

**Bath and North East Somerset Council**

**Electoral Services Review**

**A review by the Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel**

**Workshop**

**Review Panel Members**

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## **Foreword**

Elections are an indispensable part of the democratic process but can be stressful occasions for candidates, those organising them and even voters if things do not go smoothly.

The Panel decided that the review would draw upon recent experiences of B&NES local elections and the General Election in order to identify any such problems and learn lessons which may help avoid these in the future and provide us with the opportunity to help make any necessary improvements for future elections

The Resources Panel undertook a workshop session on the 14<sup>th</sup> December 2011, the session sought to identify any issues with voter experience of access to the electoral process, polling stations and the general operations of the polling day. The session also examined the information that was provided to candidates and agents on the electoral counting systems and general electoral process.

*The results and recommendations will be presented to the Policy Development & Scrutiny Resources Panel in March and to Full Council during 2012*

Councillor John Bull  
Chair of the Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel

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## **Recommendations**

Recommendation 1: Electoral Services could identify wards with care/residential homes and contact them to find how if/when any of their residents were planning to vote at their local polling station and then speak to relevant Presiding Officers to ensure that all their additional support needs are met in a timely and appropriate manner.

Recommendation 2: Training for Poll Clerks/Presiding Officers should include how to deal sensitively with voters who require additional support.

Recommendation 3: The Council's website could be utilised to provide a link to the Electoral Commission's 'How to Stand as an Electoral Candidate' permanently rather than just in the run up to an election.

Recommendation 4: The Council, through Electoral Services, should capture feedback from new candidates to find out whether additional information could be provided in future.

Recommendation 5: The Council should seek clarification and guidance from the Council's Monitoring Officer on signing of nominations, which could provide a better understanding for new candidates and help to improve the process.

Recommendation 6: The Council should write to the Electoral Commission asking them to ensure that the verification procedure for any future referendums does not slow up the counting process or declaration of results.

Recommendation 7: At the count, candidates and agents should be told by the Deputy Returning Officer at the counting centre which counting system is going to be used and kept informed of how the count is going at each stage of the process

Recommendation 8: Electoral Services should investigate the options suggested for future polling stations at Keynsham East and Midsomer Norton.

Recommendation 9: Electoral Services should consider whether Timsbury or Wellow have the facilities to host the counts for Bathavon West and Bathavon South

Recommendation 10: Electoral Services to undertake future research in order to identify the different languages spoken in our Local Authority area and the impact that this may have on their voting experience.

## **Introduction**

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011, Bath & North East Somerset Council held local, town and parish Council elections along with a referendum on whether to have an alternative voting system.

As good practice the Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel, hosted a workshop to find out how people felt the elections went, whether there was scope for improvement and also to contribute to Electoral Services review of Polling Districts.

We invited all the candidates who stood at the last election, election agents and equalities/access groups including Bath Racial Equalities Council, Age UK, Mental Health Matters, Association for the Blind and Scope. The session was structured into facilitated workshop sessions and highlighted that on the whole, the elections process works well in Bath & North East Somerset.

## **Purpose and Objectives**

This was a light touch investigation but the aims of the workshop were as follows:

1. Assess voter experience of:
  - a. Access to the electoral process
  - b. Access to polling stations
  - c. Operation on polling day
2. Information provided to candidates/agents/Councillors
3. Information about the counting system
4. Review of polling districts/stations

## **Methodology**

The investigation was suggested by Councillor Gerrish at the Panel's first public meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2011.

A scoping meeting for the workshop was held with Councillors Bull and Gerrish, the Council Returning Officer (Vernon Hitchman) and the Head of Electoral Services (Aurora Loi Wright) and officers from Policy Development and Scrutiny. This meeting was used to identify the objectives for the workshop and the list of invitees.

The workshop was held on the 14<sup>th</sup> December at the Guildhall. Councillor Bull led the workshop, introducing four workshops which were discussed in small groups who fed back and were recorded by Policy Development and Scrutiny Officers.

## Findings

### 1. Voter Experience:

#### *Students and Young People:*

Every year, Youth Parliament elections take place, with two Members of Youth Parliament (MYPs) representing Bath and North East Somerset. The workshop acknowledged that these elections are a good way of introducing young people to the concept of voting. Attendees also felt that parents had an important role to play in encouraging their children to vote.

In order to try to improve the process for students from secondary school to university it was felt that the process might need to be made clearer. For example; attendees to the workshop noted that people think that they can vote at any polling station, which suggests that there needs to be further clarity of the voting process.

It was noted that students are allowed to vote twice (at home and at university) for local elections but only once for general elections. There does not appear to be any way of cross referencing this other than developing a national database.

#### *Individual Voter Registration:*

The *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009* made provision for the phased implementation of a system of individual registration, which the Coalition Government intends to complete by December 2015. A White Paper, *Individual Electoral Registration (IER)*, which was published in June 2011, sets out how the government plans to implement the new system.

#### **Key changes under IER**

- All applications to register need to be made individually.
- All applications need to be verified before electors are added to the electoral register.
- Annual household registration will change from 2014 with special transitional arrangements in that year for eligible electors who are not registered under IER.

#### **Applications to register under IER**

- Electors must provide evidence in order to register: likely to be National Insurance (NI) number and date of birth (DOB), but other means might be possible.
- Evidence is only required once, unless circumstances change.
- Exceptions process for those unwilling/unable to provide NI number.
- Potential to use alternative channels for applications in future.

The group noted that the introduction of IER will make the registration process more demanding as a NI number and DOB are required. These will need to be cross referenced with the Department for Work and Pensions before registering the individual.

If either the NI or DOB does not match, this will need to be followed up with the individual voter within the deadline to register 11 days before an election. This method of registration will be introduced in 2014 and will be fully implemented in 2015.

### *Polling cards:*

Attendees reported that one area of confusion is that people thought they could not vote if they did not have a polling card. Although a polling card does make the voting process quicker, it is not essential.

General comments were made about the performance of Royal Mail to deliver polling cards to residents on time, the majority felt that this had improved but there were still occasional problems with polling cards not being delivered.

### *General Points:*

A suggestion was made to carry out some research on those individuals in our area to identify the languages spoken and the impact on their voting experience.

There were some general comments that at Parish level, some Councillors do not believe they need to be nominated. This is usually resolved by having the 35 day rule and also by the majority of Parish Council's hosting their Annual General Meetings (AGMs) in April so they are able to remind candidates.

## **2. Access to Polling Stations:**

The group noted that on the whole access to polling stations had greatly improved. Participants particularly appreciated the addition of wheelchair friendly polling booths, large print and braille ballot papers.

The session did highlight that there could be a need to improve training for polling staff at stations handling individuals or groups with additional physical or mental needs. Councillor Gerrish stated that in his ward, there is a care home for adults with learning difficulties and he had spoken to representative from the home about resident's voter experience.

He said that from speaking to the home, he had been told that the act of going to a polling station and voting can be very rewarding for the residents but their experience can often be distressing and confusing due to a lack of support. Residents needed more clarity from polling staff about what they should do, and explained that often the, "who, where, and when" to place a vote is not communicated clearly.

Another attendee mentioned that he had a care home in his local polling district and that polling staff had always been very respectful and supportive towards residents when they come to vote. Other participants also commented that in their experiences, polling staff had been welcoming and had not experienced any issues. This suggests that Councillor Gerrish's example is not universal but there is scope to improve the experience for voters with additional needs.

It was agreed that it is the responsibility of the issuing officer at the polling station to check that voters' needs are met and to ensure that they are handled in a sensitive way. It was recommended that Electoral Services could identify wards with care/residential homes and contact them to find how if/when any of their residents were planning to vote at their local polling station and then

speak to relevant Presiding Officers. It was also suggested that training for Poll Clerks/Presiding Officers should include how to deal sensitively with voters who require additional support.

### *Signage*

Overall the signage of access to polling stations was thought to be good. One attendee noted that they have two wards voting in the same polling station which can be confusing for people when they first enter the station so it is important for staff at these stations to clearly identify which ward area they are poll clerking for.

### **3. Information to Candidates/Agents/Councillors:**

Since the majority of Councillors operate in a party system, candidates have a lot of support networks in place for new candidates during the election period, although the support networks were less obvious for independent candidates. Although there were not any independent candidates present at the workshop, the Elections team said that they had provided advice and were available to answer questions from prospective candidates about the role of a Councillor including what they are able to influence and what powers they have.

It was suggested that we should provide the Electoral Commission's link on 'How to Stand as an Electoral Candidate' on the B&NES website permanently rather than just in the run up to an election. We should also attempt to capture feedback from those people new to the candidate process.

For example; one particular area that needed further clarification and guidance was the signing of nominations, as some candidates sign with different names (for example, signing in their married name) and although the candidate is asked to clearly print their name next to the signature. Having clear wording regarding the print and publish and the general legal issues surrounding signing would provide a better understanding for new candidates and help to improve the process.

### **4. Counting System:**

Attendees commented that the counting system used at the local elections this time was the best system they had seen used, although ideally candidates/agents would like to know what system is going to be used in advance.

The most recent election included a referendum on alternative voting which was counted on the same day as the election results. The Electoral Commission had stated that deputy returning officers could not be declare the election results until the referendum vote had been verified. It was agreed that this created unnecessary expense and time for those involved, with some results not being declared until the early hours of the morning. It was suggested that the Council should send a clear message back to the Electoral Commission that we would have concerns in undertaking the process in this way if a referendum was to be included in any future elections.

It was agreed that having more counting stations does speed up the count, however to have an increase in stations in all locations could create difficulties in logistics and tradition. Identifying the best place to hold certain counts could be reassessed for the next elections.

### *General Points:*

- One attendee noted that at his count, staff were not sure how to count un-blocked votes and some younger counters had recorded votes upside down.
- It was suggested that where possible, jugs of water should be provided to those attending the count.
- The workshop highlighted that some counting stations were busier than others and where counting stations were counting more than one ward, this was not always clearly laid out.

### **5. Review of Polling Stations:**

Although the majority of attendees were happy with the location of their polling stations, the following suggestions were made:

#### *Keynsham East:*

Keynsham East is the biggest of the three wards in Keynsham but is the only ward with one polling station. This station located at the far end of the ward, which could make it difficult for some residents who are less mobile.

Two suggestions were put forward, either a temporary polling station on Manor Road Playing fields or the Community Room at Wellsway School. The Manor Road site would be more accessible to voters, particularly those on the southern end of the ward who are elderly. The second option at Wellsway School has separate access from the School.

#### *Midsomer Norton:*

It was suggested that as Midsomer Norton should have its own count centre as it is the largest polling district in the Somer Valley. It was suggested that the Town Hall at Midsomer Norton as a potential site for a polling station and count centre.

#### *Bathavon West and Bathavon South:*

These wards are currently counted at Freshford which is not central to either ward and it was suggested that it would be worth investigating whether Wellow or Timsbury has the facilities to host either or both of these count.

### **6. Other Issues:**

For 2015 election: If parishes/district and general elections fall within the same year, the local authority has the discretion to postpone parish elections by a month. The local authority also has the discretion to re-charge parishes for these elections.

Attendees from Parish Councils are concerned that if this were to be the case, they would need as much advanced warning as possible in order to spread the cost over several year's Council Tax precepts rather than as one lump sum.

**Conclusion:** The Resources Panel appreciate the hard work and dedication that went into making the 2011 elections a success however, the workshop did flag up that there could be improvements for 2015.

**Next Steps:** The findings from this report will be taken to full Council as the parent body of Policy Development and Scrutiny. This will give all Bath & North East Somerset Council Councillors the chance to discuss the report's findings and recommendations.