

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTORAL PROVISIONS SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Electoral Provisions Sub-Committee held on Wednesday 20 November 2013.

PRESENT: Councillor Anthony Wells (Chairman)
Councillor Chris Shippam (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Peter John Cannon
Councillor Keith Martin Kelly
Councillor Geoffrey T Prout
Councillor Bryan E Read
Councillor Drew Swinerd

ALSO

PRESENT: Alan Twyman, Member Services Manager
Jeanette Stephens, Electoral Services manager

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2011

The minutes of the meeting of the Sub-committee held on 12 September 2011 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

5. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2013

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.

As a result of the current light touch review changes had been considered to the arrangements in three polling districts; New Barn west, Greenhithe, and St John's. The first two of these involved the use of temporary polling station portacabins. Members were reminded that because of the semi-rural nature of

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Dartford a relatively high number of temporary stations were used where community buildings or other suitable premises could not be identified but that these were not ideal either for voters or staff, were expensive to provide and were more disruptive to local people as they were in place for up to a week during an election.

In terms of New Barn West the temporary station had been located for some years at the junction of Nuthatch and Shearwater but following an intervention by the Kent County Council Highways before the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in November 2012 the position of the portacabin had been moved approximately 20 feet to the right of its original location. This had resulted in complaints from 3 local residents both at the PCC election and at the subsequent Kent County Council election in May 2013. One of the complainants had suggested an alternative location at the junction of Pescot Avenue and New Barn Road and this had been considered as part of the review. The Member Services Manager had visited the suggested location and also considered whether there were any other suitable options in the polling district. The junction of Pescot Avenue and New Barn Road was not considered as a viable location as the location would have been on grass verge on a significant camber, without access to street lighting or power, with limited availability for parking and poor disabled access. The junction was also on a busy road and was on the boundary of the polling district whereas the current location was more central. No other suitable alternative location had been identified in the polling district. For these reasons it was recommended that the polling station should remain at the current location but would be subject to review again during the statutory review in 2014 which would involve widespread public consultation.

Greenhithe polling district was currently served by a temporary polling station located in the Eagles Road public car park. Whilst this location had operated effectively the use of a temporary station had all of the limitations associated with using a portacabin both for staff and voters and also required several pay and display parking spaces to be taken out of action for up to a week during elections for the siting of the portacabin. A permanent alternative building had been identified as a possible replacement. The Dance Union Studio at Unit 1, North Star Boulevard had been visited by officers who felt that it offered significant advantages in terms of the facilities on offer both for voters and polling station staff. The building was situated approximately 200 yards away from Eagles Road car park and was within sight of the current location and close to the railway station and therefore convenient for electors who might wish to vote on their way to or from work as part of their commute. The building offered good disabled access, was spacious and had all of the internal facilities required for a polling station. The hire charge for the building was also significantly less than the charge for using a portacabin, would involve less disruption for local residents and would enable all of the parking spaces at Eagles Road car park to remain in use, thereby increasing the availability of car parking for use by electors on polling day. The Sub-committee was therefore asked to recommend a change of polling place to the General Assembly of the Council from the temporary location in the Eagles Road car park to the Dance Union Studio.

The third location considered was in St John's polling district. The polling station currently used was the canteen at the Brent Primary School which was

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a suitable building but had caused inconvenience for the school as it disrupted pre and post school activities. The Head Teacher had requested that an alternative room should be used on previous occasions but no acceptable alternative had been identified. However to ensure that a change could be made without requiring sub-committee and GAC approval should an alternative room become available the entire school had been designated as the polling place which allowed the Returning Officer to stipulate where the polling station would be located within the school site. The school had recently refurbished its Conference Room and had requested that this should be considered for polling station use. Officers had visited the proposed location which has better facilities, is readily accessible and would be less disruptive to the school's routine. However the Conference Room is at the other end of the school to the canteen and approximately 200 yards away from the Brent Old Boys Social Club which was used as a double polling station for Milestone and St Vincent's East polling districts. The Returning Officer had considered whether the new location could confuse voters because of its proximity to the double station but had decided that, unless Members had strong views to the contrary, the Conference Room offered significant advantages and should be used as the polling station for future elections.

Members asked whether the Brent Primary School would be open on 22nd May 2014 when the European elections would take place, whether parents had been consulted about the change and whether there would be sufficient parking, particularly during the time when parents would be delivering/collecting their children from school. It was confirmed that the school would normally remain open during elections and that the request for change had come from the school itself and that the new location should be less disruptive for the school. The school had also undertaken to get staff to park on the upper playground during elections thereby freeing up additional parking space. Whilst parents had not been consulted it was noted that they would have the opportunity to do so as part of the statutory review in 2014 by which time the new location would have been used for the European election and any feedback could inform the review.

The Sub-committee accepted that the suggested alternative location in New Barn West polling district, the junction of Pescot Avenue and New Barn Road was not viable and that given the lack of a suitable alternative location the polling station should remain at the junction of Nuthatch and Shearwater.

The proposed change of location in Greenhithe polling district to the Dance Union Studio was discussed. Some Members were concerned that the change would move the polling station further away from electors in Ingress Park and that there was insufficient car parking. It was also felt that any change of location would be a move away from the place where electors were accustomed to vote and despite the new location being displayed on poll cards and directional signs being used from the Eagles Road car park to the Dance Studio, could result in fewer people voting, especially as they would have to cross a busy road. There was also concern that polling activity could be disrupted by deliveries to Asda. Other Members felt that it could be worth trying the Dance Studio as a new polling station given the clear advantages of

using a permanent building, the significantly cheaper cost of using this site and the fact that the position could be revisited as part of the statutory review. Members highlighted the upturn in development in the borough and continuing building at Ingress Park would have to be addressed in the near future, and on balance, felt that as this could involve further changes to polling arrangements in the area it could be confusing to electors to change the polling place now when it might have to change again in a short space of time. The Sub-committee therefore decided to retain the existing arrangements and continue to use a temporary station in Eagles Road car park.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Sub-committee notes the new requirement under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 to conduct full reviews of Polling Districts and Polling Places every 5 years.
2. That the outcome of the light touch annual review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2013 be noted.
3. That the change of the location of the Polling Station at the Brent Primary School (St John's polling district) from the Canteen to the Conference Room be noted.
4. That the existing locations of the polling places for New Barn West and Greenhithe should be retained: the temporary polling stations at the junction of Nuthatch and Shearwater (New Barn West) and Eagles Road car park (Greenhithe).

6. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

The Sub-committee received a briefing on the background to the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and the implications for the Council of having a new system for electoral registration. Members were reminded of the current system whereby the electoral register was produced each year by way of information provided from an annual canvass whereby a canvass form was completed by one person in each household on behalf of all of the occupants and updated throughout the year by a process of rolling registration. Under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 this process would change to a process whereby each eligible person would have to make an application individually supplying information including their name, date of birth and national insurance number which would be checked against data held in the Department of Works and Pensions Customer Information System before a person could be added to the electoral register. This would involve the most significant changes to the way that registration was carried out for a century and the IER processes would be more complex, costly and labour intensive, particularly during the transition from the old system to the new one.

Whilst 2014 and 2015 would be years of transition, preparations had begun in early 2013 with the testing of the readiness of electoral software and DWP systems and much work had been carried out despite the lack of certainty about many aspects of the project and the late publication of guidance. This

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had included a “confirmation dry run” in July by which every local authority had to submit the data in their electoral registers for matching against DWP records as a test ahead of going live in July 2014. This process was designed to ease the transition to IER for most existing electors on the current electoral register because if their entries could be matched against DWP records or locally held data in 2014 then they would be automatically carried across to the transitional electoral register and would have to take no further action. Based on the “dry run” results around 81% of current registrants would be confirmed by matching DWP records and of the 13,500 that did not match a further 5,500 had been matched using local data. Based on these results it was likely that around 8,000 electors would have to be contacted and invited to register under the new system.

The major changes associated with IER were highlighted in the report, including the introduction of an option for online applications, and Members were advised that nobody on the pre-transition register who was not confirmed or and not responded to an invitation to register under the new arrangements would be removed until December 2015. This was in order to ensure that nobody lost the ability to vote at the General Election, however anyone who had not been confirmed across to the new register published in December 2014 by data matching or as a result of successfully completing an IER application would lose their entitlement to have a postal/proxy vote but would still be able to vote in person.

The complexity of the process during transition were explained including the requirement for many more letters to be sent to eligible electors. This would include sending confirmatory letters to everyone transferred across to the transitional register, Invitations To Register (ITR's) to those people whose data had not matched and Household Enquiry Forms (HEF's) to those households where the Registration Officer believed there could be eligible electors resident. In the case of a lack of response to a HEF or ITR at least two further reminders were required to be sent out and ultimately a personal visit by a canvasser would be required, with a clear audit trail kept in each case. During transition it was likely that some households could receive several different letters and follow-ups leading to confusion and in some cases resulting in telephone enquiries and even complaints. There would be a significant increase in workload for Electoral Services and supporting teams across the Council, particularly IT and Customer Services, during transition and it was envisaged that there would be a large increase in the cost of stationery and postage.

Although the Government had undertaken to fully fund the additional work associated with IER over and above “business as usual” it was doubtful that the funding allocated for 2014/15 of £35,453 would be sufficient and it might be necessary to seek “justification based” retrospective top-up funding. However the Government had already made it clear that there would have to be robust evidence to justify additional funding. It was also envisaged that IER would involve additional costs in future years as IER arrangements would apply throughout the year with the requirements to chase non-responders and door-knock throughout the year rather than just during canvass as at present.

Members recognised the complexity of the transition to IER and the additional burdens this placed upon Electoral Services during a time when there was already a busy electoral agenda. Members asked how potential new eligible electors would be identified, especially as a result of new development, and it was explained that Electoral Services liaised regularly with the GIS team and Council Tax to identify new electors and that local authority Elections Department's also share details of movements from one authority to another. Members felt that the introduction of IER was designed to address problems of perceived under-registration and fraud which were exaggerated and wished the Council well with moving to the new system.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a briefing note should be circulated to all Members of the Council for information.

The meeting closed at 7.53 pm

Councillor A Wells
CHAIRMAN

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