

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

17TH MARCH, 2015

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 17TH MARCH, 2015 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Jane Nightingale  
Vice-Chair - Councillor Alan Smith

Councillors Phil Cole, Nuala Fennelly, Charlie Hogarth, Dave Shaw and Sue Wilkinson.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors John Cooke, Deborah Hutchinson and Kevin Rodgers.

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

12. MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE HELD ON 25TH NOVEMBER 2014 AND 20TH JANUARY 2015

With regard to the resolution in Minute Number 7 from the meeting held on 25th November 2014, where Members had requested clarification as to the numbers of agents/visitors permitted to attend Counts with Candidates, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that this information would be provided in the Candidates' packs.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee meetings held on 25th November 2014 and 20th January 2015 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

13. ELECTORAL SERVICES UPDATE ON KEY ISSUES REPORT

The Committee received a report which provided an update on preparations for the Parliamentary, Local and Parish Elections in May 2015.

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services began by introducing Keith Porter, who had been appointed as Electoral Services Manager on a consultancy basis via the Association of Electoral Administrators. The Assistant Director informed the Committee that Mr Porter was vastly experienced in the Electoral Services field and came with very good references. The Assistant Director also introduced Trina Barber to the Committee, who had been seconded into the Elections Team to provide additional support during the Elections period and had already played a central role in the recent review of polling districts and polling places.

In summarising the salient points in the report, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that three separate Election Counts would take place at Doncaster Racecourse as follows:-

- Thursday 7th May 2015 following the close of poll – verification of all ballot papers for the Parliamentary, Local and Parish Elections followed by the counting of the Parliamentary ballot papers;
- Friday 8th May 2015 at 2.00 p.m. – counting of Local ballot papers;
- Saturday 9th May 2015 at 11.00 a.m. – counting of Parish ballot papers.

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services explained that these arrangements were designed to provide staff with a chance to rest before the Local count. He advised that the law as it currently stood required the verification of all ballot papers before proceeding to any counts. However, Regulations were currently going through Parliament which would relax this rule where a Parliamentary Election was combined with Local/Parish Elections. He added that he was currently seeking further advice on this potential change and would also be discussing the issue at a forthcoming meeting with fellow South Yorkshire Senior Heads of Legal to ascertain the approach they were planning to take.

Councillor Phil Cole stated that he understood that only the Parliamentary ballot papers had to be verified before proceeding to the Parliamentary count and that there was nothing contained in the Regulations which required all ballot papers to be verified first. He also pointed out that the Regulations were silent with regard to the number of staff assigned to the verification of the different ballot papers, therefore it should be possible to prioritise the Parliamentary verification by allocating a larger proportion of staff to this task.

The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services confirmed that the Local and Parish Election counts would be more complex than normal as counting sheets would need to be used by staff due to the large number of candidates involved.

It was noted that the recruitment of staff for the Elections was now virtually complete and that preparations were generally all on track. The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services stated that he was very pleased with the level of support being received from colleagues across the Council towards the Elections process and with the progress made to date.

At this point, with the Chair's consent, Mr Ivan Stark addressed the Committee on a number of concerns he had with regard to alleged corruption in the Electoral system and the difficulties experienced by certain sections of the community in being able to register in order to vote. In response, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services explained that the Council liaised closely with all relevant agencies, including a dedicated Police Officer, throughout the Elections process and that it was satisfied that measures were in place to deal with any inappropriate activities or behaviour. Councillor Phil Cole pointed out that political parties issued guidance to candidates on good behaviour and that Doncaster enjoyed a good record in this respect in its

Elections. With regard to registration, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services explained that unfortunately it was difficult to include certain individuals on the Electoral Register, such as those who were living in hostels or otherwise living a transient lifestyle, who did not have a fixed abode.

General discussion followed, during which Members raised various questions and/or discussed a range of issues in relation to the preparations for the Elections, as summarised below:-

- It was noted that ballot boxes would be colour coded with labels to match the respective colours of each ballot paper to assist voters in identifying the correct box;
- With regard to the role of Returning Officer in respect of the Parliamentary Election, it was noted that the Council's Civic Mayor held this position by law in relation to the Borough constituency, while the High Sheriff of South Yorkshire carried out this role for the two County constituencies. Consequently, the Chief Executive, Jo Miller, would be referred to as Acting Returning Officer for the purposes of the Parliamentary Election.
- Members noted that there would be two Postal Vote envelopes sent out to voters – one for the Parliamentary and Local Elections and one for the Parish Elections, both of which should arrive on the same day.
- In answer to a question, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that it was the Acting Returning Officer's intention to allow those people in attendance at the verification stage of the Parliamentary count to remain in the hall to observe the Count itself. The Agents of Parliamentary candidates would occupy the front rows at tables, with others behind.
- The Chair pointed out that a national 2 minute silence for VE Day was to be held on 8 May at 3.00 p.m. In reply, the Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services undertook to feed this back to the Chief Executive so that appropriate arrangements could be put in place to accommodate this.
- Arising from discussion on the possibility of using the Youth Centre in Windmill Avenue as a Polling Station instead of a portable unit for Polling Districts GB (Conisbrough and Denaby Ward) and HD/HF (Edlington and Warmsworth), Councillor Phil Cole advised that the Youth Centre premises were disused at the present time and therefore were unavailable for use in the Elections.
- Councillor Charlie Hogarth queried whether the street 'Lawn Garth' could be moved from NH Polling District into the Polling District NA with Kirkby Avenue, to vote at the Polling Station on Queens Drive. He added that if it was too late to make such an alteration now, perhaps this change could be made after the Elections in May for the future. In reply, Trina Barber stated that the Elections Team would look into this matter and keep Councillor Hogarth informed as to the actions being

taken.

- With regard to the recent review of Polling Districts and Polling Places, the Chair expressed the view that consultation with Members in this exercise had been very good and that it had proved very useful to have an input from Councillors to take full advantage of their extensive local knowledge of their respective Wards.
- The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the Electoral Registers would definitely be completed in time for the Candidates and Agents meetings to be held on 27th March. The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services added that, in the meantime, Officers would endeavour to send an update to Members on the latest position with the Registers.
- Concerning the receipt and checking of Nomination Papers, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that nomination papers for candidates standing in the Parliamentary Elections would be checked upon their delivery while the Agents waited. However, the nomination papers for the Local and Parish Elections would need to be left at the office for checking. Agents for candidates in these elections would be informed of any errors in their paperwork by telephone as soon as possible, and validation letters would be despatched at the end of each day to ensure that these would be received by Agents the following day confirming that the paperwork had been completed correctly.
- It was reported that a briefing was scheduled to be held on 10th April for all successfully nominated Candidates and their Agents.
- The Assistant Director of Legal & Democratic Services informed the Committee that an Induction Programme for Members would take place at the Civic Office on 12 – 14 May inclusive. In response to questions, he explained that those Members who were re-elected would be free to dip in and out of the Programme across the 3 days, as clearly some elements such as the tour of the Civic Office would only be beneficial to newly elected Members. The Assistant Director then summarised the content of each day of the Induction Programme, identifying those elements that would be suitable both for new Members and for re-elected Members as a refresher. Arising from a Member's suggestion, the Assistant Director undertook to look at designing the structure of the Induction Programme so that the content aimed at newly elected Members was arranged in one block, e.g. on Day One, and those elements suitable for all Members to attend as refresher training were arranged in another block.
- In response to a Member's request, the Officers agreed to look into the possibility of displaying posters showing the Election results as they were announced at the Local and Parish counts, instead of the results only being displayed as rolling banners on television screens in the count venue.

It was then

RESOLVED that, subject to the above comments and actions agreed, the update on preparations for the Parliamentary, Local and Parish Elections in May 2015 be noted.