

**To the Chair and Members of the  
ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE**

**EVALUATION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY GENERAL, BOROUGH COUNCIL AND  
PARISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS HELD ON 7<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2015 AND PROGRESS ON  
THE ONGOING IMPLEMENTATION OF INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL  
REGISTRATION**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. The Parliamentary General, Borough Council and Parish Council elections took place on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2015. The purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the election and to highlight the key processes for improvements to be incorporated into the Elections Project Plan. Any additional issues identified at this meeting will be incorporated into the service development plans for future elections.
2. This report also updates Members on the ongoing implementation of Individual Electoral Registration.

**EXEMPT REPORT**

3. Not applicable.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. The Committee is asked to approve the report and make any additional comments in relation to the contents.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE CITIZENS OF DONCASTER?**

5. National and Local Elections are the cornerstone of our democratic process and give the electorate the opportunity to hold politicians to account and shape the future direction of national and local government.
6. When Electoral Registration and Elections are well-managed and run the electorate are enfranchised, suitably informed, receive a high quality service and have confidence that their vote will be counted in the way they intended. Similarly, candidates need to have the information they require in order to take part and both candidates and the electorate need to have confidence in the process and the outcome.
7. The committee will be aware that it is no longer the case that a single member of the household registers every individual to vote that happens to live in the household. Each individual now has the right and the responsibility to register themselves to vote.

## **BACKGROUND**

### Election Review

8. For reasons that Members will be familiar with and also set out in the report to Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015, the elections in Doncaster this year was the largest combination of polls since 1979. Key features included all-out elections for the first time, new ward boundaries, a Parliamentary General Election involving the leader of a national party and 23 contested all-out parish elections.
9. A report of the results of the combined poll was presented to Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015 and all Members were invited to contribute to the post-election review by contacting the Assistant Director for Legal and Democratic Services with any comments by the end of June 2015.
10. Following the Electoral Review undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and associated decisions of the Secretary of State, the Borough Elections were for a two year term of office and the Parish Council Elections for a six year term of office. The purpose of that is to allow the Borough Elections to be run alongside the Mayoral Election in May 2017 and the Mayoral, Borough and Parish Elections to be combined from May 2021. Whilst it is unlikely that we will have a Parliamentary General Election combined with our Mayoral, Borough or Parish Elections for the foreseeable future, the experience from running an election of this scale and the lessons learned from having an all-out Borough Election for the first time, will all be very valuable in informing our preparation for future elections. Further comments on the combining of polls are given below.
11. Overall, the elections were successfully delivered, with a very significant contribution made by individuals and teams throughout the Council. A number of positive comments were made by candidates and agents in relation to the election process and, specifically, the verification and counts. Whilst the 3 elections were successfully delivered, the combination of polls did stretch the Council's resources, particularly in relation to meeting the demand for additional staff at polling stations and the Thursday evening count. All posts were filled but we did not have, for example, the traditional safety net of a bank of staff on standby to cover for illness or other emergencies.
12. There is also some indication that the combination of polls led to some confusion on the part of the electorate and that is probably reflected in the number of spoilt or unused ballot papers or votes. Whilst Doncaster had the largest combination of polls in terms of scale, Bedford Borough Council had to manage a Parliamentary, Borough, Mayoral, Parish and Council Tax Referendum on the same day with all of the commensurate difficulties. Senior commentators are concerned about the impact of combining polls in this way and are likely to make representations to the Cabinet Office and others, encouraging them to limit the number of polls that can be combined on a single day.

13. A review of the May 2015 elections has begun and a summary of the areas identified for improvement are shown at Appendix 1. The Committee is requested to consider Appendix 1 and comment accordingly.

#### Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

14. Members will be aware that electoral registration is now done on an individual basis rather than a single member of the household making a return for all residents.
15. 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. We do continue to have difficulty in recruiting canvassers and need to revise our strategies to deliver an improvement in this regard. Approximately 11,500 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 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015) had either been re-registered or entered onto the Register for the first time. The electorate now stands at 217,869. The canvass response rate for the household enquiry forms is 87.99%, which is slightly down on last year's figure of 88.6%.

#### **OPTIONS CONSIDERED and REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED OPTION**

16. Elections and Electoral Registrations are required by statute and must be delivered in accordance with the relevant legislation. Undertaking a review at the conclusion of every major election gives an opportunity to learn lessons and improve the planning and delivery of future elections. Input into the review from members will provide perspective and add value to the exercise.

#### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

17. There are comprehensive statutory provisions covering both Individual Electoral Registration and the delivery of elections.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

18. The costs of the combined elections will be shared with the Home Office where applicable. Parish Councils are charged for the Parish Elections. Legal and Democratic Services have an annual budget which funds the cost of the Borough Elections.
19. The 2016/17 budget proposals contain a saving of £97k relating to the Boundary Review and £187k relating to the change in election cycle to all out Borough Elections coinciding with Mayoral Elections.
20. Doncaster Council has received additional funding from government to cover the implementation costs of the change to Individual Electoral

Registration. The grant for 2015/16 is £69k, which is in addition to the core budget for registration of £143k.

## **TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS**

21. The Council's ICT Department extended the Council's network to the count venue at the Racecourse in order to ensure that connectivity was maintained. Laptops were utilised by the Senior Counters and other staff to support the count process, particularly the compilation of votes from the "Counting Sheets" that are an essential requirement of all-out elections and the election was managed by the Council's eXpress Elections software. Many aspects of the electoral registration process are accessible by electronic means.

## **EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

22. An Impact Assessment was undertaken in advance of the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration. The conclusion of that assessment was that the move away from a household electoral registration system should have an overall positive impact on equalities. Equality considerations are a key feature of the planning for elections. Practical examples include an assessment of polling stations to ensure wheelchair accessibility, large print stationery and training for the Presiding Officers on, amongst other things, facilitating voting by the visually impaired and how to assist electors to vote in the unlikely event that they were unable to access the polling station. Postal votes are also available to any resident that is on the electoral register.

## **CONSULTATION**

23. This report has significant implications in terms of the following:

Procurement		Crime & Disorder	
Human Resources		Human Rights & Equalities	
Buildings, Land and Occupiers		Environment & Sustainability	
ICT		Capital Programme	

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Report to Annual Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015

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