

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 FEBRUARY 2014

ATTENDANCE OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Report from: Richard Hicks, Deputy Director Customer Contact,
Leisure, Culture, Democracy and Governance

Summary

This report gives an overview of progress made within the Leader's Portfolio falling within the remit of this Committee over the last year.

1. Background

- 1.1 The area within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by Councillor Rodney Chambers, the Leader of the Council, is Democracy and Governance.

2. Democracy and Governance

2013/14 Achievements

2.1 Democratic Services

- The Democratic Services Team continues to support a wide range of meetings including full Council, Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Task Groups set up to conduct in-depth reviews, other Committees established by the Council including the Audit Committee, Planning Committee, Licensing and Safety Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board, School Admission appeals and Exclusion Reviews.
- The team also continues to lead on the management of public engagement in formal meetings, maintenance of, and revisions to, the Council's Constitution, administration of representation on outside bodies and the Council's electronic Committee Management System (modern.gov) which includes the Council's Petitions Scheme.
- Medway was shortlisted for a National Good Scrutiny Award, and commended at the Award Ceremony in June 2013 for the in-depth review of Fair Access to Credit.

- The two most recent in-depth scrutiny reviews in the current round of reviews have completed their work, with recommendations all agreed by the Cabinet. The Street Clutter Working Group generated a pilot de-cluttering exercise in Strood Town Centre and a decision to develop design principles to be applied going forward. This Scrutiny Task Group was the first to use a stakeholder event to take views and evidence from a range of individuals and organisations and to invite views from residents with learning difficulties via easy read consultation material. The Mental Health Working Group aimed to review and test the strengths and weaknesses of current mental health services across Medway, including health, social care and housing and has generated a number of recommendations which will improve outcomes for service users, their families and carers.
- Overview and Scrutiny Committees have agreed four topics for the next round of in-depth scrutiny reviews to Spring 2015. 1. Health Inequalities across Medway wards and how to direct investment where it is most needed (now underway) 2. Impact of Welfare Reforms 3. Preventing Looked After Children from becoming criminalised and 4. Housing in Medway – demand, supply and affordability.
- Support has been provided for Medway Members serving on the Joint Kent and Medway Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee concerning NHS consultation on a proposed reconfiguration of acute mental health beds across Kent and Medway, which entailed the closure of all in-patient beds in Medway. Medway Council's Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to exercise the power available to it to refer the matter to the Secretary of State, who decided the reconfiguration should proceed. The Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee is pressing the Secretary of State to submit the proposed reconfiguration for a full review by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel, set up to advise the Minister on contested NHS service reconfigurations.
- The Head of Democratic Services has briefed Members and brought forward reports on the constitutional changes required as a consequence of the Health and Social Care Act, including the establishment of the Health and Wellbeing Board and changes to the arrangements for Health scrutiny. The Council has agreed the constitutional provisions for the establishment of the Health and Wellbeing Board, with a membership including NHS and Health Watch Medway representatives. The Board met for the first time as a Committee of the Council in June 2013. Further work will take place with Members once the Department of Health re-issues Government guidance on Health scrutiny, which is expected imminently.

2.2 Electoral Services

The Electoral Services team comprises 3 staff plus the Head of Elections and Member services. One post has been filled by a temporary member of staff since October and the other two key posts became vacant in November and December 2013 respectively, and are currently out to advert. In the meantime,

the team comprises temporary staff and is being reinforced with some external assistance from the Association of Electoral Administrators, the professional body. The team's performance and workload is being closely monitored by the Head of Service and the Deputy Director.

Euro elections

- The team has undertaken a review of polling places and districts in conjunction with the Working Party on this, and Council agreed the revised schedule in January 2014.
- Despite staffing challenges, the team is on target with preparations for the European Parliamentary elections on 22 May.
- Several legislative changes come into place for these elections, including voters who are in a queue at a polling station at 10pm being able to vote, and the requirement for additional lists of alterations to the Register to be published in the lead-up to the election. These are being incorporated into our plans and preparations and candidates and agents will be advised of these, along with all the other arrangements, in due course.
- Mark Heath at Southampton City Council has been appointed the Regional Returning Officer and is developing plans for the verification of ballot papers on Friday 23 May and the counting of votes on Sunday 25 May. He has indicated that he is likely to take a "light-touch" approach in terms of issuing Directions.
- As has become usual practice, a wide-ranging review will be undertaken on all aspects of the planning and conduct of the elections once they have taken place, and a series of recommendations will be submitted to the Returning Officer for future implementation.

Register of Electors 2014

- In an attempt to make the 2014 Register more accurate for the European elections, and the imminent introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), the Secretary of State made an Order that means the canvass for the 2014 Register is taking place later than normal and the Register has to be published on 17 February, rather than 1 December.
- In an attempt to improve the registration rate of 16 and 17 year olds (known as attainers), the team undertook some matching against Council data to identify properties where 16 and 17 year olds were not currently registered and sent a leaflet to those properties encouraging them to register. Similarly, using data from MOSAIC, a socio demographic profiling tool, leaflets were included for properties where it was more likely that the householder would use the internet to re-register, thus minimising the number of forms to be processed in the team, and saving costs. It is too early to tell what impact these initiatives have had, but a full review will be undertaken and the

implications used to inform the plans for canvassing under IER from July onwards.

- In our on-going commitment to improve the accuracy and scope of the Register in Medway, the team continues to undertake several checks before publishing the new Register, including checking for duplicate entries, checking Council Tax second home discount lists, empty properties lists and housing void records, and writing separately to registered landlords of multiple occupation properties to remind them of their duty to provide information about who is resident at their properties.

Individual electoral registration (IER)

- With effect from 10 June, anyone seeking to register to vote will be required to provide their NI number and date of birth, which will be checked against the DWP database before being approved.
- The Cabinet Office has advised each local authority of the date on which it will be required to submit its Register for checking against the DWP database. This Confirmation Live Run will replicate the Confirmation Dry Run that took place last July, and involves electronically checking the details of everyone on the Register in July 2014.
- Those who are successfully matched will automatically be confirmed as registered and included in the 2015 Register published on 1 December 2014. These electors will be canvassed every year but will only have to re-register if their circumstances change, and our Confirmation Dry Run experience indicated that as many as 88% of electors could be matched in this way, particularly once the team has undertaken data matching against Council Tax data.
- The remaining non-matched people, and those identified as not registered from other data sources, will be sent a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) on which to gather their details. Once a HEF is received, or responded to by the internet or telephone, the team will send each individual an IER form to collect their date of birth and national insurance number. It is anticipated that this process will involve around 20- 30% of currently registered electors. Where households do not respond to the HEF, or individuals do not respond to an IER form, the new legislation requires that 2 reminders are sent, and that this is followed up by at least one attempt to make direct contact through a personal canvass.
- For those who do not have NI numbers or a date of birth, or who cannot provide them, there will be a process of “exceptions” by which they can provide alternative documentation to verify their identity, or if that is not possible, seek to obtain an “attestation” from a “responsible person”. The Head of Elections and Member Services continues to participate in an Expert Panel that is working with the Cabinet Office to ensure that the legislation and policy are framed in a way that can be implemented effectively.

- In recognition of the significant change that IER represents, the Government has specified in the legislation that electors who fail to re-register or provide their NI number or date of birth during the canvass in 2014 are carried forward on to the 2015 Register which will be used for the General Election and Local Elections scheduled to take place in May 2015. The only exception will be those who wish to keep or apply for a postal or proxy vote; these electors will have to have registered with their NI number and date of birth.
- Outside of the canvass period, rolling registration will continue, but individuals must submit their NI number and date of birth which will be checked against the DWP database before approval. Any that do not match may be checked against Housing Benefit data, but if that does not resolve the issue, then the individual will have the opportunity to use the “exceptions” process, and if that is not feasible, the “attestation” process, both described above.
- The software currently used to produce the Register and manage electoral registration generally will need to be upgraded to take into account the new arrangements, and the Cabinet Office is liaising directly with software suppliers over the specification and costs.
- The Cabinet Office will be launching a national electronic registration service that people will be encouraged to use to register or re-register to vote. This will make the service easier for the public to use, as well as minimising the volumes of forms processed by the electoral services team.
- The Electoral Commission will be undertaking a nationwide publicity campaign to raise awareness of this new way of registering to vote and the dates of this are awaited, but are likely to be in July. If we are to maintain existing levels of registration it is likely Medway will have to undertake its own campaign, so that individuals realise it will be their own responsibility to provide personal identifiers and respond each year to the request for information.
- Clearly there are also implications for approving applications to register in the lead up to elections; the deadline to register before an election is currently day –11 of polling day. These new provisions change that to day –12 and introduce the need for all new applicants to be checked against the DWP database before they are formally accepted on the Register. It is understood that the formal agreements with the DWP will ensure that they can cope with the influx of applications to register that are received across the country on that date.

2.3 Members and Mayoral Services

- The team continues to work with the Member Development Advisory Group to develop and deliver an on-going programme of Member development and this year has seen briefings on a range of subjects, such as ‘Be a Health Champion for your Community’ and ‘Contract Rules and Procurement Strategy 2013-16’.

- The team has planned and successfully completed arrangements for key Mayoral and civic events, including the Dedication Service, Admiralty Court and the Admiral's Cruise, Charity evenings and Remembrance Services. Of particular interest this year, the team liaised with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and arranged a successful unveiling of the refurbished memorial at the Great Lines, involving Sir Tim Laurence, one of the Commissioners, and coordinated a visit from the French Embassy to the HMS Sportsman Memorial at Saxon House.
- In the 12 month period to the end of January the team has successfully planned and supported 536 Mayoral engagements.
- The Head of Elections and Member Services continues to provide key research and other support to the Independent Remuneration Panel, whose recommendations for SRAs for the Chairmen of the Health and Wellbeing Board and Employment Matters Committee were successfully implemented this financial year. The Head of Service is now also implementing the recommendations for the revisions to the composition of the Panel, including recruiting and inducting new members in conjunction with South East Employers. The Panel is due to report back to Council reviewing the SRA to the Chairman of the Health and Wellbeing Board and the possibility of an SRA for the Vice Chairman of the Board in July this year.

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Background documents

None