

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 13TH JULY, 2021

A MEETING of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE on TUESDAY, 13TH JULY, 2021, at 10.00 am.

PRESENT:

Vice-Chair - Councillor Nick Allen (In the Chair)

Councillors Gemma Cobby, Debbie Hutchinson, Jake Kearsley, Majid Khan and Emma Muddiman-Rawlins.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ian Pearson, James Church and Julie Grace.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY.

There were no declarations of interests made at the meeting.

2 MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 2ND FEBRUARY, 2021.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd February, 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 2021 ELECTION RESULTS

The Committee considered a report which provided Members with detailed information and results of the combined Mayoral, Borough, Parish, Police and Crime Commissioner and Edenthorpe Neighbourhood Planning Referendum elections, held on Thursday, 6th May, 2021.

Trina Barber, Electoral Services Manager in presenting the report, advised that in February 2021, the Government had confirmed that the elections were to take place on 6th May, 2021. The Electoral Services Team had set in train planning for the elections in November, 2020. Due to Covid-19, the Government had provided local authorities with additional funding to directly address the costs associated with making the elections Covid-19 secure, with Doncaster receiving £101,823.

It was highlighted that Doncaster had the highest number of elections in the South Yorkshire region and one of the highest across the country (all-out Council Borough elections, the Doncaster Mayoral election, all-out Parish elections for all 304 seats and the delayed 2020 South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner Election, and Edenthorpe Neighbourhood Planning Referendum).

The Electoral Services Manager highlighted the logistical challenges faced by the Elections team in running all five elections simultaneously this year and in a safe and

Covid-19 compliant environment, including, problems with sourcing and booking of polling stations and count venues and the appointment and training of a high number of polling station staff.

The Electoral Services Manager outlined the main points within the report with regard to combining the Mayoral, Borough Councillors and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections into one postal voting pack, the outcome of each election, including the number of postal vote packs rejected, the number of candidates, the number of electors who had cast their vote on polling day, the number of polling stations, the number of electors who had voted by post, the number of ballot papers verified and the total turnout in percentages. Appendix A to the report provided a breakdown of the results for each election.

To conclude the presentation of the report, the Electoral Services Manager highlighted the number of positive comments made by candidates, agents and staff in relation to the election process.

During discussion of the report, the Electoral Services Manager and Monitoring Officer answered a range of questions from Members including the following:-

- In response to a question from a Member, the Electoral Services Manager advised that there had been no reported cases involving attempted electoral voter fraud at polling stations in Doncaster. All staff were fully trained to be competent in their required duties on polling stations and were advised to record any instances of potential voter fraud in the log books provided if any issues arose at the elections. Staff were also provided with business cards to report any issues. In the event of any fraudulent behaviour taking place, staff are instructed to inform the Electoral Services Team. It was further reported that postal votes were delivered at polling stations throughout the day, but no issues had been reported.
- Arising from a question whether there would be any changes to legislation to make voter photo identification mandatory for voters when voting in elections as a means of tackling electoral fraud and whether this would potentially create more work for election staff having to verify electors ID, it was explained that the Bill regarding the introduction of voter photo ID cards and how the scheme would work in practice was yet to be considered by Parliament. It was anticipated that for those electors who were not able to provide some form of identification to vote, local authorities would be given funding from the Government for the creation and issuing of voter photo ID cards. Voters would be able to apply for a free voter card from their local authority to use in polling stations. It was noted that polling staff would need training on the proposed changes and additional time would be needed at polling stations for people to show their ID. Further work would be required by the Council to assess the impacts of any change in law.
- A Member advised the Committee that he had been informed by a number of residents in various wards that due to changes in polling stations locations it had made voting more difficult by not necessarily having a polling station on the 'doorstep'. He asked if an analysis of turnout in previous years could be undertaken to ascertain if these changes had a detrimental impact on voter turnout.

The Electoral Services Manager informed Members that due to Covid-19, a number of buildings the Council would normally use as a polling station had been closed, in addition Public Health England had advised against the use of portable units. In these circumstances, the Council had little alternative but to have polling stations in the buildings used. Due to the pressing timescale, it was not possible to carry out the usual consultation on relocating polling stations. She confirmed that a comparison of voter turn-out in areas where changes to polling stations locations had been made would be undertaken, but it was confirmed that the overall turnout of 28.2% was not unusual for Doncaster. It was also highlighted that turnout was dependent upon voter engagement and that this varied substantially dependent upon the type of election.

Scott Fawcus, Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that all electors who had been affected by a change in polling station location had been notified of the change on their polling card letter that outlined various methods of voting. Adverts had also been published in the local press and information posted on social media informing of the options for casting votes.

- In response to a question whether the national Government guidance provided to local authorities regarding administering the elections this year was self-explanatory, or had local authorities had been expected to interpret the guidance themselves. It was reported that the Council had followed Government guidance and the restrictions to be put in place. In relation to the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, it was noted that all four South Yorkshire authorities had followed the same approach to ensure that the elections were Covid-19 compliant, social distancing restrictions were followed and risk assessments carried out. Public Health Guidance had been sought on behalf of the Returning Officer.
- In answer to a question regarding whether the usual polling stations which had been closed or re-located elsewhere would be re-opened/re-instated for the next local election when Covid restrictions were lifted, the Electoral Services Manager advised that the Council was to hold Combined Authority Mayoral elections in May next year and subject to restrictions being lifted, the Electoral Services Team would endeavour to reopen the usual polling stations. It was noted that any significant on-going changes to polling stations would be reported to this Committee and all Members of the Council.

The Committee commended the Electoral Services Manager and the Electoral Services Team for their efforts and fantastic work undertaken in conducting and organising the smooth running of the combined elections under such challenging circumstances and with limited resources. Members also gave thanks to all staff involved in making the elections a success. Members also wished to place on record their thanks to the Director of Public Health and the Public Health Team for the outstanding contribution they had made in supporting the Electoral Services Team and elections this year.

RESOLVED that the report on the 2021 Elections results be noted.

4 ANNUAL CANVASS

The Electoral Services Manager provided Members with an overview of the 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.

It was reported that each year, the Electoral Registration Officer had a duty to carry out a full annual review of the Electoral Register. In light of the introduction of the canvass reforms last year, the annual canvass had been changed which allowed the Council to carry out the annual canvass without the need to require a response from every household across the Borough. It also changed where if electors could be matched to a property using national data and the Council's data sources, where there was found to be no change and was matched with the Department of Works and Pensions and that the elector still lived at the same address meant a letter was sent to the property asking the resident to confirm whether there was a change to the people residing at the property and to inform the Elections team of any changes.

It was noted that the annual canvass was to take place from July to the 30th November 2021. The register would be updated on a monthly basis to include additions, changes to and people being removed from the register. Following the conclusion of the annual canvass, a revised version of the electoral register was to be published on 1st December, 2021 and each person would be provided with a new electoral registration number.

Under the reformed canvass, data matching would be used at the outset of the canvass to help identify those properties where the residents were more likely to have changed. The Electoral Services Team had already carried out the data step matching process against the national Government data. The Electoral Services Manager explained the process to be followed which would be one of two routes for each property; Route 1 matched properties that are not required to respond and Route 2 unmatched properties where there has been changes to the property. In addition, local data matching had been carried out with the Council's Council Tax department and Customer Services, which had resulted in a match of 104,590 properties which was 74.20% and 36, 319 unmatched properties put into Route 2.

It was noted that all electors in Route 1 would be contacted by letter or email to find out whether there are any changes to the property. Properties in Route 2 that had not been successfully data matched should receive letters next week where the householder would be asked to provide confirmation to the Electoral Services Team in relation to who resides at the properties. For those people who did not provide a response for Route 2 properties, this would be followed up with telephone canvassing, correspondence, email and foot canvassing. In relation to Route 3 properties, multi-occupancy properties, such as Care Homes would be contacted by telephone and email to ensure that recent and update information on residents was kept up to date.

The Electoral Services Manager drew Members attention to page 9 of the agenda which set out the reformed canvass model for the annual canvass and provided an update on statistical data in relation to matched properties for Doncaster electors as of 9th June, 2021.

It was noted that funding for the annual canvass was provided by central government. The Council had not yet received or had an indication of the expected amount.

Members were informed that this information would be shared with the Committee at its next meeting.

RESOLVED that the report 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, be noted.

5 2023 PARLIAMENTARY BOUNDARY REVIEW

The Committee considered a report presented by the Electoral Services Manager which provided details of a consultation that was being carried out by the Boundary Commission for England on initial proposals for new Parliamentary constituency boundaries for England in 2023, using data from the Parliamentary Electorate as of the 2nd March 2020.

The Boundary Commission was currently conducting an independent review of all Parliamentary constituencies boundaries based on new rules approved by Parliament in 2020. The Commission was required to ensure that the number of electors in each constituency is more equal, based on an electorate no smaller than 69,724 and no larger than 77,062.

It was noted that the proposals if agreed, would mean that Doncaster would still have three constituencies, however, the names of those constituencies; Don Valley, Doncaster Central and Doncaster North would change and one constituency would no longer only contain Doncaster wards.

Doncaster would take on three wards from the North Lincolnshire, Axholme Central, North and South constituencies, with three wards having a Doncaster Constituency/MP covering this area. Doncaster would receive ballot papers from North Lincolnshire for the three wards when a parliamentary election takes place. North Lincolnshire Council would have responsibility of verifying both postal votes and polling station ballot papers before delivering them to Doncaster's (Acting) Returning Officer. It was noted that this would likely cause time implications for the counting of votes and declaration of results, due to the length of time it may take North Lincolnshire Council to verify and then transport those ballot papers from their Count venue to Doncaster.

Two wards currently within Doncaster, Conisbrough and Edlington, & Warmsworth wards with a combined electorate of 20,565, would be given to a Rotherham constituency and have a Rotherham MP. Therefore, Doncaster would provide ballot papers to Rotherham Council from these wards when a parliamentary election takes place. Doncaster would have responsibility to verify both Postal Vote and Polling Station ballot papers before delivering them to Rotherham's (Acting) Returning Officer.

The Electoral Services Manager made reference to some of the logistical challenges that the proposed changes would bring for Doncaster.

A breakdown of the proposals of the 3 Doncaster constituencies and Rotherham Council's constituency to include two Doncaster wards, were detailed at Paragraphs 14 to 17 of the report.

It was noted that information on the full review of all parliamentary constituencies in England was available on the Boundary Commissions website. Consultation on the

initial proposals had commenced on 8th June, 2021 and would end on 2nd August, 2021. The public was invited to make representations and to feedback on the proposed boundaries on the Boundary Commissions online portal. All responses would be considered by the Boundary Commission. This would be followed by a further consultation later on in the year. Members were encouraged to submit any comments on the proposals.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services advised that the Council's Returning Officer would provide a response to the proposals in relation to operational issues such as the receipt of ballot papers from North Lincolnshire Council and the sending of ballot papers to Rotherham Council. The Monitoring Officer highlighted that non-coterminous constituency boundaries were not exclusive to Doncaster Council and existed across other authorities.

During discussion on this issue, a range of views were expressed by Members, with some being opposed to the proposals, whilst others in support. In light of this, it was proposed that it would not be feasible to make a representation on behalf of the Committee regarding the proposals. In noting the diverse views expressed by the Committee, it was considered more appropriate for representations to be made by political groups, or Members on an individual basis.

Arising from a question from a Member seeking clarity regarding the verification of ballot papers being carried out by another authority, it was noted that it was common practice for other authorities across the country to verify the votes of another authority. It was explained that there may be implications for Doncaster in relation to the counting of votes and declaration of results due to the length of time taken by another authority to verify the ballot papers and then transport them to Doncaster.

RESOLVED to that the report on the 2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review be noted.

6 URGENT ACTION TAKEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 36 - TEMPORARY APPOINTMENT OF MEMBERS TO CANTLEY-WITH-BRANTON PARISH COUNCIL

The Committee received a report which provided confirmation of urgent action taken in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 36 in May, 2021, to appoint Councillors Jane Cox and Steve Cox on a temporary basis to Cantley-with- Branton Parish Council, for the purpose of attending a meeting to establish a quorum and enable the Parish Council to make the necessary appointments to its membership.

Where a Parish Council becomes inquorate, legislation and the Council's Constitution provides that the Council can appoint members on a temporary basis, to enable the Parish Council to carry out its normal business, until it had co-opted or elected sufficient Councillors to be quorate. In Doncaster, this function is delegated to the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee (EDSC), the Chief Executive and the Monitoring Officer (Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services).

Scott Fawcus, Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services informed Members of the situation that had arisen in Cantley-with-Branton Parish Council, where only one nomination was received in the uncontested Parish Council election. As there was only one member of the Parish Council and three members were required to establish a quorum, the Parish Council was not able to make the necessary co-options.

Therefore, as a consequence, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services, in consultation with the Chair of EDSC had used his emergency powers in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 36 to appoint Councillors Jane Cox and Steve Cox on a temporary basis to Cantley-with-Branton Parish Council to enable the Parish Council to make the necessary co-options and would cease with immediate effect once the Parish Council had re-established a quorum.

Subsequently, Cantley-with-Branton Parish Council at its meeting on 11th June, 2021, appointed six co-opted members on to its membership and therefore, have re-gained a quorum to allow it to conduct its business.

RESOLVED that the urgent action in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 36, taken by the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services on 27th May, 2021, in consultation with the Chair of the Elections and Democratic Structures Committee, as outlined in the report, be noted.

CHAIR: _____

DATE: _____