

CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT OF: Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer

TO: Civic Affairs Committee

26/6/2013

WARDS: None directly affected

ELECTIONS MAY 2013 (REVIEW), ELECTIONS 2014 (ISSUES), INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION AND CONSULTATION ON ELECTORAL FRAUD

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to review elections held on 2 May 2013, highlight some issues that will need to be addressed in relation to the 2014 elections, update on the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and highlight an Electoral Commission issues paper on fraud.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) That the Committee notes the issues raised in the report, and to give 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.
- ii) To agree that the Annual Meeting of the Council is held on Thursday 12 June 2014 if the date for local elections are confirmed for 22 May and that officers report to the next meeting with committee dates for the 2014/15 Municipal Year.
- iii) Agree that a response to the Electoral Commission's issues paper on electoral fraud (para 6), will be circulated to the committee, with the final response sent following consultation with Chair and spokes.

3. ELECTIONS 2013

Project planning

- 3.1 This year was a county council election year (there was one city council by-election held on the same day in the Abbey ward). The County Council Returning Officer (RO) met with Electoral Services Managers in January to agree the RO's requirement for the County Council elections which were carried out in each district by a Local Returning Officer under the RO's direction. It was at this meeting that the RO advised of her decision to hold the count at the same time across the County, commencing at 10am on Friday 3 May. There were two more meetings with the RO in the build up to polling day.

An Election Project Team, chaired by the Electoral Services Manager, and comprising officers from across the Council was tasked with leading on the known service requirements to run a successful election. This year it was only required to meet twice in the run up to the elections and dealt primarily with operational issues. An Election Steering Group, chaired by the Local Returning Officer met at least monthly from January. Its role was to monitor progress against the project plan, statutory electoral timetables and consider any ad-hoc matters.

A mini-Canvass was carried out in January with the revised Register of Electors published on 1 March. This had been planned because of our concern of the implications for registration of the earlier Canvass in 2012, which had been required so the Police and Crime Commissioner election could be held in November 2012.

Member briefing

- 3.2 A briefing paper on the preparation for the elections was sent to members of the Council on 8 March. The local party agents were briefed on 28 February.

Communication

- 3.3 The County Council led on the County elections. There were updates to the City Council website, with prominence given to electoral news on the homepage and links to the County Council website as requested. Press releases notifying the media of key deadlines were co-ordinated with County Council messages.

Correspondence

- 3.4 The Customer Service Centre received 569 telephone calls during April this year (compared to 703 over the same period in 2012). A

further 369 were received directly into the Electoral Services office. The Electoral Services office received 525 election related e-mails this year, compared with 433 in 2011.

Training

- 3.5 The Returning Officer required every person working at a polling station to receive training – if they did not attend the training they would not be employed. We held 3 training sessions for Presiding Officers and 4 sessions for poll clerks using training information provided by the Electoral Commission and adapted to local circumstances and using case studies from the last couple of years as learning points.

Issue of postal votes

- 3.6 Postal vote packs were issued in-house and 100% were handed over to Royal Mail for delivery on Friday 19 April, two days after the application deadline. The total number of postal vote packs issued was 11,041. The total number re-issued because of being spoilt, lost or not received was 4, compared to 17 in 2012.

Opening of postal votes

- 3.7 Postal votes were not opened daily as the volumes returned did not require it. 68.7% of postal votes were returned for inclusion in the count (70.5% in 2012).
- 3.8 Signature and date of birth checking was carried out for 100% of returned postal votes and 3.6% were rejected due to either an invalid or missing signature/date of birth. (2.5% in 2012). The number of postal votes received this year that had the signature and/or the date of birth missing was greater than in 2012, hence a higher proportion of rejects.

Polling stations

- 3.9 There were two different polling station locations from 2012. In King's Hedges, Arbury Court Library was used because Arbury Community Centre was being re-furbished. In Newnham, the University Sports Ground in Wilberforce Road was used as Newnham College Bar was being re-furbished. Newnham ward councillors expressed concern at the location of the venue prior to the election and formally complained afterwards on behalf of voters (poor location and unhelpful map on poll card, the station was on the

first floor and the lift had no working light for part of the day). The Returning Officer wrote to the ward councillors on 7 May advising that they would be consulted seeking ideas for possible alternative locations as part of the review of polling districts this autumn. The Chair of Civic Affairs Committee in answer to an oral question at Council on 23 May also asked that any new polling station should be subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment (the Returning Officer already has obligations under the Equality Act 2010). Officers did visit the venue prior to booking and used Electoral Commission checklists on accessibility.

- 3.10 Overall there were 43 stations, with 43 Presiding Officers and 105 poll clerks.

Inspectors

- 3.11 Four Polling Station Inspectors 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.

The Count

- 3.12 Staffing was 6 counters per ward (except for Abbey which had 8 because of the city by-election) and as last year, the Small Hall was used to count five of the 14 wards, with a Deputy Returning Officer overseeing proceedings.
- 3.13 The process of getting into the Halls could have been better with party workers concerned that they would not be in situ in time for the start. However, everyone was in place for the count to commence at 10am.
- 3.14 For 2013, as in 2012, there was a single election to verify and count. In both years, using both Large and Small Halls the count was completed within 5 hours of close of poll. For May 2014-2016, there will be combined elections which will extend the time it takes to complete the count considerably and consideration will need to be given to the best arrangements for dealing with this.

Complaints

- 3.15 Other than the complaints about Newnham polling station referred to above, we received two complaints. One concerned someone who had not received a poll card and one concerning the RNIB approved template to assist visually impaired voters. We have referred a

matter to the Police where a person contacted the electoral services manager after the election alleging that their signature was forged on a candidate's nomination paper. The case is on-going.

4. ELECTIONS IN MAY 2014

- 4.1 The Government has consulted on moving the date of local elections from 1 May to 22 May 2014, the date of the European Parliamentary elections. The Government is yet to make its decision but elections were combined on the last two occasions (in 2004 and 2009) so it is likely.
- 4.2 The Annual Meeting in 2014 is currently scheduled for 22 May. If the local elections are moved to 22 May, the Annual Meeting will have to move. It is suggested the Annual Meeting moves to Thursday 12 June which will give a comparable period of time between election and Council meeting. There will be a knock on effect on the June/July decision making cycle which will be reported to the 19 September meeting of this committee.

5. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

- 5.1 IER is due to be introduced in July 2014 and will change the way that people register to vote. When a resident applies to register, they will need to provide their date of birth and national insurance number in addition to name, address and nationality.
- 5.2 IER's objectives stated by the Government are: increasing trust in voter registration; encouraging personal responsibility for your vote; introducing more convenient channels for registering and; reducing the risk and perception of electoral fraud.
- 5.3 Introducing such a significant change to the way registration is carried out will provide real challenge and there may be resource implications because of the make-up of the Cambridge electorate (high numbers of students and the transient nature of the population). IER is listed in the Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources portfolio plan 2013/14 and the Returning Officer is taking a project planning approach to delivery. The Electoral Services Manager is a member of a national panel reporting to the Cabinet Office on the issues IER raises for student electoral registration.

5.4 There will be a member briefing on IER at 6pm on 10 July to which political party agents have been invited. This committee will be kept informed as the implementation of IER progresses.

6. ELECTORAL COMMISSION ISSUES PAPER ON ELECTORAL FRAUD

6.1 The Electoral Commission is of the view that there is a consistent underlying level of concern among voters about electoral fraud in the UK. These concerns are shared by a broad range of people with experience of standing for election or running elections, and are particularly focused on specific areas of the country (Cambridge is not one of these areas).

6.2 In 2012 the Electoral Commission commenced a wide-ranging review to identify whether there are opportunities to improve confidence in the security of electoral processes in the UK. It recognises that there is an important balance to be sought between ensuring the integrity of electoral processes while guarding against risks to effective voter participation.

6.3 It published an evidence and issues paper, which set out information about electoral fraud in the UK and about concerns which people have raised during the initial consultation. (see www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voter-registration/electoral-fraud). The issues paper is wide-ranging and makes proposals covering postal voting, proxy voting, voting at polling stations and electoral registration

6.4 The Electoral Commission is clear that any changes to the electoral system need to take into account the impact on security and accessibility:

Security- ensuring everyone can be confident that their vote gets counted, that no one can steal or interfere with their vote, and that any fraudulently cast vote does not affect the result of an election.
Accessibility - ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote gets the chance to vote without facing unnecessary or disproportionate barriers.

6.5 The Chair has requested that the Council responds to the Electoral Commission's issues paper because the changes suggested would have an impact on voters and a greater impact on candidates, political parties and campaigners.

- 6.6 Deadline for submissions in response to the issues paper is 9 August. Its final conclusions and any recommendations for change will be published by autumn 2013, in time for any legislation to be introduced before the end of the current Parliament.
- 6.7 It has not been possible to produce a response in time for the committee meeting. Therefore, officers will produce a draft response, circulate it to the Committee for comment and finalise the submission in consultation with the Chair and spokes.

7. IMPLICATIONS

- (a) **Financial Implications** - none
- (b) **Staffing Implications** - none
- (c) **Equal Opportunities Implications** – there will be an equality impact assessment of any proposed polling station prior to it being confirmed.
- (d) **Environmental Implications** - none
- (e) **Community Safety** - none

BACKGROUND PAPERS: There were no background papers.

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

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