

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>ENCOURAGING ELECTORAL ENGAGEMENT</b>
<b>REPORT BY:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES</b>
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	<b>CAROLYN WHEATER – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (LEGAL AND CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES)</b>

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 In accordance with the Committee's responsibility to improve democratic engagement between the public and the Council, this report is provided to offer a starting point and summary for members' consideration.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 As part of the Council's Strategic Plan, the target to reduce poverty and disadvantage within Lincoln was agreed as being one of the Council's five strategic priorities. One strand of this priority was to increase levels of democratic engagement among Lincoln's citizens, thereby also contributing towards the broader priority of creating a fit-for-purpose Council. While the priorities have since been re-focused, the original priority remains in place as an aspiration for the Council.
- 2.2 Initial scoping work was undertaken with Lincoln University with a view to the Council adopting a two-pronged approach to improving electoral engagement; this was intended to see members feeding into the process via the Ethics and Engagement Committee, while an internal working group developed detailed proposals in combination with representatives from Lincoln University.
- 2.3 Following this initial scoping, the work outside the Ethics and Engagement Committee has been postponed as a result of conflicting priorities and the Council's re-focused strategic aims. However, the Committee retains its responsibility to seek to improve this area of Council business, while noting the continuing constraint upon resources.

## **3. Initial Aims and Objectives**

- 3.1 Initial work provided to the Committee by officers and the Chair indicated that the following aims and methods would be appropriate in order to identify and tackle problems around electoral engagement.

### Aims

- To assess turnout rates as a whole and for individual groups to establish any relevant disparities between them.
- To understand the reasons behind local people choosing not to register to vote.
- To understand the reasons behind local people choosing not to cast their

votes.

- To examine whether the Council can seek to undertake any cost-effective and resource-efficient actions to improve electoral turnout.
- To consider the potential impact of individual registration and any possible mitigation to drops in electoral registration rates.

#### Method

- Undertaking a comparison of electoral turnout in selected districts to establish whether other European Union voters are more or less likely to take part in local elections than British citizens.
- Seeking input from psephologists on broader national trends in voting patterns.
- Early forecasting of the effect of individual registration and a broad examination of the associated principles and practices.
- Carrying out an examination of best practice elsewhere and opportunities for joint working with other local authorities.
- Tackling electoral registration among homeless people.
- Examining the potential use of neighbourhood managers in improving electoral engagement.
- Bidding for new funding from the Cabinet Office for targeted canvassing and increasing electoral registration among key groups.

### 3.2 European Union Voters

Work has already been undertaken on some of the areas outlined above. At the previous meeting of the Committee, members considered the outcome of a small study into the electoral turnout rates of European Union citizens within Lincoln. This study suggested that turnout rates among European Union electors were approximately 3-4 times lower than among non-European Union electors in local government elections. Following consideration of the report, members resolved to support a bid for Cabinet Office funding to improve electoral registration rates among targeted groups; if possible, this work would encompass European Union voters. Feedback is currently awaited from other local authorities who put forward bids in the first round of funding, although initial indications suggest a relatively high failure rate among the bids placed by other councils.

### 3.3 Individual Registration

As members will be aware, recent legislation has changed the method by which the public will register to vote. In the past, one electoral registration form has been delivered to each house in the city, which is then filled in and returned to the Council. In 2014 the Council is scheduled to switch to individual registration, as part of which each individual elector must personally complete and return an electoral registration form. The switch will also see the electoral register being cross-referenced with information from the Department for Work and Pensions to automatically register as many voters as possible. While a number of aspects relating to this new way of working have yet to be confirmed by the Cabinet Office, officers are actively developing the Council's response to the likely changes. A briefing note will be circulated to all members by the Electoral Registration Officer shortly.

3.4 With regard to the Committee's remit to increase electoral engagement, there are undoubtedly a number of fundamental structural changes to the electoral system

would could help in improving turnout. However, the manner in which elections must be conducted is very closely regulated with little discretion for local innovation. As such, members are encouraged to consider more creative methods for encouraging electoral engagement; any other decisions remain solely within the power of central government.

### 3.5 Ward Twitter Accounts

The Council is currently reviewing its approach to the use of social media within the authority. As part of this review consideration has been given to how councillors can best use social media to engage with residents. The Committee will recall that it recently approved social media guidance which was issued to all councillors in order to offer members a framework for acceptable behaviour in using services such as Twitter and Facebook. However, while this guidance acknowledged the clear benefits of new social media, its focus was not upon changing the manner in which councillors engaged with the public.

3.6 With this in mind, officers have proposed that each ward of the city should have its own Twitter account which all ward councillors would be able to access and would be monitored by the Communications Team. A brief outline of some of the associated advantages and disadvantages of this approach are provided for members' consideration.

### 3.7 **Advantages**

- Non-individualised accounts would be transferrable in the event of electoral changes or the retirement of councillors
- Maintains a separation from councillors' individual political accounts
- Joint accounts remove sole responsibility for individual councillors to check their Twitter accounts
- May encourage councillors to make greater use of a new communication channel for contacting residents
- Ward accounts could become a form of community hub, not only opening channels of communication with members, but also promoting events and improving community cohesion within each ward.

### **Disadvantages**

- Possible difficulty in establishing which councillor has responded to a concern, unless councillors use individual accounts for responses
- Risk of political material being published using a Council account (subject to removal by officers)
- Lack of individual responsibility for cases may see some ward councillors undertaking more ward work than others
- Preference among some councillors for individual face-to-face or telephone contact

3.8 As members will note, implementing ward Twitter accounts could be a useful tool in reaching different sections of Lincoln's population. Any implementation could be supported by training either from officers or external social media users, or carried out on a trial basis in a limited number of wards. Members are therefore requested to provide their views regarding this proposal.

### 3.9 Other Areas of Work

In addition to the areas summarised above, members are requested to provide input regarding the areas put forward within paragraph 3.1 which are of greatest interest to the Committee in progressing the electoral engagement theme. This will provide a focus for officers in providing information to future meetings and also help to ensure the best use of the available resources. Members are also invited to put forward any other areas which would benefit from development with regard to electoral engagement and can be progressed by the Committee.

## 4. **Organisational Impacts**

### 4.1 Finance

There are no direct financial implications to this report, although consideration should be given to the likely cost of any additional actions recommended by the Committee.

### 4.2 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications to this report.

## 5. **Recommendation**

5.1 That members consider the report and highlight any areas within paragraph 3.1 of the report which the Committee would like to focus upon in future meetings.

5.2 That members provide particular feedback regarding the proposals for ward Twitter accounts outlined in paragraph 3.5.