

ELECTIONS COMMITTEE		
Report Title	REPORT OF THE SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE ON VOTER TURNOUT	
Key Decision	n/a	Item No. 5
Ward	All	
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Class	Part 1	Date: 26 March, 2009

1. Purpose

This report provides officers' comments on the recommendations made in the report of the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee report on voter turnout.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee note and comment on this report.

3. Introduction

3.1 The Committee will be considering the report of the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee following the in-depth review undertaken into voter turnout. That report contains a great deal of information on the registration processes adopted locally, voting patterns at elections and initiatives undertaken both nationally and locally to attempt to improve voter turnout. This report provides officers' comments on the various recommendations, which for ease of reference are set out below.

3.2 Recommendation 1

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

Response

The Select Committee report comments favourably on the relatively high electoral registration return historically achieved in Lewisham. The Select Committee recognise, however, that for registration rates to improve significantly, 'greater investment would be needed'.

The Committee will note from the Select Committee's report, that as part of the Electoral Services service plan for the current year, work has been undertaken by two of the Council's Graduate Trainees to develop a draft Public Awareness Strategy to inform work on promoting both registration and voting at election times. This work is nearing completion and it is proposed that the draft Strategy, once finalised, is the subject of report to the Committee.

Members will also be interested to know that a re-structuring of the Electoral Services Section has recently been completed and posts of Principal Registration Officer and Principal Electoral Engagement and Elections Officer established which will provide for a renewed emphasis on the various functions which are now the responsibility of the team. The Electoral Services Manager position has also been reviewed and all three posts are to be advertised shortly. It is suggested that further consideration should be given to this recommendation when the new staff are in post and have had an opportunity to review and develop initiatives proposed as part of the Public Awareness Strategy.

3.3 Recommendation 2

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)**

Response

The Select Committee report looks specifically at encouraging newly qualified electors and young people to register to vote. In respect of the latter, the proposal to send birthday cards to 18 year olds is being pursued and companies undertaking such work have been approached for indications of the likely cost involved. This is expected to be fairly reasonable and can be met within existing budget provision. Also planned as part of the new Awareness Strategy are mobile registration events using staff in the Young Mayor's team, to promote registration and offer 'on the spot' registration at, for example, Lewisham College and Goldsmiths University, as was done at People's Day this year. A number of other initiatives involving the Young Mayor's team are being developed. Again, this activity should be able to be met from within existing resources. This work will form an important part of the role of the new Principal Electoral Engagement and Elections Officer. Additionally, with other newly qualified voters, the Committee will note the proposal to make registration information available to those

attending Citizenship Ceremonies and other similar avenues will be explored.

3.4 Recommendation 3

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

Response

Officers are keen to progress these proposals and discussions are already taking place with the services involved.

3.5 Recommendation 4

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)

Response

This recommendation is currently being considered with the Council I.T. client service and will need to be the subject of a further report once the feasibility and likely cost has been assessed. Electoral Services do currently have on-line access to the Council Tax register, but clearly there will be budget considerations involved in introducing any shared database on the Hammersmith and Fulham model.

3.6 Recommendation 5

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)

Response

As part of the work to develop the draft Public Awareness Strategy, some research has been undertaken by way of interviews with local residents on why they had chosen to vote or not to vote at recent elections. It is suggested that this recommendation should be further considered when the Committee consider the draft Strategy with results of the consultation undertaken, at which time proposals and potential costs of more detailed research work can be presented and considered.

3.7 Recommendation 6

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

Response

This is a matter which the Committee will no doubt wish to consider.

3.8 Recommendation 7

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)

Response

There are currently a range of initiatives in place to deepen and extend the ability of young people to engage with the democratic process and influence the delivery of services across both Lewisham and its partners. These follow the Review of Participation Activities across the Authority. The primary outcome of which was to set in place routeways between the community sector, youth service, faith groups and schools-based work to come together around the enhanced and relaunched Young Citizens Panel. The main focus of the Young Citizens Panel, will change from a primarily re-active body responding to external requests, to an active body engaging with Ward Assemblies, Safer Neighbourhood Panels and the other community engagement activities. It is also anticipated that school councils, youth forums and other grass roots initiatives will feed into this panel as well as into the Young Advisors.

The Young Advisors and Young Mayor will continue to be the conduit whereby the Youth Management Board, the Youth Opportunities Fund, Youth Capital Fund and Positive Activities for Young People money, distributed by young people, report back to both the Mayor and Young Mayor to ensure transparency and accountability. With the changes to the organisational, structural and strategic architecture of the authority's democratic engagement activities for young people, steps have been taken to further enhance young people's ability to become part of, take part in and engage in the Council's democratic and civic processes.

3.9 Recommendation 8

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)

Response

This matter is being addressed at the Member Development Steering Group and the initiative will be developed further with the support of elected members.

4. Financial implications

Any financial implications arising from this report will need to be contained within existing budgets. Those activities requiring additional funding would need to be the subject of a growth bid through the usual councils budget setting process and could not be progressed until such funding had been identified and agreed. The budget process for 2009/10 is complete so any bid for growth would need to be included in the 2010/11 budget process and prioritised alongside other bids.

5. Legal implications

There are no immediate legal implications arising.

6. Crime and disorder implications

There are no crime and disorder implications arising.

7. Equalities implications

Equality considerations are central to the work of Electoral Services in attempting to maximise both registration and voter turnout. Initiatives agreed as part of the Select Committee's recommendations and the Public Awareness Strategy will be developed recognising and reflecting the needs of 'hard to reach' and disadvantaged groups and those with specific disabilities.

8. Environmental implications

There are no environmental implications arising.

Background documents

Report of the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

Draft Public Awareness Strategy

If there are any queries on this report please contact Dave Kingdon – 020 8314 6907