

HAVANT BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCRUTINY BOARD

REVIEW OF ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

**Report by Governance and Logistics Scrutiny
and Policy Development Panel**

Governance and Logistics Cabinet Lead: Cllr Jackie Branson

Key Decision: N/A

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The Governance and Logistics Scrutiny and Policy Development Panel have been tasked with investigating how the elections process can improve, including options for future delivery.

2.0 Recommendation

That the Scrutiny Board recommends to Cabinet:

- 2.1 A central desk for the counting of spoilt ballot papers be introduced;
- 2.2 Candidates be informed of the election results prior to them being announced on the stage;
- 2.3 Havant Borough Council's PA system be used for future counts;
- 2.4 Improved publication of the agents briefing to ensure attendance by all agents;
- 2.5 Councillors attending the count to receive a timetable providing details on the running order of the evening;
- 2.6 A breakout area for staff be introduced during the count to help alleviate staff tiredness;
- 2.7 Vehicle access to the area allocated for the delivery of ballot boxes be restricted on health and safety grounds; and
- 2.8 The Public Service Plaza be the preferred venue to hold the count and this be investigated before any other alternative venue options be considered.

3.0 Summary

- 3.1 At the recent elections held on 22 May 2014 the Panel was very impressed with the professional manner that the recent elections had been undertaken. This was particularly evident during the recount of the votes for the Hayling East Ward which was carried out in a very quick and effective manner. There have been however some concerns raised by Councillors over certain aspects of the day. These will be dealt with in this report along with opportunities identified to hopefully ensure these issues do not arise again.

4.0 Review of Electoral Arrangements

- 4.1 One of the first issues raised concerned the fact that there was no central area for the counting of spoilt ballot papers. This caused a degree of confusion amongst candidates resulting in some candidates not being present when the counting was taking place. To avoid this confusion in the future the Panel feels that at the next election there should be a central desk where spoilt ballot papers are counted and candidates being informed that this is happening so they can be in attendance.
- 4.2 The area where most concern was expressed was over the quality of the sound system on the evening which had been inadequate resulting in many attendees being unable to hear the announcement of the election results. The sound system used was owned by Horizon Leisure Trust (HLT). Despite the system being tested successfully during the day it is recognised that there were issues with the sound during the count on the evening. The panel feels that the best option in future would be for the Council to utilise its own PA system which has worked well for other civic events.
- 4.3 Some agents and candidates had not been informed of the results prior to being asked to go on the stage. Following discussions with the Solicitor to the Council it was confirmed that candidates had been told the results on the stage before the results were read out, however for future elections it should be ensured that this is done prior to going on stage.
- 4.4 Some agents, especially those undertaking the task for the first time, suggested that they were not fully aware of how the count on the evening was due to be run. An agents briefing had been scheduled prior to the elections which provided details on how the evening was going to progress but not all agents had attended. It was felt that this briefing needed to be publicised further in future in order to ensure there was a better attendance.
- 4.5 There was a certain degree of confusion by Councillors attending the count regarding the events for the evening. In order to alleviate this problem in future every Councillor should receive a timetable in future detailing the evenings events.
- 4.6 A query had arisen over a discrepancy between the results announced on the night and those published in The News. The reasons for this is unclear but it was suggested the communications team will ensure corrections are

printed if the incorrect figures are reported by the media. It was felt by the Panel that the reporting of the results through the Council's website and Facebook had been very successful. Due to long staff working hours though it was suggested that a review of whether it was necessary for the Council's press office to publish the results online as they were announced maybe required.

- 4.7 The Panel were aware though that some of the staff working at the elections had worked all day at a station and were then working through the evening at the count. The tiredness of the staff was a concern, not only for their own health and safety but also because mistakes were more likely to occur at the count if staff had been working all day at a station. The Panel is aware that preventing staff from working at both events could create resource issues and that Council staff were often used as they were regarded as reliable and professional. Next year at the general election it was proposed to have a break out area for staff at the count where refreshments will be available to help ease any tiredness issues. Other authorities did use local bank staff to man the count although at this moment in time it is unclear if local banks would have the resources to carry out this function. The possibility of using local charity workers to help staff the election was raised with their payment being donated to a relevant charity instead but this idea would require further investigation.
- 4.8 Following a car accident on the evening of the elections in the area where presiding officers were delivering their ballot boxes it was suggested that the number of vehicles being allowed access to this particular area needed restricting on health and safety grounds. An idea was raised that a courier service, instead of presiding officers, could undertake the role of transporting the ballot boxes to the count but it was explained that this could potentially create delays in the process.
- 4.9 A complaint had been submitted by one of the candidates regarding the unsafe access to the stage at the leisure centre. In response HLT was due to implement improvements to allow safer access to the stage area. As part of this it was also suggested that HLT staff needed to have a clearer understanding of their roles during the evening to ensure the event went as smoothly as possible.
- 4.10 The Panel considered the possibility of using alternative venues to the leisure centre for future elections. The Public Service Plaza was recognised as being an excellent venue for holding events and for future elections it was suggested that the Atrium area could be utilised for such an event. The Panel feels that one evening this year an election rehearsal should be held at the Plaza to assess how suitable the venue would be to hold next years general election. It was the Panel's preferred option to use the Public Service Plaza before any other alternative options were explored.
- 4.11 In order to ensure the smooth running of elections the Panel considered that in future the count venue should be alcohol free to avoid any unacceptable behaviour.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 The Panel feels that on the whole the recent elections went very well. Areas of concern have been raised though and through our investigations the Panel have highlighted several improvements (recommendations 2.1 – 2.7) which we feel can ensure that elections in the borough can continue to be administered in an efficient and effective manner.

5.0 Implications

5.1 **Resources:** *The review of electoral arrangements on the whole has no real financial implications. However, the recommendation of the Plaza as a preferred venue for the count does have possible financial implications therefore a full costing would be required. If the Cabinet agrees the Plaza as the preferred option then a comparison will be made of the costs of using the Plaza compared to other suitable venues.*

5.2 **Legal:** None arising from the report.

5.3 **Strategy:** Ensuring the smooth running of the elections will help towards providing the most cost effective and efficient service possible in accordance with the Council's Corporate Strategy 2012 – 2017.

5.4 **Risks:** To minimise the potential of any health and safety incidents which could arise during the count.

5.5 **Communications:** Communications will be required if the recommendations are implemented and will be assessed and addressed appropriately at that time.

5.6 **For the Community:** Improved management of the elections should encourage the community to take a greater interest in the election process.

5.7 **The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) has been completed and concluded the following: N/A**

6.0 **Consultation:** During its review the Panel consulted the following:

Ward Councillors
Facilities Team Manager
Finance Business Partner
Marketing and Customer Relations Service Manager
Legal and Democratic Service Manager

Appendices: None

Background Papers: None

Agreed and signed off by:

Service Manager - Finance: 11 July 2014
Legal Services: 14 July 2014

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