

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES OVERVIEW

SERVICE CONTEXT

Democratic Services comprises the following services:

- Democratic Services
- Electoral Services
- Community Engagement
- Civic
- Scrutiny

DEMOCRATIC & MEMBER SERVICES

What has been achieved?

Cabinet and Council approval was obtained in Feb/March 2011 for a revised Members Learning & Development Strategy following consultation with the Members Advisory Panel. The strategy reflects existing back practice and feedback obtained from members and as part of the authority's last Member Charter assessment. In particular, the strategy contained information to support members in their community role, maximise IT support and to provide initial essential information in the early days following election. As well as presentations on key service areas and issues facing the Council, members have been afforded the opportunity to visit Democratic Services at their At Home Day and attend a Market Stall type event to engage with the services provided by each service group.

This new approach to Member Induction is currently being delivered with 18 new members elected to the Authority in May 2011. Mandatory training in respect of quasi judicial committees such as Planning and Licensing has been undertaken for both members of those committees and any member wishing to substitute. Further mandatory training in respect of Employee Appeals is to take place; and informative sessions on Members personal Health & Safety are also planned. Other features of the Induction Programme have included an Introduction to the Council, Member Roles and Responsibilities, Executive and Scrutiny briefing and the role of Members as Corporate Parents and Safeguarding.

At the Annual Council Meeting held in May 2011, members were appointed to appropriate Committees and Outside/Joint Body organisations for the first time for a four year term in order to encourage and foster continuity and build up member capacity in specialist roles. This coincided also with the introduction of new Executive Arrangements within the Council with a new Leader appointed by the Council, again for a four year term, and the Leader appointing his own Cabinet for the same period.

Meetings for each of the various Council Committees have been agreed and publicised for the four year term and are available via the Council's website. From 2011/12, an August recess will be piloted, with only meetings considered essential to service delivery, such as Planning and Licensing Committees, being held during this period. Therefore, during this period Democratic Services will operate with reduced hours for staff, thereby achieving targeted financial savings, and reflecting service demand. It is worth noting that viewpoint surveys carried out in relation to public awareness of democratic procedures were carried out in 2010 order to be compared with a 2008 survey and to assess the success of the section's Community Engagement Strategy. Positive results showed that, by 2010, awareness had increased in relation to awareness of ward surgery information, public attendance at meetings, and public availability of agendas and minutes.

Work has also been undertaken to implement the recommendations arising from the recent Task & Finish Scrutiny Review of the Council's Governance arrangements with Outside/Joint Bodies, which has led to greater information being obtained on each organisation in order to build up the profile of each to assist members understanding of their purpose and consider their own involvement.

The Council's Petition Scheme has now been in operation for nearly a year, with a total of 9 petitions having been received; 2 of which are scheduled to be considered by full Council. This now includes an E-Petition facility.

What has proved more difficult?

- Lack of resources for IT development restricts the Council's ability to support members in managing their ward casework

Emerging Issues:

- To meet the criteria for assessment against the Members' Charter Plus thereby maximizing the capacity of elected Members and delivering the highest standards of support required to be provided to Councillors in order for them to fulfill their duties.
- To identify Members learning needs via the Personal Support Plan process, and seek to source and deliver those required needs.
 - To manage and support the Council's decision making procedures within the context of the Council's new political composition and Executive arrangements.

ELECTORAL AND CIVIC SERVICES

What has been achieved?

The **Parliamentary General Election** was held on 6 May 2010. A year's worth of planning, working with partners and suppliers paid dividends with a successful election outcome. Clear roles and good communications contributed to this success.

The national public awareness campaign aimed to encourage all eligible people to register and included advertising on TV, radio, press and on line. The campaign was complemented by SBC's ongoing democratic engagement campaign. In the weeks leading up to the election an additional 506 people registered to vote and 165 people registered to vote by post.

To comply with the Parliamentary Constituencies (England) Order 2007 it was necessary to alter the parliamentary boundaries of 6 of our polling districts. The Boundary changes could not come into effect until the proclamation was issued by Her Majesty summoning a new parliament. Good planning and preparation meant the change and transition went smoothly.

Communication with and delivery of information provided to Candidates and Agents was reviewed and improved and this enabled us to deliver a better service to them.

Feedback from Candidates and agents stated that the postal vote opening sessions were well conducted. This is in part due to the further improvements that were introduced for opening of postal votes to improve speed and efficiency whilst providing a clear audit trail.

The Verification and Count were held at The Pavilion. After overcoming service issues this venue proved to be an excellent facility for its large, open interior space that allowed both

counts to take place simultaneously. Feedback from the candidates was positive with one commenting that the count process was considerably better than in previous years.

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 gave the Electoral Commission (EC) powers to set standards of performance for Electoral Registration Officers, returning Officers and Referendum Counting Officers in Great Britain. The framework consists of 7 self assessment performance standards. Significant improvements of performance were achieved and we have now attained the standard for 2 performance indicators and attained above standard for 5.

The Parliamentary General election accounts were been submitted to the Elections Claim Unit well ahead of the 1 year deadline for both Stockton north and Stockton South.

The **polling districts, polling places and polling stations review** was completed. There were no changes to polling districts or places but several new polling stations have been identified for use in the 2011 elections. This process reduced the number of portacabins from 17 to 9.

The **Register of Electors Annual canvass** project plan was revised once again in order to deliver the most effective and efficient result. A performance based payment structure was implemented to encourage a higher return by canvassers and a public awareness campaign this proved to be successful as the number of electors registered increased from 141,495 last year to 142,523 this year.

The electoral registration canvass form was amended to minimise the number of postal vote applications that are sent out but not returned. This year electors could download an application form to vote by post or contact us via email or telephone to request that a form be sent out. This change in procedure has proven to be very successful as 3,797 applications were sent out and 2,462 were returned (65%) and we have made considerable savings on processing and postages and more completed applications have been returned than in previous years.

Following an audit of electoral service and audit of the Express software used for elections and electoral registration, Full Assurance was achieved in all areas.

The **Civic Office** organised the Mayors Annual Charity Dinner was held on 4th February 2011. A record number of seats were sold and excellent auction and raffle prizes sourced. The event was successful and raised around £9500 and generated very positive feedback from those who attended.

Freedom Parades were organised for both the Yorkshire Regiment and The Rifles. They were enthusiastically attended by many people in Stockton Town Centre, and letters of thanks were sent from both regiments.

The most significant **engagement** work involved the planning and preparation for the national referendum on the Alternative Vote, the May Local Elections and supporting the work of the Office of National Statistics in carrying out the 2011 Census. Key activities included producing and implementing the Public Awareness Plan to target specific groups as well as the general public; audit and preparation of polling equipment for the election; liaising with the library service and Census staff to provide 12 Census 'completion' sessions at 6 libraries across the Borough.

Ongoing engagement work to maximise voter registration and public participation included Citizenship workshops for young people aged 16 to 19; registering new British citizens as voters; Town Hall visit and tours; attending Stockton Riverside College and Durham

University to promote voter registration and voting to students; providing information and advice to enquirers from our 'be a Councillor' campaign.

The **Elections 2011** were unique in that a UK wide referendum was taking place at the same time as all other polls due on this date. It was the first time that more than 2 combined elections were held on the same day. In previous years parish elections have been postponed. This report highlights what went well, what could be done better. The report highlights the complexity of providing for the Referendum in conjunction with the local and parish elections, in particular the complexity of the procedures for postal vote opening and the count.

The Chief Counting Officer and the Electoral Commission published in excess of 200 detailed directives, guidance and bulletins which whilst sometimes helpful directed resource away from managing the process.

Following the conclusion of the 2011 Elections the CCO wrote to each counting officer on 18 May to thank them and their staff for all the effort and hard work they put into ensuring the elections and referendums were a success. Several messages of congratulations and thanks were also received from our local councillors, and colleagues who had supported the Elections.

At the Adare (elections contracted printer) lessons learned seminar held on 23 June 2011 discussions took place regarding their performance and areas for improvements were identified. It was recognised that the project planning started very early and that this was welcome as it showed a real commitment to deliver successfully and on time. Adare was proactive in obtaining and following EC meetings and AEA guidance. The liaison between Adare and Royal Mail was also appreciated for approval of envelopes and collection of poll cards and both issues of postal votes including overseas electors. Areas for improvement were highlighted but through influence and negotiation SBC achieved a satisfactory delivery schedule. It was acknowledged that under very difficult, complex and unique circumstances we continued to work together effectively to ensure an accurate and timely election.

Feedback was requested from all staff who took part in the May 2011 elections. Positive feedback was received in respect of joint team training for PO/PCs, briefing sessions, count process and management of the election as a whole.

The communication with and delivery of information to Candidates and Agents having been reviewed to further improve the services offered were well received and attendance at the briefing was exceptional. This also contributed to our performance against the Electoral Commission Performance Standards framework for Returning Officers.

Early appointment of election station staff was a very successful exercise and enabled us to train promptly within the short election timetable. This saved valuable time. However we still experienced a high drop out rate close to poll day, mainly due to personal circumstances / emergencies.

We continued to enjoy a successful partnership with the NEPO contracted printers Adare maintaining our good relations with the company to ensure their best service. Several meetings were held to plan the best approach for Stockton.

Royal Mail work continued to ensure we maximised all available efficiencies. Additional licences meant that postal vote envelopes were delivered ready sorted saving staff time. We will continue to work with Royal Mail re SBC service requirements to ensure the most efficient and economical product is selected.

The Verification and Count were held at The Pavilion. Transport was provided for staff and candidates and agents due the restricted parking at this venue. The count was arranged to accommodate all wards verifying and counting at the same time. This meant using all available space at the venue. The impact of this was added strain on the RO and his team. However an efficient and accurate election outcome was secured. Areas for further consideration and improvement are the postponement of parish counts in combined elections, alternative venues, and alternative counting style and set-up.

To summarise a year's worth of planning, working with partners and suppliers paid dividends with a successful election outcome. Clear roles and good communications contributed to this success. In particular close working relationship with the ICT enabled us to eliminate potential ICT difficulties for the unique combined elections.

What has proved more difficult?

The Chief Counting Officer and the Electoral Commission published in excess of 200 detailed directives, guidance and bulletins which whilst sometimes helpful directed resource away from managing the process.

The AEA Chief Executive contacted the CCO during the election process to raise concerns about the complexity of the polls, the detailed prescription and the impact this would have on officers' welfare as a result of trying to deliver the elections and meet the commission's directions within the tight statutory timescale.

Post election the AEA attended a meeting with the EC on 20 May. This meeting included a discussion with the Chief Counting Officer and representatives from the Electoral Commission about the administration of the UK-wide referendum and the other polls that took place on 5 May 2011. The discussion covered legislation, management and monitoring issues, the exceptions process, communications, fees and charges, specific issues relating to the conduct of the poll, and verification, count and results collation. They all agreed that it had been one of the quietest election days on record; however Stockton turnout increased in 2011 compared to 2007. Similarly, the verification and count arrangements appeared to have largely worked.

The AEA raised the issue of the complications at the count caused by parish council elections and the length of time it had taken to count many of these where there had been a large number of candidates contesting large numbers of seats. The AEA suggested that the time had come to allow electronic counting for such counts.

The Head of Democratic Services (HODS) and the Team Leader for Elections (Deputy Returning Officers) attended an AEA and Electoral Commission post election seminar on Monday 6 June 2011. The meeting reviewed the 2011 Elections and colleagues were open and frank with their comments on one of the most difficult elections yet. All who attended had felt this was the most difficult to manage to date and felt the Referendum should have been a stand alone election. The authorities that had large parishes felt they should have been postponed as has been usual practice in the past

Emerging Issues:

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act provides for boundary changes to be made to reduce the size of the House of Commons to 600, with the exception of two preserved island constituencies in Scotland, the remaining seats will be distributed between the four parts of the UK according to their relative electorates in the registers that were published on 1st December 2010. Under the revised rules a UK electoral quota will then be calculated on the basis of those registers, and constituencies recommended by the Boundary

Commissions will be required to contain a number of electors that is within 5% either side of the quota (subject to a small number of tightly drawn exceptions).

The Act requires the Boundary Commissions in each part of the UK to complete a review of the distribution of Parliamentary constituencies and report to Government before October 2013. This deadline envisages the completion of the review of seats in the UK in a far shorter timescale than has been achieved previously. It is essential that the Boundary Commissions have the full support and co-operation of Electoral Registration Officers and their staff if they are to achieve the task set for them by Parliament, a task to which Ministers attach considerable importance. The 2013 deadline has been set to allow administrative preparations to be made for a general election on new boundaries in 2015, and to allow political parties time to select candidates in advance.

It is worth noting that the combined effect of the reduction in the number of constituencies and the requirement for those constituencies to be more equal in size means that this review is likely to result in a considerable degree of change to the existing boundaries. There are many possible patterns for drawing up constituencies that will be consistent with the new rules and the final word will go to the Boundary Commission working in each of the component nations of the United Kingdom. It is also likely to result in a larger number of constituencies crossing local government boundaries than at present, which has implications for the conduct of elections.

The Fixed-Term Parliaments Bill fixes the date of the next General Election at 7 May 2015, and provides for five-year fixed terms. It includes provisions to allow the Prime Minister to alter the date by up to two months by Order. There are also two ways in which an election could be triggered before the end of the five-year term:

- if a motion of no confidence is passed and no alternative government is found
- if a motion for an early general election is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the House or without division

The third reading, the final chance for the Lords to change the Bill - took place on 24 May 2011. The Bill is now in the Commons for consideration of Lords amendments.

Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill. A meeting of the Police and Crime Commissioners Elections Panel was held on 24 May. The Panel has been established by the Home Office to assist them with the preparation for the first elections of Police and Crime Commissioners planned to take place in May 2012. In addition to Home Office staff, there are also representatives from the AEA, Cabinet Office, DCLG, Electoral Commission, the Election Claims Unit and Solace.

The House of Lords continues to scrutinise the Bill. On 11 May the House voted in effect to remove from the Bill the principle of a directly elected Police and Crime Commissioner. The Government is clear that the directly elected PCC policy is a Coalition Agreement commitment and will seek to overturn the relevant amendments when the Bill returns to the House of Commons. More generally the Government will continue to consider carefully points made in debate as the Bill proceeds through Parliament.

The EC has raised concerns about the timescales for the elections and getting the necessary regulations and orders in place in time.

The Cabinet Office explained the key issue for decision is on the hierarchy of elections. The question is whether the election should be at the same level as European ones. This would affect whether the PCC or Local elections would lead, the practical implications of this decision for example on the appointment of returning officers and the effect on postal votes.

The Home Office noted that a submission had gone to Ministers and it had recommended that the PCC election be conducted on the same level as the European elections. It was agreed that as the Referendum was complete the Returning Officers would be asking about the arrangements and rules. It was felt there would be value in having a background note with the timetable so that Local Authorities could start committing resources to it now. The Electoral Commission are ready to provide the guidance and undertake the relevant awareness activities once the legislation is in place.

The date of the next meeting of the Police and Crime Commissioners Elections Panel is 5th July 2011.

The Localism Bill received its second reading in the Lords 7 June 2011 and the committee stage of the bill began on 20 June. After consideration by the Lords, the Bill will return to the Commons for consideration of Lords amendments. It is not anticipated that this will occur until after the summer recess, and that the Bill will receive Royal Assent in late October or November of this year. Particular provisions will be introduced in stages after the Bill passes into law. The Bill will devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities more control over housing and planning decisions.

Key area in relation to Electoral Services is;

- giving residents the power to instigate local referendums on any local issue and the power to veto excessive council tax increases

Local referendums part of the Bill sets the framework for local people to trigger referendums and one way people can do this is with a petition. The Government say that giving people a new power to trigger a referendum will enable people to exert real influence over local decision making and is putting in place a full, though non-binding, local referendums regime which will give residents greater influence, increase participation, make councils more accountable and should lead to better outcomes.

The government recognises that given the significant impact that a referendum will have, both in terms of the management of the poll and the impact of the referendum result, it is necessary that local authorities adhere to robust processes when dealing with such petitions and conclude that Government involvement is therefore appropriate in these circumstances.

Electoral Commission Performance standards. The EC are introducing new standards for elections and electoral registration that will need to be incorporated into future elections and canvass project plans.

Elections - The EC will be consulting on a new set of standards for Returning Officers between August and December 2011. They will publish the revised standards in the New Year and they will be used in respect of May 2012 polls.

Electoral Registration - Self-assessment forms for EROs will be sent out in August for return in December 2011. This will be the last collection of ERO performance information based on the current set of standards as the EC will be consulting on a new set of ERO standards early in 2012 in preparation for the 2012 annual canvass.

The absentee voting (England and Wales regulations 2006) Collection of personal identifiers from electors registered for an absent vote. In January 2007, Electoral Registration Officers had to send a notice to all postal, proxy and postal proxy voters who have an entry on the absent voting record requiring them to supply a specimen of their signature and their date

of birth. From 1 January 2007, every new absent voting application had to include the applicant's signature and date of birth to be valid.

Electoral Registration Officers are required to refresh the identifiers on their record; currently this is required every five years. Therefore the identifiers received from new applications in early 2007 will need to be refreshed in January 2012. This is a resource intensive project that will need to be planned and managed closely.

Draft legislation on Individual Electoral Registration (IER) In order to meet its commitment to speed up the introduction of IER so that it is ready for implementation in 2014, the Government intends to publish draft legislation in June 2011, which will be considered by Parliamentary Committee under pre-legislative scrutiny. Once Parliament has reported on the draft proposals, the Government will formally respond to the Committee's report, making any necessary changes to the draft legislation with a view to laying a final Bill before Parliament in early 2012.

The Government wants to take steps to improve the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register and between June and December 2011. A number of local authorities will run pilots to test data matching schemes to see if the existing public authority databases can be used to improve the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register. The pilots will allow local authorities to compare their electoral register with other public databases to identify people missing from the register or entries on the register that are inaccurate or fraudulent.

There are 22 pilot schemes which between them will use combinations of data from public authorities including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, the Department for Education, HM Revenue and Customs, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Ministry of Defence.

If data matching identifies eligible individuals who are not already on the register then officers responsible for Electoral Registration will be able to offer them the opportunity to register. As is the case now, it is the choice of the individual whether to register to vote.

If data matching identifies names on the register that are not found elsewhere then officers will be able to investigate whether those entries are legitimate.

The pilots will be independently evaluated by the Electoral Commission.

The AEA have circulated notification from the Cabinet office that very shortly, the Government will outline its thinking on the implementation of IER in some detail and they intend to offer to come along to AEA branch meetings once again to give a short briefing and Q&A on the proposals.

In addition they would like to schedule further discussions with AEA members to hear views on these more detailed proposals when they are published, but also to discuss how IER will work in practice in more detail, including the full impact of the change on our systems and processes.

Next Steps

Continue to monitor progress of the new bills, implementation of the new Acts and the EC's approach and assess the impact on electoral services.

Planning for the Annual Electoral Registration Canvass has begun and the canvass will begin in August and end with the publication of the new electoral register on 1 December 2011.

The deadline for submission of accounts for the referendum on the voting system for the UK Parliamentary elections to the Elections Claim Unit has been set at 8 months from the date of the referendum, instead of the usual 12 months, and accounts must be submitted by 5 January 2012.

The recollection of personal identifiers from electors who have been registered for 5 years will begin in January 2012 and end in March 2012.

Contribute to the EC consultation on a new set of standards for Returning Officers between August and December.

Contribute to the EC consultation on a new set of ERO standards early in 2012 and manage the implementation of revised performance standards in preparation for the 2012 annual canvass.

Contribute to the contracting process for Electoral Printing currently being lead by SBC.

Contribute to the Cabinet office consultation on IER through our AEA membership and at regional meetings

Plan and prepare for directly elected Police and Crime Commissioner elections as more information becomes available from Parliament and the EC

SCRUTINY

What has been achieved?

- Continued support to the Council's **Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Programme**. Scrutiny involvement in the EIT programme has contributed to the identification of significant efficiency savings for the Council as well as identifying service improvements. Challenging deadlines for accelerated reporting of scrutiny led reviews to December 2010 Cabinet have been met as well as reporting of officer led task and finish reviews which were subject to challenge by Select Committees. Year 2 reviews have, in the main, met corporate targets for efficiency savings.
- **Monitoring** arrangements for tracking implementation of agreed scrutiny recommendations have been strengthened with reporting arrangements now aligned with corporate reporting on Service Plans. Progress reports for EIT reviews also now include an overall summary of the savings from each review as well as HR implications.
- Further improvements have been made to the **scrutiny web pages** with more detailed information on forthcoming meetings.
- A revised **scrutiny toolkit** has been issued to all Members.
- Following a significant piece of regional joint working, the **North East Regional Joint Health Scrutiny Committee** was established. Cllr Ann Cains was elected Chair, and therefore the Committee has been supported by the Stockton Scrutiny Team over the past year. A regional response to the NHS White Paper consultation was formulated and submitted from the Joint Committee. The Committee has also responded to national consultation on Children's Heart Surgery.
- Once established the North East Regional Joint Health Committee oversaw the delivery of **the regional review of the Health Needs of the Ex Service Community**. This was the

first time that all North East Councils had come together to work on a project of this kind. The 12 month project conducted specific inquiries into the physical health, mental health and socioeconomic wellbeing of the ex-service community resulting in 47 recommendations for improvement. It was produced after extensive discussions with the armed forces and ex-forces personnel, the NHS, other public bodies and voluntary organisations. The work has achieved recognition at the highest levels with endorsements from MPs and Ministers and the Minister for Care Services has committed to ensuring the recommendations are considered by regional Armed Forces networks.

- The regional scrutiny also received national recognition at The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) **Good Scrutiny Awards 2011**. The North East entry beat its way to the top from among 80 national entries. Not only did the review win the award for joint working, it also won the prestigious 'Overall Impact Award'. The North East Health Scrutiny Joint Committee entry was considered to be a great leap of the imagination, by CfPS judges, for the way that it embraced regional working. The work was applauded for taking on such a sensitive subject and making a real difference to the ex-service community.

What has proved more difficult?

- **Workloads** to deliver expedited Year 3 EIT reviews into Year 2 combined with other challenging work pressures such as supporting the newly established Regional Joint Health Scrutiny Committee.

Emerging Issues:

- To review Stockton's scrutiny arrangements to **respond to national developments** including the Localism Bill, Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill and changes affecting health including the establishment of GP consortia and Health and Well Being Boards and the need to ensure robust scrutiny arrangements with clear lines of accountability.
- A strengthened role for scrutiny in **self regulation and service improvement**.
- Role for scrutiny under the Council's **petitions** scheme (Executive Scrutiny Committee may consider a valid petition or undertake a review and other Select Committees may undertake a review where Executive Scrutiny Committee has been involved in dealing with the matter under the scheme).
- To continue to support the Council's drive for **Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation** through in depth scrutiny reviews and challenge