

Present:	Councillor Loraine Woolley (<i>in the Chair</i>)
Councillors:	Gill Clayton-Hewson (substituted for Tony Gray), Carol Daniel, Gary Hewson (substituted for Geoff Ellis), Ronald Hills, Jackie Kirk (substituted for Liz Maxwell), Adrianna McNulty, Ric Metcalfe and Edmund Strengiel
Independent Person(s):	Chris Elkington and Roger Vine
Apologies for Absence:	Councillor Geoff Ellis, Councillor Liz Maxwell and Councillor Tony Gray

17. Election of a Chair

In the absence of the Chair and Vice Chair, members were invited to nominate a replacement chair for the meeting.

It was therefore proposed, seconded, and RESOLVED that Councillor Woolley be appointed as Chair.

18. Confirmation of Minutes - 21 September 2015

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2015 be confirmed.

19. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

20. Individual Electoral Registration - Update

Steve Swain, the Principal Democratic Officer:

- a) presented a report updating members on progress made with the Individual Electoral Registration programme.
- b) invited members' questions and comments.

Members noted that relatively few students appeared to be registered on university campuses. The Principal Democratic Officer advised that students were not obliged to register at their term-time addresses if they remained registered at home. Typically, the number of students registered increased in years when general elections were held.

Members questioned whether greater prominence could be given to the threat of fining those who did not register to vote. The Principal Democratic Officer responded that pursuing offenders through the courts was very time-consuming and expensive. In a time of straitened resources, it was not common for councils to prioritise this type of action.

Members discussed whether the new system of registration was more straightforward and questioned whether uptake was higher or lower. The Principal Democratic Officer advised that as it was no longer possible to carry forward people

who failed to register on an annual basis, the number of registered electors had reduced. Efforts continued to contact approximately 3,500 people who had not confirmed their registration.

Members questioned what the current number of registered electors was and expressed interest in gathering data for comparator councils. The Principal Democratic Officer responded that there were approximately 61,000 people currently registered.

Members questioned what the main reason was for the drop in the number of students registered to vote each year. The Principal Democratic Officer responded that first-year students in halls of residence were particularly unlikely to register to vote as they often retained their home registration and were more difficult to contact than students living in private houses.

Members questioned whether the Individual Electoral Registration would be easier to manage in the future. The Principal Democratic Officer noted that people were increasingly willing to respond to electoral forms digitally which improved processing times. However, a minority of potential electors required a disproportionate degree of effort in encouraging them to register to vote.

The Reserve Independent Person questioned whether carrying out additional work to encourage registration on an annual basis was the most effective use of resources. The Principal Democratic Officer responded that the Council's electoral system ordinarily meant that at least one election was held every year, meaning that any reduction in the frequency of the Council's efforts to encourage registration could jeopardise people's ability to vote.

Members questioned whether there were any benefits to electors or councils through registering to vote, other than allowing people to take part in elections. The Principal Democratic Officer highlighted the use of the electoral register in allowing credit reference agencies to carry out checks on potential borrowers. However, local authorities were unable to set charges which reflected the work required to produce the electoral register, meaning that credit reference agencies acquired electoral registers at a flat rate fee of £10 plus £1.50 for every 1,000 electors.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

21. Code of Conduct: Cases Review

Becky Scott, the Legal and Democratic Services Manager:

- a) presented a report containing information on recent cases relating to other local authorities' codes of conduct.
- b) summarised the cases within the report, noting the particular areas which members might wish to consider.
- c) invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- noted that the highlighted complaints appeared to have been a waste of resources for the investigating councils, with councillors having behaved within the bounds of acceptable behaviour.

- discussed their previous experience of complaints made locally, and noted that expectations of councillors' behaviour varied between meetings, with particular latitude given for political debate in full council meetings.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

22. Improving Member Development Attendance

Becky Scott, the Legal and Democratic Services Manager:

- a) presented a report, which had been requested at the previous meeting of the Committee.
- b) drew members' attention to the options available for improving member development attendance rates and the current attendance rate at member development events.
- c) invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- discussed the manner in which the attendance statistics were compiled and expressed the general view that a mean 49% attendance rate at member development events was acceptable and likely to be in keeping with other local authorities.
- considered the opportunities for using video conferencing to avoid members having to attend City Hall in person.
- debated whether there was any merit in gathering information as to why members had been unable to attend events and questioned whether any practical response would be possible once the information had been received.
- emphasised the importance of ensuring suitably high attendance in order to be sure that the cost of providing any training was justifiable.
- noted the danger of providing identical training on an annual basis if members became less willing to attend the training as a result of its repetition.
- highlighted the limitations of whipping by political groups.
- noted that it was useful for political group leaders to be able to access member development attendance data.
- suggested that exemptions from certain training should be possible for councillors who had been in post for more than a certain number of years.
- emphasised that councillors were not full-time professionals and so it was important to provide a motivating factor to encourage the attendance. For example, this could include making further use of individual development plans.

RESOLVED that the political group leaders be recommended to consider attendance at member development events in further detail.

23. Proposed Changes to the Constitution

The Legal and Democratic Services Manager:

- a) presented a report containing details of a number of proposed changes relating to the Council's Member Code of Conduct.
- b) summarised the proposed changes.

- c) drew members' attention to the proposed extension of powers to grant dispensations for personal and pecuniary interests.
- d) invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- discussed the proposed revision to the Member Code of Conduct complaints form, noting that the option to submit a complaint anonymously had been retained. Members noted that this could interfere with councillors' rights to know the details of an accusation made against them and so an anonymous complaint would be relevant only in exceptional circumstances.
- considered the limitations placed upon councillors through being required to declare interests and then being unable to discuss the items about which they had the greatest knowledge.
- noted that complaints received against councillors were often unrelated to actions undertaken in his or her role of a councillor.

The Independent Person emphasised the importance of having provisions in place which allowed the Monitoring Officer to make decisions as to whether a complaint merited further investigation.

The Legal and Democratic Services Manager confirmed that anonymous complaints would ordinarily be rejected as the councillor would be unable to contest the allegation properly, as had occurred in a recent complaint.

RESOLVED that Council be recommended to incorporate the following changes to the Constitution:

- Revisions to the Member Code of Conduct.
- The incorporation of the assessment criteria, complaints form, and Hearings Sub-Committee Procedure in relation to complaints under the Member Code of Conduct.
- The extension of any powers currently held by the Ethics & Engagement Committee or the Monitoring Officer to grant dispensations in relation to Disclosable Pecuniary Interests also to be applicable to personal and pecuniary interests.

24. A Councillor's Guide to Interests

The Democratic Services Officer:

- a) presented a guide which had been compiled to assist members in understanding their responsibilities when taking part in Council business.
- b) advised that the guide was specific to the Council's Member Code of Conduct and was intended to act as an accessible summary rather than being exhaustive and definitive.
- c) invited members' questions and comments.

Members welcomed the provision of the guide.

RESOLVED that the document be circulated for the attention of all elected members.

25. Work Programme Update

The Democratic Services Officer:

- a) presented the current Ethics and Engagement Committee work programme for consideration by members.
- b) invited members' questions and comments.

Members requested that a further update be provided on the Individual Electoral Registration system.

RESOLVED that:

1. the work programme be approved.
2. an update on the Individual Electoral Registration system be scheduled for the meeting on 21 March 2016.