

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

7 FEBRUARY 2013

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Corporate Management & Finance – Lead Cabinet Member Cllr Harrington

REVIEW OF POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER ELECTION

1. Summary

This report provides Members with feedback following the Police and Crime Commissioner Election, in which Stockton acted as the Lead Authority for the Cleveland force area.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet notes the report.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

To inform future planning and identify areas for improvement.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members) should consider whether they have a personal interest in any item, as defined in **paragraphs 9 and 11** of the Council's code of conduct and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with and/or taking account of **paragraphs 12 - 17** of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 16** of the code, in any business of the Council he/she must then, **in accordance with paragraph 18** of the code, consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest and the business:-

- affects the members financial position or the financial position of a person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code, or
- relates to the determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission or registration in relation to the member or any person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code.

A Member with a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, may attend the meeting but must not take part in the consideration and voting upon the relevant item of business. However, a member with such an interest may make representations, answer

questions or give evidence relating to that business before the business is considered or voted on, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under a statutory right or otherwise (**paragraph 19** of the code)

Members may participate in any discussion and vote on a matter in which they have an interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, where that interest relates to functions of the Council detailed in **paragraph 20** of the code.

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

It is a criminal offence for a member to participate in any discussion or vote on a matter in which he/she has a disclosable pecuniary interest (and where an appropriate dispensation has not been granted) **paragraph 21** of the code.

Members are required to comply with any procedural rule adopted by the Council which requires a member to leave the meeting room whilst the meeting is discussing a matter in which that member has a disclosable pecuniary interest (**paragraph 22** of the code).

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SUMMARY

This report provides Members with feedback following the Police and Crime Commissioner Election.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet note the report.

BACKGROUND

1. The first election for the new PCC for the Cleveland Force Area was held on 15 November. This was a new election administered under new legislation and guidance and using the Supplementary voting system (SV) which was new to two of the four local authorities within the Cleveland Force Area:
 - Hartlepool
 - Middlesbrough
 - Redcar & Cleveland
 - Stockton
2. Stockton acted as the Lead Authority for the elections for the Cleveland force area which included the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) role.
3. The management of the election was unique and challenging:
 - This was an entirely new tier of elections second only in constituency electorate scale to the elections to the European Parliament
 - This was a new election for Stockton, including the PARO role
 - The election was administered under a raft of new legislation and guidance which was supplemented by weekly bulletins from the Electoral Commission providing additional guidance and clarification
 - Nomination Papers containing 100 assenters needed to be checked across four Councils' registers
 - Close working with external printers and Royal Mail was essential

- This was the first time that there had been hand counting of SV across boundaries
- Indications from previous SV elections was that there was likely to be a high number of technically “rejected” papers, requiring a much more involved and lengthier adjudication process
- The November poll presented particular difficulties and extra care and planning was required to mitigate against the risk arising from adverse weather conditions and dark nights
- The PARO, LROs and Election Team were subjected to “real time” performance monitoring by the electoral commission throughout the elections process
- Working across four local authority boundaries presented a range of practical difficulties and steps were taken to ensure high levels of:
 - Co-ordination
 - Consistency
 - Communication

Co-ordination

4. Building on a background of strong joint working and networking in the Tees Valley and regionally, regular co-ordination meetings took place as follows:-
 - Cleveland Force elections planning meetings
 - Cleveland LRO meetings
 - Regional LRO and PARO meetings
 - National meetings of PAROs
 - Communications meetings – at force level and nationally

Consistency

5. Extensive planning and training took place to ensure consistency of materials and behaviour and confidence with systems.
6. At force level, detailed project planning and discussions were held to ensure there were consistency of practices, timescales, procedures, materials, ballot papers, instructions, notices and consistent adjudication of ballot papers. This was reinforced by joint training across the force area.

Communication

7. It was vital to have a force area communication strategy to raise awareness of the election and explain the voting system.

Verification and Count

8. Following discussion with colleagues from the force area as well as local politicians and political parties, agreement was reached to verify ballot papers locally following the close of poll and have a central counting of votes on the Friday.
9. LROs oversaw local verification of ballot papers on the Thursday evening/ early hours of Friday morning and verified ballot papers were securely transported to the Thornaby Pavilion ready for the count on Friday morning. The central count enabled all candidates and agents

to oversee proceedings at one venue, helped to achieve a consistent approach across each voting area and avoided potential communication problems between multi-count venues.

10. A “mini-counting” approach for the central count was adopted; this meant that each count table was a mini-count and ballot papers allocated at the start of the count remained with that table at all times throughout the count process.

What went well?

11. Months of planning paid dividends. No significant problems were encountered during the hours of poll and verification and count processes ran smoothly. The Cleveland Force Area was the only area in the North East to move to a second stage count of second preference votes and it was encouraging to see that our count processes were fit for purpose.
12. A joint training session for count supervisors from across the force area has been held which included a “hands on” practical exercise in conducting an SV count. Following the training, a simplified count process was produced to reinforce the key stages of an SV count. The practical training exercise and quick reference guide were highly effective in ensuring the smooth running of the count.
13. The “mini count” approach ensured a tighter control of proceedings and secured greater accuracy. LRO’s local adjudication teams dealt with doubtful ballot papers on a continuous basis at each count “mini count” table in full view of candidates and agents and this helped to manage the high volume of doubtful ballot papers.

Issues

14. Low voter turnout was disappointing. The higher turnout at the parliamentary by-elections shortly after the PCC election would suggest that this was more to do with the nature of the election than the November poll.
15. In addition, customer feedback during the election revealed frustration with the lack of information on candidates. A number of callers reported problems with accessing the Home Office phone line to request candidate information and also delays in receiving the information after requesting it. The general information about the election also appeared to have been mixed in with “junk” mail.
16. There were a number of comments from electors that the ballot paper did not make it clear that voters were able to exercise only one preference vote if they wished.
17. All of these issues have been fed back to the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators.

CONSULTATION

18. In order to inform future planning and identify areas for improvement, a short survey was circulated to:
 - Presiding officers and poll clerks (199 responses received)
 - Verification and Count Supervisors and Assistants (101 responses received)
 - Polling Station Inspectors (7 responses received)
 - Postal Vote Opening Supervisors and Assistants (17 responses received)
 - LROs and election teams (1 survey returned; other comments via email)
 - Candidates/ Agents and count attendees (2 surveys returned; other comments via email)

THEMES FROM THE FEEDBACK

19. The response rate was high with most polling staff and verification and count staff returning the survey. The feedback comments are very detailed and will be subject to further consideration and will assist with the planning of future elections. Overall, comments from respondents were extremely positive. The key themes are set out below.

Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks

20. The vast majority of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks felt that the training and handbook were helpful. There were a number of comments about the timing of the training sessions being too early and some poll clerks queried whether they needed the same level of detailed training as Presiding Officers. There were also several requests for a practical training exercise. The suggestions will be considered in the planning of future training.
21. In addition to comments about the training, there was some specific feedback about the quality/ suitability of some polling stations/ rooms. All of the comments will be investigated. There were also several complaints about polling screens; these are now being replaced with more compact, lightweight screens.

Verification and Count Staff

22. All respondents indicated that the training/ briefing they received had been helpful. Overall, respondents were highly complementary about the organisation of the verification and count and the training received.

Polling Station Inspectors

23. All Inspectors felt that the information and training received had been helpful. Several comments were made about the need to review the system of POs texting to advise of "late" postal votes.

Postal Vote Opening Staff

24. All respondents felt that the briefings and instructions they had received had been helpful. Again, a suggestion was received for a simplified guide (similar to one produced for the count).

LROs and Elections Teams

25. All the other LROs in the force area commented on the excellent communication throughout the planning for the election and commended the PARO and his staff on the organisation and paperwork for the count. In addition to the written feedback, an LRO review meeting was held. Overall, the view was that planning and communications had been excellent. The only problem encountered had been at the packing up of the verified ballot papers prior to transportation and this will need to be considered further for future elections.

Candidates and Agents

26. All comments received praised the staff for their hard work and professionalism throughout the election process.

Viewpoint

27. In order to gauge the views of residents, a Viewpoint survey was undertaken. The responses confirmed the feedback from telephone calls during the election period and at polling stations:

- Almost a third of respondents felt that the ballot paper did not make it clear that they were able to exercise only one preference vote
- For electors voting at a polling station, the vast majority of respondents felt that the polling station was clearly signed (86%), the polling station was accessible (86%), the polling station was clean and tidy (89%), polling station staff were helpful (87%), polling station staff were polite and approachable (89%), polling station booths were accessible (87%) and private (86%). Where electors had a query, 98% felt that staff had been knowledgeable and 91% commented that staff had been able to answer their queries fully
- For electors who voted by post, the vast majority of respondents felt that the instructions were clear and helpful (92%) and that it was easier to vote by post than at a polling station (97%)
- 64% of respondents were dissatisfied with the information/ material available before the election and the vast majority of additional comments provided were complaints about the lack of pre-election material / lack of information made available from the Home Office
- 72% of respondents felt that it had been easy to vote in the election
- 61% of respondents did not have any suggestions for improving elections run by Stockton; 39% had suggestions and the comments were almost exclusively about the need for more information before the election

Electoral Reform Services Survey

28. In addition to the viewpoint survey, during the annual canvass those residents who chose to complete their registration using the online service were invited to take part in a survey at the end of the registration process. In addition to the standard questions on registration, residents were also asked whether they were aware of the election in November. 31% of respondents said that they were aware of the PCC election in November compared to an average of 39% across the participating councils.

Conclusion

29. Overall, despite the challenges of a new election and voting system combined with a November poll, there were no significant problems encountered during the hours of poll and verification and count processes ran very smoothly. The vast majority of negative comments from residents were about the lack of pre-election material particularly in relation to candidates and this has been fed back to the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial or legal implications arising directly from the report.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Feedback and learning from the review of the PCC election will help with planning future elections and mitigate against future risk.

COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

The conduct of elections contributes to the Stronger Communities theme with the Sustainable Community Strategy.

CONSULTATION

Consultation has taken place with the relevant portfolio holder and appropriate officers.

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Background Papers: None

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors: N/A

Property Implications: None