

**DEPUTY LEADER
13th January, 2015**

Present:- Councillor Hoddinott (in the Chair); Councillors Sims and Tweed.

D26. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Consideration was given to the minutes of the previous meeting held on 2nd December, 2014.

Reference was made to Minute No. D23 (Webcasting RMBC Meetings) and an update provide on progress. It was highly unlikely that the webcasting equipment installation would be completed for the Council Meeting on the 28th January, 2015 as planned, but the temporary solution currently in operation would continue.

A full day's training would take place for relevant officers and this would then be rolled out to Elected Members.

The Director of Legal and Democratic Services pointed out the need for the Council to be aware of the re-publication of any defamatory or criminal information that would need to be removed before publication on the website.

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

D27. PROCUREMENT OF ANNUAL SOFTWARE SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE

Consideration was given to a report presented by Stuart Booth, Strategic Director of Resources and Transformation, which outlined how to enable the Council to ensure ongoing use and reliability of the Civica Electronic Document Management and Workflow System functionality from 1st April, 2015 to 31st March, 2016, there was a need to have a Support and Maintenance agreement with the software supplier.

Maintaining the reliability of Civica was essential in maintaining an excellent customer service in the administration of benefits, ensuring efficient billing of Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates and ensuring that income collection was maximised.

Exemption from Standing Orders for procuring this software support and maintenance was sought as the provision of the document management and workflow software support could only be supplied by Civica.

Resolved:- That the contract for the purchase of annual Support and Maintenance for the Civica System be approved and be exempt from the provisions of Standing Order 47.6.3 (requirement to invite at least three written quotations for contracts with a value of £20k but less than £50k) and that the purchase be made from Civica.

D28. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING FOR THE PERIOD ENDING 30TH NOVEMBER 2014

Consideration was given to a report presented by Stuart Booth, Strategic Director of Resources and Transformation, which provided details of progress on the delivery of the 2014/15 Revenue Budget for the Deputy Leader portfolio based on performance for the first eight months of this financial year. It was currently forecast that the portfolio would underspend against its Budget by £243k.

The report set out in detail the forecasted spend and where services were forecasting an underspend or overspend the key reasons were shown as:-

- HR and Payroll - Additional income generation principally from schools and academies and reduced staff costs through vacancies.
- Legal and Democratic Services - Staff cost pressures (£97k), income pressures relating to printing (£50k) partially offset by savings on Members Allowances (-£48k), savings with Election Services from the combined election (-£46k) and savings arising from the moratorium on non-essential spend (-£13k)
- Financial Services - Reduced staff costs through vacancies.
- Performance and Quality - Reduced staff costs through vacancies.
- Commissioning - Reduced staff costs through vacancies.
- Procurement - Staff costs in excess of budget due to staff turnover being less than budgeted.
- Internal Audit and Risk Management - Staff costs in excess of budget due to staff turnover being less than budgeted.

The moratorium on non-essential spend implemented on 2nd September, 2014 would continue until the end of March. This would assist with maintaining the portfolio forecast underspend.

It was noted that HR and Payroll had been included in the body of the report by mistake as this was not in the portfolio held by the Deputy Leader.

Questions were raised and clarification sought on the pressures relating to printing in Legal and Democratic Services and the high income target which had been set against the budget which had not materialised.

It was noted that the Central Print Unit and its state of the art equipment were under-utilised and various options were being considered to make full use of the provision available to ensure its viability and sustainability.

Some software adjustment had been made within the Print Unit to realise savings in Revenues and Benefits, which the Elections Office had also benefitted from.

The Chairman also asked about ICT and whether the proposed virement had assisted with the forecasted balancing of this budget and was informed that the virement had been implemented following a rigorous cost analysis and income generation process.

The Corporate ICT Manager reported on the decrease in business from schools once they converted to an academy and the move to more independent dedicated schools packages.

Resolved:- That the current forecast outturn for the Deputy Leader portfolio be noted.

D29. REVISED COMPUTER RE-USE POLICY

Further to Minute No. 22 of the meeting of the Deputy Leader held on 2nd December, 2014, consideration was given to a further report presented by Richard Copley, Corporate ICT Manager, which detailed how, having so far being unable to identify a suitable partner it was now proposed that the Council ceased the practice of donating/selling its old computers.

Instead, the Council would either re-use old equipment internally or dispose of it in accordance with the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive (WEEE Directive).

Resolved:- (1) That the proposal to cease the practice of selling or donating surplus RMBC computers be approved.

(2) That the situation be kept under review with a view to potentially re-commencing donations in the future should a suitable partner be found.

D30. REVIEW OF THE SOUTH YORKSHIRE POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER BY-ELECTION

Mags Evers, Chief Electoral and Registration Officer, provided an update following a review of the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner By-Election, which had been called at short notice due to the resignation of the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner on 16th September, 2014.

The timescales were extremely challenging, with exactly the same twenty-five day timetable being applicable to this whole area by-election as would apply to a single ward involving around 10,000 electors and 2,000 postal votes. The whole area involves 198,000 electors, approximately 50,000 postal voters and requires the use of 166 polling stations and hundreds of staff for polling duties, postal votes and for the count.

A particular issue for some voters was the voting system - Police and Crime Commissioner elections were conducted using the supplementary vote system where voters were asked to mark a first and second choice. The first and only other time that the supplementary voting system was used in Rotherham was for the first set of Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2012. For those elections, however, the Electoral Commission produced a booklet which it sent to every household to explain about the elections and about the voting system.

This was not available for the by-election in 2014 and the wording on poll cards and postal vote packs which were issued by the Returning Officer was prescribed in law. The prescribed wording did not allow for any detailed explanations except to say the voter should vote for their first choice candidate in the first column and for their second choice in the second column. It did not allow for an explanation that the first choice would still be counted if the voter only marked a first preference or that the vote would only be counted once if the voter marked both first and second preference for the same candidate.

Some concerns were expressed about high numbers of rejected votes at the election. There were 481 rejected votes which represented 1.35% of the total 35,696 votes cast at the by-election and was a similar rate to the other voting areas involved in the election.

It was important that any additional guidance offered to voters on the voting system should come from a source which was required in law to be impartial such as in prescribed wording on poll cards and postal vote packs issued by the Returning Officer or in guidance issued by the independent Electoral Commission.

The issue has been raised with the Electoral Commission with a suggestion that the prescribed wording on poll cards and postal vote packs should be amended before to allow for more explanation of the voting system.

Turnout was low at 18.01% although slightly higher in the Rotherham voting area than in Barnsley, Doncaster or Sheffield.

Votes for each area were counted by the Local Returning Officer and the figures from each count centre were reported to the Police Area Returning Officer in Barnsley for collation.

It was the responsibility of the Police Area Returning Officer to collate the figures and determine whether a second preference count was required or whether any candidate had been elected at the first preference stage by polling more than 50% of the first choice votes.

The statutory position was that in the event of any candidate achieving over 50% of first preference votes, the counting did not proceed to a count of second preference votes and the candidate was declared elected.

At this election, the winning candidate polled a sufficient number of the first preference votes to satisfy the statutory requirement and the Police Area Returning Officer declared Dr. Alan Billings elected as the new Police and Crime Commissioner.

The next time the seat would be up for election would be at the elections scheduled for 5th May, 2016.

Advice was sought on the availability of the information relating to the supplementary voting system for voters. Members were informed that there was no provision to allow a booklet such as that provided to every household in the UK by the Electoral Commission when the Police and Crime Commissioner elections first took place in 2012. The voting system may have been a contributory factor to the number of rejected votes.

The Chairman, when asking about the total number of rejected votes and whether these were because mistakes had been made by voters, was informed that a large number were void for "voting for more than one candidate as to first preference vote." The rejection rate at 1.35% was higher than the 0.74% at the local election earlier in the year.

It was a statutory requirement at the count that postal and polling station voting papers were appropriately mixed before being sorted so it would not be possible to identify whether postal voters experienced more difficulty completing their vote than those in polling station who were able to ask relevant polling station staff for advice.

In light of the forthcoming combined election, the Chairman asked if any supporting guidance would be circulated to voters either from the Local Authority or the Electoral Commission and was informed by the Chief Elections and Electoral Registration Officer that the voting system (first past the post) was the same for all the polls, but that the parish council elections being all-out would mean that voters in any contested parish election would have more than one vote on that ballot paper. There may be some confusion due to the difference in franchise and it is proposed that polling stations be resourced accordingly.

It was, therefore, suggested that the Home Office and the Electoral Commission be written to requesting guidance and explanations on the supplementary voting system for all elections where this was used to help increase democracy.

Resolved:- (1) That the information be noted.

(2) That a supporting letter be submitted to the Home Office and the Electoral Commission for the inclusion of guidance and explanations on the supplementary voting system for all relevant elections to help increase democracy.

(3) That all staff involved be thanked for dealing with this by-election at such short notice.

D31. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Consideration was given to a report presented by Mags Evers, Chief Electoral and Registration Officer, which provided an update on progress in the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration which became effective for all new applications on 10th June, 2014.

Under Individual Electoral Registration each person wishing to be entered on the Electoral Register was required to register individually, rather than by household. Applicants were asked to provide identifying information (date of birth and national insurance number) which enabled their identity to be verified with records held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) before they were added to the register. People who could not provide this information may prove their identity using an alternative form of evidence.

The new system allowed for telephone and online applications. The Council's website had a link to the online registration service and funding from the Cabinet Office was used to purchase software to allow the Council's contact centre to take applications by telephone on a "golden" number. The telephone registration service went live on 1st July, 2014 and contact centre staff now proactively offer the service to callers contacting the Council about a change of address

The transitional canvass to obtain responses was conducted during August – November, 2014 and although this was interrupted by the Police and Crime Commissioner by-election, which was called at short notice and affected the whole area, a revised register of electors was published on 15th December, 2014.

The electorate figure at the commencement of Individual Electoral Registration was 198,020 and on publication of the revised register on 15th December, 2014 the electorate figure was 197,925. The total number of postal voters was 49,374.

It was noted that when all Local Authorities, electoral registers were matched against DWP records, Rotherham was one of the 13 (out of 346) to achieve the highest match rate of 86%.

Further information was provided on action to be taken on those electors who did not transfer automatically, some of whom may have moved house. There was much work still to be done to ensure an accurate and up-to-date register going into the May 2015 elections.

The effect of the by-election and the already heavy workload associated with the combined Parliamentary, Borough and Parish elections in May this year presented challenges in keeping up Rotherham's pro-active approach to registration. It was clearly essential for successful delivery of these important elections that accurate and up to date registers were maintained.

The report also set out in detail and further information was provided on what would be expected from July, 2015 and each year thereafter in terms of the annual canvas and continuous registration.

In terms of the legal individual registration requirement, the Chairman asked about other methods of access for young people such as email or text, and was informed that by law a form had to be posted out to a home address along with a pre-paid return envelope but does provide information and encouragement to register online or by telephone. Where no application to register is made, reminders must be issued.

To assist with attracting younger people to the democratic process work was to take place with the Council's Youth Service and Community Engagement Teams to engage target groups.

The Chairman asked if consideration had been given to visits to residential establishments or supported care housing schemes for care leavers and the Chief Elections and Electoral Registration Officer confirmed that if information was provided this would certainly be followed through. In addition, the Youth Service will be asked for advice and assistance on how to reach these groups.

In light of National Registration Day, and maximising registration efforts to coincide, a meeting had been arranged with the Corporate Communication and Community Engagement Teams to look specifically at a communications marketing strategy and how information could be shared via the website and through the Youth Service.

It was also suggested that a briefing note be prepared for all Elected Members highlighting details for Individual Electoral Registration and National Registration Day with links to the relevant documentation on the website, along with details of the "Golden" number for the Council's contact centre to take applications by telephone, which could then be shared with constituents.

In preparing for the forthcoming elections in May, 2015, the Chairman asked about any proposals in dealing with the counts for the parliamentary, borough and parish council elections.

The Chief Elections and Electoral Registration Officer confirmed that plans were still in draft format, but it was anticipated that the parliamentary count would be conducted on the Thursday evening, following verification of all three elections. The counts for the borough and parish council elections would then probably take place on the following day (Friday) at a time yet to be confirmed. Contingency plans would need to be finalised in the event of a delay in the parliamentary count being concluded.

In response to concerns about the management of those persons allowed access to observe the relevant verification and counting process at the count venue, plans were in hand to ensure security staff were briefed by Elections Staff to provide a consistent approach.

Resolved:- (1) That the contents of the report be noted and the proposals outlined be supported.

(2) That a briefing note be prepared for all Members to highlight details for Individual Electoral Registration and National Registration Day with links to the relevant documentation on the website, along with details of the "Golden" number for the Council's contact centre to take applications by telephone.

(3) That the achievement of Rotherham being one of thirteen Local Authorities who had achieved the top percentage of 86% for its registration data be recognised and noted.

D32. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:- That the next meeting of the Deputy Leader and Advisers take place on Tuesday, 3rd February, 2015 at the slightly later time of 6.00 p.m. with a briefing at 5.30 p.m.