

DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES WORKING GROUP
5 July 2021

Commenced: 4.00pm

Terminated: 4.25pm

Present: Councillors Cooney (In the Chair), Billington, Fairfoull Feeley J. Fitzpatrick, Kitchen, Reid, M Smith, Ryan, Ward and Warrington.

1. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Working Group held on 29 March 2021 be approved as a correct record.

2. TAMESIDE ELECTORAL REVIEW – RESPONSE TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND (LGBCE) WARD PATTERNS AND WARD NAMES PROPOSAL

Members considered a report of the Director of Governance and Pensions which reminded Members that in June 2019 the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) informed Tameside Council they would be undertaking an electoral review of Tameside. The last such review was concluded in 2004. At stage one of the review which concluded in January 2021 the LGBCE proposed 57 councillors for Tameside. At the first part of stage two a full borough wide ward patterns and ward names proposal was submitted to the LGBCE by Tameside Council. The LGBCE published their draft ward patterns and ward names proposal on 1 June 2021 which triggered ten weeks of public consultation (closing on 9 August 2021).

The report noted that the LGBCE ward pattern and names proposal was based in the greater part on the Tameside Council submission. As such Tameside Council broadly supported the proposal outlined by the LGBCE but with some areas of difference where amendments were suggested. Those amendments were based on the original Tameside Council submission (1 April 2021) as a better balance of community identity and electoral equality informed by local knowledge and experience. The amendments were outlined in detail in the relevant sections of the report.

AGREED:

That Council be recommended to endorse the submission.

3. THE 2023 BOUNDARY REVIEW – INITIAL PROPOSALS FOR NEW PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARIES

Members considered a report of the Director of Governance and Pensions, which informed Members that the Boundary Commission for England had published its initial proposals for new constituency boundaries as part of the 2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review. The proposals and maps for the nine English regions had been published on their website beginning an eight-week public consultation period has commenced, ending on 2 August 2021. This would be the first time the public would get a chance to see what their new constituencies might look like, and give the Commission their views on the proposals.

The Commission's initial outline timetable is planned as follows:

- 5 Jan 2021: Publication of headline electorate figures by ONS, BCE begin development of initial proposals;
- 24 March 2021: Publish complete ward-level electorate figures (i.e. including 'prospective' wards);

- 10 May 2021: Publish 'Guide to the 2023 Review';
- 8 June 2021: Publish initial proposals and conduct eight-week written consultation;
- Early 2022: Publish responses to initial proposals and conduct six-week 'secondary consultation', including between two and five public hearings in each region;
- Late 2022: Publish revised proposals and conduct four-week written consultation;
- June 2023: Submit and publish final report and recommendations.

The proposals contain three constituencies that include Tameside ward. Maps of the proposals were appended to the report. The proposed constituencies for the Tameside area were:

Ashton-under-Lyne Constituency (electorate: 71,840), to include the following wards:

Ashton Hurst	Ashton St Michael's	Ashton Waterloo	Dukinfield
Dukinfield/Stalybridge	Mossley	St Peters	Stalybridge North

Denton and Hyde Constituency (electorate: 71,951), to include the following wards:

Denton North East	Denton South	Denton West	Hyde Godley
Hyde Newton	Hyde Werneth	Longdendale	Stalybridge South

Failsworth and Droylsden Constituency (electorate: 74,818), to include the following wards

Audenshaw	Clayton and Openshaw	Droylsden East	Droylsden West
Failsworth East	Failsworth West	Gorton and Abbey Hey	Miles Platting and Newton (part)

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

4. UPDATE ON MAY 2021 ELECTIONS

Consideration was given to a report of the Director of Governance and Pensions, which outlined the administrative issues, which arose during the 2021 Borough Council and GM Mayoral. Members were reminded that the Combined Borough Council and GM Mayoral Elections took place during a period when the coronavirus pandemic continued to have a significant impact, with significant restriction which presented particular challenges for candidates, agents, parties and campaigners in how they prepared for and campaign in elections in May 2021.

For the Borough Council election the government introduced temporary legislation to reduce the number of signatures required on nomination papers from the usual 10 to 2. Beyond this, the usual rules about the completion and submission of nomination papers applied. However, some adjustments were required by both the Returning Officer and candidates and agents to the way that the nominations process were managed in practice to ensure this was done safely.

Each polling station was the subject of a covid health and safety visit and arrangements agreed with Health and Safety and Population Health were put in place. Arrangements were put in place to ensure that polling stations were safe places to vote. Most of the measures put in place were similar to those in place in other public places such as shops and banks, for example wearing face coverings (unless exempt), floor markings to ensure social distancing and the provision of hand sanitiser on entry and exit. There were also screens between staff and voters. In addition voters were encouraged to bring their own pen or pencil for use in polling stations, but pencils were also made available for anyone who needs one. Other measures included restricting the number of people inside polling stations (dependent on the size of the polling station) and to assist with this each polling station had a marshall stationed outside each polling station to manage entry and exit and to advise electors on safety requirements before entering the polling station.

Given that Covid restrictions were still be in place for the elections and there was a possibility of receiving a large number of late postal vote applications by electors wishing to avoid having to go to a polling station an early publicity campaign about alternative ways of voting was undertaken. In line with Government and Electoral Commission guidance we particularly targeted those most at risk, those on the clinically vulnerable lists and those on the electoral register who have indicated that they are over 76 – each of these was sent a letter advising them of their options for voting and including a postal vote application form. In addition we took the opportunity to use Council Tax bills to inform residents of the options for voting and used other, targeted publicity to inform residents that we would make polling stations covid safe and that they have the option to use a postal or proxy vote.

Arrangements were put in place to ensure that postal vote verification and opening was conducted in a covid safe way. Postal vote scanning to check signatures and dates of birth was undertaken at Dukinfield Town Hall in the usual way between 9am and 5pm each day from 24 April to 6 May.

With regard to the opening of returned postal vote envelopes containing ballot papers, candidates and agents were still able to observe this process as a check to help ensure the integrity of the election. However, it was not be possible to undertake this in the same way as usual due to covid restrictions. In order to minimise the number of people in the room at the same time the number of wards opened at the one time was be restricted to five and the number of candidate representatives for each ward will be restricted to 1, with one member of staff opening the postal votes for each ward. This ensured that a candidate is afforded the opportunity to see every ballot paper going into the count.

Given restrictions on numbers of people who could be indoors together it was not possible to undertake the Verification and Count for the May elections in the usual way. To maximise the space available the Count was held at Unit 7, Plantation Industrial Estate with four counters per ward, rather than the usual six, due to social distancing and safety requirements. Given the space available it was necessary to undertake each stage of the verification and count in two parts – 10 wards, followed by 9 wards. The Count is split between the verification and counting of ballot papers. The verification stage had to be undertaken for both the Borough Council and GM Mayoral Elections at the same time and was undertaken from 10pm on Thursday, 6 May 2021. The count stage for the Borough Council elections took place on Friday 7 May. The Count stage for the GM Mayoral Election took place on Saturday, 8 May 2021. It was necessary to put in place safety measures to minimise the risk of spreading covid, these included screens between staff and those observing the election, masks were worn, hand sanitiser used regular and social distancing measures. Given the special circumstances under which the verification and counting of votes took place and the reduced number of counters the Returning Officer determined that for each candidate there would be a maximum of four representatives for each candidate, made up of candidate, election agent, guest and counting agent.

AGREED:

That the report be noted and those aspects of the administration of the election introduced to ensure covid safety inform arrangements for future elections, in particular the arrangements put in place for processing of returned postal votes and the arrangements for the verification and counting of ballot papers.

CHAIR