

## CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

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REPORT OF: Returning Officer

TO: Civic Affairs Committee

27/6/2012

WARDS: None directly affected

### **A REVIEW OF THE LOCAL ELECTIONS HELD ON 3 MAY 2012**

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#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this report is to review the preparation and run-up to the local elections held on 3 May 2012, and the events that occurred on the day itself, including the count. This is an opportunity for the Committee (and the Members of the Council in general) to feedback to the Returning Officer (the Council's Chief Executive) on any issues that would inform the preparation and running of future elections.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATION**

That the Committee notes the issues raised in the report, and gives feedback on any matters concerning the running of the elections which it wishes the Returning Officer to consider further in planning and running future elections.

#### **3. PREPARATION**

##### **Project planning**

- 3.1 Since 2010, an Election Project Team, chaired by the Electoral Services Manager, and comprising officers from across the Council has been tasked with leading on the known service requirements to run a successful election. This met from December 2011 and dealt primarily with operational issues. An Election Steering Group, comprising the Returning Officer, Head of Legal Services, Head of Corporate Strategy, Democratic Services Manager and Electoral Services Manager met monthly from December. Its role was to monitor progress against the project plan, statutory electoral timetables and consider any ad-hoc matters.

## **Member briefing**

- 3.2 A briefing on the preparation for the elections was offered for members of the Council prior to Civic Affairs Committee on 21 March. The local party agents had been briefed earlier (9 February) which had been appreciated and will be repeated next year.

## **Communication**

- 3.3 Regular updates to the website and the prominence given to electoral news on the homepage was improved upon having listened to feedback from the committee last June e.g we made it clearer on deadline dates for registering, applying for proxy votes.
- 3.4 There were regular press releases notifying key milestones. Coverage in the local newspaper was good, aided by the support of comprehensive information (and photo opportunities) from the officers in corporate marketing.

## **Correspondence**

- 3.5 The Customer Service Centre received 703 telephone calls during April this year (compared to 901 over the same period in 2011). A further 450 were received directly into the Electoral Services office. The Electoral Services office received 433 election related e-mails this year, compared with 595 in 2011.

## **Training**

- 3.6 The Returning Officer required every person working at a polling station to receive training on the basis that if they did not attend the training they would not be employed. We held 3 training sessions for Presiding Officer and 4 sessions for poll clerks using training information provided by the Electoral Commission and adapted to local circumstances and using case studies from 2011 as learning points. This year, the Presiding Officer training was more detailed and the sessions were longer, to ensure Presiding Officers were completely aware of their duties and the procedures involved.

## **4. POSTAL VOTING**

### **Issue of postal votes**

- 4.1 As in 2011, postal vote packs were issued in-house and 100% were handed over to Royal Mail for delivery on Friday 20 April, two days

after the application deadline. The total number of postal vote packs issued was 11,857. The total number re-issued because of being spoilt, lost or not received was 17, compared to 27 in 2011.

### **Opening of postal votes**

- 4.2 Unlike 2011, postal votes were not opened daily as the volumes returned were not expected to require it. 68.7% of postal votes were returned for inclusion in the count (75.9% in 2011).
- 4.3 Signature and date of birth checking was carried out for 100% of returned postal votes and 2.5% were rejected due to either an invalid or missing signature/date of birth. (1.9% in 2011).
- 4.4 The Council approved a budget bid in February for a FREEPOST address for use by the public and local parties to return postal vote and other registration forms to Electoral Services.

## **5. POLLING DAY**

### **Polling stations**

- 5.1 Three out of 32 polling stations were at different locations from 2011. We reverted to the 2010 locations in all three cases (Fisher Hall in Market/Newnham, Selwyn Diamond in Newnham and Panton Street in Trumpington). As in previous years, each location is checked for suitability of access and advice was sought from the Council's Access Officer. No negative comments from electors have been received about any location. The Poll Cards this year, for the first time, included a location map of the polling station.
- 5.2 At the Referendum in 2011, because of specific directives from the Electoral Commission we had four additional polling stations compared to 2010. This year, the Returning Officer was able to use local knowledge and experience of both 2011 and the parliamentary election in 2010 and decided upon 43 stations and staffing was reduced to 43 Presiding Officers (from 46) and 98 poll clerks (from 109).

### **Inspectors**

- 5.3 For a second year, we engaged four Polling Station Inspectors, who were responsible for checking all the polling stations at least twice during the course of the day. This was in addition to the Returning Officer visiting all polling stations (with the Mayor and Mayoress).

There were no reported problems with queues, either during the day or at close of poll.

## **6. THE COUNT**

- 6.1 This was the first city council only election to be counted since 2008 and it was a good opportunity to organise things differently in an attempt at an earlier finish. Staffing was increased from 4 to 6 counters per ward. Because of the extra staff and extra space required, the Small Hall was used to count five of the 14 wards, with a Deputy Returning Officer overseeing proceedings in that hall. The final declaration was much earlier than in many years. Years when there are two sets of elections will continue to pose challenges for achieving an early declaration of results because of the requirement to verify both sets of ballot boxes to ensure stray votes are not in the wrong box. There is no room in the halls for more counting staff so when there is a double election this would mean that the same number of counting staff would be managing a third set of counting on the night, which will inevitably slow the overall process down.
- 6.2 We used coloured slips when counting into favour, which helped those observing and our count staff to better organise the ballot papers.
- 6.3 The Returning Officer needs to maintain the secrecy and security of the count, but there is also a duty to facilitate the attendance of the established media. For the first time, a request was received from a member of the public (a local blogger) to attend to observe and the Returning Officer used her discretion to permit attendance in the public gallery alongside the media.
- 6.4 The wi-fi connection in the count venue went down towards the end of the evening. This was not satisfactory for the many media and other observers present. Officers have already given instructions to ensure that improvements are made to the coverage in the Halls. In addition, the speaker system did not work in the Small Hall so the Returning Officer's announcements had to be made by the DRO in the Small Hall.

## **7. STAFFING**

- 7.1 The staff who run polling stations and count the ballot papers are volunteers who opt to take on this role. They are paid for their time. Some staff are employed by the City Council in other roles, but not all

are. Staffing continues to be a challenge although we had fewer drop out at late notice compared to 2011.

7.2 As in previous years, stand-by polling station staff were provided with training and were on call from 6 am polling day. In the event, the stand-by PO and one stand-by PC were required to replace staff at the last minute.

## **8. COMPLAINTS/COMPLIMENTS**

8.1 We received three complaints from the public following the election concerning:

- Unhelpful staff at a polling station – the staff member concerned has been spoken to. They were ‘on loan’ from another authority’s election staff pool and will not be used again.
- An elector who could not vote as he was not registered wanted to know the rules and procedures – information was provided and the elector has accepted the situation and thanked officers for the response.
- A number of elderly electors who turned up at a polling station but could not vote as the Presiding Officer was unable to work the disabled lift. An engineer was called and it was fixed within an hour of being reported to the elections office. Those affected were advised but chose not to return. The Democratic Services Manager spoke to the care home the following day to apologise.

8.2 We received two complaints from party agents prior to polling day. The first related to a complaint from the Cambridge Socialists that a Liberal Democrat leaflet circulating in Romsey did not make clear it was an election communication. The Returning Officer advised that the election communication was legally compliant, as it made clear who it was published by and for whom. The Returning Officer did pass the complaint to the Liberal Democrat party agent for noting. The second complaint was from the Labour Party agent and related to an article by Romsey County Councillor Bourke (Liberal Democrat) in a community newsletter delivered and made available in the Petersfield and Romsey area in April. The newsletter was edited by a local group, but grant aided by the city council. As a result of this complaint, the Head of Community Development is reviewing grant conditions to make sure instructions are clear when grants are awarded for community newsletters or publicity.

- 8.3 After the election, compliments from the party agents were received about how the whole process had been managed by the Returning Officer and Electoral Services team.
- 8.4 Two Presiding Officers have given feedback concerning some of the signage provided at their stations, which will be addressed for the PCC elections on 15 November.

## 9. POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER ELECTION 15 NOVEMBER

- 9.1 There are a number of matters still to be clarified by the Government regarding the elections taking place in England (except London) and Wales on 15 November. We are planning based on what we know already and this involves:
- An earlier electoral canvass which is required so the Register of Electors can be published on 15 October. We are working with the colleges to ensure an earlier publication does not impact on student registration.
  - Working with the Police Authority Returning Officer (East Cambridgeshire's Chief Executive) on the planning for the election and the count. The first stage of the count (verification) will be carried out by the individual authorities across Cambridgeshire at their local count venues, but the second stage (counting into favour) will be centralised at one location in East Cambs.

## 10. IMPLICATIONS

- (a) **Financial Implications** - none
- (b) **Staffing Implications** – An additional full time post was approved by Council in the Medium Term Strategy, following consideration by this committee and approval by the Executive Councillor for Customer Services & Resources. The post was filled in December 2011 and it has made a noticeable positive impact in the capacity of the electoral service.
- (c) **Equal Opportunities Implications** - Equality Impact Assessment not conducted – this is an information report. Each Presiding Officer is asked to complete a survey of the electoral process/the polling station etc. which is provided by SCOPE. Any information received helps in the planning for the future and ensures our elections comply with accessibility requirements.
- (d) **Environmental Implications** - none
- (e) **Community Safety** - none

**BACKGROUND PAPERS:** There were no background papers used in the preparation of this report.

The contact officer for queries on the report is Gary Clift 01223 457011  
gary.clift@cambridge.gov.uk

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