

Subject to approval at the next meeting

ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE

17 December 2015 at 6.00 pm

Present:- Councillors Gammon (Chairman), Charles (Vice-Chairman), Brooks, Bower and Chapman.

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors; Mrs Brown, Dendle and Oppler.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Monitoring Officer has advised Members of interim arrangements to follow when making declarations of interest. They have been advised that for the reasons explained below, they should make their declarations on the same basis as the former Code of Conduct using the descriptions of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

Reasons

- The Council has adopted the government's example for a new local code of conduct, but new policies and procedures relating to the new local code are yet to be considered and adopted.
- Members have not yet been trained on the provisions of the new local code of conduct.
- The definition of Pecuniary Interests is narrower than the definition of Prejudicial Interests, so by declaring a matter as a Prejudicial Interest, that will cover the requirement to declare a Pecuniary Interest in the same matter.

Where a Member declares a "Prejudicial Interest" this will, in the interest of clarity for the public, be recorded in the Minutes as a Prejudicial and Pecuniary Interest.

There were no declarations of interest made.

9. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 10 August 2015 were approved by the Sub-Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10. ELECTORAL REVIEW OF WEST SUSSEX

With the agreement of the Chairman, the Head of Democratic Services raised the matter of the Electoral Review of West Sussex, as an urgent item, so that Members would have time to respond to a consultation exercise which would end on 8 February 2016.

Members were informed that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England had published their draft recommendations on the electoral review of West Sussex County Council. In reviewing their report, the Head of Democratic Services had identified that 4 of the 13 electoral divisions in Arun had been recommended for minor change:

- Arundel & Wick
- Bersted
- Bognor Regis West & Aldwick
- Littlehampton Town

The report also recommended consequential changes to the parishes of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton.

The Sub-Committee considered whether an additional meeting was required to respond to the consultation exercise. Following a brief discussion it was decided that all Members would be advised to make their own representations.

11. REVIEW OF THE PARLIAMENTARY, DISTRICT AND PARISH ELECTIONS HELD ON 7 MAY 2015

In presenting this report, the Chief Executive and Returning Officer asked Members to note that questions, on the Review of the Parliamentary, District and Parish Elections held on 7 May 2015, had been submitted by a member of the public. A briefing paper, detailing the response was circulated to the Sub-Committee.

Members were provided with information on election planning, polling day and verification/count arrangements. The Chief Executive emphasised the significant challenge of covering elections for 3 Parliamentary constituencies whilst also covering elections for Arun District and Town/Parish Councils. It was noted that this was the first time in over 20 years that there had been a combined poll of this nature. The Chief Executive referred to the complexity involved and stated that, in view of this, he was pleased with the positive outcome.

It was pointed out that as the 7 May 2015 elections were more complex planning for them had been carefully managed. The decision was taken, with the Corporate Management Team, to identify the management of the elections as a major project. It had been recognised that a much larger staff

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resource would be required to support the run up to the poll as well as manage the complications of multiple verifications and counts. The Chief Executive praised the corporate support received from staff that helped achieve the key tasks in the election timetable.

Electoral Review

It was noted that the outcomes of the Electoral Review of Arun District Council has caused a number of changes for the District and Parish elections on 7 May 2015. Members were reminded that there had been a number of ward changes that had to be implemented to the electoral register.

It was reported that the basis for the changes to the ward boundaries was a series of maps provided by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. It was noted that the maps had been not been ideal, as there was no supporting road lists or background documents. Since then, Ordnance Survey had produced maps showing the new boundaries and rechecks had been made on the Council's interpretation of the information provided by the Boundary Commission.

Nominations

The Chief Executive praised the system that the Democratic Services Team had adopted to process nominations. It was noted that several nomination forms had not been completed correctly and staff had been able to correct mistakes to aid submission. It was reported that a number of negative comments had been received from parish candidates. Following investigation it appeared that the nomination guidance notes the Council provided in November and January were not widely distributed in parish areas. As a result of this it has been decided to provide additional briefings to parish councils for future elections.

Election Timetable

The Chief Executive highlighted other issues from the election timetable. It was noted that, as part of the review, meetings had been held with the key staff involved that considered the Council's processes and systems; and the reports made by Presiding Officers from polling day were reviewed and actioned where required. The analysis had been considered by the Corporate Management Team and no issues of significance had been raised. Identified areas of improvement were included in future project plans.

The Chief Executive also highlighted:

- There had been severe problems with election software and as a result a new software provider had been contracted for future elections.
- Call volumes to the Call Centre increased significantly ahead of a Parliamentary election. The Council allowed for this in project plans

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by increasing resources to Arun Direct for the period of the election timetable.

- Turnout, as anticipated, had been high across all elections. This had been especially noticeable in Ferring and Aldwick East. There were some queues, at Polling Stations, but the Council had additional staff in reserve which helped reduce queues quickly. It was recognised that the nature of the election meant a very challenging day for staff.
- It was noted that there had been a trial that had allowed Tellers to sit inside at 5 polling stations. No complaints had been received.

Individual Electoral Registration

The Chief Executive reported on the impact of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and emphasised that there was still a lack of understanding of the requirements of IER. Electors were struggling to comprehend that registration had two stages:

1. Completing a household enquiry form – so that the local authority would identify who was eligible to vote
2. Then completing an invitation to register form – either online or by hard copy

It was noted that the verification stage that checked identity could delay an application if processing was not immediately matched. This would require further evidence before an application could be confirmed. It was reported that voters that had failed to re-register had been deleted from the register published on 1 December 2015.

Verification and Count

The Chief Executive also reported on the verification and count. The feedback from candidates and agents had been both positive and negative. The Chief Executive felt that this was expected due to the complex combination of elections.

The Chief Executive accepted that he should have advised the candidates and agents in advance, of the decision to use an alternative counting method. He emphasised that, based on assessment, that the counting sheet method proved a more efficient and accurate system.

The Chief Executive recognised the elections' impact on Democratic Services Staff. The team had faced the challenge of introducing a major change in legislation in electoral registration, had managed 11 Neighbourhood Plan Referendums and 3 Community Right to Build Order Referendums. This was in addition to planning for the combined elections on 7 May 2015. It was explained that, in order to meet these demands the Elections Team had the benefit of additional temporary resources to support the changes to electoral

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registration, funded by a Cabinet Office grant. It was noted that this arrangement would cease at the end of 2015.

Having reviewed future workloads against capacity the Chief Executive had concerns that the Elections Team would not be able to cope with future demands, putting the Council at significant risk of election error. In view of this concern, it was reported that the Chief Executive would be submitting a report to Cabinet in February 2016 that would request additional funding for staff resources.

The Chief Executive concluded his report stating that he would not have been able to deliver these elections without the Election Team's commitment and hard work, together with the help of the whole Arun organisation. He thanked staff for the commitment and support he received.

In discussing the report, the Committee referred to the counting system used at the election and remarked on the confusion that had been caused. Members deliberated the pros and cons of count methods. The future use of technology, to aid count processes, was also debated.

Following a question on IER it was confirmed that there were 15000 outstanding registrations. The Head of Democratic Services pointed out that those individuals would have received at least 6 letters as part of the IER process including the Household Enquiry Form, Individual Registration form and reminders. It was noted that the review of those that had failed to register had not been concluded.

In discussing nominations, Members were grateful for the staff checking procedures that aided satisfactory completion of the nomination forms. Concern was raised that some Parish Council clerks had failed to inform their Members with the result that parish candidates had experienced difficulties with the nomination process.

The Committee thanked the Corporate Management Team, Democratic Services and all Staff that had contributed to a successful election. Members also recognised the staff effort that had been required with the introduction of IER.

The Committee then considered the report's recommendations which were agreed.

The Sub-Committee;

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL – That

- (1) the report be noted; and
- (2) support be given to the Returning Officer continuing to work on a longer Election Timetable for future District & Parish Council Elections to allow at least a 10 working day period for nominations.

12. REVIEW OF POLLING STATIONS

The Chief Executive presented the report on the Review of Polling Stations in the Arun District. It was noted that an ongoing review of polling stations was carried out in Arun. To support this review the report considered feedback from Parliamentary, District and parish Elections held on 7 May 2015 and made recommendation on any change required for the forthcoming Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2016.

It was reported that the Council's aim was to ensure polling stations were located within a convenient distance from the majority of elector's homes with the premises being accessible by all.

Member's attention was drawn to the use of schools as polling stations. Although Schools were legally required to submit their premises for polling station use the impact on their term time activity was recognised. It was reported that the Council would trial alternative arrangements in Felpham and Rustington for the 2016 elections. However the Chief Executive emphasised that if schools were needed for future elections then he could, and would, insist on their use.

It was noted that the arrangements for BNB2 and BNB3 polling districts would be reviewed further as the current premises did not work for the May 2015 elections. Ward Councillors would be kept updated on progress.

It was noted that the next Statutory Review would start by 1 October 2018.

The Committee then

RESOLVED – That

- (1) the Returning Officer's report on the review of polling stations, as set out in Appendix 1, be agreed; and
- (2) the use of the polling stations listed in Appendix 1 be agreed for use at the Police & Crime Commissioner elections to be held on 5 May 2016.

13. REVIEW OF THE 2015 ANNUAL CANVASS FOR THE ELECTORAL REGISTER

The Head of Democratic Services provided the Committee with a verbal update on the key headlines from the Autumn canvass of the electoral register.

It was noted that this was the first canvass undertaken under the Individual Electoral Registration (IER) requirements. The legislation required

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that a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) was sent to every household to confirm if the details held were correct. Where a new elector was identified, they would be sent an Invitation to Register (ITR). When this was processed the elector's details would appear on the electoral register.

The Committee was informed that the canvass began at the beginning of August with first reminders issued in early October and the final reminders throughout November, with an element of door to door enquiry. Households were able to respond by internet, telephone, text message or by returning the hard copy form in the pre-paid envelope provided.

The response was reported as poor throughout each stage. The Council delayed each reminder stage slightly in the hope that the position would improve. Only 55% of households had responded to the initial HEF whilst 28% of households had still not responded at the final reminder stage. The final response rate was 80% when the register was published on 1 December 2015, so that the statutory deadline was met.

Members were informed that the Elections Team worked closely with the Communications and Web Teams so that key messages were promoted throughout the canvass. The Elections Team was also supported by Arun Direct and the Reception Teams.

It was reported that, from the enquiries received, there was a lack of understanding of the new legislative requirements. The key messages received were firstly, confusion about needing to return the HEF when many households had only responded 6 months previously to the household notification letter which had confirmed who was or was not registered; and secondly, a number of electors thought they needed to re-register through the on-line service and this would mean they did not need to return their HEF. The on-line service did not ask the elector to confirm they were responding to the HEF so reminders had to be sent adhering to legislation.

It was noted that further feedback received from customers concerned the validation process. Members were informed that it was an onerous task if an elector did not match when they had registered. If local data matching did not confirm an individual's identity, then further evidence had to be provided. The mandatory administrative processes involved had caused a high level of complaint.

The Head of Democratic Services stated that feedback had been provided to the Electoral Commission who was responsible for providing all the template forms and notices. There had been changes made to the legislation that simplified some of the validation processes which was expected to help.

The Committee discussed the impact of IER on the annual canvass and return rates relating to ward demography. Members requested data that would detail ward response rates and it was agreed that this statistical analysis would be circulated.

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Comment was made that IER legislation required change and Members stated that they would lobby for a less bureaucratic process.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Democratic Services for the report and passed on the thanks of the Committee to the Elections Team who had worked hard on IER delivery.

14. FUTURE MEETING DATES

The Committee noted the next meeting dates as follows:

11 February 2016

13 April 2016

(The meeting concluded at 7.25 pm)