

MINUTES OF THE ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 22 October 2014 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Liam Curran, Janet Daby, Alan Hall, Stella Jeffrey, Alicia Kennedy and John Paschoud

18. Election of Chair and Vice Chair

RESOLVED that Councillor Jeffrey be elected as Chair and Councillor Curran be elected as Vice Chair for the Municipal Year 2014-15.

19. Declaration of interests

There were no declarations of interest.

20. Minutes

Members were pleased to note that comments made at the last meeting regarding count timings had been taken into consideration by officers and that the timing of the count had been changed accordingly.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Meeting held on March 10 2014 be confirmed as signed as a correct record.

21. Combined elections 2014

The Committee considered a report which reviewed the arrangements and conduct of the Combined Elections held in the London Borough of Lewisham on the 22 May 2014. The Electoral Services Manager commented that the elections went according to plan and passed without any notable incidents, with the exception of an accounting error in Forest Hill Ward.

Members raised a concern that although comments made by the Committee regarding count timings had been taken into consideration and changed accordingly, there had been a lack of communication between officers and Members in relaying the change in timings. This had resulted in a number of Members being uncertain of what time the count was taking place.

Officers took on board the concerns raised, and confirmed that in future communication to Members would be prioritised.

A number of Members commented that finding appropriate venues within the Borough was a concern. The Elections Manager confirmed to the Committee that Forest Hill School had been approached to host the count for the 2015 election, and that the Council was still awaiting a response.

The Chief Executive clarified that although there had been difficulty in identifying venues within the Borough that were big enough to accommodate the count, as

well as being logistically appropriate, the Council had a number of identified venues that would be adequate for the upcoming General Election.

In response to a query regarding the use of internal staff and external individuals in supporting the elections, the Electoral Services Manager confirmed that no agency staff had been used. There was a 40/60 split between internal employees and external individuals assisting with elections.

The Head of Law commented that the Council's elections call centre had been a success. The call centre had operated during the election period with four members of staff able to respond to all elections related queries, such as preparing and distributing FAQs to the public, confirming whether individuals were registered to vote, registering individuals for postal or proxy votes, etc. The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that although this information was available online, a large number of residents had continued to contact the call centre, and it was seen as a positive service.

The Chairman queried the cost of the election in the London Borough of Lewisham compared to other London Boroughs. The Electoral Services Manager commented that he had contacted a number of neighbouring authorities and the Council's cost of £600,000 was in line with other London authorities.

In respect of the single accounting error in Forest Hill Ward, Members felt it useful that the importance of clear and consistent marking by poll clerks be highlighted in future training sessions. The Head of Law confirmed that at every training session the importance of this was stressed and that it would continue to be stressed at all future training sessions.

The Committee requested that a meeting be held in January 2015.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

22. Polling District and Polling Place Review 2014

The Committee considered a report which outlined the Council's arrangements for polling districts and places.

Councillor Alicia Kennedy raised a concern that the consultation had taken place during August which was the Council's summer recess and as such a number of individuals who may have wished to make a representation had not been able to.

The Electoral Services Manager commented that the review was a statutory requirement, and as the team had focused much of its energies on Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the annual canvass, August was the time when the team felt most able to conduct the review. The Electoral Services Manager clarified that members of the public and Councillors were welcome to submit feedback at any time.

RESOLVED that the Elections Committee recommend to Council that the polling districts and places set out in Appendix A to the report, which included

amendments in paragraph 7 below, be adopted and become effective at future elections.

23. Update on IER

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in Lewisham.

The Head of Law commented that Members had been provided with a number of updates relating to IER over the past year. The Head of Law further explained that the London Borough of Lewisham were amongst the first tranche of Local Authorities who were asked to submit information to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for the data matching exercise. Around 46,000 individuals' information did not match, and each of these individuals needed to be directly contacted to ask for their personal information. Another complication was that non-responders to the annual canvass also needed to be contacted. The Elections team sent Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) to households where the team were unaware of who was in residence. This related to around 21,000 households.

The Committee noted that the Council was conducting its canvass four weeks later than usual, and that this scenario was repeated in every Local Authority across the country.

The Electoral Services Manager confirmed to the Committee that the figure of unverified voters had fallen from 46,000 individuals to around 35,000 individuals following targeted contact, and that the numbers were decreasing over time. There was a further concern around postal voters who may not be aware of the need to be IER registered, and may only find out when they were unable to vote.

The Electoral Services Manager outlined the Council's plans to purchase a small number of mobile devices to assist in the canvassing process, whereby canvassers would be able to knock on individual's doors and request that they securely submit all of their information there and then. Further benefits would be that less canvassers would need to be hired, and that the Electoral Services Manager would be able to directly monitor which households had been visited.

A number of Members commented that there had not appeared to be an engagement strategy with the public, such as posters and advertisements. The Electoral Services Manager commented that the London Borough of Lewisham was subscribed to the Electoral Commission's campaigns and as such, the Council were waiting on the Electoral Commission's own campaign to be launched. It was confirmed to Members that this issue would be chased up.

Councillor Alicia Kennedy requested that a ward by ward breakdown of information regarding difficult to reach households be provided to her.

A number of Members queried whether canvassers could use the mobile devices to request that individuals access the government's own IER website on the device and register securely through that format, rather than using supplier provided software. The Chief Executive highlighted the need for strong security when using these systems, and confirmed that this possibility would be explored

further. There was a view that if the tablets were to be purchased, this would be completed in January 2015.

Councillor Alicia Kennedy felt it important to continue to encourage youth engagement, and queried whether the Electoral Services team had plans to use Government initiatives such as Bite the Ballot and Rock Enrol. The Electoral Services Manager commented that he was unaware of receiving information relating to these initiatives, but would look into the issue further. The Electoral Services Manager further confirmed that a list of Goldsmiths students could be received directly from the College to assist with getting students to register to vote in the Borough. Councillor Alicia Kennedy also requested a breakdown of ward information relating to postal voters affected by the changes who may be unaware of the need to be IER registered. The Head of Law noted that the Council was considering contacting all postal voters in the Borough to update them on the process and to let them know how they are directly affected.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The Meeting closed at 8.58 p.m.