Committee	ELECTIONS COMMITTEE		Item No.	4
Title	SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEW OF VOTER TURNOUT			
Wards	All			
Contributors	Executive Director for Resources (Scrutiny Manager)			
Class	Part 1		Date	26 MARCH 2009

1. Introduction

1.1 The attached report is the product of a review of voter turnout in Lewisham carried out between July and December 2008 by the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee.

1.2 Evidence sessions for the Review were held on 4th September and 2nd October 2008. Members discussed and agreed recommendations for the review at the 13th November meeting. The attached report summarises the evidence considered by the Committee and the recommendations agreed.

1.3 In most cases, Mayor and Cabinet would be responsible for formally responding to reviews carried out by Select Committees. However, as electoral matters are matters which may not be exercised by the Executive, the Elections Committee are asked to provide a formal response in this case.

2. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee consider the report attached as an appendix, and the officer report at item 5, and agree a formal response to the review's recommendations.

3. Context

A detailed context for the review, explaining the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee's rationale for carrying out the review of voter turnout, is provided within the main body of the report below.

4. Legal implications

Most of the legal implications are set out in the body of the report. As explained in 1.3, in Lewisham electoral matters have been delegated to the Elections Committee, apart from those matters which are for the Returning Officer personally or reserved to full Council. Hence the final

report has been referred to the Elections Committee rather than to Mayor & Cabinet.

5.   Financial implications

There are no specific financial implications arising out of this report per se, although the financial implications of any specific recommendations – in particular those necessitating new initiatives – will need to be considered in due course.

6.   Equalities implications

6.1   The entire review is concerned with promoting social inclusion in the democratic process of elections, where traditionally those on low income and BME communities have participated less frequently.

6.2   In addition, a number of the recommendations seek to address the particularly low turnout among young people.

7.   Crime and Disorder implications

There are none arising.

8.   Environmental implications

There are none arising.

If there are any queries on this report please contact Joel Hartfield 020 8314 9941

Overview and Scrutiny

Review of Voter Turnout in Lewisham

Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

December 2008

The Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee helps to ensure the promotion of equality and opportunity within the borough, including ways in which participation by disadvantaged and under-represented sections of the community might be more effectively involved in the democratic processes of local government. The Committee is also responsible for scrutinising services regarding access for vulnerable and minority groups, and for fulfilling all the Council's Overview and Scrutiny functions in relation to crime and disorder (as proposed in the Police and Justice Bill). Further information on the Committee's functions and previous work can be found at:
http://www.lewisham.gov.uk/CouncilAndDemocracy/ElectedRepresentatives/OverviewAndScrutinyCommittees/

The Committee consists of the following members:

Councillor Jarman Parmar (Chair)
Councillor Dean Walton (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jackie Addison
Councillor Simon Carter
Councillor Hilary Downes
Councillor David Edgerton
Councillor Daniel Houghton
Councillor Seamus McDermott
Councillor Eva Stamirowski
Councillor Alan Till

1.   Introduction

1.1   This report is the product of a review of voter turnout in Lewisham carried out between July and December 2008 by the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee. The review was prompted by concern from members at the historically low turnout at local elections in Lewisham.

1.2   The report is divided into six main sections, in addition to this short introduction. Background to the review, including a statistical analysis of turnout at local elections in Lewisham, is set out in Section 2 below. It is followed by an explanation of the scope of the review in Section 3, and a description of the sources of evidence considered by the Committee, in Section 4. The main bulk of evidence heard by members is set out in Sections 5 to 7: Section 5 looks at voter registration; Section 6 examines voting methods; and Section 7 looks at raising awareness of local elections.

2.   Background to the review

2.1   As the table and graph below indicate, turnout has been in general decline since the 1960s, and in steep decline since 1990. Although there was a slight recovery in 2006, it was nevertheless the third lowest turnout since 1964.

% Turnout in Lewisham Local Elections: 1964-2006	
1964	34.7%
1968	35.7%
1971	41.8%
1974	36.6%
1978	43.6%
1982	41.5%
1986	45.6%
1990	45.2%
1994	41%
1998	29.7%
2002	25.6%
2006	29.4%
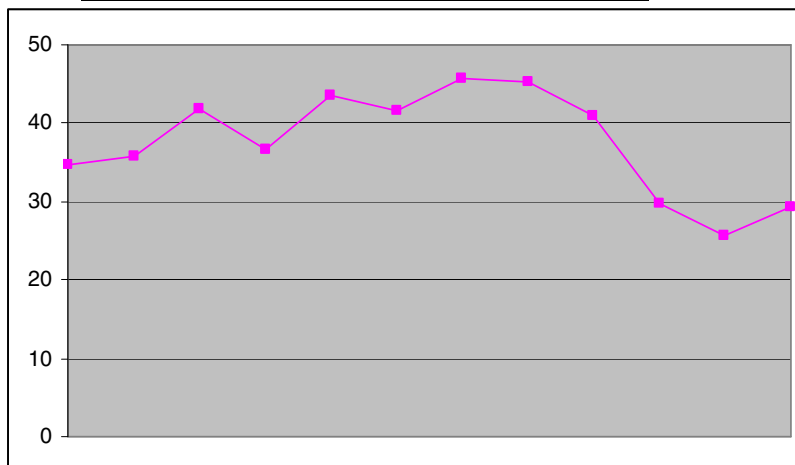
2.2   The Committee heard that this mirrors, to an extent, a national (and indeed international[1]) decline in turnout: the turnout of 59.4% at the 2001 general election was not only the lowest since 1918, it also represented a fall of 24% since 1950. Turnout for local elections has traditionally been around half that of general elections, and the relationship has remained broadly similar through the decline since 1990. The average turnout, for example, at the local elections in 2002 in Lewisham was 25.6%, while the turnout for the three Lewisham constituencies at the 2001 general election varied between 46.3% and 51.5%.

2.3   The review sought to address why, despite the decline in turnout at a local level being proportionate to the decline at a national level, Lewisham has had historically one of the lowest turnouts in London. As the graph below indicates, Lewisham had the second lowest turnout in London in the 2006 local elections, at only 29.4%[2]. Turnout ranged from 29% in Kensington & Chelsea to 51.1% in Richmond:

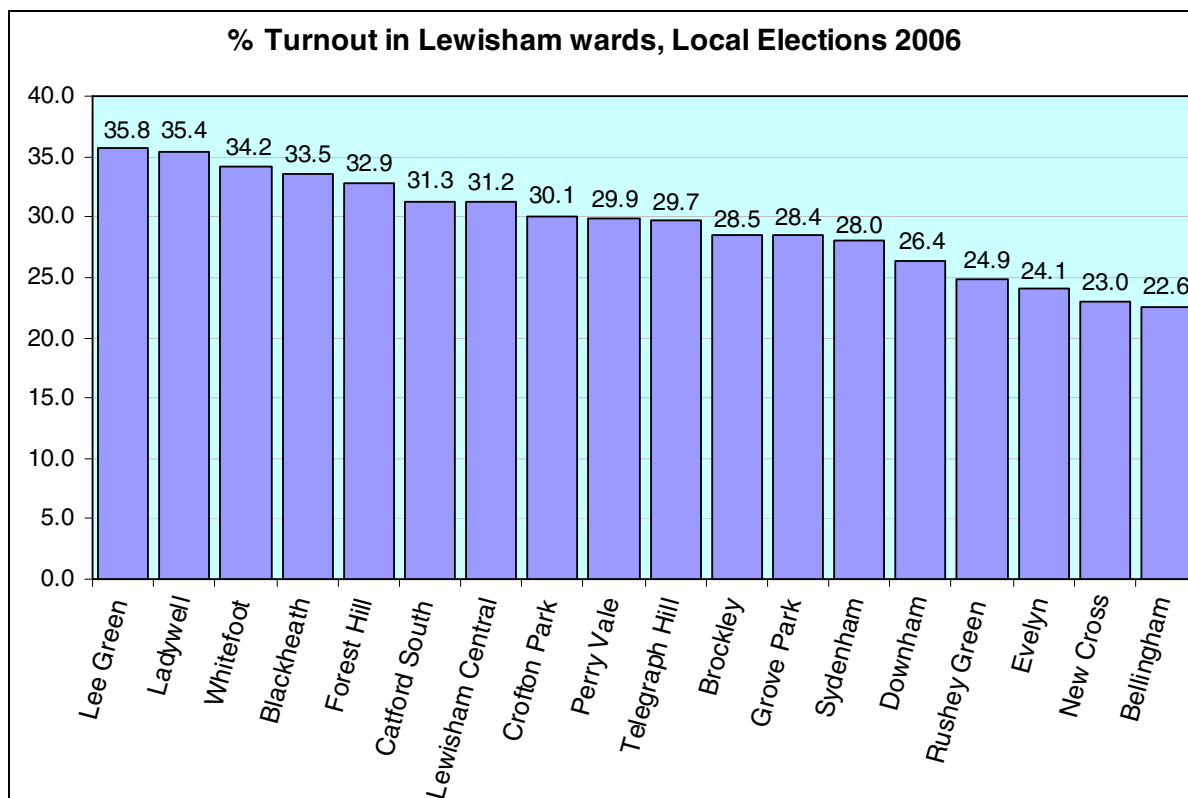**% Turnout at 2006 Local Elections - London Boroughs**
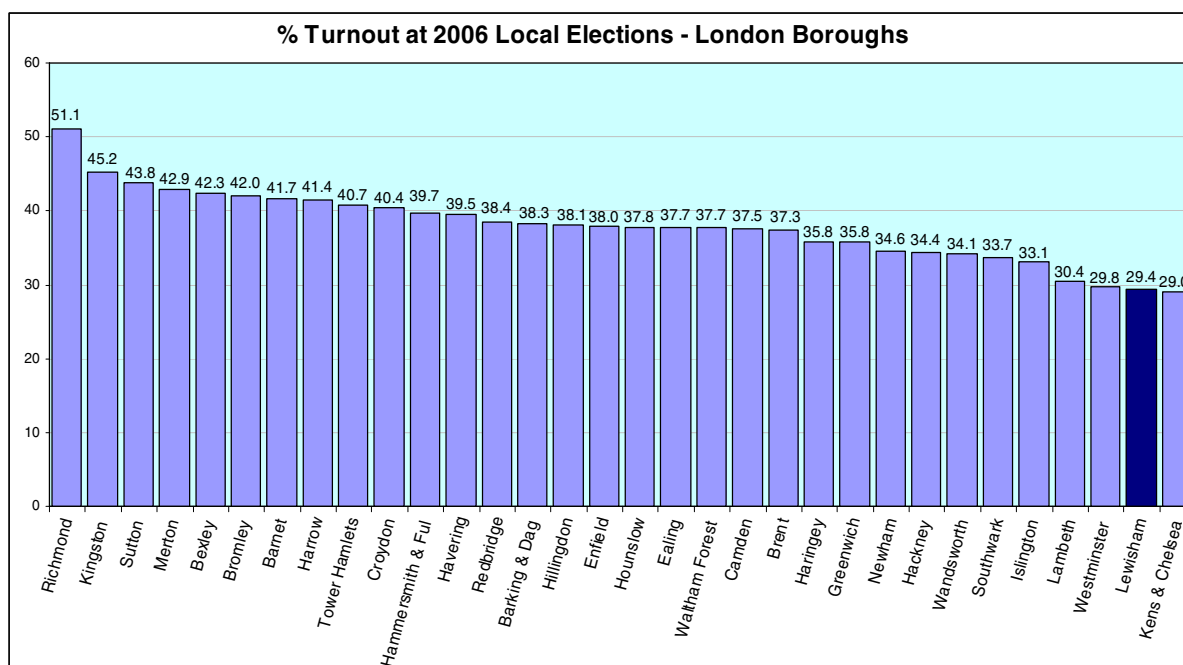
2.4   The Committee heard that at ward level, eight Lewisham wards were amongst the fifty wards with the lowest turnout in London at the 2006 local elections. Bellingham had the second lowest turnout in London at 22.6%, and New Cross the fourth lowest at 23%. As the graph below shows, ten Lewisham wards had turnouts of under 30%[3]:

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[1] Turnout dropped by 7% in older democracies across the world during the 1990s and in 20 out of 27 established democracies in the same period (Norris P, 2002, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[2] Data is taken from Minors & Grenham, *London Borough Council Elections 4th May 2006*, GLA (DMAG). However, due to errors in the information provided for Lewisham, turnout for the borough was calculated from ward-based election results published on the council website.
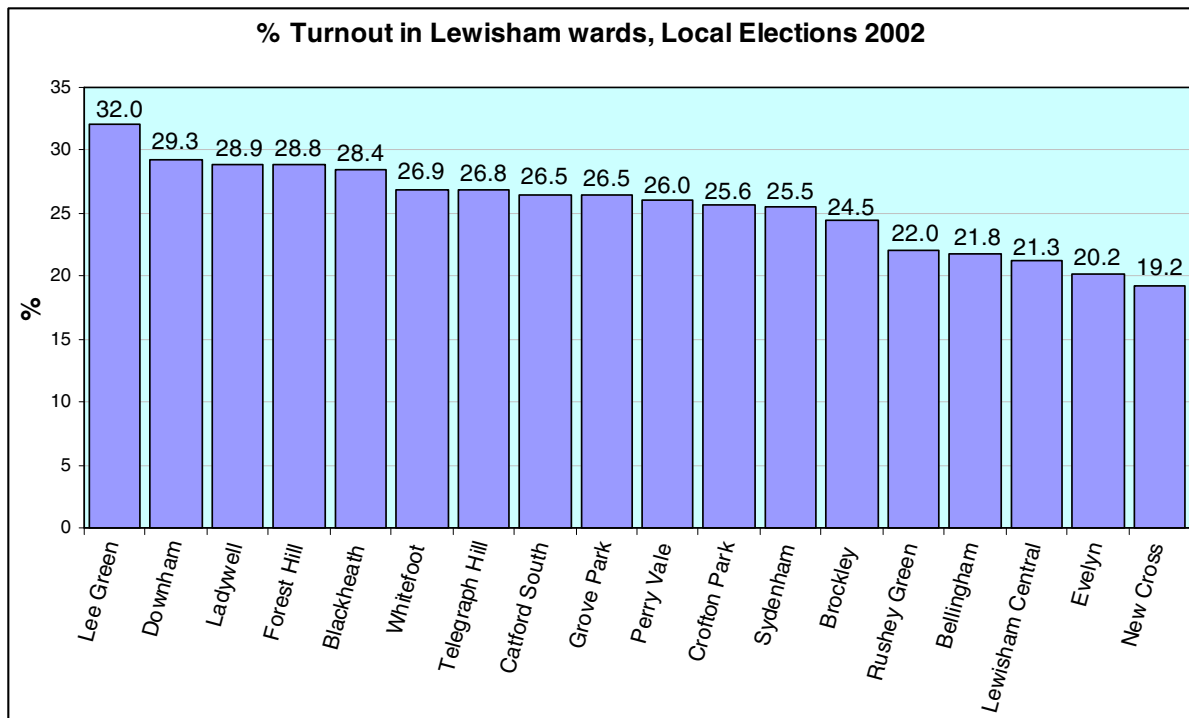[3] Full results available at:
http://www.lewisham.gov.uk/CouncilAndDemocracy/DemocracyAndElections/ElectionCounts AndResults/

% Turnout in Lewisham wards, Local Elections 2006

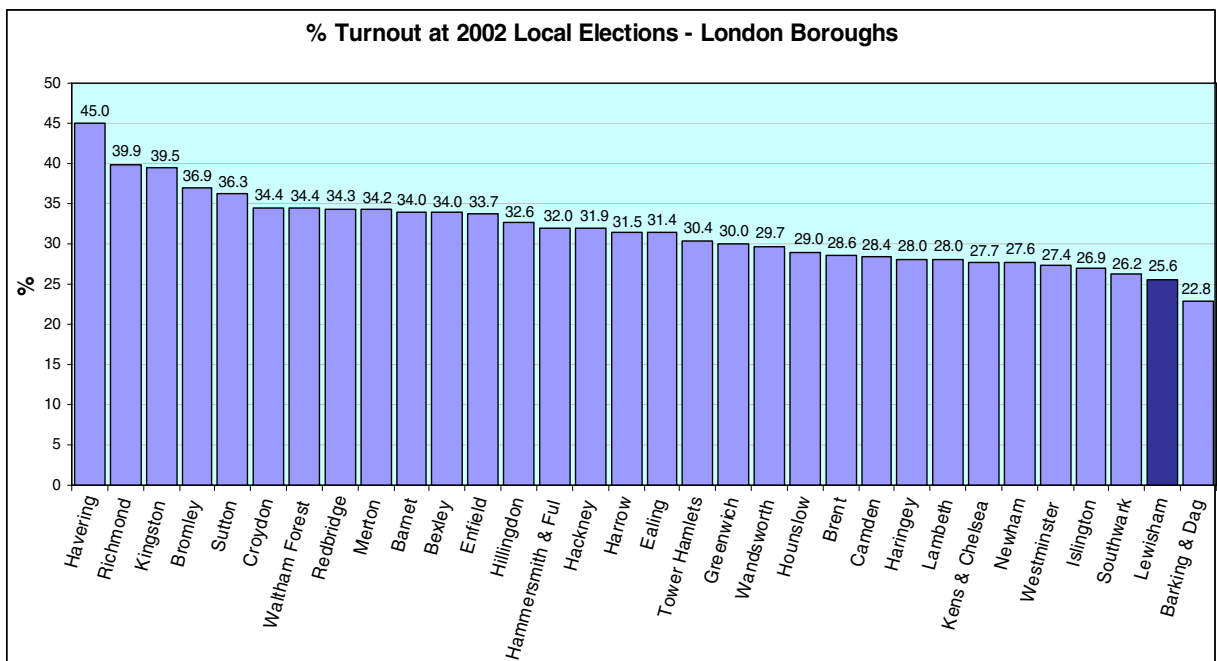| Ward	Turnout
Lee Green	35.8
Ladywell	35.4
Whitefoot	34.2
Blackheath	33.5
Forest Hill	32.9
Catford South	31.3
Lewisham Central	31.2
Crofton Park	30.1
Perry Vale	29.9
Telegraph Hill	29.7
Brockley	28.5
Grove Park	28.4
Sydenham	28.0
Downham	26.4
Rushey Green	24.9
Evelyn	24.1
New Cross	23.0
Bellingham	22.6

2.5   The poor turnout in 2006 was nevertheless an improvement on the turnout in 2002[4] – the graph below shows the turnout on a ward-by-ward basis in 2002. There was an improvement in turnout of at least 3% in most wards between 2002 and 2006; in Lewisham Central, there was a rise of 9.9%, and a decline in turnout in only one ward (Downham).

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[4] Ward data for 1998 is not comparable due to changes in ward boundaries between 1998 and 2002.

% Turnout in Lewisham wards, Local Elections 2002

Ward	%
Lee Green	32.0
Downham	29.3
Ladywell	28.9
Forest Hill	28.8
Blackheath	28.4
Whitefoot	26.9
Telegraph Hill	26.8
Catford South	26.5
Grove Park	26.5
Perry Vale	26.0
Crofton Park	25.6
Sydenham	25.5
Brockley	24.5
Rushey Green	22.0
Bellingham	21.8
Lewisham Central	21.3
Evelyn	20.2
New Cross	19.2

2.6 The Committee noted, however, that the rise between 2002 and 2006 was in proportion to the rise seen in other boroughs over the same period: Lewisham had the second lowest turnout in both elections, as the graph below indicates. The turnout can be seen in its starkest terms when viewed in the context of the council's relative success in encouraging voter registration; a clear majority of Lewisham residents registered to vote did not turn out at the local elections in 2006.

% Turnout at 2002 Local Elections - London Boroughs

Borough	%
Havering	45.0
Richmond	39.9
Kingston	39.5
Bromley	36.9
Sutton	36.3
Croydon	34.4
Waltham Forest	34.4
Redbridge	34.3
Merton	34.2
Barnet	34.0
Bexley	34.0
Enfield	33.7
Hillingdon	32.6
Hammersmith & Ful	32.0
Hackney	31.9
Harrow	31.5
Ealing	31.4
Tower Hamlets	30.4
Greenwich	30.0
Wandsworth	29.7
Hounslow	29.0
Brent	28.6
Camden	28.4
Haringey	28.0
Lambeth	28.0
Kens & Chelsea	27.7
Newham	27.6
Westminster	27.4
Islington	26.9
Southwark	26.2
Lewisham	25.6
Barking & Dag	22.8

2.7 The Committee sought to maintain a focus on equality of opportunity during the review. Voter turnout is lower among black and minority ethnic (BME)

communities[5], young people[6], and those on low incomes. Turnout among BME voters at the 2005 general election was 47%, compared to 62% of white voters. At the same election, only 37% of 18-24 year olds voted compared to 75% of people aged over 65. Amongst those typically on higher incomes (denoted as A/B social class), turnout was 70% in 2005, whereas among the more deprived (D/E social class), turnout was 54%[7]. There is no such data, however, breaking down the ethnicity or age of voters at local elections in Lewisham.

2.8   In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that Lewisham has had an historic problem with low turnouts: the borough has an estimated BME population of 38.3% (according to GLA estimates for 2006); and a younger age structure than the London and national averages (ONS, 2007). Furthermore, Lewisham is the 39th most deprived local authority area in the country, out of 354[8]. Nevertheless, the Committee's original concern about turnout is further backed up the fact that boroughs with similar demographic make-up, such as Southwark and Lambeth, had higher turnouts than Lewisham in 2002 and 2006.

2.9   The rapid decline in turnout has clearly been a matter of concern at national and local level. As stated by ODPM[9]:

> "Elections are the prime way in which the political will of a community is expressed. Local elections allow local communities to set the political agenda for their local area. The more people that vote, the greater the democratic legitimacy of the elected local authority and the greater its scope to claim a mandate for its actions."

2.10   This concern was reflected in the creation of the Electoral Commission in 2000, which aimed to encourage involvement in the democratic process by modernising electoral processes, increasing awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties. The Commission set up pilots for the 2000 local elections in thirty different local authority areas, and in a further thirty-eight areas in 2002. These tested innovative approaches such as voting by internet, text message, telephone or at kiosks; all postal ballots; electronic counting, and flexible voting hours/days[10].

2.11   The recognised need to modernise electoral processes led to the Electoral Administration Act 2006. The Act makes significant changes to the way that local elections are administered. This not only includes the way that elections are run but also how people register to vote; how candidates run for elections; how political parties are regulated; and how the performance of electoral services is measured. A notable requirement of the act is the duty of electoral officials to 'encourage engagement' by the public in the electoral process. The

[5] Purdam, K., *Voter Engagement Among Black and Ethnic Minority Communities*, Electoral Commission: 2002.
[6] Keaney E & Rogers B, *A Citizen's Duty: Voter inequality and the case for compulsory turnout*, IPPR: 2006
[7] The Electoral Commission (2005) Election 2005: Engaging the Public in Great Britain http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/generalelection2005.cfm.
[8] Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2007 (CLG).
[9] ODPM, *Turnout at local elections: Influences on levels of voter registration and voting*, London: 2002
[10] An evaluation of the pilots (*Modernising Elections,* 2002) can be found on the Electoral Commission website (www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

Committee heard that the Ministry of Justice had set aside funding to support local promotional work, at the discretion of the Secretary of State.

2.12 Members were also reminded of other statutory duties around democratic participation. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduced a 'duty to involve' people in decision-making, which comes into force in April 2009. In addition, the *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* White Paper published this year included a proposed new 'duty to promote democracy'[11]. As part of the White Paper, it was suggested that local authorities should run information campaigns to explain the processes and implications of voting, especially to young people. In addition, it was proposed that powers are given to local authorities to incentivise voting.

3.   Scope of the review

3.1 When discussing the scope of the review, the Committee were mindful that voter turnout is a complex subject and that there are many influences on voter behaviour that cannot realistically be addressed by the Council.

3.2 The Committee noted a number of such examples identified in a major piece of research commissioned in 2002 by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on turnout at local elections[12]:

- *National policy agenda*: there is plenty of evidence to suggest that even at local elections, voters are swayed by national issues.
- *Proximity of general elections*: turnout has traditionally been higher when a local election has been held on the same day as, or in close proximity to, a general election.
- *Persuasive local issues*: the ODPM research suggested that voters are more likely to vote where they are galvanised to do so by persuasive local issues. The controversy of the poll tax, for example, is widely thought to have been a key factor in the high turnout in the 1990 local elections[13].
- *Size of electorate*: evidence suggests that the larger the electorate, the lower the turnout. This is a particular issue in densely populated urban areas such as Lewisham.
- *Stability of local population*: registration and turnout is generally lower in areas where there are high levels of population migration. Again, this is a particular issue in inner city areas such as Lewisham.
- *Marginality of ward/authority* – turnout is likely to be higher in marginal wards or local authorities; similarly, there is likely to be a higher turnout the more parties contesting a seat.

3.3 In addition, another influence on turnout identified by the Committee was the role of party groups, particularly in terms of campaigning. The ODPM research, supported by further research carried out in 2003[14], concludes that

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[11] The new duty would require primary legislation through the draft Community Empowerment, Housing and Economic Regeneration Bill.
[12] ODPM (2002).
[13] Ibid, p.4.
[14] Rallings, C and Thrasher, M (2003), "Local Electoral Participation in Britain", *Parliamentary Affairs,* 56(4); 700-715.

the prevalence and quality of party campaigning, and the number and profile of candidates, are all influences on turnout. 65% of respondents to a survey commissioned by the Electoral Commission after the 2006 local elections felt that they did not receive enough information about local parties' policies or candidates[15]. As the Committee is concerned with making recommendations to the local authority, however, it was agreed that the role of party groups would not be specifically included within the scope.

3.4   Having ruled out a number of factors discussed above from the review's scope, the Committee sought to identify areas where the council can make a difference. The extensive body of research on voter turnout shows that most non-voters give 'circumstantial' reasons for not voting (e.g. being too busy to get to a polling station)[16], or when pressed, explain that they do not think voting will make a difference[17]. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that people are interested in local issues and politics in general[18], and also believe strongly in the principle of voting[19].

3.5   The Committee agreed to focus on the following three areas, which they felt local intervention can, in theory, influence voter turnout: increasing **voter registration**; assessing **methods of voting**; and **raising awareness** of elections and electoral processes.

3.6   Consequently, the committee agreed to use the review to assess how the council could help to increase voter turnout at the 2010 local elections, by:

- examining ways in which the council could increase the number of people registered to vote;
- assessing the accessibility of voting methods currently available in Lewisham, and evaluating the role of alternative voting methods in boosting turnout; and
- examining ways in which the council could raise awareness of the 2010 local elections.

3.7   Members also agreed that the review would be underpinned by a focus on promoting equality of opportunity in the electoral process.

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[15] Electoral Commission, *Public Opinion and the 2006 Local Elections*
[16] Electoral Commission, *Public Opinion and the 2002 Local Elections*
[17] Around 43% of non-voters in English local elections gave this reason for not voting (Electoral Commission, *Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections*).
[18] MORI/Electoral Commission, cited in Electoral Commission, *Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections*, p.15.
[19] ICM/Electoral Commission, cited in Electoral Commission, *Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections*, p.16.

4.   Sources of evidence for the review

4.1   The review was informed by two evidence sessions. The first evidence session (held on the 4th September 2008) considered voter registration and voting methods, while the second session (held on the 2nd October) focused on raising awareness of local elections.

4.2   Verbal evidence was taken from Steve Miller, the Electoral Services Manager at the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (a Beacon-award winner for their work in promoting electoral registration[20]), and the Head of Law (Kath Nicholson) and Electoral Services Manager (Dave Kingdon) at Lewisham.

4.3   In addition, the Committee considered a range of written evidence prior to each evidence session. The written evidence comprised:

- an analysis of local and national turnout data;
- a background paper describing the annual canvass process in Lewisham and summarising registration rates in the borough;
- the Council's *Your right to vote – updating the register of electors* leaflet;
- the Electoral Commission's *Electoral registration in Great Britain: Fact sheet;*
- the Electoral Commission's *Who has my personal details?* fact sheet;
- a background paper on voting methods, summarising electoral pilots and the impact on turnout, and the legislative background to improving access to voting;
- the Electoral Commission's *Key issues and conclusions: May 2007 electoral pilot schemes*
- a background paper summarising the council's approaches to raising awareness of local elections; and
- a background paper summarising good practice from outside Lewisham in raising awareness of local elections.

4.4   The background papers mentioned above were themselves informed by a variety of research and consultation; individual references are included as footnotes within the body of the report.

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[20] Last year 97.2% of households responded to the Annual Canvas in Hammersmith & Fulham – the highest rate in London.
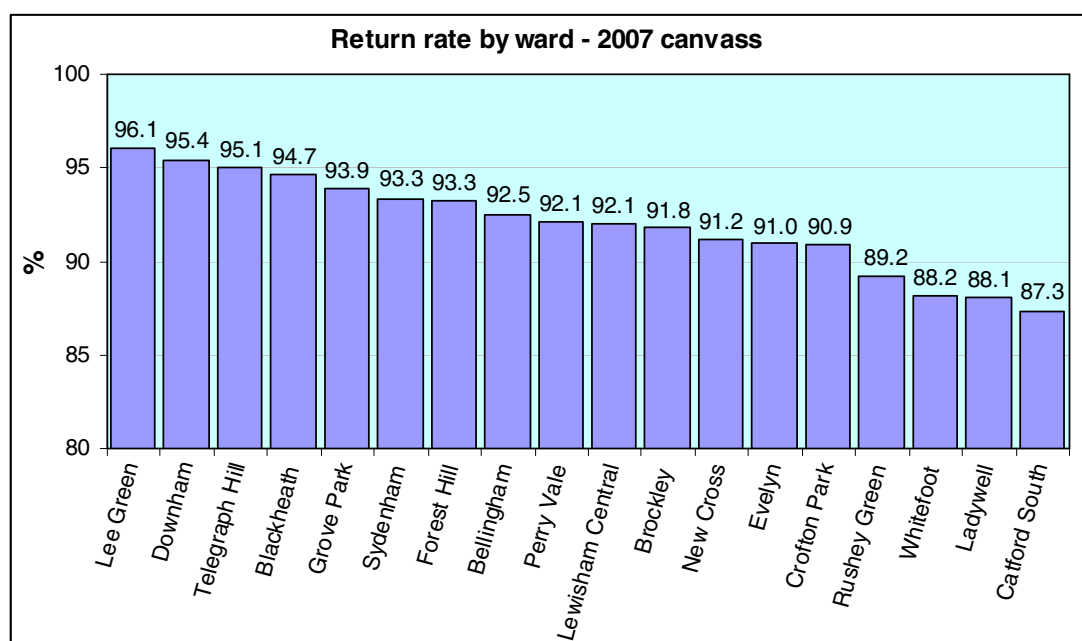
5. Voter registration

5.1 Registration rates in Lewisham

5.1.1 The Committee heard that the annual canvass is the main means by which the Electoral Registration team gather and update the names of Lewisham residents eligible for the electoral register. An annual response rate is measured, which can be compared against other boroughs. At the time of the evidence session which addressed voter registration, the annual canvass for 2008 had not yet been completed and therefore the results from the 2007 canvass were the most up-to-date available.

5.1.2 The Committee welcomed the news that Lewisham had a final response rate of 92% for the 2007 annual canvass of the electorate, which was the third consecutive increase and compares favourably with the overall London rate of 89.8%[21]. This is particularly notable as Inner London Boroughs such as Lewisham tend to have lower registration rates due to the higher turnover of population[22]. Since the review was completed, the results for the 2008 have been published: the rate of 91.84% is a slight fall since 2007, but this seems to be in line with a general decline across the country.

5.1.3 The Committee were shown the response rate broken down by ward, as represented in the graph below.

Return rate by ward - 2007 canvass

Ward	Return rate (%)
Lee Green	96.1
Downham	95.4
Telegraph Hill	95.1
Blackheath	94.7
Grove Park	93.9
Sydenham	93.3
Forest Hill	93.3
Bellingham	92.5
Perry Vale	92.1
Lewisham Central	92.1
Brockley	91.8
New Cross	91.2
Evelyn	91.0
Crofton Park	90.9
Rushey Green	89.2
Whitefoot	88.2
Ladywell	88.1
Catford South	87.3

5.2 How the annual canvass is carried out in Lewisham

5.2.1 Members heard that the fieldwork for the 2008 canvass was completed in two stages:

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[21] Electoral Commission, *Baseline performance information – electoral registration in Great Britain, 2008.*
[22] Population migration in London is analysed in detail in the GLA's Data Management Analysis Group's *London Borough Migration: 2001-06* briefing, which can be found at http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/factsandfigures/dmag-briefing-2008-10.pdf

- First stage: Monday 18th August to Friday 5th September
- Second stage: Friday 26th September to Friday 24th October

5.2.2   Intensive efforts were made during a third stage – between 24th October and the end of November – in those wards with the lowest incidence of registration to canvass rigorously to improve response rates ahead of the publication date of 1st December 2008.

5.2.3   Over 140 canvassers were recruited to carry out the 2008 canvass. The first stage of the canvass required the canvassers to drop off registration forms at all properties in the borough. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires canvassers to door knock at least once; in Lewisham, canvassers were required to knock on doors during the first stage to see if residents were able to complete and sign the form on the spot. If there was no-one in at the time, the canvasser would drop a form and guide through the letterbox, explaining what the resident needs to do.

5.2.4   The second stage consisted of a visit to all properties for which no form had been collected or delivered during the first stage. At least three personal visits were required before a form was left at a property. At the third stage, second reminder forms were sent by Royal Mail.

5.2.5   The Committee asked whether local people's knowledge was used to improve the success of the annual canvass. They were informed that many local people (including staff who live locally) are recruited as canvassers, and are matched to their local area where possible.

5.2.6   In addition to the requirement to make a personal visit to properties, the Committee heard that a number of other changes to the registration process have been introduced by the Electoral Administration Act. For example, the Act enables people to register anonymously where their safety may be compromised by their details appearing on the register (e.g. victims of domestic violence); further details on data protection issues are provided in an Electoral Commission leaflet. Other changes introduced by the Act include the requirement to obtain the nationality of all people registering, and the need for people to provide full first names rather than initials.

5.2.7   The Committee were told that efforts are made to make the registration process as simple as possible for residents. If no changes are to be made, residents can confirm their details via the internet, freephone telephone, pre-paid envelope, or by SMS text message. For those whose first language is not English, forms and supporting leaflets are available in a range of languages, while Language Line provide translation of the forms over the phone. Canvassers are encouraged to offer help to residents in filling out the form, where appropriate.

5.3   Improving registration rates further

5.3.1   Although the Committee welcomed the high annual canvass return rate in Lewisham, they were also keen to hear good practice from outside of the borough to assess what further improvements could be made. As mentioned in 4.2, the Committee heard evidence from Steve Miller, Electoral Services Manager for London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (LBHF), a Beacon

council for electoral services. Steve Miller suggested that LBHF's success was explained by three factors:

- a multi-channelled annual canvass;
- proactive rolling registration supported by a shared customer database; and
- organisational and political commitment and resourcing of the service.

5.3.2   As the Electoral Registration team in Lewisham already run a multi-channelled annual canvass, members focused more on LBHF's rolling registration and organisational commitment to voter registration.

5.3.3   *Organisational commitment to voter registration*
The Committee heard that electoral services at LBHF received significant political and organisational support, perhaps partly explained by a number of marginal results at recent elections[23]. This has ensured that a reliable register is seen as essential for campaigning purposes. High-level support is reflected in the staffing structure at LBHF, where all five officers are principal officers – compared to two principal officers, one SO1 and two Scale 5/6 in Lewisham.

5.3.4   In addition, LBHF also provide substantial funding for the annual canvass (around £100,000), which enables around £60-65,000 to be spent on incentivising canvassers to get as many forms completed as possible[24]. In Lewisham canvassers are also paid on an incentive basis but the scheme in LBHF is far more generous. Canvassers in Lewisham also face a considerably larger electoral roll than LBHF (121,301 compared to 180,063, as at December 2007[25]).

5.3.5   The Committee heard that although a deputy manager post had been introduced last year (in light, partly, of the additional administrative burden of the postal voting system) the budget had remained largely the same this year. Members agreed with the Head of Law's assessment that Lewisham had reached the point that for registration rates to significantly improve, greater investment would be needed. Therefore, **the Committee recommends that the Council should place more of an emphasis on registration in order to increase registration rates further.**

5.3.6   *Rolling registration backed by a shared customer database*
The Committee heard that although LBHF did not view proactive rolling registration process as a substitute for a good annual canvass, it was nevertheless a useful way to boost registration rates. Rolling registration was carried out, for example, by sending out blank voter registration forms with Council Tax bills, and by carrying out door knocks outside of the annual canvass. A crucial part of LBHF's rolling registration process is the comprehensive data matching system comprising information from all

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[23] In two wards, leading candidates were separated by as little as four and eleven votes in 2002.
[24] Canvassers in LBHF are paid per form completed, and can earn up to £350 if all their forms are completed and returned. Other incentives provided by LBHF include an additional £1000 offered to the team (out of 16 ward teams) with the highest return rate, and a lunch provided by the Chief Executive for all canvassers, where certificates of achievement are presented to the most successful team.
[25] Electoral Commission, *Baseline performance information – electoral registration in Great Britain, 2008.*

customer databases across the council; Council Tax, Housing Benefits, Parking tickets etc are matched against the registration database every night, and those that do not match are flagged up by alerts each day for the team to follow up. In the first year this led to 14,000 (11%) being added to the register and 13,000 (10%) being removed.

5.3.7   The Committee heard that there are a number of ways in which the Council encourages registration all the year round. Members were informed that there is a substantial amount of permanent information on the Council's website about registration and elections, including downloadable forms, a link to the Electoral Commission *About my vote* website, and a leaflet explaining the registration process: *Your Right To Vote: Updating the Register of Electors*. This leaflet is available on request in other formats such as Braille, large print, audio tape, CD, and in a variety of languages, including British Sign Language. Further publicity is provided by announcements on the council website, an advertisement in Lewisham Life, a stall at People's Day, and a bus advertising campaign funded jointly with four other neighbouring boroughs.

5.3.8   The Committee particularly welcomed the news that registration leaflets were handed to 16 and 17 year olds on polling day for the Young Mayor, especially in light of evidence presented to members showing that registration was particularly low among young people. **As further ways to encourage young people to register to vote, the Committee recommends that the Council:**

- **sends registration information prior to local elections to all residents who have become eligible to vote since the last election; and**
- **sends voter registration information as part of a birthday card to all young people when they turn eighteen.**

5.3.9   The Committee also heard other approaches proposed by the Electoral Registration team to improve the rolling registration process: for example, registration information was to be provided to participants attending local Citizenship ceremonies, and other service users such as new housing tenants or Council Tax payers. Television advertising in GP surgeries was also being considered. Furthermore, two management trainees from the National Graduate Development Programme have recently joined the Electoral Services team on a part-time basis until February; their work will include promoting registration through outreach work with community groups.

5.3.10 The Committee welcomed the proposals to improve Lewisham's rolling registration process further. **Members particularly endorsed the proposals to send registration information with council tax bills, and in introductory packs for new housing tenants.**

5.3.11 The Committee was also clear that a similar shared customer database to LBHF was crucial for rolling registration to have a significant impact on registration numbers – and the accuracy of the register – in Lewisham. **The Committee recommends that proposed work to assess the feasibility of comparing the council tax database with the Electoral Register should be undertaken to improve the accuracy of the Register.**

5.3.12 *Other approaches considered by the Committee*
The Committee also considered, but were not persuaded by, a number of other approaches to improving registration rates in Lewisham. One such method was to pursue robust enforcement measures against those who failed to return canvass forms. It was felt, however, that prosecution was a costly exercise that could result in as little as a £40 fine.

5.3.13 In addition, the Committee also enquired whether setting an ambitious target of 100% registration rates would help to inspire further improvement in Lewisham. The advice from witnesses was that setting such a target would merely set the council up to fail, as such a target was unrealistic; LBHF, for example, did not set targets but simply aimed for the maximum return they could achieve.

6. Voting methods

6.1 Impact of alternative voting methods on turnout

The Committee heard that over recent years the Government has encouraged local authorities to carry out pilot schemes to trial new methods of voting and voting arrangements at local elections. The Electoral Commission has been responsible for evaluating each pilot. Six rounds of pilots have been undertaken so far, which are summarised below:

Table 1: Summary of electoral pilot schemes since 2000[26]		
Pilot programme	Scale	Innovations tested
May 2000 English local government elections*	38 pilot schemes	All-postal voting, postal voting on demand and early (advance) voting
May 2002 English local government elections	30 pilot schemes	All-postal pilots, and multichannel voting pilots using remote electronic voting
May 2003 English local government elections	59 pilot schemes	All-postal voting, multi-channel remote electronic voting, new voting hours, locations and administrative processes such as electronic counting
June 2004 combined European Parliamentary and English local government elections	Four European Parliamentary regions: the East Midlands, North East, North West, and Yorkshire & the Humber	All-postal voting
May 2006 English local government elections	15 pilot schemes	Postal vote signature checking, signing for ballot papers at polling stations, advance voting, electronic counting and a number of administrative measures included in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 designed to improve the security and administration of elections
May 2007 English local government elections	12 pilot schemes	Electronic voting, electronic counting, advance voting and signing for ballot papers at

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[26] Electoral Commission, *Key issues and conclusions: May 2007 Electoral Pilot Schemes*, 2007, p.2.

		polling stations
Note: *The May 2000 electoral pilots pre-dated the establishment of the Commission. These pilot schemes were evaluated by the local authorities themselves, using academics, consultants or their own resources. All subsequent pilot schemes have been evaluated by the Commission.		

6.1.2   The Committee was advised that Lewisham has carried out three pilots, the most recent of which – involving advance voting and electronic counting – was in 2006[27]. The latest of these pilots particularly informed the Ministry of Justice about the practicability of changes it intended to make in the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

6.1.3   The Committee heard that there is little evidence to suggest that the different voting methods piloted nationally since 2000 have had a significant impact on turnout, with the exception of postal voting. As the Electoral Commission has consistently pointed out, "the methods of voting are unlikely in themselves to address the underlying causes of low turnout[28]".

6.1.4   In terms of **electronic voting**[29], for example, the evaluation of the 2002 pilots concluded that "the technology-based voting pilots appeared to have no significant impact on turnout[30]". The Beacon-accredited Swindon Electoral Modernisation Programme (SEMP), which has offered e-voting in all wards since 2002, even saw the percentage of e-votes drop from 17.6% to 15.9% between 2003 and 2007, despite overall turnout increasing from 29.5% to 33.8%[31]. The Electoral Commission concluded in 2007 that "the majority of those who voted electronically are likely to have voted anyway via another channel[32]".

6.1.5   Furthermore, the Committee heard evidence that pilots of **advance voting**[33] have also shown little evidence of impact on turnout. The Electoral Commission concluded that "the majority (74%) of users of advance voting would have voted in any case" and "repeated piloting of advance voting did not necessarily lead to higher levels of usage, which were low[34]." Furthermore, with the increased availability of postal voting caused there was some confusion over the role of advance voting[35].

6.1.6   Evidence suggests that **postal voting**, however, is "an increasingly important contributor to turnout[36]". All-postal ballots in 2002 saw an average increase in

[27] A summary of the Electoral Commission's evaluation of the Lewisham pilot can be found at: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/news-releases/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-reviews-and-research/electoral-commission-evaluates-lewisham-election-pilot

[28] Electoral Commission, *Modernising elections: a strategic evaluation of the 2002 electoral pilot schemes*, 2002, p.61.

[29] The forms of electronic voting piloted in 2007 were voting by the internet and by telephone.

[30] Ibid, p.4.

[31] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6268734.stm

[32] Electoral Commission, *Electronic voting: May 2007 electoral pilot schemes*, 2007: p.5.

[33] Advance voting is the term used for paper-based voting at polling stations in advance of polling day.

[34] Electoral Commission, *Advance voting: May 2007 electoral pilot schemes*, 2007: p.3.

[35] ICM, *Local elections pilot schemes 2007: main research report*, 2007: p.19

[36] Ibid, p.19.

turnout of 28%[37]. 15.3% of voters were issued with a postal vote in the 2008 local elections, compared to 12.8% in 2007 and 4.9% in 2002. There was, however, a slight fall in the proportion returning the postal vote in 2008 (71.2%) compared to 2007 (74.9%)[38].

6.1.7   The Committee noted that administration of postal voting is resource intensive, with a disproportionate amount of time devoted to administering a voting method used by around 15% of the electorate.

6.1.8   In addition, the Committee was informed that independent researchers were commissioned in Lewisham's postal pilot to contact voters to verify if they had actually voted, and no systematic fraud in postal voting has been discovered in Lewisham.

6.1.9   The Committee was advised that more radical alternatives mentioned during the evidence sessions – such as proportionate representation or compulsory voting – would require primary legislation and could therefore not be progressed locally.

6.1.10 The Committee was also advised that further pilots are unlikely to be sanctioned for the 2010 local elections for several reasons. Firstly, the 2010 elections may well be held on the same day as the general election, and as the Electoral Commission points out, "there is no statutory basis for using non-traditional voting methods at UK Parliamentary general elections[39]." Secondly, new parliamentary boundaries are due to be introduced with effect from the next general election, and if the local elections are to be held on the same day, it would not be sensible to undertake a local pilot alongside the administration of new parliamentary boundaries. Finally, the use of electoral pilots has reached something of a crossroads: in their evaluation of the 2007 pilots, the Electoral Commission recommended that no further pilots be sanctioned by the government unless part of a "comprehensive electoral modernisation strategy" subject to "extensive consultation." [40] The Government's response to the Commission's evaluation makes reference to ongoing work on an electoral modernisation strategy[41], but nothing has been published as yet.

6.1.11 The Committee noted that the Electoral Commission's evaluations referred to in this section – supported by numerous studies cited in the Power Report (2006)[42] – suggested that tinkering with voting methods was unlikely to have

[37] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1965521.stm

[38] Electoral Commission, *Local elections in England 2008: report on the administration of the 1st May 2008 elections,* 2008: p.27.

[39] Electoral Commission, *Key issues and conclusions: May 2007 Electoral Pilot Schemes*, 2007, p.8.

[40] Ibid, p.6.

[41] Ministry of Justice, *The Government's response to the Electoral Commission's recommendations on the May 2007 electoral pilot schemes*, 2007: p.3. http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/gov-response-elec-comm.pdf

[42] The Power Inquiry was set up by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to address the decline in democratic engagement in Britain. The citations included in the Inquiry's final report (*Power to the People – the Report of Power: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy)* to support the claim that alternative voting methods have limited impact on turnout, include Bentley, T. and Oakley, K. (1999). 'The real deal. What young people really think about government, politics and social exclusion'. London: Demos; Diplock, S. (2001). None of the Above, London: Hansard Society; Pattie, C., Johnston, R. (2001) 'A low turnout landslide:

a significant effect on turnout, and therefore chose not to make any specific recommendations around voting methods. Nonetheless, the Committee were keen to investigate how the council seeks to improve accessibility of voting, particularly in light of its legal and moral responsibilities.

6.2   Improving accessibility of voting
The Committee heard that efforts have been made in Lewisham to encourage people with specific communication or mobility requirements needs to vote. In terms of improving physical access to polling stations, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and Electoral Administration Act 2006 require that polling stations must not only be made accessible for people with disabilities, but must also be reviewed every four years. As a result of a review of polling stations carried out in Lewisham, some polling stations were discontinued, six new ones were included and 18-20 had minor changes made to make them DDA compliant. A review of polling districts in Forest Hill was also carried out recently as the terrain of the area made it difficult for some people to get to some of the previous stations. This led to the introduction of one more polling station in Forest Hill to ease access difficulties.

6.2.1   Accessibility across polling stations has also been improved by the introduction of tactile voting templates and large print versions of ballot papers. The Electoral Administration Act also removed the common law rule that people with certain types of mental impairments be prevented from voting.

6.2.2   The Committee was also advised that for people whose first language is not English, guides to voting are offered in different languages. However, all voting materials at polling stations must, by law, be in English. For those who cannot read, voter guidance is produced in Makaton in the polling stations in Lewisham.

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abstention at the British general election of 1997' Political Studies, 49(2): 286-305; Pirie, M., Worcester, R., (2000) The Big Turn-off. Attitudes of Young People to Government, Citizenship and Community, London: Adam Smith Institute; Rallings, C. and Thrasher, M. (2003). "Local Electoral Participation in Britain". Parliamentary Affairs, 56 (4): 700-715.

7. Awareness raising of local elections

7.1 The Committee heard about a number of initiatives introduced in Lewisham to raise awareness of voting and local elections. For example, a letter is sent to every registered address in the borough each February, referring to any forthcoming election and providing an opportunity for residents to update registration details or apply for a postal vote. At the time of elections, editorial articles and advertisements are placed in Lewisham Life and the local press, and posters are displayed on JC Decaux sites across the borough.

7.2 The Committee was also advised that in light of the new statutory duty on Electoral Registration Officers to promote engagement in electoral processes, work is currently being undertaken to develop a formal outreach/awareness strategy aimed at bringing together and developing on existing initiatives. Two graduate trainees have been recruited within the Electoral Services section to carry out a project to support this work from November this year to February 2009. Additionally, a staffing review is currently underway in Electoral Services, aimed, in part, at focussing dedicated resources on outreach and awareness work.

7.3 **The Committee recommended that the Council should carry out detailed research into why local residents do not vote – especially those who have lived in the borough all their lives and yet have never voted in local elections – as part of the planned Outreach and Awareness Strategy.**

7.4 Members also heard about methods used at other local authorities to promote voting at local elections. A survey carried out as part of the ODPM research mentioned above found that advertising through local newspapers was the most common approach to publicising local elections; the results are summarised below:

Methods of publicising local elections, other than delivery of poll card		
	% of LAs surveyed	No of LAs surveyed
Local newspapers	80.4	201
Council newspapers	63.7	160
Council-produced posters/advertising	61.4	154
Radio	36.7	92
Government produced posters/advertising	29.5	74
Leaflets	23.1	58
Banner at Town Hall	6.0	15

7.5 Other methods of publicising local elections cited in the ODPM research included are listed below. Members acknowledged that the Council already uses many of these methods.

- Leaflets posted with poll cards, promoting the importance of voting.
- Second reminder poll cards issued to households in wards with the lowest turnouts.
- Advertising local elections on beer mats in local pubs and clubs.

- Signed video provided to charities for the deaf and hard of hearing, and to Talking Newspapers.
- Franking machine logos used to promote local elections.
- Loud-speaker cars promoting election day.
- Posters placed outside polling stations at least a week before the election date.

7.6 Members noted the important role party groups have to play in improving turnout, and although it had been agreed that this would not be investigated as part of the review (as discussed in Section 3), **the Committee encourage the Elections Committee to consider examining the role of party groups in promoting local elections in the future.**

7.7 In addition, the Committee heard about the range of advice and practical materials available through the Do Politics hub[43], an online initiative developed by the Electoral Commission. Furthermore, the Committee was informed about the examples of good practice collated by the Local Government Association's (LGA) Local Democracy Campaign[44], which aims to get young people more involved with, and aware of, their local council and local democracy in general.

7.8 The examples provided by the Local Democracy Campaign were not set out in detail as they were more generally aimed at encouraging democratic engagement and participation, rather than the specific area of voter turnout. Similarly, the Committee heard about a number of council initiatives aimed at the wider theme of democratic engagement rather than voter turnout. These are summarised below.

7.9 *Young Mayor election*
The annual Lewisham Young Mayor election was first introduced in 2004 as a way of making sure that young people in the borough of Lewisham can have a real say in the future of the area. It also provides young people with direct experience of voting in an election; the election is formally organised in very much the same way as a traditional Council election with postal voting for out of school pupils, and a count and formal declaration of the results in the Civic Suite attended by both schoolchildren and local dignitaries. All young people aged between 11 and 18 who go to a Lewisham Secondary School or Sixth Form College are allowed to vote in a polling station at their educational establishment on polling day, with each given a ballot paper enabling them to vote for their first and second choice for Young Mayor. At the various school and colleges where the election is held, forms are distributed to students as a way of encouraging registration/voting. The elections are well publicised: for 2008, new JC Decaux promotional posters were produced, press releases issued, an editorial and advertisement placed in Lewisham Life and special editions of Blue Borough News published. This led to a turnout of approximately 50% at the Young Mayor election held in October this year.

7.10 **The Committee noted the success of the Young Mayor election, but suggested that more young people could be encouraged to get involved in local democracy if a Young Councillors element were introduced as part of the Young Mayor Scheme. The Committee therefore recommends**

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[43] The Do Politics hub can be found at www.dopolitics.org.uk.
[44] Further information is available at www.localdemocracy.lga.gov.uk.

that a feasibility study be carried out on the introduction of elected Young Councillors to augment the Young Mayor Scheme.

7.11   *'Be a Councillor' promotion*
The Council has been actively supporting the London Council's 'Be a Councillor' promotion. This was launched locally at People's Day in July and was followed up with a 'Become a Lewisham Councillor' event held in the Civic Suite on 15th October. There is a link on the website both to the Council's electoral registration information and to the London Council's 'Be a Councillor' website, which provides comprehensive information on the roles and responsibilities of local authority members.

7.12   **Although the Committee welcomed the Council's participation in the 'Be a Councillor' campaign, members recommended that the process could be improved by greater involvement of elected members at Lewisham.**

7.13   *Operation Black Vote*
The Committee also heard that the Council is working with Operation Black Vote, a non-party political campaign, supported by a broad coalition of mainly Black organisations, to increase understanding of how Lewisham Council works, specifically the role of elected members, the people who run them, and how to make contact. A draft booklet, *Who Runs Lewisham?*, has been prepared by Operation Black Vote, and is currently being evaluated.

Appendix A

Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council should place more of an emphasis on registration in order to increase registration rates further. **(5.3.5)**

As further ways to encourage young people to register to vote, the Committee recommends that the Council:

- sends registration information prior to local elections to all residents who have become eligible to vote since the last election; and
- sends voter registration information as part of a birthday card to all young people when they turn eighteen. **(5.3.8)**

Members particularly endorsed the proposals to send registration information with council tax bills, and in introductory packs for new housing tenants. **(5.3.10)**

The Committee recommends that proposed work to assess the feasibility of comparing the council tax database with the Electoral Register should be undertaken to improve the accuracy of the Register. **(5.3.11)**

The Committee recommended that the Council should carry out detailed research into why local residents do not vote – especially those who have lived in the borough all their lives and yet have never voted in local elections – as part of the planned Outreach and Awareness Strategy. **(7.3)**

The Committee encourage the Elections Committee to consider examining the role of party groups in promoting local elections in the future. **(7.6)**

The Committee noted the success of the Young Mayor election, but suggested that more young people could be encouraged to get involved in local democracy if a Young Councillors element were introduced as part of the Young Mayor Scheme. The Committee therefore recommends that a feasibility study be carried out on the introduction of elected Young Councillors to augment the Young Mayor Scheme. **(7.10)**

Although the Committee welcomed the Council's participation in the 'Be a Councillor' campaign, members recommended that the process could be improved by greater involvement of elected members at Lewisham. **(7.12)**