

An Overview & Scrutiny Report

A review of Electoral Services in Bath & North East Somerset

A Report by the Resources Overview & Scrutiny Panel Task & Finish Group

Cllr. David Bellotti (Chairman)
Cllr. Brian Webber
Cllr Shaun McGall

Introduction

A Task & Finish Group from the Resources Overview & Scrutiny Panel have undertaken a short review into Electoral Services at Bath & North East Somerset Council. The review set out to look at ways of:

- a) increasing the percentage of residents on the electoral roll and;
- b) encouraging more people to come out and vote on Election Day.

In particular, the Members are concerned at the relatively low percentage of residents being registered (85% compared with an average from similar local authorities of 95%)¹.

Moreover, if the recent Electoral Administration Bill becomes law this will result in many changes to the way local Councils operate the election process and additional costs. The Task & Finish Group were keen to understand the current pressures on the service and the issues it faces in encouraging electoral registration and election turnout, in the wake of these changes.

The Councillors are under no illusions as to the resourcing pressures faced by this service. They anticipate that their recommendations will make a positive contribution to an already well operated service and may play a role in bringing about an increased participation in democracy locally.

Approach

After approving the Terms of Reference² the Resources Overview & Scrutiny Panel commissioned three of its Members to form a Task & Finish Group to complete this review. This group undertook the following activities to gather their evidence:

1. Background information

To understand the processes of registration and elections the Task & Finish group held an informal briefing session with electoral services officers, including the Council's electoral registration and returning officer.

¹ Summary of Results of Questionnaire sent to similar local Authorities – Appendix 3

² Terms of Reference – Appendix 1

They also received a pack of literature including a summary of the recent Electoral Administration Bill and national publications on voter turnout by the Electoral Commission. The group have not carried out any statistical research of their own concerning levels of registration and election participation for particular groups but have assumed that the national findings in the Electoral Commission's reports reflect a similar position in Bath & North East Somerset.

More significantly, the panel received the report of a recent Operation Efficiency Improvement Project of the Council Elections Services, conducted by the Corporate Performance Unit for managerial purposes. This report set out in detail the process and costs of electoral registration and the operation of elections in Bath & North East Somerset. It also makes recommendations for efficiency savings and future developments of the service. The efficiency project's findings have been included and referred to in this report.

Copies of the Task & Finish Group's background reading are included in the Appendices to this report (*Please note: the Operational Efficiency Report is a publicly exempt appendix*).

2. Other local Councils

To explore what other Councils are doing in the wake of the Electoral Administration Bill and to help place their investigation in a national context the Task & Finish Group sent out 19 questionnaires to other similar local authorities³ receiving 10 replies in total. The Questionnaire focussed on asking general questions about the operation of electoral services, about methods of electoral registration and details of elections.

3. Ward Councillors

The Councillors were also keen to gain the perspectives of their fellow Members particularly to gain a perspective at a ward level of election participation and registration. A short questionnaire was sent out to all 65 Councillors of Bath & North East Somerset⁴. The Panel received 10 responses (15%).

4. Particular groups in Society

The Councillors' review focused particularly on those groups in society who have been identified by the Electoral Commission⁵ as either being under represented on the electoral register or who have potential barriers to participating in elections. Specifically these include students, Black & minority Ethnic communities, disabled people and homeless people. A Contributors Session⁶ was held specifically to hear the views of representatives of these groups. The Panel also heard about ways of encouraging young people to become interested in democracy before they are able to vote. It was a very useful meeting, with many of the suggestions coming from the day being taken forward to inform the Panel's recommendations.

Background

The Electoral Commission have recently made proposals concerning electoral registration and election processes, some of which have materialised into an Electoral Administrative Bill currently going through parliament. This bill is set to encourage greater voter participation in elections, whilst introducing further measures to combat fraud and increase security for Election

³ Questionnaire to other Local Authorities – Appendix 3

⁴ Questionnaire to ward Councillors – Appendix 4

⁵ See Understanding Electoral Registration (Electoral Commission Sept 2005) – Appendix 2b

⁶ Contributors Session – Appendix 5

services and procedures. These changes are likely to bring an increased demand on the already limited resources of the Electoral Services team.

The Electoral Service is part of Democratic and Member Services (DMS) and is based in the Guildhall in Bath. It is a comparatively small unit (2FTE staff supplemented by casual labour at elections and during the annual register preparation) providing a dedicated and specialised function, which is responsible for:

- Producing and maintaining the register of people in Bath & North East Somerset who are entitled to vote in all local and parliamentary elections.
- Ensuring that all Elections and Referendums are run in a free and fair way
- Conducting Elections and managing all the administrative processes supporting the Elections, as follows;
 - Parliamentary (General) Elections
 - District and Parish (Local) Elections
 - European Elections
 - Referendums (a vote to accept or reject a particular proposal)

At the outset the Task & Finish Group would like to acknowledge that despite resource pressures the Council runs a value for money electoral service. The current staff are held in high regard throughout the authority; they are competent and conscientious and have served the Council to a good standard for many years. This does not preclude the fact that although it is a well run service, it is a basic one due to limited resources and previous political decisions to not pursue pilots of innovative practices.

The approved Service and Resource Plan for DMS highlights an Election Services funding shortfall of £11k, (the overall budget for the service is £118k). It is anticipated that with the proper investment, moving to a more 'modern' electoral service could offer the opportunity to generate service efficiencies and cost reductions, as well as alleviating some of the capacity issues currently facing the service.

In comparing with Electoral Services in other similar Councils⁷, a number of observations can be made.

- Bath & North East Somerset are at the lower end of the scale with a budget of £118,000. In the other Councils, Electoral Service Budgets varied from £100,000 to £250,000pa despite each council being of similar population and structure
- The budgets for the Councils who had similar numbers of staff running their Electoral Service as Bath & North East Somerset (i.e. 2.0 – 2.5 FTE) ranged from £104,000 to £146,000. Those with higher budgets employed up to 4.5 FTE staff.

General Recommendation

1. The Task & Finish Group recognise that the Council must take on board all potential requirements as outlined in the bill going through parliament. Despite the major ensuing resource implications this should be seen as an opportunity to progress the service rather than a detrimental cost to the Council. The Task & Finish group recommends that the council is proactive in making improvements and pursuing new innovative practices in response to the changes in the law.

⁷ For a full list of those Council's who received a questionnaire see Appendix 3

Registration

The Electoral Register is a definitive list compiled by Bath & North East Somerset Council of everyone who is registered to vote at elections. Much of the process for the registering of the electoral role in Bath & North East Somerset is set by national guidelines and legislation.

Each year at the beginning of September a registration form is sent to every household in Bath & North East Somerset (In 2004, 77,000 forms were issued). By the beginning of October approximately 60% of these forms have been returned and a reminder is issued to non-responders ahead of the qualifying date of October 15th. Issuing reminder letters is not a statutory requirement. The Council used to send 3 reminders but reduced it to one based on cost and the apparent futility of the exercise i.e. response rates did not fall significantly by sending three reminders compared to one⁸.

If a property fails to confirm details, the Council must roll the present details over for one year before they are taken off the following year.

It is the Electoral Returning Officers duty to ensure that the register is as accurate as possible.

In 2001 the rolling register was introduced nationally. Up until this point the annual qualifying date of October 15th meant that households who moved between qualifying dates were unable to vote in their new location until the following year. The rolling register means that an individual can volunteer to add, amend or delete their registration details at any point in the year. The register is now updated each month between January and August with a letter sent to each Councillor detailing the changes in their ward for that month.

Currently in Bath & North East Somerset, Electoral Registration is at 85% of the eligible population, this is down from 96% on the previous year. This is low compared with other similar Council's registration levels (that varied from 88% - 99% of the eligible population⁹).

Moreover, from the questionnaire returns there is no obvious correlation between level of registration and budget of service or staffing levels. In fact, one Council with a budget of £104,000 and 2 FTE staff achieved a registration level of 99% which is the same level as another authority with 4.5 FTE staff (budget not specified). This is compared to Bath's level of 85%, budget of £118 and staffing levels of 2 FTE.

When asked about improving the process of registering, Councillors had a number of suggestions from a ward perspective. One of which was to include a registration form with the first Council tax bill sent to new residents. Another suggestion was to introduce on-line or electronic registration, one Councillor had heard of an authority where people can reregister over the phone if their details have not changed, by using a pin number sent in the post.

Students

Students are among the groups that have a low record nationally of registering to vote in the area where they study.

⁸ Taken from the Operational Efficiency Improvement Project – Appendix 2a, Section 2.

⁹ See the summary of questionnaire returns from other Councils – Appendix 3

Currently the Council block registers all students in University Halls of Residence, a move that has proved successful and efficient at a very low cost. There is no focused effort for students who are not in Halls of Residence, they only receive the same sort of information that the general public receive about registration. These off-campus students usually have not moved into their house in time to receive the initial registration form for their household. There is a perception that this is lost amongst other junk mail, discarded by the landlord or just ignored by the students – an observation that was reinforced by the Student Union President of the University of Bath at the Contributors Session.

All Students should be in residence, or just arriving, by the time the reminder letter is issued but may not understand what they have to do. If they are second or first year students then there is a high likelihood that this is the first time they will have ever registered to vote – they may not think about it or even realise they need to do this, particularly if it is not in the lead up to an election. Students may also think that they only register at home (the area where they resided prior to coming to University).

The Electoral Services team advise parents of students who have moved away to remain on the register here, this may also be the case of the local authorities of students who move into the area to study.

Electoral Services no longer have a stall at the Freshers Fairs as there was very little interest shown, they do however, advertise in Freshers magazines.

The Task & Finish group discussed the possibility of block registering off-campus students with the President of the Students' Union and later with the Council's Returning Officer. A number of interesting points were raised.

- There is no legal reason why the Council could not block register off campus as well as on campus students.
- The University does hold a database of students' off-campus accommodation details.
- Data protection issue could be covered by asking permission from the student, on enrolment at the university, for their details to be shared with the Council.
- In accordance with the rolling register the students could be block registered at any time in the year.

Black & Minority Ethnic groups

2.5% of the population in Bath & North East Somerset is considered to come from a Black and Minority Ethnic population.

In speaking to a representative from Bath Racial Equalities Council the Councillors identified few specific issues concerning electoral registration and black & ethnic minorities. The main areas that were discussed were around general engagement with the Council and pertain more to voter turnout, so are covered in the elections section below.

It was highlighted that complicated forms and instructions may be difficult for people to understand where English was not their first language. Translation/interpretation process could make the difference between functioning and participating. If someone has to pay a high price in personal dignity terms to learn or participate then it is discouraging.

Most other Councils identified black & ethnic minorities as one of the groups who followed the trend of non-registration

Disabled People

Bath & North East Somerset has an aging population and this can bring failing eyesight, hearing, and mobility impairment. As a matter of course, residential elderly homes are block registered and rolling registration and postal voting forms are sent out to them for their new residents.

As with black and ethnic minorities much of the discussion at the Contributors session was concerned with access to polling stations and voting rather than registering to vote and no specific issues were identified in this area. There are far fewer access issues concerned with registering than there are with voting.

The Homeless

Changes in 2001 meant that a person is able to register to vote at the place where they normally reside, this declaration of local connection is only normally to be used for homeless people, detained offenders and people in mental institutions (this also applies to the Canal population). This means that technically a homeless person can register themselves at a bus station or under the railway arch where they normally sleep.

In Bath, Julian House is a homelessness charity who have 6 different services ranging from people on the street right through to the process of supporting people with their first home. A homeless person can use Julian House as a postal address for registration. However, only one person registered through Julian house out of the 350 people who passed through in one year. The Julian House team said that they have not specifically targeted their clients with elections issues due to more pressing problems that their clients face.

The Canal Population

A short discussion was held over the registering rights of people who live on boats. It was confirmed that these people are eligible to register to vote by declaration of local connection with a boat house or local post office etc. Boats dwellers were communicated their rights via posters including the including changes to no fixed address rule, to date there has been little response to this.

Recommendations to improve the registration process

2. Mindful of the fact that Students in Halls of Residence are already block registered and that the Solicitor to the Council has advised that there is no legal objection, the Task & Finish Group recommend that the Council should liaise with the Universities to ensure that all students are block registered, not just those in Halls of Residence.
 - 2.1. The group are aware of discussions taking place between the Council's Revenues and Benefits department and the Universities regarding Council tax data. This discussion should be extended to include the sharing of information for block registering purposes.
3. The registration objective of the Council is to ensure that as many people as possible are registered in time for Elections. The introduction of a rolling register means that the work load peaks should be distributed more evenly across the year. To these ends the Task & Finish Group recommend
 - 3.1. That the first letter requesting registration details is sent out in early September rather than August when the likelihood of people being away is reduced.
 - 3.2. That the Council wait until January to send out the reminder letter to those who have not responded to the first letter. Although this is after the registration publication date, the Task & Finish Group believes that more people will be captured at this time, especially in the lead up to an election and this will also alleviate some of the pressure on the team in September to November.
 - 3.3. That every other year a canvass should take place of those properties that are not on the register or are about to come off, with the first canvas in early 2007. If there are serious cost pressures this should be piloted using three wards with the largest number of unregistered properties and properties about to come off the register.
 - 3.4. That by using the emerging Electronic Document and Record Management System, the Council should use these canvasses for the information needs of other Council departments and not just for registration purposes.
4. The Council should send out the September registration forms to residents along with other information that goes out from the Council at the same time, e.g. Council News, Council tax etc. This will save cost and also act to engage more people with the registration process.
5. The Council should be actively liaising with and learning from similar local authorities who are implementing changes to their elections and registrations services in time for May 2006 elections.

Elections

An election is the process by which a vote is cast by eligible member of a constituency to elect candidates to an office.

There are currently three methods of voting in Bath & North East Somerset;

- at a polling station
- by postal vote
- by proxy vote

Postal voting has increased locally by 142% since 2001; this is inline with a national trend that is set to increase in the future. The risk with postal voting is that it puts an increase work load on the Electoral Services team which already has to cope with a sharp peak in work load during election periods.

During the 2005 parliamentary election the average turnout across the Bath & Wansdyke constituencies was 71% this is compared to a national average of 61%. Postal and Proxy Voting accounted for nearly one fifth of all votes.¹⁰ This figure can be compared to the 2003 local election turnout which was at 36% in Bath & North East Somerset.

A wide variety of buildings are used as polling stations such as schools, village halls, churches and community centres. Other structures include mobile jackleg buildings and caravans, which are used to access remote communities and provide greater accessibility, are used by other Councils. The Council presently does not have many major disability access problems with their polling stations and are phasing out the use of those that do. Nevertheless, the availability of suitable polling stations is an ongoing issue for the Electoral Services team, particularly with some local schools being reluctant to allow use of their premises. This problem was also expressed by other councils who were questioned.

Comments from ward councillors included the feeling that a local school should be used if there are no suitable alternatives. One particular Councillor said that residents in their ward would turn up at old polling station sites as its location had been changed so often.

Poole Borough Council was the only authority out of those who returned the questionnaire to be planning to pilot new forms of technologies to be used in polling stations; they are considering using electronic ballot boxes for their 2006 elections.

Students

The introduction of a polling station on the campus of the University of Bath has been successful, though presently it can only be used by those students who are registered in the Bathwick ward. There is also a polling station on the Newton Park campus of Bath Spa University.

The Task & Finish group heard about the problems students face in trying to locate their polling station. They might not know where their polling station is located if they register within a ward they are not familiar with; it is likely they will not have lived there long. A simple suggestion of

¹⁰ Taken from the Operational Efficiency Improvement Project – Appendix 2a, Section 3.

including a map of the routes to the polling station on the back of the polling cards was made. This would also be useful for any resident trying to locate a polling station.

Off Campus students currently cannot vote on campus however, if this were to change then this would greatly increase accessibility and turnout of the student population on voting day. The barriers to this are currently a person is only allowed to vote in a designated polling station.

A major issue that seems to affect election turnout for students is engagement with local issues and the student's perception of the Council. Students need to understand and see demonstrated reasons why they should vote. These reasons need to be portrayed to the students as they may not be engaged enough to actually vote on issues that do not affect them directly. The Council could work towards making positive contributions to student lives, i.e. free wheelie bins, or seek to more proactively engage with them on issues that would be of interest i.e. the extension of licensing hours.

The Task & Finish Group were told that there needs to be more specific canvassing and marketing to students. The publicity in the halls of residence is good but not generally up around the university campus; this is missing the students who do not live on campus. The Students Union however are willing to support advertising to increase the student vote, but it obviously cannot support individual Political Parties. One area mentioned which needs looked in to, is the possibility of using the library foyer plasma screens to display information to the students. Cost of Plasma Screens could be bypassed if were run through the student political parties, other advertising costs will need to be researched.

Black & Ethnic Minority Communities

The Panel heard that there was a general issue of engagement with the Council behind low election turnout figures from the ethnic minority communities. People from ethnic minorities need to see positive role models of people from black & minority ethnic groups stand for elections.

There was a suggestion that Elected Candidates could get invited to various meetings of local BME groups. The Councillors understood that the challenge is in making the contact and candidates should make better use of the formal mechanism for consulting with black & minority ethnic groups.

Another improvement would be for Ward Councillors to be more aware of demographics in each ward and be able to target each demographic.

Disabled People

The most common issue disabled people will have with an election is access. This is either physical access into a polling station, access in the method of getting to the polling station or access to information of how to vote and in the physical ability to use a pencil and paper to vote.

The Council like many others wherever possible choose polling stations that are accessible for a range of mobility needs. The costs associated with ensuring this is always the case are generally high, an issue that would find a compromised solution in a person being able to vote at different polling stations in which they are registered.

Homeless People

In one of the Julian House projects working with the most challenging people, 3 out of 5 of these went out to vote at the last election. However, the representative explained that it is disputable as to how much of this was a real choice as often the clients would ask how the staff were voting and only went because they were told.

The Councillors also heard how many of these clients didn't fully understand the various issues that are being dealt with by the Council and that these residents need to break the pull of just being on the street by feeling supported and comfortable within a community. This is an important role of a local councillor and the link would provide an avenue for the person to participate in future elections.

The Councillors were led to understand that many of the Julian House clients are not part of anything that is usually taken for granted in society, such as banks and cinemas, so voting does not usually feature very high on their list of priorities. Literary skills are also generally poor for these people.

Young people

At the Contributors Session the Councillors heard of the many initiatives that were being undertaken by Democratic Action for B&NES Youth for young people aged 13-19. This is very much tied in with the citizenship agenda in the national curriculum. These initiatives include organising the national youth parliament elections. The Councillors heard how young people need to be inspired to be involved in local democracy and this is key to them participating in later life when they are eligible to vote.

Super Polling Stations

In their discussions the Task & Finish group concluded that one solution to many of the problems associated with elections turnout would be the introduction of what they called Super Polling Stations. These would be located in central public places like a supermarket, the guildhall, a library etc. They would have the necessary facilities to enable votes to be cast in any ward in the Council's area in the form of ward ballot boxes, registers and links to other polling stations. Any person from Bath & North East Somerset would be able to vote from these for a candidate in the ward they are registered in. This would mean that people could pop out from work to vote, go whilst they are shopping or running errands and would make the voting process much more accessible for and would raise its profile.

These Super Stations could also be issued with the latest technology, access ramps and language facilities, breaking down barriers to voting for the disabled and ethnic minorities.

To enable this to become a reality Bath & North East Somerset would ideally need to have an electronic register, and all polling stations electronically linked to prevent people voting more than once. Although this may seem an idea that is far from the reality of our present elections the Council should be looking to the future of its elections service. The government periodically offer pilot schemes which encourage Councils to pioneer new ways of working, there is funding available specifically for pilots that test an electronic element and is considered on a case by case basis.

Recommendations to improve the election turnout

6. The Task & Finish Group would urge the Executive to put forward Bath & North East Somerset for a pilot scheme candidate in May 2007 should an appropriate opportunity arise.
7. In the wake of mandatory electronic registration systems the Council should pilot the operation of Super Polling Stations. This could be under the guise of a government pilot or independently. The Task & Finish Group suggest the following locations for these Super Polling Station pilots:
 - The Guildhall
 - A supermarket somewhere in North East Somerset
 - The Royal United Hospital
 - The University of Bath
8. The Council should look into the possibility of using outlets that have electronic information points to promote election participation. For example, informing the public of the election date, reminding people to vote on Election Day and giving simple information about polling station hours. This could be done at minimal cost and be run on plasma screens at the Cinema, at banks, local post offices, local libraries and in the University library.
9. Two members of the Task & Finish Group recommend that the Council should explore using a variety of incentives to get people out to vote. These could include
 - Appropriate commercial sponsorship of raffle prizes or vouchers for voters.
 - The Council itself offering a raffle of winning free Council Tax for the year or offering a voucher towards a Council service, such as a leisure centre, for everyone who votes. This way people would see the connection between voting and the services the candidates will be responsible for.
10. An interactive CDROM should be produced for 16 year olds in Bath & North East Somerset educating them from a local perspective about registration and voting.
11. All polling cards should include a map on the back showing routes of how to get to the polling stations in the ward; this information should also be available on the Electoral Services webpage.
12. The Council should adopt a more robust strategy to obtain the best polling station facilities for the voter in each area, where necessary requiring schools to make their premises available. If planned for far enough in advance the school calendar could be rearranged accordingly.

Appendices

1	Electoral Services Terms of Reference
2	Reading pack for Task & Finish Group
	a) Operation Efficiency Improvement Project Report (<i>Exempt Appendix</i>)
	b) Securing the Vote – The Electoral Commission report
	c) Securing the Vote – the Government’s response
	d) Understanding Electoral Registration –Electoral Commission report
	e) Summary of Electoral Administration Bill (LGIU)
	f) Participation and Turnout publication
3	Questionnaire to Other Councils – and responses
4	Questionnaire and to other Councillors – and responses
5	Contributor Session Summary

Copies of these appendices can be obtained by contacting the Overview & Scrutiny Team on 01225 396053 or by writing to scrutiny@bathnes.gov.uk

Appendices b), c) and d) can be found on www.electoralcommissison.gov.uk by typing the relevant title into the search box.