

# **MINUTES OF THE ELECTORAL REGISTRATION WORKING PARTY**

22 January 2015 at 8.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillors Kevin Bonavia, Joe Dromey, Alan Hall, Stella Jeffrey, Roy Kennedy (Chair), Jim Mallory, David Michael, Jacq Paschoud and Jonathan Slater

## **1. Election of Chair**

RESOLVED that Councillor Roy Kennedy be elected as Chair for the Municipal Year 2014-15.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Roy Kennedy declared a personal interest as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Voter Registration.

## **3. Update on IER**

The Working Party considered a report which provided an update on the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the Council wide initiatives undertaken to date and planned for the future to maximise registration in Lewisham.

The Head of Law commented that IER updates had been presented at previous meetings of the Elections Committee.

Electoral registration was changing significantly. In the past, one member of each household completed the registration form on behalf of everyone living at the property. Now electors could only register to vote on an individual basis and had to provide personal identifiers to do so.

It was noted that electors would be deleted from the electoral register on 1 December 2016 if: -

- they had not been automatically transferred under transitional arrangements involved matching the Council's electoral roll with DWP data; or
- they did not respond to the 2013/14 canvass; or
- they subsequently did not respond to requests to register under the new IER system.

The Electoral Services Manager noted that it would only be postal voters affected by IER changes for the 2015 General Election.

Following the DWP and local data matching exercise undertaken in June 2014, the details of 46,000 people did not match with the DWP database. The Council sent invitations to register to all of these individuals, which outlined that they needed to complete the application form and send the Council personal identifiers, ideally date of birth and their National Insurance number, to be registered.

Where there was insufficient detail to enable the Council to send an individual invitation to register, they were sent a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to try to obtain those details. Approximately 20,300 households were sent HEFs. By law these were to be sent to households which were empty, or where there had been no response to the 2013/14 canvass.

Lewisham's local government electorate decreased by approximately 6,400 between the publication in February and December 2014. With an 87% return to the IER canvass, this meant that just short of 26,000 people had not registered.

The Head of Law highlighted to the Working Party that this was typical of what had happened across other London Boroughs, and that the HEF canvass was directed at non-responders and properties thought to be empty, so did not capture data relating to people moving in to the borough or the natural 'churn' of people in the borough. Furthermore, the population of the borough was increasing and the electoral roll had increased year on year across all constituencies at least since 2009 until February 2014.

As Postal Voters would be the only group affected by IER changes for the 2015 General Election, the Council had made dealing with these voters a priority. As at 1 December 2014 there were over 20,000 registered local government postal voters and 18,000 registered parliamentary postal voters. Since publication of the register, a further 1000 applications for postal votes had been received.

The Head of Law commented that of the 26,000 unregistered voters, a significant number of them were in wards where there was a prevalence of a number of groups, for example students and young people, social renters, and black and ethnic minority groups.

In an attempt to maximise registration, an outreach and publicity action plan had been created and a number of initiatives, designed to target unregistered and general voters. Members considered the steps the Elections Team were undertaking, and the Chair commented that the action plan contained a wide range of positive measures, especially those targeting significant unregistered groups.

The Chair queried whether information on voter registration could be included in Council Tax letters sent to households, and the Head of Law clarified that additional information could not be included directly on the bill itself. Councillor Dromey queried whether information could instead be inserted on the letter sent out with the Council Tax bill, and the Head of Law commented that as long as it conformed to Cabinet Office guidelines, it would be a decision for the Mayor to

make.

The role of Council officers, councillors and faith groups and the local media in engaging with people and encouraging voter registration was discussed by the Working Party, and a number of Members considered it important that the Council co-ordinate with a wide range of external organisations such as care homes, schools, colleges, faith groups and BME groups to ensure the voter registration was effectively encouraged, especially amongst harder to reach groups.

Councillor Bonavia suggested that the Council's website be updated to display a prominent banner on voter registration, and further suggested that a prominent display of information on registering to vote be contained in upcoming editions of Lewisham Life.

The Head of Law commented that during the week of the election a voter registration stall would be installed in Lewisham town centre to provide information to the public and encourage people to register to vote.

Councillor Mallory suggested that Local Assembly meetings place the topic of IER and voter registration as agenda items, to assist in raising awareness of the issue.

Accordingly it was RESOLVED that:

- a) the report be noted;
- b) the Electoral Registration Working Party meet every three months, and receive an updated report on the progress of the implementation of IER;
- c) a report on under-registration across the UK be provided at the next meeting of the Working Party;
- d) Bte the Ballot be invited to attend the next meeting of the Working Party to provide an update on the work they have been undertaking; and
- e) the Strong Communities Projects Manager be invited to provide a report to the next meeting of the Working Party on the Council's engagement with faith groups in the community and voter registration.

The Meeting closed at 9.20 p.m.