had been granted an injunction to prevent such a strike. It was also reported that the Royal Mail usually recruited additional staff at this time of year to help keep on top of the additional seasonal mail. He added that the Electoral Services team would be able to monitor the situation by checking logs of how many postal votes were coming in each day.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

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ELECTIONS, BY-ELECTIONS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING REFERENDUMS UPDATE

The Committee received a report which provided an update on the results of the Bawtry Neighbourhood Planning Referendum held on Thursday 12th September 2019. It was noted that, in total, 490 electors had cast their vote (turnout of 17.72%), and the outcome had been in favour of using the Neighbourhood Plan for Bawtry to help decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area. The result was reported to Full Council on 21st November 2019, and a full breakdown of the results was provided in Appendix A to the report.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the 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 the Register of Electors and Annual Canvass.

In presenting the report, the Senior Electoral Services Officer confirmed that work on the annual canvass had commenced in July 2019. Having received 78,401 responses to the initial Household Enquiry Form, reminders had been sent out in August, followed by a further second stage reminder in September, leaving approximately 37,000 properties left to canvass. Following telephone canvassing and door knocking during September to October, the Register had been published on 4 November 2019 to coincide with the UK Parliamentary Election being held on 12 December 2019. Members noted that Doncaster's overall electorate had increased to 231, 360. A full breakdown by return method in comparison to 2016, 2017 and 2018 was detailed at Appendix A to the report.

In reply to questions, the Senior Electoral Services Officer confirmed that the turnaround for receiving verification of electors' applications to be added to the electoral register from the Department for Work and Pensions was relatively quick.

With regard to eligibility to vote in the forthcoming General Election, Members noted that EU citizens were not entitled to vote. Foreign nationals from Commonwealth countries could vote however. It was noted that there were approximately 11,000 European electors in Doncaster, meaning that there were approximately 220,000 eligible voters on the Register.

Councillor Derek Smith queried what measures were taken to ensure that residents of care homes were given an opportunity to participate in elections if they so wished. In response, the Senior Electoral Services Officer explained that canvass team leaders were employed and part of their role was to visit residential homes. These individuals had built up good relations with the residential homes over the years and there were no major problems to speak of. Members spoke of some instances where the care home staff were reluctant to give candidates/councillors visiting homes in the run up to elections access to speak to residents. In reply, the Assistant Director explained that as care homes in Doncaster were privately owned, this was a matter for each individual home to address.

The Chair then thanked the Electoral Services Team for their efficiency in managing to bring forward the publication of the Electoral Register to 4th November, 2019, and he congratulated them on the progress made. The Assistant Director added that it was a testament to the work of the Electoral Services Team to have achieved the progress to date under testing circumstances, with the Electoral Services Manager currently being on maternity leave, and another member of the team only returning this week having been on long term sick leave with a serious illness.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the report.

CHAIR: _____

DATE: _____