

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTORAL PROVISIONS SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Electoral Provisions Sub-Committee held on Thursday 5 November 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor Chris Shippam (Chairman)
Councillor Romana Gosine
Councillor Sacha Gosine
Councillor Peter Harman
Councillor Denzil J Reynolds
Councillor Richard J Wells

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chairman, Councillor Shippam, welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting and reported that there had been no apologies for absence received.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. CONFIRMATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 OCTOBER 2018

The Minutes of the Electoral Provisions sub – committee held on 17 October 2018 were confirmed as a correct record of that meeting.

4. REFERENCES FROM OTHER COMMITTEES

It was confirmed that there were no references from other Committees for the sub – committee to consider.

5. URGENT ITEMS

It was noted that there were no urgent items for the sub - Committee to consider.

6. ANNUAL CANVASS

The Electoral Services Manager reported verbally on current reforms to the Canvass process.

She informed Members that Reform was introduced for the canvass taking place in this year to allow Electoral Registration Officers to have greater discretion in organising a process which better suited their local area;

It was noted that in previous years, the Electoral Registration Officer sent a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to every household in the borough. Someone in the household was required to respond by completing the paper form,

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online, telephone or by text. Any households which did not respond would receive a personal visit from a canvasser.

It was explained that in the reformed process, Officers started the process by completing a data-matching exercise against information held by the Department of Work and Pensions and locally held data. This allowed properties where the residents are more likely to have changed to be identified and to determine how such properties should be canvassed.

Data matching was undertaken in July and the results were positive which allowed a significant number of properties being assigned to route one. This meant that Officers were confident the information held on the Register of Electors was correct and the households did not have to take any action unless they needed to advise us of changes.

For those households where data matching could not be confirmed, a combination of different forms and electronic communications has been used to encourage a response which is required for these properties.

For properties still not responding, a visit by a Canvasser is still required, however the risks of this during the pandemic has been considered and a decision made not to send canvassers at this time.

Officers are currently waiting to assess whether the reforms have enabled the creation of an accurate Register and what impact the pandemic has made on the process.

Members noted the information provided.

7. POLLING ARRANGEMENTS - 2021

The Strategic Director (Internal Services) updated Members on the position of elections following legislation to delay the May 2020 elections and subsequent local authority by-elections and local referendums in England and the PCC elections, to May 2021.

Members were informed that as a result of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, a preliminary review of the current polling arrangements for the polls scheduled for 2021 had been undertaken to ensure that staff can work safely during the pandemic and that electors are able to comply with social distancing guidelines.

It was noted that Officers had reviewed the suitability of all the polling places previously used considering such matters as:

- whether the venues are spacious enough to enable social distancing,
- if there are multiple entrances and exits to allow a one way system,
- areas for electors to queue outside, and;
- other relevant considerations, in line with current public health advice and government guidelines.

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Arising from this review the sub – Committee received a schedule of polling places currently used showing their availability and suitability for use in forthcoming elections, together with details of substitute venues should those identified prove unavailable.

The sub - Committee also received an assessment of the polling places from the (Acting) Returning Officer.

Members raised concerns about the possible difficulties that could arise should postal vote applications greatly exceed current levels, but were reassured that the only problematic area could be the issuing of ballots should there be a huge influx of applications close to the closing date.

The Sub Committee noted;

1. The recommendations from the interim polling review set out in the report: and,
2. That as and when guidance is received from Central Government, to note that further changes to these arrangements may be necessary.

The meeting closed at 5.25 pm

Councillor C Shippam
CHAIRMAN