

**3 NOVEMBER 2023**

**NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE**

Minutes of a meeting of the General Purposes and Licensing Committee held on Friday, 3 November 2023

\* Cllr Neil Tungate (Chairman)

\* Cllr Richard Young (Vice-Chairman)

**Councillors:**

\* Steve Clarke  
\* Jack Davies  
\* Philip Dowd  
Allan Glass  
\* David Harrison  
\* David Hawkins

**Councillors:**

\* Nigel Linford  
\* Colm McCarthy  
Neil Millington  
\* Dave Penny  
\* Alvin Reid

\*Present

**Officers Attending:**

Rebecca Drummond, Debbie Everett and Joe Tyler

**Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs A Glass and N Millington.

**4 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2023 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**5 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of Interest were made by any Members in connection with any Agenda Item.

**6 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

**7 MAY 2023 ELECTIONS - POST ELECTION REVIEW**

The Assistant Director of Transformation introduced the report and provided an overview of the context regarding the May 2023 Elections. The main points included:

- 140,000 voters were registered to vote in the District and Town & Parish Council election.

- The first tranche of the Elections Act 2022 changes came into effect for the May 2023 election.
- The main changes that effected the May 2023 local election were the introduction of Voter ID, the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) review and the subsequent Polling District and Places Review.
- A lot of feedback was received from partners and stakeholders on how the local election was conducted which informed the Post Election Review.
- From this feedback, and the observations gathered during the election timetable, the opportunities for improvement were split into four defined areas:
  - 1) Nominations, candidates, and agents
  - 2) Polling day and polling stations
  - 3) Staffing
  - 4) Counting of votes.
  
- On nominations, candidates and agents, the Committee heard that the online booking system was used by a majority of agents and candidates. The North Wing of Appletree Court was utilised for application submissions and the necessary checks to take place. There was one Parish Council which received an insufficient number of candidates and therefore had to undergo a re-run on the day of the election. There were some issues with access to the online candidate briefing session, which had to be resolved by members of staff at the time.
- For polling stations, the feedback was positive and very few complaints were received. Although the boundary review information and subsequent changes to polling station locations, some voters did visit their previously known polling stations. The polling station inspectors faced a substantial task of undertaking their first inspections where checks were made on the set up of the stations. This inspection took longer than anticipated and would be something reviewed for future elections.
- Staffing was an area identified as facing key challenges. It had become increasingly difficult to attract new members of staff to fill polling station positions. Despite this, a campaign to attract more staff saw 84 new polling staff join for the election. Overall, NFDC employed around 500 people for polling and count day, most of which are temporary, meaning that there was a significant reliance on NFDC staff.
- The counting of votes saw the greatest level of feedback and the biggest issues faced. It was recognised that the count did not run as well as it could have and one reason for this was down to the staffing levels and the small space at the counting location. The 'Grass Skirts' counting method, although incredibly accurate, was a time-consuming process. It was noted that for this election there was an unorthodox voting pattern. The Action Plan addressed this issue and would be a key area of review going into future elections. It was highlighted that this issue would not be as significant for Parliamentary elections or Police and Crime Commissioner elections where the process is simpler. Alternative venues were being explored but this was not an easy task within the NFDC area and there were not many suitable locations within the NFDC area. This would be an ongoing area of review for future elections.

The Electoral Services Manager provided a detailed summary of the Elections Act changes and the issues that had been identified during the May 2023 local election. The main points were as follows:

- The Election Act 2022 included a large number of amendments to existing legislation that was progressing at a slow rate through Parliament. Therefore, there was insufficient time for all of the legislative changes to be approved by Parliament and subsequently be implemented in time for the May 2023 local elections.
- The key changes to legislation that had been approved and were therefore ready for implementation prior to May 2023 were: Voter ID and Polling Station Accessibility.
- Further introduction of Election Act 2022 legislation changes would be introduced under Tranche 2. The focus of tranche two would be the Online Absent Voter Applications (OAVA). As of the 31 October 2023, new security measures had been introduced for voters to apply online for postal votes. This process required electors date of birth and National Insurance Number to be matched with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The online process was contained securely on the gov.uk website.
- One main advantage to OAVA is that it is ideal for those voters who are able to self-serve and use technology.
- The online system is, however, still being developed and has not been running as expected. Therefore, with the system continuing to be updated until January 2024, training and testing had been limited.
- The processing of paper applications is the most difficult aspect of the new system and is a lengthy process for administrators. The demographics of the New Forest District had been considered and assistance had and would be required for those voters who were not able to upload a digital copy of their signature.
- Another change was that all voters must reapply by January 2026 for their application to submit postal votes. This was a variation on the previous 5-year refresh period, as this now had to be completed every 3 years.
- Additional changes to the current electoral process were expected to come in the future and would be badged as 'tranche 3', 'tranche 4' and so on until the completion of the Elections Act 2022.
- The expectation of the Elections Act 2022 was that there would be new limitations on the number of postal votes that could be handed in by an individual as well as the number of proxy votes. EU Citizens will see a change to their candidacy rights however those with leave to remain prior to 2020 will remain on the electoral register.

- The most significant change would be to overseas electors, whereby every British citizen who has ever lived in the UK will be enfranchised to vote at Parliamentary level Election. The 15 year limit would also be removed. Overseas voters will have to reapply every year on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November but this would be an online process. The number of overseas voters eligible within the District was unknown exactly and the number could be near 750.
- When the Parliamentary election occurs the numerous changes to process would all be tested to their maximum.

Following the detailed report and presentation by officers the Committee asked several questions and provided comment. These were as follows:

- On photo ID it was explained that ID certificates were provided to those who requested them and that photographs were taken, and applications submitted by staff which was then delivered to individual voters via a Central Government service.
- The Committee heard that consideration had and would continue to be given over the possibility of holding future counts over two days rather than one.
- Praise was given to all staff that worked on the May 2023 local elections and their handling of what was an extremely complex and time-consuming process.
- Members were critical of the candidate templates, citing technical issues with the online documents, as well as the content of the templates being difficult to understand for some. It was asked whether contact could be made with the Electoral Commission to address these issues.
- Frustration was expressed over the length of time it took on the day of the count for results to be declared. Despite this, members acknowledged and appreciated the professionalism and positivity of all staff at the count during what was an intense and stressful time.
- It was suggested whether experienced staff members that no longer worked for the Council could be recruited for future counts so as to provide oversight and experienced guidance for training and mentoring of count staff.
- The use of two separate venues, possibly an East and West divide, was discussed and the Committee heard that this had been done during 2015 when a Parliamentary, District and Town & Parish election had all taken place during the same period. This was highlighted on the Action Plan as a way that the spacing issues experienced during the May 2023 local elections could be mitigated. It would be reviewed going into future elections.
- A member explained that during the count, some counting staff and supervisors seemed unsure of their role and the information that they were providing to agents. It was noted that this could be mitigated by way of further training.

- The Committee were informed that for boundary changes to be made on a Town & Parish Council level, a Local Government Boundary Commission would need to be undertake a Community Governance Review, which it was noted is a significant piece of work. These types of reviews are usually undertaken for the purposes of electoral equalities to ensure that there is parity in the number of voters within each boundary.
- Voter confusion was referenced with respect of the Town & Parish Council elections, and it was acknowledged that the number of candidates on each ballot may have contributed to this confusion. Members made comment on the fact that it was also the responsibility of local election candidates and sitting Councillors to inform residents on the specifics of the local elections.
- Finally, the Committee were reassured that the overseas electors voting procedure was specifically for Parliamentary elections and not for Town & Parish Council elections.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee:

- i) Note the report and the issues raised, and;
- ii) That the Committee approve the Action Plan.

**8 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

That the dates of future meetings, as listed on page 2 of the agenda, be agreed.

CHAIRMAN