

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 7 July 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Parekh (Chair); Councillor Kilbride (Deputy Chair);
Councillors Aziz, Marriott, Gowen, Russell, Sargeant, Shaw and
Stone.

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21 January 2015 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

4. DEPUTATIONS / PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

**5. MATTERS OF URGENCY WHICH BY REASON OF SPECIAL
CIRCUMSTANCES THE CHAIR IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE
CONSIDERED**

There were none.

6. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2015

The Chief Executive presented his report and gave a PowerPoint presentation on the work undertaken on reviewing the Polling Districts and Polling Places used for elections within the Borough. Maps of Abington and Phippsville Wards were displayed to indicate the types of issues which could be considered as part of the review. Council at its meeting on 8 June 2015 had resolved that in the next review equal access should be ensured to all using polling stations, including those without cars and with restricted mobility. The Committee's guidance was requested on consultation with the public as part of the review.

The Committee would receive a report to its meeting on 6 October 2015 detailing the consultation response and a submission by the Returning Officer with regard to future polling arrangements. There would be recommendations to form the basis of consultation before the Committee takes a decision at its meeting on 17 November 2015. It was intended to publish the final decision by 1 December 2015, which would be the publication of the first Electoral Register following the 2015 Canvass of Electors.

In answer to members' questions and comments the Chief Executive responded as summarised below:

- Alternatives would be considered where any polling places/stations could not be made accessible to all users.
- Some wards had anomalies as a result of boundary reviews undertaken by the Council, County Council and the Boundary Commission using different bases. The review would seek to resolve such issues.
- There would be a boundary review after the new Electoral Register was published on 1 December 2015.
- The cost of running a polling station on an election day had variables, including hire and staffing costs and any additional equipment which might be required, but was approximately £1,000-£1,500 per station.
- Schools could be required to provide a polling place but the Returning Officer was aware there were costs to the school in doing so, such as caretaking on election day, and that schools had safeguarding concerns to consider.
- Some local authorities had experimented with alternatives to traditional forms of voting, including electronic media, but there were still concerns regarding safety and security to be considered. The previous Parliament had established a commission to look into ways the current system might be changed.
- It was important for members to seek their constituents' views, and offer local knowledge, particularly where any issues had been raised. For example, a very large polling district had been created in Talavera ward which had led to complaints in 2015 that this caused access issues. This had been flagged up for consideration in this review.
- Members could usefully direct their constituents to information on the review and a brief questionnaire which were on the Council's website. A copy of the information and questionnaire was circulated at the meeting.
- The Household Enquiry Form, which required details of persons living in properties, had a prescribed form of wording which did not leave space for the details of the review to be included on it. The Individual Electoral Registration Form had greater space available and some information about the review would be included on that form.

Members offered the following comments for consideration:

- The possibility of requiring supermarkets to make a room available as a polling place if no suitable alternative was available;
- The use of housing policies to allow empty properties to be used as polling places;
- To potentially use Housing Officers to identify areas for polling places;
- To potentially use Neighbourhood Wardens to identify issues regarding polling places;
- That the Borough was one of the fastest growing areas in the country and as a result of this fast growth many new residents were not aware of the ward they lived in;

- That Individual Electoral Registration information material could be given to members for passing to constituents.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Electoral Commission's guidance on the conduct of reviews of Polling Districts and Polling Places and the respective responsibilities of the Council and of the Electoral Registration Officer and Local Returning Officers be noted.
2. That the work done to date on the current review and the plans to complete the review in good time for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May 2016 be noted.
3. That the comments in the preamble above be considered bearing in mind the Commission's guidance.

7. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

The Chief Executive presented a report detailing progress made towards the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in light of the Council's resolution on 8 June 2015 that further work be carried out to ensure maximum numbers of Borough residents are registered to vote, particularly with the full implementation of IER.

The response to IER had been very low nationally in 2014/15 and the Electoral Commission had decided to recommend that the final transition from the household system to IER be put back to be completed in December 2016. Approximately 4,000 electors in the Borough (4.6%) who are registered under the old system were still to register under IER in spite of repeated reminders.

In answer to members' questions and comments the Chief Executive responded as summarised below:

- Notifying people of IER through the Council Tax system when they reported changes to circumstances had led to some issues, particularly in the case of bereavements, and other methods were being considered.
- Under IER people have to register individually and then register each following year. A person's electoral number would change as the new Electoral Register was published annually in December.

Members offered the following comments for consideration;

- That IER information material could be given to members for passing to constituents;
- That local radio be used to publicise IER as many people were listeners;
- That door knocking to chase up IER responses often tended to miss catching many people;
- There might be an issue with many first time voters not registering under IER;
- That consideration be given to students who are not registering under IER, with approximately 7,100 not registered;

- That attention be paid to IER in those wards where there is a high transient population, particularly of transient workers;
- That attention be given to registering voters in areas of high density housing;
- Publicising IER at social and community events where many people gather together;
- That the resources available to promote IER be considered.

The Chief Executive stated that the intention was to promote IER until it became something people did on a routine and on-going basis.

RESOLVED:

That the actions being undertaken by officers to pursue the ongoing implementation of Individual Electoral Registration in Northampton be noted and the comments in the preamble above be considered following the motion passed at the Council meeting held on 8 June 2015.

The meeting concluded at 7:03 pm.