

GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE – 18 JANUARY 2008

DISTRICT AND PARISH ELECTIONS MAY 2007 – COSTS AND ASSOCIATED MATTERS

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Polling Districts Working Party, which was set up by this Committee to review polling districts and polling places to meet one of the new requirements of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, requested that a report be submitted to this meeting of the Committee on the District and Parish elections in May 2007. The request arose from discussion on the costs of the elections and of polling stations, particularly those polling stations that have low usage, bearing in mind the availability of postal votes on demand.

2. ELECTION COSTS

- 2.1 The May 2007 elections were the first held in this District where a number of new legislative provisions, introduced by the Electoral Administration Act 2006, took effect. The most significant (and costly) of these was the need to check signatures and dates of birth of postal voters (“postal vote identifiers”). These identifiers were collected from permanent postal voters as a separate exercise during the early part of 2007. When completing their ballot papers, postal voters were required to sign and provide their identifiers on a “postal voting statement” and these were then compared with the records held.
- 2.2 Some comparisons of cost with 2003 are:

	2007	2003
Total cost of combined elections	£212,423	£134,601
Charges to Parish and Town Councils	£62,496	£33,500
District Council's share of costs	£149,917	£100,801

- 2.3 The District Council's budget provision for the 2007 election was £150,000 so the cost to the Council was just within budget.
- 2.4 Part of the overall increase and the increased charge to Parishes and Towns was due to the fact that there were more parish contests in 2007 (32, compared with 20 in 2003), but there has been a steady rise in the cost of elections over the past few years. Even after allowing for the larger number of parish contests, the increase in costs in 2007 was significant, with most of the increase being attributable to the following new legislative requirements:
- (a) Polling stations were open for an additional two hours. This meant higher payments to polling station staff;
 - (b) Ballot papers had to have a “unique identifying mark”, or UIM, and, because of the new signature checking arrangements, bar codes on the ballot papers were required. This increased printing costs and limited the pool of suppliers able to print the ballot papers;

- (c) The process of checking the identifiers was lengthy and costly. Software was ordered to assist with the checking process, but it was delivered late and was not fit for purpose. The identifiers had to be checked individually, comparing details visually with images of records collected. No payments were made to the software supplier.
- (d) Because of the legislative and procedural changes that took effect at the elections, training of polling staff was necessary.
- (e) The various changes to the legislation and procedures, including the need to check identifiers on postal votes handed in at the polling stations, led the decision to combine the counts for all elections at a single venue. The count was conducted on the day following the poll. Counting at a single venue, during the day, led to higher overall costs of the count.

2.5 It will be recalled that the Government undertook to fund the changes arising from the Electoral Administration Act 2006, and an amount of £55,000 was separately identified in the 2006/07 Rate Support Grant (RSG) for this purpose. The changes brought about by the Act cover a range of electoral registration and elections functions. (This report covers elections issues only and does not deal with the extra duties attached to the Council's electoral registration function.) Advice from the Government is that the RSG funding is ongoing, but the amounts are no longer separately identified.

2.6 In addition to the provision in the RSG, direct Government funding for following has been received:

Collection of Postal Vote Identifiers	£15,992
Checking Postal Vote Identifiers	£14,539

The first amount (£15,992) was spent on contractor and staff costs for collecting the identifiers during the early part of 2007, while the second amount (£14,539) has been retained for the acquisition of signature checking software.

2.7 The Government also made funds available to authorities to promote participation in elections. This Council undertook a poster campaign prior to the 2007 elections. Large panels were placed on refuse vehicles, smaller magnetic posters on other vehicles in the Council's fleet, and banners were erected in Council buildings. The total cost of these amounted to £4,902. A claim for this amount has been lodged but the funds have not yet been received. Turnout at the May 2007 elections was 38.62% compared with 32.99% in May 2003. It is not possible to say whether the poster campaign contributed to the increased turnout, but it is hoped that it had some effect.

3. OTHER ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS

3.1 Polling Districts/Places Review

3.1.1 As mentioned in paragraph 1 above, this report arises from a request by the Polling Districts Working Party, which was concerned at the steady rise in the cost of elections. The Working Party spent some time examining the continued need for seven polling stations that are little used and which have high per elector costs compared with the average. These are set out in Appendix 1 to this report. The most

expensive was £15.57 per elector (Fritham Free Church), compared with a District-wide average of £0.77 per elector. However, the Working Party appreciated that the polling stations serve distinct communities where transport was sometimes difficult (and, in the case of the Fritham Free Church, the poll was delayed, leading to a lower turnout), and felt that no changes should be made at this stage but that the position be re-examined following the next Parliamentary elections when more meaningful comparisons may be made. The recommendation was accepted by the Committee on 16 November 2007. The number of polling stations in Totton has been reduced, but others have been added in Hythe and Pennington. The overall effect of changes agreed as a result of the review was cost-neutral, but, bearing in mind the constant pressure on funds, it will be important to try to achieve economies where these are appropriate.

- 3.1.2 A natural consequence of the closure of some polling stations would be an increase in the number of electors choosing to vote by post or by proxy. While it is difficult to provide a precise figure, the additional costs of dealing with postal votes at elections amount to approximately £2.00 per vote. In addition, the processing of applications to vote by post is also costly – again it is difficult to provide a precise figure but is also in the region of £2.00 per application. However, these costs will rise as it is now a requirement for fresh signatures and dates of birth to be obtained from all “permanent” postal voters every 5 years. Therefore, the overall cost of postal votes is considerably higher than voting in a polling station.

3.2 Citizens’ Panel Survey

- 3.2.1 As requested by the Corporate Overview Panel, a Citizens’ Panel survey was conducted on involvement in, and perception of, the elections. The results are attached at Appendix 2. It will be seen that there is a high degree of knowledge of when and where to vote and other processes associated with the election, but little was known about candidates, their policies, or that voting makes a difference to their lives. This mirrors the national picture and is an area that will be considered further as part of the Council’s proposed community engagement strategy.

3.3 Electoral Commission’s Assessment

- 3.3.1 Most of the many recent changes in electoral registration and elections are a result of the Government’s concern at low participation in elections and the resulting “democratic deficit”. Some of the measures introduced to address this, for example the availability of postal votes on demand, brought security concerns which in turn have had to be addressed. All these measures have brought additional pressure on electoral services throughout the country and, as can be seen, have led to substantially increased costs of elections. Much of the legislation has been introduced unacceptably close to key events such as elections and the annual canvass for the register of electors, which has severely stretched staff resources and contractors working with electoral registration and elections throughout the country.

3.3.2 The Electoral Commission has recently published an assessment of electoral administration in the United Kingdom. A copy of the Commission's report is circulated separately with this agenda to members of the Committee only. Others who wish to view it may do so on the following link:

electoralcommission.gov.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/20469

The Commission has identified three key issues that need to be addressed to support public confidence in the electoral process –

- The delivery structure for elections
- The integrity of elections and
- Legislation for elections

The Commission is to lead a detailed examination of the structure of electoral administration in the UK and aims to publish initial findings by the summer of 2008. Hopefully there will be opportunities for councils and other interested parties to input into this process.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 None arising directly as a result of this report.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

5.1 None

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

6.1 That the report be noted; and

6.2 That the Committee indicates whether it wishes any action taken arising from consideration of the report.

Further information:

Rosemary Rutins
Democratic Services Manager
Tel: (023) 8028 5381
E-mail: rosemary.rutins@nfdc.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Published documents

APPENDIX 1

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES – POLLING STATIONS WITH LOW USAGE

Polling Station	Polling District	Cost – May 2007 (premises and direct staffing)	Electors allocated to polling station	No of voters at May 2007 elections	Cost per elector (premises & direct staffing only)
Fritham Free Church, Fritham	BF	£436	159	28	£15.57
Reading Room, Hinton Admiral	BG	£421	167	61	£6.90
Thorney Hill Community Centre, Thorney Hill	BI	£458	265	85	£5.38
Caravan adj telephone kiosk, Wootton Farm Road, Wootton	BM	£406	101	37	£10.97
Bold Forester, Marchwood	DM	£446	111	30	£14.86
Exbury Club, Exbury	EX	£546	142	46	£11.86
Bisterne Village Hall, Bisterne	RD	£418	172	64	£6.63
Average for District					£0.77

Summary of findings for: Engaging the community

Taking part in elections

Question 11 - Were you aware that you could vote by post?

91% of panel members knew they could vote by post.

Question 12 - Did you know where your polling station was?

Nearly all 96% knew where their polling station was.

Question 13 - Did you know you could vote by proxy?

76% knew they could vote by proxy.

Question 14 - Did you vote in the elections?

77% of the panel voted in the district elections and 75% in the town/parish elections.

Of those who voted, 77% voted at a polling station, 23% voted by post, none voted by proxy.

The main reasons given for not voting were:

Away from home

Busy/at work

Forgot

Don't know what the candidates policies are

Have no confidence in the candidates/they don't make a difference

Question 15 - If you voted at a polling station, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the following aspects?

The majority of those who voted at a polling station were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' will all aspects of the voting process:

- Timeliness of receiving polling card (98%)
- Location of the polling station (97%)
- Voting process (96%)
- Facilities at the polling station (94%)
- Overall voting experience (94%)
- Confidentiality of votes (93%)
- Helpfulness of staff (93%)
- Process for verifying your identity (88%)

Question 16 - If you voted by post, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the following aspects?

The majority of those who voted by post were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' will all aspects of the voting process:

- Timeliness of receiving voting papers (98%)
- Overall voting experience (93%)
- Instructions for voting (92%)
- Voting process (including use of envelopes) (90%)
- Process for verifying your identity (90%)
- Confidentiality of votes (88%)

Question 17 - How much did you know about the candidates standing for district council election in your local area, did you know what their policies were?

Less than a third (31%) of the panel said they knew 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' about the candidates standing in their area.

Question 18 - How much did you know about the candidates standing for parish/town council election in your local area, did you know what their policies were?

Less than a third (29%) of the panel said they knew 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' about the candidates standing in their area.

Question 19 - What would encourage you to vote in the future?

By far the most common answer given was more information. Quite a few also suggested a booklet which lists all the candidates and what their policies are.

Other comments mentioned were:

- Candidates to canvass, more personal contact
- Clear policies
- Knowing it will make a difference
- Less constrained by their party
- Voting via the internet
- More choice of candidates
- Candidates not commenting on others failings
- Honest candidates

Question 20 - Did you see any of the following advertising the elections?

It seems the panel didn't really see the advertising of the elections:

- Banners in council buildings (11%)
- Boards on the council's refuse vehicles (6%)
- Signs on other council vehicles (5%)

Question 21 - Did you see any information on the elections and the candidates on the council's website?

Of those who had internet access, 95% didn't look for information on the candidates on the council's website. 3% had purposely looked for it.

Question 22 - Do you believe that voting in local elections makes a difference to you and your life?

15% of the panel thought that voting in the district and the town/parish elections makes a big difference to their lives. 36% said 'some difference' for both district and town/parish elections.

Question 23 - Do you believe that voting in local elections makes a difference to the area where you live?

16% of the panel thought that voting in the district and the town/parish elections makes a big difference to their local area. 37% said 'some difference' for district elections and 39% said 'some difference' for town/parish elections.

Question 24 - Do you know who your local councillor/s is?

41% said that they knew who their local councillor/s was. Many were able to name them.