

Scrutiny Committee

Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

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To: Scrutiny Committee

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Conduct of the 2011 local elections: update on progress

Recommendation: to note the progress on the election action plan

Purpose of Report

1. To consider progress on the implementation of the scrutiny committee's recommendations on the review of the 2011 local elections.

Background

2. At its meeting on 24 August 2011 the committee agreed a number of recommendations to improve the way future elections are managed. Appended to this report is a table setting out the recommendations and the current position in addressing the recommendations.

Progress on implementation of recommendations

3. Since the agreement of the recommendations the elections team has been busy submitting the final accounts to the Electoral Claims Unit for the referendum and finalising the invoices for the parish/town council contested elections. This process was complicated by the nature of the compensation payment received from Paragon and involved additional work. In addition the team undertook the 2011 annual canvass publishing the revised register on 1 December 2011. In light of this work the chairman agreed to defer the submission of this report until this meeting.
4. The **attached** schedule provides an update on the status of the committee's recommendations. The following paragraphs provide further clarification of some of the issues.
5. Officers identified the integration of a joint electoral database as the main priority. Working with Halarose (the council's electoral software provider) this project was successfully completed in February and enables officers to process forms more

efficiently and offer an improved service to our customers as we do not have to switch between two systems when dealing with enquiries. The system allows officers to input and read information for both councils in a single database but separates the information to produce the electoral registers, run elections and produce reports.

6. The returning officer now holds monthly meetings with the core team to discuss progress on the implementation of the scrutiny committee recommendations and other electoral matters. This allows the returning officer to have greater involvement, provides a formal means of monitoring agreed actions, which are recorded, and an opportunity to receive and discuss developments – for example in relation to the Police and Crime Commissioner elections.
7. The failure of the printer employed at the 2011 elections had a major impact on the delivery of the 2011 elections. As detailed in the attached schedule the returning officer has appointed a printer to undertake work on two forthcoming by elections within South Oxfordshire District Council's area. The returning officer has met a representative from the company to satisfy himself of their ability to deliver these elections. Many of the committee's recommendations will be implemented and trialled at these elections including those relating to the issue of postal votes and the tracking of data.
8. Officers consider that a number of the recommendations would be best addressed by specific projects. These are referred to in the attached schedule but to summarise would comprise of the following:
 - communications
 - staffing – to cover involvement of non core election staff and training
 - count venues
9. Officers propose submitting these plans to the task group for consideration.

Task group

10. At its meeting in August the committee agreed to establish a task group comprising councillors Eric Batts, Andrew Crawford, Jim Halliday and Melinda Tilley. Appendix one sets out the terms of reference of the task group. The task group met the returning officer and head of legal and democratic services on 29 February and requested a number of documents and comparative data information which officers are providing. Any recommendations from the task group will be reported separately.

Financial Implications

11. The implementation of a joint database cost £6,500 which was met from savings on the budget for the 2011 elections and under spends within the service.

Conclusion

18. The committee agreed a number of recommendations for suggested improvements for the future management of elections. The committee is asked to note progress to date.

Background Papers: Minutes of scrutiny committee meetings held on 24 August and 22 December 2011

Terms of reference for the Vale of White Horse District Council Scrutiny Committee's Task Group set up at the committee meeting of 24 August 2011 to review the organisation of elections by the council.

The task group will consist of four councillors - two nominated by the Leader of Council and two by the Leader of the main opposition group.

The task group shall take due note of the recommendations of the independent review (which were considered by committee meetings held on 21 July 2011 and 24 August 2011) and the subsequent response by the officers, and enquire further into the areas listed below, requesting appropriate evidence, written and verbal, from officers, and then make any recommendations it may deem appropriate to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

Areas of interest:

- To review the resources (computational, physical, financial and staffing) allocated to the elections team prior to the elections held in May 2011.
- To review the written procedures, risk assessments, plans and other appropriate documentation prepared by the elections team prior to the elections in May 2011, their subsequent use by the team.
- To consider whether to recommend that the Council should commission a report analysing best practice across a range of Councils for allocating and discharging the role of Returning Officer in delivering elections.

Update on status of committee's recommendations

1	Recommendation	Status comment
i	exercise to identify and select a suitably experienced printing firm be undertaken	The print company appointed to undertake the annual canvass has been appointed to assist with two forthcoming by elections at South. The returning officer (RO) has met a representative of the company to satisfy himself of their ability to deliver these elections. Following these by elections the RO will then make a decision any future appointment for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections and beyond.
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	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	Work in progress. Meeting scheduled with communications to draw up a communications strategy for election work in general including electoral registration. This will form part of a communications project.
iv	during the nominations process <u>frequent</u> communication take place with agents	Will be built into future plans and form part of the communications strategy.
v	the nomination process be reviewed to ensure a more efficient and effective use of resources and eliminate use of paper records	At the forthcoming by elections the team will investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the paper based and electronic processes.
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.
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	Work in progress (see xiii below). Further opportunities will form part of the Police Commissioner elections project plan. Ongoing work in progress to identify ways of reducing call on core team to deal with telephone queries leading up to election day. This will form part of a staffing project.
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 currently holds monthly update meetings with core team. At election time these will be held on a more regular basis.

1	Recommendation	Status comment
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.
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;	To be implemented for future elections – timetabled for forthcoming by elections at South.
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;	Work in progress. For the forthcoming by elections the printers have agreed to supply details of the number of documents supplied to Royal Mail. As an additional check the printers are confirming the number of data files received at each stage of the process.
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;	Work in progress. Non core team officers identified to manage future postal vote opening/verification work. These staff attended a training session in February delivered by Halarose staff. All will have an opportunity to assist at the forthcoming by elections. Non core elections officers already act as polling station supervisors and count supervisors. Appropriate briefing/training sessions are held and updated to reflect each type of election. Further written instructions to form part of staff project.
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);	Count venue will be reviewed as part of a venues project plan in preparation for the 2015 elections.
xiv	a training course be developed for count supervisors encompassing all aspects of their role;	Briefing session exists. Further written instructions to form part of a staff project.
xv	the 'combination method' is not a recognised means of counting 'split votes'	Officers will agree the count method before each election and train and instruct staff

1	Recommendation	Status comment
	and should not be used;	accordingly.
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 revised in light of the above.
xvii	all staff employed by the returning officer be paid by BACS through the payments system; use of cheques becoming an exception;	Work in progress.
xviii	the allocation of polling stations be reviewed in the light of the electorate and turnout figures;	Polling district and places review completed and agreed by Council at its meeting in December 2011.
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;	This report fulfils the first part of this recommendation.
3	<p>That the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and the two local Members of Parliament be asked to press:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) for a statutory despatch date for all postal votes (except those granted for late illness, etc.); (b) that in future no more than two elections/referenda take place on the same day; 	Completed.
4	That the election team's annual self-assessment for the 2011 elections be presented to the committee as soon as it is written;	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. The task group has been offered evidence of the submission of this information during the 2011 elections. Prior to the elections a representative from the Electoral Commission visited the councils and was satisfied with the preparations for the elections/referendum.
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	Task group established – details set out in the covering report.

1	Recommendation	Status comment
	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;	
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.	Work in progress.