

DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES WORKING GROUP

27 JULY 2015

Commenced: 3.00pm

Terminated: 4.10pm

Present: Councillors Cooney (In the Chair), P. Buckley, Cooney, Fairfoull, K. Quinn, Taylor and Warrington

Apology for Councillors J. Fitzpatrick

Absence:

1. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 February 2015 be accepted as a correct record.

2. REVIEW OF 2015 ELECTIONS

Consideration was given to a report of the Executive Director (Governance), which provided an assessment of administration on the 2015 Combined Parliamentary and Local Elections. It was explained that the 2015 Parliamentary, Local and Parish elections were the first such combination and administratively the most complicated for a long time. Across the three Parliamentary Constituencies it had been necessary to make use of approximately 150 buildings and over 600 temporary staff. In addition there were 113 candidates and over 200,000 electors, with over 50,000 postal votes. The elections were also the first since the introduction of individual electoral registration.

Members were informed that each year the Electoral Commission selected a sample of Returning Officers for detailed monitoring. For the 2015 elections Tameside was one of a sample of Returning Officers who were asked to submit evidence of how they were meeting performance standards throughout the election period, Tameside had been chosen because of the extent of the combination of polls. This involved submitting copies of plans and documentation that had been put in place. Members were informed that following the elections, the Electoral Commission had written to the Returning Officer to confirm that Tameside had met all the performance standards.

The report set out in detail the issues which had arisen during the elections, with particular reference being made to the following:

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) – IER had introduced important changes to the system of electoral registration. In practical terms IER placed considerable strain on the election team in the weeks leading up to the registration deadline due to the uncertainty on the part of the electors as to whether they or not they were registered.

Fixed-term Parliaments Act – The Act meant that there was a greater certainty as to when Parliament could be dissolved and when the election would take place and the timetable that had to be followed.

Communications – During the election period the Returning Officer continued the usual practice of sharing significant amounts of information prior to nominations and during the campaign via regular email alerts. This approach continued to work well with positive feedback being received particularly from candidates and agents in Failsworth and Reddish, who do not normally receive such information during the local elections.

Nominations – Members were informed that two specific issues impacted on the nomination process. Firstly guidance was issued by the Electoral Commission during the nomination process

concerning the use of commonly used names on the ballot paper which could have impacted on the validity of already received nomination papers. Secondly, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens changed their logos during the nomination period, which caused delays in the production of ballot papers and the signing off of details of candidates after the close of nominations.

Polling Stations – for the 2015 elections there were 150 polling stations used of which 5 were mobile polling stations, this included 18 polling stations in Reddish North and South and 11 in Failsworth East and West. Appended to the report was a breakdown of the elector numbers for each polling station together with the actual number of electors who voted. Members were informed that prior to the elections all schools to be used as polling stations had been visited to check facilities and ensure that there was clarity about the room and access to be used. This had been a time consuming process especially as schools continued to challenge why they were being used and in some cases hadn't made adequate, timely arrangements in the belief that alternative arrangements would be made if they didn't co-operate.

Staffing – It was explained that a Parliamentary election presented significant challenges in recruiting staff as the complexity and scale meant that it was necessary to employ significantly more staff than at other elections. Over the past three years a large number of Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks and Polling Station Inspectors have been replaced. The reduction in the Local Authority workforce by 40% had a significant impact on election recruitment. It was felt that the revised arrangements and additional input had worked well this year.

Postal Votes – Postal Votes in Tameside (and Failsworth and Reddish) were distributed on 17 April, the remainder of Greater Manchester postal votes were sent out a week later. In the Electoral Commission's report on the administration of the 7 May elections they recommended maximising the time available to electors to receive, complete and return their postal vote, Tameside postal votes were sent out as early as possible. For the Tameside area postal vote returns totalled 28,899 (80.5%). Members were also informed that the total number of postal votes rejected during the verification stage was 792 (2.3%). The report contained a breakdown of rejected postal votes by ward.

Campaign Issues – all candidates and agents had received, amongst other things, a revised Code of Conduct for campaigners. Amongst the provisions the Code made clear that campaigners should not handle completed postal vote applications as well as not handling actual postal votes.

Arrangements for the Count – Members were reminded that the principle of one count venue for Tameside had received widespread support amongst candidates and agents. It was explained that for the 2015 elections, due to the nature of the counts, Dukinfield Town Hall was not suitable and an alternative venue had to be found that was sufficiently large to accommodate three parliamentary counts, 19 borough counts and the parish count as well as the large number of candidates and agents. The venue chosen had been Unit 7, Plantation Industrial Estate as it provided enough space for undertaking the count, all candidates, agents and staff and storing and moving of boxes and paperwork. The response to the venue had been overwhelmingly positive.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the update be noted;
- (ii) That all staff involved in the delivery of the elections be thanked for their contribution to successful running of the elections;
- (iii) That Unit 7, Plantation Industrial Estate be the preferred venue for conducting the 2016 election count with Dukinfield Town Hall as the contingency venue.

3. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Consideration was given to a report of the Executive Director (Governance), which provided an update on the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration. Members were reminded that by law the transition to IER in Great Britain, which began in Summer 2014, would end on 1 December 2015. At that point any entries for electors who were not registered individually, that is those who

had not either been confirmed or successfully made individual applications to register to vote would be removed from the register.

It was explained that if transition ended immediately 1.9 million entries would be removed from registers nationally, in Tameside 7,830 would be removed from the register. It was likely that many of the entries that would be removed from the register when the transition ended would be redundant (i.e. they related to people who were no longer resident at the address). However, it was not possible to be certain how many were in fact for electors who were still resident and eligible to be registered to vote but who were not registered individually.

The registers published on 1 December 2015 would form the basis of the registers to be used at the May 2016 elections. In addition, the 1 December 2015 registers would be used for determining the distribution and boundaries of parliamentary constituencies and other electoral areas.

Nationally, the December 2014 registers contained approximately 920,000 fewer entries than the registers published in February 2014, which indicated a decrease of approximately 2%. In Tameside the figures were 168,749 on the December 2014 register (following the canvass) and 171,605 in February 2014 a fall of 2,856 (1.7%). In light of the fall in the numbers on the electoral register letters were sent to all properties in the Borough in March 2015 explaining who was registered to vote at the property and action required if the information was incorrect. Prior to the write out the local electorate in Tameside was 168,749, after the write out the electorate was 169,990 an increase of 1,241.

Members were informed that in the weeks preceding the closing date for registering to vote at the May 2015 elections there had been extensive publicity around the deadline and reasons for registering, this saw 1,186 additional people on the register, giving a local government electorate of 171,176 which is 429 less than was on the February 2014 register.

Members were informed that comprehensive household activity would be taking place from 1 July 2015 until the new register was published on 1 December 2015 and would involve sending out Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) to all properties. The report set out the process for dealing with returned HEFs and for sending out Invitations to Register to new electors.

The report also informed Members of the Electoral Commission performance standards for the transition to IER. The Electoral Commission had informed the Electoral Registration Officer that they were confident that Tameside had in place the necessary strategies and plans to be able to meet the challenges of IER and meet the performance standards.

With regard to the 7,839 entries that were unconfirmed it was explained that responses being received during the canvass would impact on the number of unconfirmed electors. When initial responses to the canvass are processed reminders would be sent to all non-responders. At that time publicity would be undertaken aimed at encouraging registration and individually targeted communication to unconfirmed electors explaining that they needed to take action to ensure that they remained on the register.

AGREED:

That the update be noted and it was agreed that Members would do all they could to support the electoral canvass process.

4. ELECTORAL COMMISSION REPORT: ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE OF RETURNING OFFICERS AT MAY 2015 ELECTIONS

Consideration was given to a report of the Executive Director (Governance), which informed Members of the contents of the Electoral Commission report on the performance of Returning Officers at the May 2015 Elections. The report provided details of those Returning Officers that had failed to meet the Electoral Commission performance standards. Those Returning Officers

that the Commission rated as not meeting the standards encountered issues in one of more of the following areas:

- Ballot papers issued to those not entitled to receive them;
- Early dispatch of poll cards;
- Incorrect declaration of result;
- Issues with the allocation of electors to polling stations;
- Print errors with election material;
- Multiple errors.

It was noted that the Electoral Commission had confirmed that Tameside Council had meet all the performance standards fully.

RECOMMENDED

That the report be noted.

5. ELECTORAL COMMISSION BULLETINS

Consideration was given to a report of the Executive Director (Governance) which provided Members with recent copies of the Electoral Commission news bulletin which set out current issues affecting the democratic framework for local government.

AGREED:

That the report be noted.

CHAIR