

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTORAL PROVISIONS SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Electoral Provisions Sub-Committee held on Wednesday 11 June 2014.

PRESENT: Councillor Anthony Wells (Chairman)
Councillor Chris Shippam (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Peter John Cannon
Councillor Geoffrey T Prout
Councillor Drew Swinerd

ABSENT: Councillor Keith Martin Kelly
Councillor Bryan E Read

Dartford Borough Council Officers:-

Graham Harris – Managing Director
Alan Twyman – Member Services Manager

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Read and K Kelly.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 NOVEMBER 2013

The minutes of the meeting of the Sub-committee held on 20 November 2013 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

5. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2014

The Member Services Manager informed the Sub-committee that under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 there was a requirement to hold full statutory reviews of Polling Districts and Polling Places every five years with the first such review being completed by January 2015. This replaced the previous requirement to carry out statutory reviews every four years, with the last one having been undertaken in Dartford in 2011. In any event it was the Council's practice to carry out a "light touch" review on an annual basis to ensure that the current arrangements were fit for purpose. Although there had been some changes to polling places since 2011, mainly when the previous places had been temporarily available for elections, the

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only change to polling districts had been the creation of a new polling district (Waterside) in December 2013 to serve new homes in that been built in that area.

Members were advised of the principal requirements of the full statutory review and the proposed timetable which would include the Sub-committee conducting an initial review of current polling districts and polling places, the Acting Returning Officer's initial submission on the arrangements and the current and future locations of polling stations and widespread public consultation from 1st July until 8 August. There would be a further report to the Sub-committee in September which would include the outcome of the consultation, options for consideration and recommendations for submission to the General Assembly of the Council in October. This would allow any changes to existing arrangements to be incorporated in the annual register of electors to be published on 1st December 2014. It was explained that the Council would be writing to all Councillors, local political parties and community organisations and organisations with expertise in accessibility for the disabled but that any local elector would also be able to contribute to the consultation.

Notice of the intention to carry out a review had been published on the Council's web site and was on display at the Civic Centre and at Dartford Library. Officers had carried out an initial review of the existing arrangements for polling districts and polling places. A comparison had been made between the electors in each polling district in 2011 when the last statutory review had been carried out and as of 17 February 2014 when the annual register of electors was published. The Electoral Commission recommended that there should be a maximum of 2,500 electors allocated to any polling station and currently only one polling district, Greenhithe, had exceeded this number however when postal votes were taken into account the number of electors eligible to vote at the polling station in Greenhithe was below the 2,500 threshold.

Whilst it was recognised that the pace and scale of residential development in the borough would eventually require a change to electoral arrangements there was a concern that the increase in building in particular areas could result in a need for additional polling districts and polling stations in certain wards which could result in an imbalance between wards where electors were over-represented and wards where there was under-representation. This could only really be addressed by a review of warding which was a matter for the Boundary Commission rather than as part of the review of polling districts and polling places.

Some concerns had been raised about two polling stations during the recent European election. The first related to the inability of a disabled candidate to access the Methodist Church Hall in Ship Lane (Sutton-at-Hone polling district (MB) in his motorised buggy. Upon inspection it proved that the entrance in use on the election day could not be accessed by a large motorised buggy but that if the main entrance to the Hall had been used this would have been fully accessible. It was therefore recommended that the polling station and polling place should remain unchanged but that the main entrance should be open at future elections. Concerns had also been expressed by a small number of residents about the use of a temporary mobile unit in New Barn West polling

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district (IC). This related to a mobile unit placed at the junction of Nuthatch and Shearwater which had attracted complaints from three neighbouring properties since the location of the unit had been moved further along Nuthatch at the insistence of Kent Highways before the Police and Crime Commissioner election in November 2012. Members were reminded that this had been reported to the sub-committee at its last meeting when it was explained that no other suitable alternative location could be identified in the polling district and that an alternative location suggested by one of the local residents, the junction of Pescot Avenue and New Barn Road had been unsuitable for the reasons stated in the report. This remained the current position although it was recognised that the provision of mobile polling stations tended to result in complaints from people inconvenienced by the temporary siting of the units.

Presiding Officers had also assessed the suitability of the existing polling stations during the recent European election and no significant issues had been reported and the existing arrangements continued to work well. Given this and the fact that Dartford continued to keep its polling districts under annual review it was not proposed to make any changes to the current arrangements at this time. However in order to allow for greater flexibility in the location of polling stations within polling places, particularly where buildings or specific rooms were unavailable for use at an election, Members were asked to consider designating a geographical zone around each current polling station as the polling place. It was suggested that each polling place should be designated as a geographical zone within 500metres of the normal polling station location. The Acting Returning Officer had been consulted and agreed with the proposal for no changes to the existing polling districts and polling stations and with the polling places being defined as geographical zones.

Members noted the comments made about Greenhithe polling district and recalled the discussion at the last meeting when consideration had been given to changing the location of the polling station in that polling district from the mobile unit at Eagles Road car park to the Dance Union Studio. At that time there had been concern that this would move the polling station slightly further away from Ingress Park and that if it became necessary to create an additional polling district because of the increasing number of residents this could result in more changes to polling stations in quick order which could cause confusion. For this reason the arrangements had remained unchanged. The Sub-committee accepted the recommendation to continue with the current arrangements for Greenhithe but also accepted that development in the area would have to be addressed at some stage in the future. It was felt that this should be reflected in some way in the review documentation.

A Member also commented on the use of the Conference Room at Brent Primary school as a polling station for the first time at the European election. The polling station had generally worked well but it was felt that better signage from the previous location used within the school to the new location would have been helpful. It was also suggested that consideration should be given to creating an additional polling district in Newtown ward to serve the

community around the former fantasies site as this seemed to form a distinct separate area and it was difficult for local people to access the existing polling place, the Brent Old Schoolboys Club. It was pointed out that the reason for the existing arrangements was partly dictated by parish boundaries and the requirement for each parish to be a separate polling district and not to contain parts of other parishes or un-parished areas. It was also likely that a mobile polling station would have been required for this area.

The Sub-committee considered the proposal to designate polling places as a geographical zone but felt that 500 metres was too large and that a 250 metre zone would offer the Acting Returning Officer sufficient flexibility should a polling station need to be moved.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Sub-committee agrees the proposed timetable for the review outlined in the report and that any subsequent changes should be agreed in consultation with the Chairman.
2. That the Sub-committee has reviewed the current polling district and polling places and considers that the existing arrangements should form the basis of the Council's proposals.
3. That in each case the polling place should be designated as a geographical zone within 250 metres of the current polling station location.
4. That the Sub-committee's proposals arising from the initial review of polling districts and polling places be put out to public consultation together with the Acting Returning Officer's comments on polling stations.
5. That the organisations listed in paragraph 5.3 of the report be invited to comment as part of the consultation exercise.

6. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

The Sub-committee received an update on the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and the Council's preparations for the most significant change to the system of registration for a hundred years. It was noted that from 10 June 2014 anyone wishing to be added to the electoral register would have to apply to do so individually and would have to supply details of their date of birth and national insurance number as well as their name and address. This additional information would be checked against the records held by the Department of Works and Pensions to verify the identity of the applicant. Applicants could now apply to register on-line or by contacting the Council's Electoral Services team. This replaced the previous system of household registration.

In order to make the transition to the new system as painless as possible for most people it was intended that the contents of the Council's existing register of electors would be submitted to the DWP IER digital service on 30 June 2014 for data matching against the DWP's records. This would involve submitting details of in excess of 72,000 electors and it was expected that over 80% of the records would be matched. Where this was the case those

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electors would be automatically “confirmed” across to the new IER transitional register and would receive letters to confirm that this had happened and that no further action was needed. Efforts would also be made to match as many people who had not matched DWP records by using locally held databases. When this had been done on a trial basis in July 2013 of the 13,500 records which had not initially matched DWP records a further 5,500 had been matched using local data but 8,000 could not be matched. It was hoped that the match rates in 2014 would be slightly better as considerable work had been carried out to try and make the register as accurate as possible before the confirmation process took place. Where records could not be matched individuals would be sent Invitations to Register and where the Registration Officer suspected that eligible individuals might be present in a household then a Household Enquiry Form would be sent to seek information on the occupants which could then be followed up by sending Invitations to Register. Members were reminded that non-responders to both HEF’s and ITR’s would have to be sent at least two further reminders and at least one attempt to make personal contact by “door knocking”. This would be a major exercise during the transition period following 30 June but would also be a continuing requirement throughout the year on the case of new applications.

It was noted that nobody on the register prior to the change to IER would be removed if they failed to be confirmed or to respond to invitations to register until 1st December 2015 and would still be able to vote at the May elections in 2015. However anyone who had not been confirmed to the new register or had not registered individually would not be able to have a postal or proxy vote for those elections.

Progress since the last meeting of the Sub-committee in November 2013 was outlined. The last pre-IER canvass had been completed and the Register of Electors published on 17 February 2014. Preparations had been made for the introduction of IER after the Minister finally confirmed that this would go ahead to the original timetable in December 2013, although the Cabinet Office had continued to make changes and require additional system testing right up until the end of May. At the same time electoral services staff were conducting the canvass and making arrangements for a by-election and the European elections whilst also been short staffed due to illness. In all the circumstances preparations for the introduction of IER had gone as well as possible and the Council had passed all of the “connectivity” tests that had been required to be carried out. However Members were reminded that this represented fundamental change and was a new challenge for all electoral teams across the country and that there were many uncertainties, including how well electoral management systems would work with the new arrangements and how well the interface with the IER Digital Service worked. Although the Electoral Commission would be running a national publicity campaign in July and August to publicise the change to individual registration it was likely that the change would cause confusion and could also generate complaints from the public and resistance to providing the additional information required in order to register to vote. It was likely that there would be a high level of registration activity across the summer and throughout the transition period and the preparations for the combined elections in May 2015. Once IER had

been introduced anyone registered under the new system would only need to re-register if they changed address and to confirm their details on the Household Enquiry Form which would be sent to every household each autumn during the annual canvass.

The Managing Director suggested that the political parties might wish to give greater thought to how they sought to encourage people to register during the run up to future elections given that this would involve handling personal data.

It was suggested that other Members might wish to learn more about individual registration and that a briefing might be offered to all Members during the transition stage if there was sufficient interest.

The Sub-committee wished the officers every success with the move to individual registration.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 7.37 pm

Councillor A Wells
CHAIRMAN

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