

GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE – 11 SEPTEMBER 2009

PROMOTING PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 On 16 January 2009 the Committee considered possible activities to be undertaken with funding provided by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to encourage participation in the electoral process and to assist Electoral Officers to fulfil the new statutory duty to “promote participation”.
- 1.2 The Committee agreed that efforts be directed at increasing voter registration in sixth form colleges in advance of the June 2009 elections. It asked for a progress report to a future meeting of the Committee. This report informs members of the action taken and seeks the Committee’s further views on any action it considers appropriate (and which would bring about improvements in voter turnout) to increase participation in the electoral process.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a duty on electoral registration and returning officers to “promote participation” in the electoral process. The MoJ made specific amounts available to electoral registration authorities to assist in fulfilling this duty. The amount available in 2008/09 was 6p per elector, which for New Forest District Council amounted to £8,448. The MoJ has discontinued specific allocations for the current (2009/10) financial year, but funding is still available, subject to a prior approval process.

3. ACTION TAKEN SINCE LAST MEETING

- 3.1 Following the Committee’s decision in January, the Electoral Services Team arranged a joint display with Southampton City Council at Totton College on 18 February 2009. Wiltshire Council was also invited to participate but was unable to arrange a presence. Totton College fully supported the initiative. NFDC Electoral Services, assisted by the Communications Team and other employees, set up a registration corner in the College Canteen from 10.00 a.m. Tutors informed students of the initiative at classes in the morning. The Councils’ teams actively approached students and encouraged them to check whether they were registered to vote and explained the importance of being on the electoral register. There was a fair amount of interest, but all those who checked, except one, were already registered. The end result was that only one new registration in NFDC’s area was obtained. Southampton gained no new registrations.

- 3.2 In the light of the disappointing result at Totton, it was decided not to pursue further similar events at other colleges. The Electoral Commission actively promoted the European and local elections nationally, with a series of television adverts. Posters promoting the European election (provided by the Electoral Commission) were displayed locally. Hampshire County Council promoted their elections through the local media and in their "Hampshire Now" magazine. Of course, the required statutory notices were published and displayed locally, and a poll card was sent to every person entitled to vote.

4. ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- 4.1 The Committee is asked whether it wishes to suggest any other actions to "promote participation". While the MoJ is not prescriptive about the nature of activities for which funding could be available, activities that are clearly designed proactively and specifically to encourage electors to register for and/or to vote at elections will be eligible. Excluded are:
- (a) activities that are already statutory duties of the Electoral Registration or Returning Officer, for example undertaking the annual canvass, issue of statutory notices, or reimbursement of costs considered to be ordinary staff wages; and
 - (b) activities designed to encourage wider democratic participation outside elections.

5. WIDER DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

- 5.1 In the light of the duty to promote participation in the electoral process, the Committee will wish to consider what action to take next. Two possible ways forward are suggested:
- 5.1.1 Firstly, it is felt that there is scope to do more work with young people. In the Forest, we are fortunate to have some good mechanisms where young people already meet to discuss issues important to them. One of these groups is the Youth Forum which covers the whole District. An approach could be made to them to consider the matter of participation in the electoral process. This would be with a view to ascertaining what actions might be attempted and how, if appropriate, the Forum might join with the Council to make a bid to the MoJ to undertake an initiative. Hampshire County Council help to facilitate the Forum and initial indications are that this is a subject that would be of interest. The Forum meets monthly so there should be the opportunity to discuss the matter quite promptly.
 - 5.1.2 Secondly, the Council could take a broader, longer term view through improving opportunities for all to become involved in Council business. The new duty to involve reinforces this approach. Effective communication with communities results in a better informed population that sees the relevance of, and is more likely to become involved in, what the Council does and understands how its work impacts on their lives. There needs to be an understanding of the difference it makes for someone to engage with the Council – whether that is influencing service delivery, shaping their community, voting at

elections or even standing as a candidate. This should be seen as part of the approach to renew interest in democracy, one of the outcomes of which would be to achieve improved voter turnout in the medium and longer term. The Local Strategic Partnership is developing a framework for all partner agencies to use in increasing engagement. The importance of the democratic process is recognised in the draft framework and the Committee may wish to support that. Officers can explore the potential for this aspect comprising part of any bid to the MoJ, although any bid would have to be carefully prepared to demonstrate that the action designed was specifically geared towards promoting participation in elections..

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The cost of any action the Committee might decide it wishes to take to “promote participation” should be covered by grant funding from the MoJ and therefore there should be no direct financial implications for the Council. Employee time would, however, have to be devoted to any initiatives. It is not possible to estimate the extent of this at this stage.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL, CRIME & DISORDER AND EQUALITIES & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None that are apparent at this stage but these issues will need to be borne in mind in deciding what action, if any, to take.

8. RECOMMENDATION

- 8.1 That the Committee notes the result of the registration initiative undertaken at Totton College on 18 February 2009;
- 8.2 That an approach be made to the Youth Forum to develop an initiative to promote greater participation in the electoral process.
- 8.3 That the LSP be advised that the Committee supports the inclusion of the democratic process in the emerging Engagement Framework and that officers explore whether there potential for this aspect to be included in any future bid to the Ministry of Justice.

Further information:

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Background Papers:

Published documents