

HAVANT BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY BOARD

THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS - UPDATE

Report by the Governance and Logistics Panel

Councillor L Turner (Scrutiny Lead)

Councillors R Bastin, R Heard, A Lenaghan, M Smallcorn

Governance and Logistics Portfolio: Councillor J Branson

Key Decision: N/A

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Board following the Cabinet's consideration of the Panel's original report which went before the Cabinet on 5 February 2014.

2.0 RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:

2.1 Closer scrutiny of Mayoral engagements take place to ensure cost-efficiency to the Council and to maximise value to the organisation concerned;

2.2 The Economic Development Team, in conjunction with the relevant Portfolio Holder, be encouraged to liaise more closely with the Mayor's support team to identify suitable events at an early stage;

2.3 Closer liaison between the Mayor and the Cabinet/Joint Management Team to ensure that no opportunity for maximising the role of the Mayor to promote/raise the profile of the Borough is missed; and

2.4 Alternatives to using porta cabins as polling stations be found in order to minimise costs.

3.0 Summary

3.1 The Panel's brief was to investigate the cost and benefits of the democratic process in Havant, to measure the value of the councillor / resident link, establish if it is strong enough and suggest any changes

3.2 The Panel's original report went before the Cabinet on 5 February 2014 where it was recognised that the Panel had undertaken a considerable amount of work to review the various elements of the Council's democratic function. The two recommendations in the report which related to the visibility of the Cabinet decision making process were not approved, however it was noted that other

potential recommendations were contained within the report and these could be brought forward at a later date. This updated report contains these new recommendations for consideration.

- 3.3 The second stage of the review, which didn't form part of the original report, was to measure the value of the councillor / resident link. The findings from this stage of the review are included in this report.
- 3.2 The Panel decided to divide the review into two stages:
- (a) Stage 1 - Investigated the cost and benefits of the Council's democratic processes with a view to identifying any potential improvements and/or financial savings. The scope of the review focussed on the following key areas:
- Role and function of the Mayor– The review looked at the functions of the Mayor and what support is provided by officers. The Panel consulted a small group of past Mayors to help inform this work.
 - Elections and electoral registration - The Panel examined electoral registration and the running of elections. This included possible joint working with EHDC, electoral registration, location of counts, the number and staffing of polling stations and the increase in postal voting.
 - Support to Councillors, including training – The Panel looked into the support provided to councillors, including what support was needed and how it was provided.
 - Visibility of Cabinet Decision Making – The Panel gauged the opinion on how visible cabinet decision making was perceived to be.
- (b) Stage 2 - to measure the value of the councillor / resident link, establish if it is strong enough and suggest any changes.

4.0 Elections

- 4.1 The Panel conducted interviews with the Democratic Services Team Leader and the Electoral Services Team Leader who provided an overview of the current electoral process in the borough. The electoral staff are governed by the Electoral Commission and the department has guidance rules, which combined with local knowledge, helps ensure the smooth operation of elections in the area.
- 4.2 The Panel was keen to identify any potential savings available in the electoral process. Postal votes are currently very popular and it was thought that if more people vote this way it may be possible to reduce the number of polling stations. This would reduce the number of staff required to work at the stations and hence reduce staff costs. Following our interviews though the statistics reveal that the number of postal votes appear to have peaked and are now not increasing annually as they previously have done. Even at current levels of postal votes this has not reduced the need for polling stations and therefore the number of polling stations and staff has to be maintained.

- 4.3 It appears Central Government are also making plans to reduce the number of postal votes and return to the process where only postal votes are issued for certain circumstances in order to combat electoral fraud. Postal votes still require lots of staff time as well, a new signature is needed every five years which adds to costs. Many people also drop their postal votes off at polling stations on the day of the election which causes confusion with the system and increases workload due to the detailed procedure that has to be followed to open them.
- 4.4 Despite no reduction in the number of polling stations throughout the borough savings have been made by Havant Borough Council (HBC) who usually employ approximately 24 less clerks at each election than suggested by the European Commission. This has been achieved through smarter methods of working.
- 4.5 Another potential area we looked into for savings was the location of election counts and the sharing of resources with East Hampshire District Council (EHDC). Often local elections double up with other elections, such as County or European elections. Officers have examined the different costs and where joint elections are concerned it is recommended that the Horizon Leisure Centre is used for the count. When the elections are purely local though the most economical option is to have the count in the ward e.g. one of the polling stations, this way costs can be minimised. Potentially, the Plaza could hold the local elections with the possibility of a room for each ward and count. This is considered a good idea where everyone would then proceed to the atrium for the announcements. The problems that would need considering with this option though would be the security required to undertake it and if the appropriate number of rooms would be available. The possibility of holding joint counts with EHDC had been examined but a break down of the costs had revealed that it provided no savings, the vast area of both boroughs combined being the main reason for this. Therefore it is considered continuing to hold them separately is the best option.
- 4.6 One area where savings could be recognised was through finding an alternative to two porta cabins which are currently used at Auriol Drive, Bedhampton and Island Close, Hayling Island. Using these is expensive but it is proving difficult to find an alternative at these locations. Overall though the electoral department is currently operating very efficiently and last year actually operated under budget.

5.0 Councillor Training and Development Programme

- 5.1 The Councillors' Training and Development Programme has been in place since the end of 2013 and aims to help members prepare for the various roles they may hold in the Council, as well as ongoing training to help them develop and fulfil their role effectively. The programme aims to provide general training for all Councillors, together with specialist training for individual Councillors as and when required.
- 5.2 A range of different types of training and skills development needs, deemed to be appropriate for Councillors at different stages of their local government careers, was identified by the Joint Human Resources Committee and underpins the training programme (Appendix A), which was put together in consultation with Cllr Branson as Portfolio Holder for Governance and Logistics:

New Councillor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Induction Programme • E-Learning 'How to be a Councillor' • Mentoring Programme • Media Skills • IT Training • Specialist Training
Committee Chairman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist Training • Charing Skills • Public Speaking Skills • Objection Handling Skills • Negotiation Skills
Cabinet Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership Skills • Enhanced Public Speaking • Advanced Negotiation/Influencing Skills • Strategic Awareness • Role of Cabinet/Democratic Services

5.3 Key to the success of the training programme is good attendance and all Councillors have been strongly encouraged to make every effort to attend those training sessions that are relevant to their individual roles. In many cases, parallel training sessions have been held at EHDC, offering Councillors two options in terms of dates and times. An indication of attendance is also set out in Appendix A.

5.4 Councillors were asked to complete self-assessment 'Knowledge and Skills' forms (19 returned) to enable Councillors' training needs to be identified. Responses to the questionnaire show that Councillors were most interested in the following areas of development:

- Dealing with the Media
- Awareness of Equality
- Crime and Disorder
- Data Protection
- Freedom of Information
- Human Rights Act
- Welfare Reform
- Demographics
- Health and Wellbeing
- Affordable Housing
- Troubled Families
- Issues Affecting the Coastline
- Using Microsoft Office (Power point & Excel)
- Monitoring Financial Information & Understanding the Budgetary Process
- Developing Partnerships & Understanding strategy Development
- Understanding the Role of Safeguarding
- Analysing and Speed Reading Complex information

5.5 Although not an exhaustive list, the main areas involve knowledge based understanding with changing policies, laws etc.

5.6 As part of its ongoing review of democratic processes, the Governance and Logistics Panel will monitor the delivery of the programme and assess its effectiveness with a view to developing the programme going forward and ensuring that Councillors' future training needs are proactively met on a targeted basis.

6.0 Mayor

6.1 The role and functions of the Mayor are set out in the Council's constitution and are defined as follows:

- (a) to uphold and promote the purposes of the Constitution;
- (b) to preside over meetings of the Council so that its business can be carried out efficiently and with regard to the rights of Councillors and the interests of the community;
- (c) to endeavour to ensure that the Council meeting is a forum for the debate of matters of concern to the local community and the place at which Councillors who are not on the Cabinet can hold all decision makers to account;
- (d) to promote public involvement in the Council's activities; and
- (e) to attend such civic and ceremonial functions as the Council and he/she determines appropriate.

6.2 The Panel was advised that officers had recently completed an in-depth review of the costs associated with the office of Mayor and savings that had been identified following that review had been agreed by the Council and factored into the 2012/13 budget. That being the case, and in order to avoid duplication of effort, the Panel decided that financial matters should be excluded from its own review, and that the focus should instead be on the role of, and the activities undertaken by, the Mayor with a view to identifying the priorities for the future within the agreed financial framework.

6.3 As part of its research, the Panel consulted with a group of former Mayors, asking them to share their experiences and to highlight particular successes as well as things that they felt might have been done differently during their terms of office. Feedback from that consultation indicated:

- (a) The Mayor should continue to be the "face" of the Council with a PR focus central to the role;
- (b) The "traditional" invitation-led role of the Mayor should be maintained, but with closer scrutiny of the engagements that are accepted to ensure cost-efficiency to the Council and maximum value to the organisation concerned;
- (c) Opportunities should be explored to reduce the volume of costly external weekend engagements attended by the Mayor in favour of inviting more organisations to meet with the Mayor at the Plaza during the working day, whilst ensuring that the Mayor continues to meet with as many people as possible;
- (d) Recent Mayors have all, to some degree or another, actively engaged with the local business community, however, the role of the Mayor as a facilitator should be developed to encourage more networking opportunities for local and potential new businesses in the Borough;

- (e) David Willetts MP's willingness to become involved with regular meetings that he suggests the Mayor could facilitate with both large businesses as well as small/medium enterprises, to discuss issues such as apprenticeships and other key issues of interest to the local economy, should be followed up; and
- (f) There should be closer liaison between the Mayor and the Cabinet/Joint Management Team to ensure that no opportunity for maximising the role of the Mayor to promote/raise the profile of the Borough is missed.

6.4 The Panel also interviewed lead officers in the Facilities Management team directly involved in supporting the Mayor. The officers supported the view that the office of Mayor could be better used to raise the profile of local events and to maximise networking opportunities with local businesses. It was suggested that the Economic Development Team, in conjunction with the relevant Portfolio Holder, be encouraged to liaise more closely with the Mayor's support team to identify suitable events at an early stage.

6.5 Whilst recognising that the acceptance of invitations to charity and other events is at the discretion of the Mayor, the officers agreed that a more selective approach could be used, both in the interest of costs and also to ensure that attendance by the Mayor is of value to both the Council and to the organisation concerned.

6.6 In terms of managing priorities for Mayoral activities within the agreed budget, the officers were satisfied that this could be achieved as long as a degree of flexibility is maintained, recognising that priorities will vary from year to year as different Councillors take up the office of Mayor. Taking into account also that each Mayor must have the freedom to personalise the role of Mayor, not wishing to attain a "one size fits all Mayoralty."

7.0 Visibility of Cabinet Decision Making

7.1 Following the original review two recommendations came forward which went to the Cabinet on 5 February 2014, these were:

- The Cabinet agenda should be published a minimum of ten working days before the meeting, to allow councillors and members of the public to make effective representation; and
- Informal Cabinet meetings be opened to all councillors.

7.2 The Cabinet recognised the significant amount of work that had been done by the Panel to review the Council's democratic functions. The Cabinet was however, satisfied the arrangements currently in place for the publication of the agenda allowed sufficient time for councillors and members of the public to make effective representation and that Cabinet Briefing meetings should continue in the present format in order to allow free and informal discussions between Cabinet members and senior officers. The Cabinet therefore decided to not approve the two recommendations. For this reason the visibility of the Cabinet decision making process will not be considered in this updated report.

8.0 Councillor – Resident Link

- 8.1 The second stage of the review was to try and assess the link between residents and councillors. It was hoped this would establish whether residents were satisfied with the link to local councillors or if any improvements were required. To ascertain this information the Panel had requested a meeting with the Consultation and Market Research Adviser to discuss possible survey questions they could ask residents to obtain this information.
- 8.2 The Consultation and Market research Adviser informed the Panel of a residents survey which had been undertaken in 2011. This was a postal survey carried out using a random sample methodology to which 1,000 residents responded and had a response rate of approximately 50%. As the survey contained several questions relating to councillors it was felt that despite it having been undertaken in 2011 the results were still applicable.
- 8.3 The results revealed that the majority of the responders did know who their local councillor was but 36.1% did not. Other relevant results showed that 53.4% didn't know if their councillor was doing a good job and 47.6% didn't know if it was easy to contact their councillor or not. Looking at these results initially is a cause for concern but the Panel does recognise that often residents only feel the need to contact their councillor when they have a problem. This could explain why residents don't know if councillors are doing a good job or not.
- 8.4 A breakdown of the results by age group was asked for in order to examine if there were any variances in the results by age group. The results revealed that residents aged over sixty were more likely to know who their councillor was and how to contact them etc. This is encouraging as it shows councillors have a strong presence amongst the older age groups and the democratic link between the two is robust. The younger age groups had less knowledge of their local councillors, this could be explained by a potential lack of interest or that they have jobs and therefore less available time to participate with councillors locally. The Panel were aware that the Marketing and Development Scrutiny Panel had produced a valuable scrutiny report on Havant Borough Council's marketing strategy to attempt to encourage residents to interact with the council via other sources such as Facebook and Twitter. A new residents survey was due to be undertaken later on in 2014 and hopefully this will reveal that the new communication initiatives developed are working which will hopefully involve a larger number of younger residents in the democratic process.

8.0 Implications

8.1 Resources:

The Panel Members believe that:

- (a) any proposed changes to mayoral engagements could impact on workflows; and
- (b) If alternatives to using porta cabins for elections can be found this could potentially reduce the financial impact on the council.

8.2 **Legal:**

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

8.3 **Strategy:**

Improved democratic processes directly link to the Corporate Strategy.

8.4 **Risks:**

The Panel Members believe that by improving the democratic process the Council reduces the risk of running financially unsustainable processes.

8.5 **Communications:**

The increased use of social media to contact residents could encourage younger age groups to participate in the democratic process.

8.6 **For the Community:**

8.7 **The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) has been completed and concluded the following:**

There was no IIA completed in the preparation of this report.

9.0 **Consultation**

The Panel has consulted:

- (a) previous Mayors and the current Mayor of the Council;
- (b) lead officers in the Facilities Team;
- (c) the Democratic Services Team Leader; and
- (d) the Electoral Services Team Leader.
- (e) the Consultation and Market research Adviser

Appendices:

Appendix A – Training Programme

Background Papers:

None

Agreed and signed off by:

Legal Services: 21 May 2014

Contact Officer: Tristan Fieldsend
Job Title: Democratic Services Officer
Telephone: 02392 446233
E-Mail: tristan.fieldsend@havant.gov.uk