REVIEW OF 2015 MAY ELECTIONS AND AN UPDATE ON 2015 CANVASS; COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEWS; THE POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER ELECTIONS; AND PARLIAMENTARY BOUNDARY REVIEW

SUMMARY

To provide feedback from the May 2015 Elections and to highlight next steps in readiness for the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Elections in 2016.

To provide an update on the 2015 Canvass, Community Governance Reviews and Parliamentary Boundary Review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the report be noted

DETAIL

Background

1.   The Parliamentary, District and Parish elections were held on 7 May 2015. This report highlights what went well, what could be done better and the next steps needed to allow SBC to undertake a successful PCC election programme in 2016.

2.   We knew that the combined nature of the election programme in 2015 would create inevitable pressures within key areas of the project. This was the first time since 1979 that the Parliamentary, Borough and Parish Elections had taken place at the same time resulting in 33 separate polls to administer; this was also the first time that an election was being delivered under the new Individual Electoral Registration (IER) regime. As a result the workload for the elections increased significantly. By way of illustrating the scale of the task:

- 339 nomination papers were checked (most of which required further follow up and multiple checks)
- 2,254 assenter details had to be checked against the electoral register
- 196 agents were appointed
- 100 polling stations were booked
- 505 staff were appointed to 1,372 jobs
- 70,002 postal ballot packs were issued and 64,162 were receipted and opened representing an unprecedented turnout of postal voters

- A staggering 2,592 postal votes were returned on polling day which all had to be opened and processed for verification as soon as possible after 10pm

3. The interest in the election also resulted in a surge of registration and postal vote applications which put additional pressures on the Electoral Team working to new IER processes and at a time when work on administering the elections was gathering pace. During the statutory elections period:

- 16,127 registration applications were received
- 2,140 postal vote applications were received

Regional and Sub Regional Feedback

4. Regular meetings were held in the region and sub region particularly in the early planning stages ahead of the statutory period commencing. These meetings continue to be invaluable in sharing ideas and best practice.

5. Following the elections, the Deputy Local Returning Officer and Electoral Team Leader attended a Regional meeting in Sunderland which reviewed how the elections had been delivered across the region. All Councils reported the same pressure on electoral teams. However, some neighbouring Councils had experienced more significant problems. Several Councils had serious problems with printing errors which resulted in adverse media coverage and two Councils experienced problems at the verification and count; one Council had underestimated turnout resulting in significant delays in declaring, and flawed count processes at another resulted in a postal ballot box being overlooked which subsequently required a court order for it to be opened and counted. Nationally the picture was similar with a number of authorities failing to commence the Parliamentary count by 2am. These issues reinforce the need for careful planning and risk assessment and for the elections teams to be properly resourced.

Local Feedback/Issues

6. Overall, the combined elections at Stockton were delivered successfully despite the significant challenges and many commendations have been received. We have analysed the feedback so far to illustrate what went well and areas for improvement. Clear leadership and project management enabled a planned approach to delivery including working with partners and suppliers and thereby achieving a successful election outcome. Clear roles and good communications contributed to this success and will stand us in good stead for future elections.

7. There was considerable media interest in the Stockton South election which meant that there were full film crews from BBC, ITV/ Tyne Tees, Sky news and local radio present. The project team and colleagues from IT and Communications met with media representations at several site meetings and these meetings proved to be useful in clarifying and planning for media requirements well ahead of the count.

8. As in recent elections, a mini count approach was adopted. This means that each individual table is its own count and ballot papers allocated at the start of the process remain with the table at all times. This approach has proven to be quicker and more accurate and if problems arise they are isolated to a particular table and are easier to resolve. One recount was requested for the Bishopsgarth and Elm Tree ward (as the result rested on six ballot papers). The recount produced an identical result to the

original count. This was the first parliamentary election where the mini count procedure was adopted, however, a visual display of the results on six screens at the rear of the count hall proved very successful and allowed attendees and media representatives to view the overall results as the count was progressing.

Recommendation: The mini-count procedure is retained for future elections

9.   Mobile Stations – the only substantive complaints from voters received were in relation to the use of mobile polling stations. A comprehensive polling district review took place in the autumn of last year and efforts were made to review our arrangements and find alternative venues to avoid using mobile stations as they are unpopular with voters and expensive. During the polling district review, an alternative venue was found to replace only one of the mobile stations. During the May 2015 elections, the combined poll, high turnout and limited space in the mobile stations led to queues forming. It is proposed that a mini polling station review is carried out focusing on the districts where mobile stations are used to seek to identify any alternative arrangements. In four of these districts there are schools which could be used if the schools were willing and fresh approaches will be made.

Recommendation: That a mini polling station review is undertaken to seek to identify alternative polling stations where polling districts have mobile polling stations

10.   Verification and Count Layout – in planning for an expected high turnout, the decision was taken to increase the number of count teams to 32. This decision proved to be prudent; even with the increased staffing levels, the Stockton South result was not declared until shortly after 4am on the Friday morning. Negative comments were received from candidates and agents as in order to accommodate the additional teams, the layout meant that there was less space for candidates and agents to observe proceedings. In addition some negative comments were received about a lack of seating which has now been resolved. These will be taken on board and considered for future elections, however, the lack of an alternative venue and the high turnout expected from the combined poll did not afford a viable alternative on this occasion. Thornaby Pavilion and the venue continues to be an excellent facility for its large, open interior space and parking facilities and it is recommended we use this building for all future major elections. We will continue to work with architects to ensure the best use of the space to accommodate the verification and count process.

Recommendation: Undertake further work with Architects to establish best use of floor space at Thornaby Pavilion to accommodate the Verification and Count for the 2016 elections

11.   Postal Votes – dealing with postal votes at the close of poll continues to present a pressure in terms of finalising verification of personal identifiers to enable ballot papers to go forward to the count. Based on the exceptionally high turnout out at the European Elections, additional postal vote opening teams were employed in the run up to polling day and designated poll clerks and polling station inspectors/couriers were deployed immediately after the close of poll to bring final returned postal votes from polling stations to the count venue. Again, this proved to be a prudent decision as turnout for postal votes at this Poll was unprecedented and postal vote verification did not conclude until 1.30am

Recommendation: Continually review what measures are required to minimise the length of the postal vote verification process on an election by election basis

12. Printers – we currently use ADARE via the NEPO contract and we will continue to work closely to maintain our good relations with the company to ensure their best service. There were a number of issues relating to quality assurance which we experienced in the run up to the May elections and proofing processes which proved to be overly time consuming. Feedback has been provided to the printers and discussions with other North East Councils are underway as the contract is coming to an end; negotiations are on-going in respect of the contract and the market for other print services is being investigated.

Recommendation: Review the Adare printing contract in conjunction with other North East Councils including investigating the electoral printing market for alternative opportunities

13. Royal Mail – Royal Mail continue to introduce new products to the elections market however for this poll it was necessary due to the resources available to use internal hand delivery for Poll cards, and business post via our contracted printer was more economical than using Royal Mail for delivery of postal votes. We will continue to monitor Royal Mail products and services to ensure we maximise all available efficiencies.

Recommendation: Continue to work with Royal Mail re SBC service requirements.

14. Training – In the run up to the European Elections, the training model was adapted to include remote training, briefing on the job, and chalk and talk training for Presiding Officers. This saved money but did not offer value for money as more time was spent rectifying errors that could have been avoided had we delivered the more robust model usually adopted. For the May elections face to face training was provided for all polling station staff and count staff in accordance with a detailed training plan. Inevitably, there will always be some issues on stations, but there were significantly less issues/queries during May despite the complex nature of the combined poll.

Recommendation: The training model used in the May 2015 elections be retained for future elections

15. Accounts – following the European Elections an independent book keeper from accountancy services was utilised to complete and submit the elections accounts. This significantly reduced the number of queries and led to early approval of our elections account by the Elections Claims Unit.

Recommendation: Continue to utilise an independent book keeper to assist with the submission of the election account to the Elections Claims Unit

16. Department of Neighbourhood Services - an early project planning meeting and the production of an agreed schedule contributed to the smooth running of arrangements leading up to, before and after election day. DNS staff continue to provide us with excellent support.

17. Security Services – again early planning meetings and an agreed schedule ensured smooth running of arrangements and mitigated security issues. The enforcement service also continue to provide us with invaluable support.

18. Police – an early Police project planning meeting across the Tees Valley with the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) allowed us to discuss security and integrity issues in

a timely manner, facilitating a risk assessment to identify and address potential concerns about electoral malpractice, thereby complying with EC advice. Prior to every electoral event our Integrity Plan is reviewed and shared with our SPOC. A further meeting was held with the local force to review our plans in view of the heightened media interest in respect of the Stockton South parliamentary election. Again this proved helpful and highlighted the most appropriate approach to electoral security, at an early stage.

19.   ICT - continues to be critical in enabling the delivery of the election and through good working relationships with IT staff we are able to overcome any problems that we might encounter. IT critical dates are provided at an early planning stage and attendance by IT support staff at the first postal vote opening sessions and verification and count provide essential support. IT support staff continue to provide us with excellent support, and in particular this year they were instrumental in developing a new visual display results system.

Recommendation: Continue to work with council services as appropriate to maintain efficient electoral processes

20.   Staffing – the combined nature of the May polls meant that staffing numbers needed to be increased and, as ever, the appointment of staff proved to be very difficult. Corporate commitment remains invaluable in recruiting sufficient temporary election staff from within the Council, however during the May elections some staff reported that there were managers who would not release them for elections duties. A renewed corporate commitment will be essential for smooth and successful elections in the future.

Recommendation: Renewed corporate commitment to encouraging SBC staff to undertake election duties

2015 Canvass

21. The 2015 canvass will be the first full canvass of all properties in the Borough since the move to Individual Electoral Registration. The canvass will differ from other previous canvasses under the old system because the form sent to properties, the "Household Enquiry Form (HEF)", is used purely to elicit information about who lives in the property and cannot be used to register them. Following receipt of a Household Enquiry Form, any new resident who has moved into a particular property will need to be sent an invitation to register individually and this can be completed on the Invitation to Register form provided, online, or over the telephone (provided that national insurance number and date of birth are provided).

22. The 2015 Canvass will also be last that is undertaken before the transition to individual electoral registration is complete. Any existing elector that has not registered individually by 1 December 2015 will be removed from the register. A large number of existing electors were transferred automatically to the IER register last summer following matching against central government records and those unconfirmed or "red" electors, who could not be confirmed automatically, have already received repeated communications from electoral services and personal visits. These "red" electors, along with any new elector, need to provide national insurance number and date of birth to complete their registration.

23. There are currently 2,569 unconfirmed existing electors on our electoral register who will be removed from the register on 1 December 2015. Given the number of unsuccessful invitations to register made individually, it a likely that the majority of

these electors have moved or are not eligible to be registered. Through a combination of canvass activity and data mining against other records, it is anticipated that the number of unconfirmed electors will reduce significantly before any remaining are removed on 1 December.

24. Key dates in the 2015 Canvass are:

   - 5 August – all properties receive a HEF form by post
   - 7 September – personal visits to all non-responding households commences
   - 19 October – end of personal visits
   - 27 October – final HEF reminders are posted
   - 1 December – publish revised Register and delete any existing unconfirmed electors

   Invitations to register individually will be sent out to anyone added to the HEF form throughout all stages of the canvass.

25. A comprehensive engagement plan has been developed identifying a range of activities to raise awareness of the canvass across the Borough. This will include press releases, social media messages on Twitter and Facebook, Stockton News, KYIT, advertising on 180,000 SBC car park tickets, library book receipts and information sent out via partners in our Democratic Information Network.

Community Governance Review

26. A valid petition has been received calling for a Community Governance Review to be undertaken with a view to the abolition of Billingham Town Council. Key dates are as follows:

   - Cabinet Meeting 10 September 15

   - Council agrees to publication of Terms of reference notifying key stakeholders 16 September 15

   - Views invited from key stakeholders 17 September 15 – 31 October 15

   - Consultation with all Local Government Electors in the area 17 September 15 – 31 October 15

   - Consideration of the wider forms of Community Governance in the area 17 September 15 – 31 October 15

   - Cabinet will consider findings at their meeting 3 December 15

   - Draft recommendations to Council 20 January 16

   - Consult on draft proposals 21 January 2016 – 17 February 2016

   - Final recommendations to Cabinet 17 March 16

   - Final recommendation to Council 26 April 16

   - Final Recommendations and reasons for the decision published and stakeholders informed on 27 April 16

- Recommendations implemented from 27 April 16

27. It was also agreed that a Community Governance Review into the future of Elton Parish Council should also be conducted as this Parish Council had not been in operation since December 2008 when all the Councillors resigned. Work will commence on drafting the terms of reference for the reviews of Billingham Town Council and Elton Parish Council for consideration by Cabinet on the 10 September and approval by Council on 16 September.

National Reports

28. The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), who represent the interests of Electoral Professionals in the UK, have published their report which considers Elections/IER and the challenge of 2015. It should be noted however that despite the challenges it is recognised by the Electoral Commission that we continue to deliver elections that are well-run with high levels of voter satisfaction. However the AEA is acutely concerned that unless the issues identified in the report are addressed those colleagues responsible for electoral services will not be able to cope, and therefore a fundamental review of the future management and administration of elections is recommended. A number of the issues/concerns raised in the report were experienced in Stockton and the RO, DRO, and the Electoral team fully support the recommendations contained in the report, a summary of which is at **appendix 1**

Other Work

Boundary Review

29. In 2011 legislation was passed to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, but the review of constituency boundaries that would have made the recommendations necessary to implement these changes was halted because of disagreements within the previous Government over constitutional reform.

30. Under the law as it still stands, a new review by the Boundary Commission must be conducted after the 2015 General Election and completed by October 2018. It must again divide the UK into 600 constituencies.

30 Given the time required to complete boundary reviews, any changes to the Rules would have to be a priority for the new Government if the October 2018 deadline is to be met.

Election Timetable

31. The election programme for next year will see Stockton lead on the PCC election for the Cleveland Force area. Preparation commenced on 4 August and will continue with regular updates to Lead Members throughout. In addition it is likely that we will be requested to undertake a Referendum on Europe between now and May 2017. In addition, if greater devolution is given to the Sub Region, a Mayor may need to be elected.

Next Steps

32. Complete election accounts.

33. Maintain momentum with suppliers especially Adare and Royal Mail.

34. Continue planning for the 2016 PCC Elections with immediate effect, drafting the detailed management plans and scheduling Cleveland Force Planning Meetings.

35. Consult with the necessary stakeholders re the PCC election Arrangements

36. Implement 2015 and Canvass Plans

37. Implement Community Governance reviews

38. Undertake preparation for any Boundary Review.

39. Implement recommendations as agreed.

40. Cabinet will consider the item on 10th September 2015 and a copy of the relevant minute extract will be circulated to Members.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

41. Duty to comply with the requirements of the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

RISK ASSESSMENT

42. Development and implementation of 2016 election programme will include an appropriate risk log, integrity plan and business continuity plan to mitigate against any perceived risks.

COUNCIL PLAN IMPLICATIONS

43. Liveability.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

44. The requirement for an assessment will be considered as part of the review process.

CONSULTATION

45. All stakeholders will be consulted on the arrangements for the verification and counting of votes in the 2016 election programme.

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Background Papers:
Ward(s) and Ward Councillors:
Property Implications: