Scrutiny Committee Report

Vale
of White Horse
District Council

Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

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Preparation for the 2015 district, parish and parliamentary elections and progress on the elections action plan

Recommendation: to note the progress on the preparations for the 2015 district, parish and parliamentary elections and on the election action plan.

Purpose of Report

1. To consider progress on the preparations for the district, parish and parliamentary elections in May 2015 and on the implementation of the scrutiny committee's recommendations on the review of the 2011 local elections.

Background

2.   This report fulfils the recommendation agreed by the committee in August 2011 for a report in November 2014. In light of a number of conflicting projects, including the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), which requires each person to register to vote individually rather than by household, the chairman agreed a request to delay the submission of a report by a month to this meeting. Appended to this report is a table setting out the recommendations of this committee agreed at its meeting in August 2011 and the progress in addressing each recommendation. The body of the report includes further detail on a number of issues.

Progress on implementation of recommendations

3. Since 2011 the elections team has successfully delivered a number of by elections at county council, district council and parish council level, the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2012, Oxfordshire County Council elections in 2013, the European Parliamentary elections in 2014 and two neighbourhood plan referendums in South Oxfordshire. These elections have allowed the team to further address the actions identified in the review, improve their project

management/risk management processes and importantly identify how best to deliver the 2015 elections.

4. The **attached** schedule provides an update on the status of the committee's recommendations.

5. The schedule shows progress against the recommendations and where applicable identifies arrangements for 2015. The following paragraphs expand on a number of important issues for the delivery of the elections.

Appointment of printers (postal vote issues)

6. Printing issues formed a major part of the review undertaken in 2011 and were identified as a major factor that contributed to the issues encountered at the 2011 elections including incorrect ballot papers and the non-delivery or incorrect delivery of postal packs. David Buckle, in his capacity as returning officer (RO) appointed an alternative printing firm which successfully delivered a number of by-elections, annual canvass registrations and the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in 2012. However, in 2013 the RO took the decision to undertake a full procurement exercise to test the market and ensure the council had a contract in place setting out service delivery expectations and which would offer both him and the council a means of redress in the event of the non-delivery of service.

7. Officers undertook the procurement exercise in accordance with the council's procurement processes and with support of officers within the procurement team. The council invited proposals from companies who had extensive proven electoral and electoral registration work experience. Three companies submitted proposals which were scored in accordance with the advertised process. The contract was awarded to the company who had undertaken work for the RO and council since the 2011 elections. To date the company has delivered an excellent service offering regular communication with officers and attending meetings at the council offices prior to the delivery of major elections.

Purchase and performance of new software

8. Committee members will be aware that since the IER go-live date of 10 June the council's previous electoral management system was beset by problems which delayed the introduction of IER during the summer. Because of ongoing problems the chief executive, in his capacity as electoral registration officer, took the decision to seek an alternative software provider with a proven track record in the delivery of IER. On 10 October the deputy leader of the council took an urgent decision to award the contract to an alternative software provider. The council is now successfully delivering IER albeit behind schedule. Officers are confident that this new software will positively contribute to the delivery of the 2015 elections.

Project management arrangements and resource plans

9. The 2011 review identified the need for activities to be undertaken by staff outside the core team. Officers considered the option of engaging a project manager from outside the core team for major elections to provide a fresh perspective and an independent challenge. Officers agreed to implement this approach for the delivery of the IER project with the appointment of an officer with proven project management experience from outside the service managing both the project plan and risk register elements of the project – a move welcomed by the Cabinet Office. In light of the success of this approach the RO has appointed the officer as project

manager for the delivery of the 2015 elections. He will commit up to two days a week to the project from now until February and then commit more time nearer the election. The project will be run in accordance with the council's project management procedures and comprise both a project team and project board to oversee the successful delivery of the project.

10. In addition to the appointment of a project manager external to the service the RO is seeking to appoint a consultant with extensive experience in the delivery of elections from the Association of Electoral Administrators as a critical friend to review the project plans and preparations in general. The appointee will be expected to attend the project board meetings.

11. This report and appendix sets out a number of ways in which existing council staff resources will be deployed to assist with the delivery of the 2015 elections. In addition to this the elections team comprising a team leader, officer, trainee and a four person administrative team will be supported by an additional temporary member of staff from January until 30 June 2015.

Count arrangements for 2015 elections

12. The 2011 review recommended an assessment of suitable count venues. The Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon was successfully used as the count venue for the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in 2012 and the Oxfordshire County Council elections in 2013. The successful delivery of these elections and the subsequent European Parliamentary elections in 2014 at the same venue has reinforced the returning officer's view that this is the most suitable venue across both South Oxfordshire and Vale for the delivery of the combined elections in 2015.

13. In light of the scale of next year's elections the RO has appointed Clare Kingston, Head of Corporate Strategy, as count venue manager to oversee this element of the project. She is currently scoping the project and will appoint appropriate support staff to undertake specific roles.

14. All ballot boxes will be returned to the count venue for verification at the close of poll on Thursday 7 May. The three parliamentary constituency counts will be held immediately following the completion of the verification with the announcement of results by the morning of Friday 8 May. The RO is currently finalising arrangements for the timing and location of the district and parish council counts. Current proposals involve holding the district council counts on Friday 8 May at the Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon. The final timing will be dependent on the availability of staff and provision of a reasonable rest period for those staff who would have worked on election day and through the night.

15. At the 2011 elections a number of parish councils requested that future parish council election counts be held in the community. In light of this request the RO is exploring the possibility of holding the parish council counts on Saturday morning in regional count venues. A meeting to discuss these arrangements with the proposed venues is scheduled for 10 December 2014.

16. Officers are aware that other authorities intend to hold district counts on Saturday and parish council counts on Monday. In light of this officers are currently undertaking a survey of authorities within the South East to gain a picture of how other authorities are approaching this major exercise. The RO will make a final decision in light of this survey and the meeting referred to in paragraph 15 above.

Call handling by Capita

17. The elections team was not prepared for the number of telephone calls received in 2011 and was overwhelmed by the number it received when issues arose. Whilst additional staff resources were made available during subsequent elections, officers continued to explore other options to increase resilience and relieve the pressure on the core team. With the introduction of IER, and in anticipation of the high volume of routine phone calls, arrangements were made for Capita to undertake electoral services call handling on behalf of the council. Due to the success of this exercise officers are currently working on an extension of this agreement to allow Capita to answer more general electoral questions from customers. We anticipate that this arrangement will be in place for the 2015 elections.

Engaging with stakeholders for 2015 elections

18. The appendix to this report contains recommendations to improve the communication with those involved in the election process (for example parish councils and agents). Such communication has improved at the elections held since 2011. The RO and elections team will ensure this is maintained and enhanced for the 2015 elections. Officers are currently finalising a 2015 election webpage which will include relevant information and sign post customers to other relevant information held with other organisations – for example the Electoral Commission. On 2 December, the RO had his first meeting with election agents. As stated in recommendation vi of the appendix to this report officers have attended a meeting of parish clerks to offer guidance on the electoral process.

Financial Implications

19. None arising from this report.

Conclusion

20. At its meeting in March 2012 the committee considered an update report on the implementation of its recommendations, agreed at its meeting in August 2011, for suggested improvements for the future management of elections. This report provides an update on the delivery of those recommendations and the preparations for the delivery of the 2015 combined elections. The committee is asked to note progress to date and make any observations.

Background Papers: Report to committee meetings held on 21 July 2011 and 22 March 2012. Minutes of the scrutiny committee meetings held on 21 July and 24 August 2011 and 22 March 2012.

Update on status of committee's recommendations

	Recommendation	Status comment
1		
i	exercise to identify and select a suitably experienced printing firm be undertaken	See paragraphs six and seven of main report
ii	a suitable local printer be identified to deal with small scale elections printing and to provide back up in the crucial period immediately prior to an election	A local printer identified and agreed to provide back up for printing ballot papers.
iii	a communications strategy be developed for all elections using the councils' facilities and a wide range of media and in particular consider the use of adverts in the printed media	The elections team works closely with the communications team and specifically their identified 'communications buddy' during all elections. A full communications strategy is in place for 2015.
iv	during the nominations process frequent communication take place with agents	Agents are now regularly updated on developments (issue of poll cards/postal votes etc and advised of any problems).
v	the nomination process be reviewed to ensure a more efficient and effective use of resources and eliminate use of paper records	Officers will explore the feasibility of this with the new electoral software package.
vi	clerks of parish and town councils should be advised that they are not required to handle completed nomination papers	Guidance note to parish clerks has been amended to reflect this and will form part of written instructions to parish clerks for future elections. Officers attended the Society of Local Council Clerks on 25 November to brief clerks on arrangements for the elections.
vii	analysis take place to identify those activities which must be carried out by the core team and those which are peripheral and could be carried out by other parts of the organisation but shaped by the elections team	Non-core team officers are trained and administer the postal vote opening sessions. The training of presiding officers and poll clerks is delivered via an online session followed up with a short briefing session from the RO when staff collect their ballot boxes. This releases elections staff from the resource intensive process of delivering numerous training sessions. Non-core team officers from the department's business support unit will be on standby to assist with telephone queries and any other duties as required. See paragraphs nine, 10, 13 and 17 of main report.

	Recommendation	Status comment
viii	during the election period the project plan and risk register be regularly updated to form part of short and focussed meetings of the core elections team chaired by the returning officer (or a deputy authorised to act on his behalf) to oversee progress	RO continues to hold monthly update meetings with core team. Project board meetings have been scheduled for the 2015 elections.
ix	the two separate IT systems used by the elections team be integrated as soon as possible	Joint data base system in place and operating successfully. No issues identified with new electoral software.
x	data be supplied to the printer in a timely manner so that majority of postal vote packs are in future provided to Royal Mail on the day after the postal vote deadline	A change in legislation now requires postal votes to be issued to electors as soon as is practicable, which in practice means at any time after the details to be printed on the ballot papers have been confirmed – deadline for withdrawals. A second issue is made for new applications received by the registration deadline date.
xi	the Online Business Account be used by both the printer and the elections staff in a timely manner to check the quantities of documents supplied to Royal Mail against the data file supplied to the printer and that future printing contracts specify exactly what regular reports are to be made to the council and when;	Officers receive data from the printers on the number of data files received, poll cards and postal vote packs produced and supplied to the postal service and from Royal Mail on the number of packs received from the printers and entering the mail system. For each election the election team ensures it has a named contact at Royal Mail to follow up on any issues that may arise.
xii	an exercise be carried out to identify colleagues outside the core elections team who can support the process in a variety of roles such as overseeing postal votes, inspecting polling stations, count supervision having received appropriate training;	As noted in vii non core team officers manage the postal vote opening/verification work for major elections. Non-core elections officers act as polling station supervisors and count supervisors. Appropriate briefing/training sessions are held and updated to reflect each type of election.
xiii	all options for count venue(s) in 2015 be considered and each potential count venue be subject to a detailed written assessment and that a named person holds responsibility for the preparation of the selected venue(s);	See paragraphs 12 and 13 of main report.
xiv	a training course be developed for count supervisors encompassing all aspects of their role;	Comprehensive briefing sessions held for count supervisors. These will be repeated for the 2015 elections.

		Recommendation	Status comment
xv		the 'combination method' is not a recognised means of counting 'split votes' and should not be used;	Officers agree the count method before each election, train and instruct staff accordingly and explain the process to agents. The 'block vote' method of counting is a valid option in appropriate circumstances, for example where four candidates stand for two seats.
xvi		the returning officer review the method used for counting 'split votes' and inform all agents of the method to be used in the future;	As above. Procedures to be determined for each count.
xvii		all staff employed by the returning officer be paid by BACS through the payments system; use of cheques becoming an exception;	Due to the timing of the PCC elections staff were not paid by BACS due to concerns that payments would not be received before Christmas as favoured by the Home Office. However, payments have been made via BACS for all subsequent elections. This form of payment is now necessary to ensure the RO complies with the Real Time Information (RTI) directive. Officers are currently assessing the options offered by the new elections software package to provide further payroll efficiencies.
xviii		the allocation of polling stations be reviewed in the light of the electorate and turnout figures;	A polling district and places review completed and agreed by Council at its meeting in December 2011. Officers are currently undertaking a further review in accordance with the requirements of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2013 to undertake a review before 31 January 2015.
2		the returning officer shall provide a report to the scrutiny committee in six months and in November 2014 setting out progress on implementing these recommendations, and the scrutiny committee should regularly monitor progress on implementation;	The committee received a report in March 2012. This report fulfils the second part of the recommendation.
3		That the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and the two local Members of Parliament be asked to press:	Completed.
	(a)	for a statutory despatch date for all postal votes (except those granted for late illness, etc.);	See x above for update on postal vote despatch.
	(b)	that in future no more than	The RO has stated that no neighbourhood plan

	Recommendation	Status comment
	two elections/referenda take place on the same day;	referendums will take place from March until after the May 2015 elections.
4	That the election team's annual self-assessment for the 2011 elections be presented to the committee as soon as it is written;	As reported in March 2012 the Electoral Commission no longer require the submission of an annual self assessment. This has been replaced by the submission of data and information during an election. No issues have been raised by the Electoral Commission during the delivery of elections since 2011 and none were raised by Oxfordshire County Council's returning officer in 2013 or the Regional Returning Officer who oversaw the delivery of the European Parliamentary elections in 2014. Paragraph 10 of this report states that the RO is seeking to appoint an AEA consultant to ensure the preparations for 2015 are fit for purpose.
5	That a small task group of four Scrutiny Committee members be set up to review how the 2011 elections were planned and delivered by the council's staff with the terms of reference to be agreed by the committee. The task group to report back before/at the February 2012 committee meeting, and that the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition be asked to nominate two councillors each;	A task group was established. Officers provided information on request.
6	the elections task group be requested to consider the best way of commissioning, while being mindful of the cost, a report from the Association of Electoral Administrators or SOLACE Enterprises analysing best practice across a range of other councils to assure this council that it is using the best model for allocating and discharging the role of returning officer in delivering elections.	The task group met several times in Autumn 2012. It concluded that some of the problems in 2011 arose from project management and resourcing issues which it noted had also been identified by the independent review for example items viii and xii. The task group reported its conclusions directly to the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition, and noted that the committee was already scheduled to receive a further report about preparations for the 2015 elections. The task group suggests that performance of the 2015 elections should be formally reviewed in Autumn 2015, when if necessary best practice from other councils could also be reviewed.