



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Action Note from the meeting held on 3 October 2016

Present:

Cllr Andrew Marchington
Cllr Gemma Wilson
Cllr Andrew Cooper

In Attendance: Sharon Salvanos, Carl Whistlecraft, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims, Richard Dunne

Witness:

Sharon Salvanos is the Council's Electoral Services Manager; she has worked in Electoral Services since May 2012. Sharon was initially employed as the Principal Electoral Officer, responsible for leading the transition to and implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), alongside supporting the administration of elections in 2012, 2013 and 2014.

In her current role she reports directly to the Chief Executive in his roles as (Acting) (Local) Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer, advising him on all aspects of policy in relation to electoral registration and elections. Alongside IER Sharon has been responsible for leading the administration of the combined elections in 2015 (UK Parliamentary, District and Parish/Town Council elections), the combined Police and Crime Commissioner and District elections in May 2016 and the recent EU Referendum in June 2016.

Sharon's role encompasses working with a wide-range of stakeholders for example Police; Electoral Commission; Cabinet Office and other West and South Yorkshire Electoral Services Managers. She is a member of the Association of Electoral Administrators.

Summary of Discussion

Election Cycles

Changing from elections held 3 years out of 4 to every 4 years could be done in Kirklees and costings indicate that you would see savings after about 8 years. The costs of staging this change would initially be significantly higher.

Although the costs for polling stations and staff would remain the same, costs for printing would be significantly higher due to a much longer ballot paper and the change would have to be scheduled to coincide with parish elections as it would too costly for parish's. The next opportunity for this change would therefore be 2019.

Savings for the changes is estimated to be around £900,000 spread over 8 years although the longer ballot paper would impact on administration and result in a longer count. One solution would be to look at grass skirts or counting sheets which pre-empt the assumption that some people will block vote for the same party.

Complexities of Voting and the Count

Experiences elsewhere have shown that the choice available to voters does not always result in the same party being selected on the ballot papers and counting sheets are not used as much as had been anticipated.

For the electorate it would be much confusing and complex and for people who are not familiar with this process this could potentially lead to more spoilt papers. The count would also take much longer and the estimated savings are based on the Kirklees schedule/cycle of elections.

If national elections are combined with local elections central government will only pay half of the costs and the council has responsibility for covering its own election costs. If local elections are held with the parish elections costs are shared 50/50.

The accounting system for Kirklees when administrating the costs of national and parish elections is complex. Accounts and invoices need to be submitted to central government and spend must be justified and work done within a strict deadline.

An all out election would require a change in the process for nominations. In 2015 parish council nominations were 150 and based on 5 candidates per ward this would equate to between 300 – 400 district councillors having to be covered in a five day period which would require significantly more staff.

Demands on Election Team

Kirklees core election team is one of the smallest teams in the South and West Yorks sector and the additional demands of elections are met by a register of casual workers.

Work has been relentless with recent elections administered by Kirklees. Ordinarily casuals workers are only used for a 6-8 week period for elections however last few years there have been some significant elections and this has resulted in the casuals being used more often.

However Kirklees belief is that this structure is better than a large team and works well although it is possible that if we moved to an all-out election we could lose some of the workers and their expertise.

Voting Systems and Costs

Retention of polling stations and keeping them is becoming more problematic as more community buildings are closed. If they are used less frequently there is a risk that owners of polling stations may be less willing to allow them to be used in the future.

The option to move more people to postal votes would be very costly at around £1.59 per pack compared to 0.08/0.09 p for votes done in person.

Some organisations are looking at electronic voting and although it's not a perfect option it will be developed further and at some point introduced, although there are still questions regarding its integrity and security.

Elections laws are complex and different laws and timelines apply to different elections which can lead to risks. In addition different voting systems exist for example the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections operate on a supplementary system.

If this was put together with district elections it would result in an increase of people voting twice on the district ballot paper. For example Sheffield recently held the PCC, parliamentary and local elections at the same time and this resulted in a noticeable increase in parliamentary papers being rejected due to people voting twice.

The Electoral Commission

The different systems are complex and electorate do find them confusing. The Electoral Commission does provide useful templates and guidance although there are challenges with the electoral administrators for example for the referendum they issued a number of different interpretations of the law as well as issuing a number of directions which had to be followed.

Electoral Commission also changed the time of the sweep with royal mail for the referendum without notifying Kirklees which result in a complaint from the authority and an agreement to do an interim pick up.

The Electoral Commission is good as some things but maybe too distant from electors. The regional manager however is good and supportive although at times there is a question whether the electorate is really at the heart of the process.

Electoral Commission devised the registration forms and letters following change to individual registration. The authority did question whether the electorate would be able to understand them and Kirklees received a significant number of complaints.

The Electoral Register and Registration

Kirklees does network with other LA's and is part of a West Yorkshire network. The Yorkshire and Humber association meets quarterly and there is also a good national network.

Experience shows that the turn out for local elections is significantly higher if it coincides with a national election. This is driven by national publicity although it is not clear why people are more interested in national elections when compared to local.

The job of electoral services is to get people onto the electoral register and the service has secured the services of two officers from Revenues and Benefits. The officers have done a phenomenal job working with voluntary agencies, university student union, estate agents and canvassing to get people onto the register.

Government will have to do something as individual registration isn't working. Students have to apply if they wish to be included on the register and students can register both at home and at the university.

Individual registration isn't the finished product and there are still many challenges such as duplicate registrations. Kirklees receives thousands of duplicate registrations and some duplicates can be easily merged with records but others will need more detailed investigations.

Votes for life is an emerging challenge and there is concern on what the process will look like. It is also unclear on where the onus of responsibility will be to prove where the person lived at a particular address and this could be a major administrative challenge.

An overseas elector application currently allows someone to stay on the register for 15 years and Kirklees had a significant increase of overseas applications before the referendum. This meant having to check the registers, for potentially up to 15 years to locate the person.

Work will also need to be done on sorting out the canvass Kirklees currently has an individual registration and household canvass which is extremely costly. Although it can be done electronically or submitted via text and phone people still send in forms.

Individual registration is a very bureaucratic process. Registration is a cost for the authority and the recent increase in the numbers of registrations were clearly linked to the referendum.

A recent review highlighted that registrations that come through prior to national election should be a cost borne by central government. People who go onto the registration for a specific election can come off again as part of the annual canvass.

Boundary Review

All Kirklees constituencies are currently coterminous in the Kirklees boundary the initial proposals of the parliamentary boundary review will result in Kirklees sharing constituencies with other LA's. This will present a significant challenge and pressure and Kirklees will feel the impact of this at the next general election. The key impact will be on the timing and risk in terms of integrity of papers.

The Law currently makes the process complicated and difficult and the electoral report has identified a number of reforms that could help. The timeline for delivering an election is 25 days. For one election that's tight but to deliver 3 elections within this timeline will add complexity and risk.

The election period is intensive for the core team and will include working weekends and bank holidays. Without the extra workers elections could not be delivered within the timeline.

The Chief Executive will be speaking to political group leaders to establish if Kirklees are to respond to the consultation on boundary review. Ideally the service would not want a cross boundary constituency but Kirklees will be very lucky to end up with all coterminous constituencies.

Support of the networks will be helpful should Kirklees need to implement any changes from the boundary review.

Challenges

The biggest practicable challenge locally is maintaining the numbers of polling stations. It can cost up to a £1,000 for a temporary station.

The service has started to look at alternative ways of providing a polling station. One option is to have a larger building that could accommodate multiple polling stations such as the Town Hall, although this could be problematic for the electorate as they would have to travel further and could encourage more people to register for postal voting which would be more costly.

The service may need to think more creatively on how to deliver a polling station, however temporary stations are not the answer as they are more costly and less accessible. Electoral services work closely with PRP who alert electoral services to any plans that will impact on existing polling stations.

Switching polling day to a weekend (Saturday) would be a positive move although this could potentially mean that some existing polling stations wouldn't be available. However this could provide an opportunity to move polling stations back to schools although switching polling day could require a change in law (would need to be checked). Historically Thursday has been polling day.