

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION SERVICES

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Legal And Democratic

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

1. To receive an update on the Parish and Council by-elections undertaken by Electoral Registration Services over the last 12 months.

Financial Implications

2. It is anticipated that any costs arising from improvements made within the service will be met within existing budgets apart from those already identified.

Background

3. In November 2008 the Committee considered an update on progress in implementing the electoral registration services action plan. The Committee agreed that a further report on the by elections that took place in 2008 be presented and this is set out below.

By-elections

4. During 2008 there were eight parish council and two unitary council by-elections. These gave the opportunity to implement the improved processes and procedures arising out of the Action Plan following the review of the May 2007 elections. Examples of these improvements are set out below:
 - Meetings with candidates and agents take place at the beginning and end of each election
 - Meetings with ICT, Communications and Amey are carried out at the beginning of each election to ascertain what is required, by whom and when. An action plan for each service is devised and relevant information added
 - Improved signage at the count and clearer explanation of each stage of the count
5. Set out at Appendix 1 is a table detailing the elections that took place and providing information regarding the numbers of candidates, percentage of turnout etc.

Communication

6. All notices and information regarding elections is now supplied to Parish Clerks, Polling Stations, Booking Clerks, District Councillors, Local Agents, Political Party Agents, Group Leaders, HALC and Communications. Information is also added to the Council website. A database is being built up of where notices can be displayed for advertising casual vacancies and running elections. Contact is made with each individual via phone first to establish if a notice can be displayed, then a letter is sent confirming the agreement.

7. All suppliers for printing and consumables are contacted to give advance warning of an election, then contacted again to confirm if the election is taking place or not.
8. Custodians of the Town Hall are notified of the date for close of nomination papers and a sweep of the building is carried out to ensure that no papers have been received by another section.
9. Royal Mail is informed in advance of all mailing out, using discount walksort and cleanmail.
10. Members Services are contacted so that all election information is available in the Member Services Newsletter.

European Elections

11. Work has commenced on preparing for the European Elections scheduled for the 4th June 2009.
12. There have been four refresher training sessions for Presiding Officers, both existing and those who wish to become a Presiding Officer, organised which are scheduled to be completed by 11th March, 2009. Feedback from these sessions is collated and any suggestions for improving the process are considered. There will be further training sessions closer to the election date for those who have been allocated a Presiding Officer role to cover any changes in legislation and procedures.
13. An inspection has been carried out of all polling booths and those requiring repair have been sent to Amey. The polling booths that are beyond repair will be replaced and this is in hand.
14. A meeting has taken place with ICT to start to identify IT requirements during the course of the election. A meeting has also taken place with the Leisure Centre to discuss requirements for the verification and count e.g. layout of count station, dropping off of ballot boxes and public address system.
15. Polling Stations are being booked and confirmation of bookings made. Allocation of staff to roles has also commenced.
16. Information regarding the verification and count process will be given to candidates, agents and any other person attending the count. A layout of the counting station will also be provided. There will be clear signage on tables as to what process is taking place at a particular table. Coloured bibs will be worn by counting supervisors and counting staff together with information regarding their role.
17. The Returning Officer for the European Elections is Mr Steven Hughes, Birmingham City Council. Training sessions have been held at Birmingham for Local Returning Officers which have been attended by the Deputy Returning Officer with a final session for training on 9th March, 2009.
18. The Electoral Registration Team have also provided assistance to Shropshire County Council who will be holding Council and parish council elections as well as the European Elections who came to visit and talk through the process for such elections.
19. The Electoral Registration Service is currently looking for approximately 20 internal employees who can be released by their line managers to be trained and appointed

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to roles to help in the European Parliamentary Election on June 4th 2009 and for any further elections. Information regarding this recruitment process has been placed in First Press, Team Talk, Schools Newsletter and on the Intranet under Jobs and Vacancies.

20. The Electoral Registration Manager and Registration Services Manager meet the Deputy Returning Officer on a fortnightly basis who in turns briefs the Returning Officer.
21. Guidance will be issued to Members in respect of the pre-election period (Purdah Period) by the end of March, 2009.

Performance Standards

22. The Electoral Commission has introduced a set of performance standards for electoral registration officers and these are set out at Appendix 2. There are ten standards and each standard has three levels;
 - Not currently meeting the performance standard
 - Performance Standard
 - Above performance standard.
23. A self assessment was submitted to the Electoral Commission on the 16th January, 2009.
24. As this was a new initiative the Electoral Commission selected a number of authorities with a view of visiting each one and going through the self assessment form. This was to enable them to gauge whether the standards were measurable, that they were set at the right level and that those carrying out the self assessment were assessing themselves correctly. Herefordshire was chosen as one of the authorities that the Electoral Commission would visit and a meeting was held on 6th February, 2009 following the submission of the self assessment.
25. Each standard was considered and out of the ten the Electoral Commission felt that seven met the standard, one was below standard and two were above standard. The Commission felt that whilst in several areas the Electoral Registration Service was doing many of the actions necessary that would improve some of the levels of standard, there was no written evidence to support the actions. Steps are being taken to produce plans which will provide the supportive evidence. The Commission will be producing a report after visits to all authorities have been completed giving a general overview of what has been found. There is no intention to provide reports for individual authorities.

Action Plan

26. Attached at Appendix 3 is a copy of the Action Plan which sets out the actions arising from the review that was carried out following the May 2007 elections together with progress made.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the report be noted, subject to any comments the Committee wishes to make.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- None