NOTTINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held at LB 31-32 - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 7 October 2015 from 14.00 - 16.00

Membership

Present	Absent
Councillor Brian Parbutt (Chair)	Councillor Ginny Klein
Councillor Glyn Jenkins	Beverley Frost
Councillor Azad Choudhry	Councillor Corall Jenkins
Councillor Georgina Culley	
Councillor Gul Nawaz Khan (Vice Chair)	
Councillor Neghat Nawaz Khan	
Councillor Anne Peach	
Councillor Pat Ferguson	
Councillor Leslie Ayoola	
Councillor Josh Cook	
Councillor Mohammed Ibrahim	
Councillor Patience Ifediora	

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

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12   APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Corall Jenkins – Personal Reasons
Councillor Ginny Klein – Personal Reasons
Councillor Anne Peach (for Lateness) – Other Council Business

13   DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

14   MINUTES

The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2015 and they were signed by the Chair.

15   MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION OF THE LOCAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS HELD IN MAY 2015

Ian Curryer, Chief Executive, led a presentation to the Committee with support from Debra La Mola, Head of Democratic Services, Glen O'Connell, Corporate Director for Resilience, and Sarah Wilson, Electoral Services Manager. The presentation covered

the management and organisation of the Local and Parliamentary elections held in May 2015 and highlighted the following points:

(a)   The 2015 elections were particularly complex due to the coincidence of the Parliamentary and Local elections, something which had last occurred in 1997. A large number of nominations were received with 19 Parliamentary Candidates and over 200 Local Candidates representing more parties than had ever been dealt with before. The introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) resulted in the core Elections Team spending significant time on registration queries and having less time for preparing for the election. Significant changes in voting patterns including an increase in postal voting by around 8% and more stringent requirements regarding the checking of postal votes also impacted on the demands on the service.

(b)   Locally, the failure of the service's externally provided IT system to cope with the requirements of IER resulted in the purchase of a new system in the run up to election day. Whilst this was the right decision to take, it did put extra pressure on the service as staff had to learn how to use a new system while also preparing for a major election.

(c)   The turnout for the election was 56.7% citywide, an increase from 36.5% in 2011. This increase does not reflect the huge turnover of electors on the electoral register with existing electors coming off the register and new electors being added.

(d)   The size of the temporary workforce required to support the election also posed a challenge. 322 individuals were appointed to 628 posts. All of the appointees had volunteered to support the election. Elections staff are paid but City Council colleagues could not be required to put themselves forward for roles, though if the opportunity to review contracts came up in future, this could be considered. There was a relatively high drop out rate amongst those who had volunteered, which caused difficulties with training and ensuring there were sufficient staff to cover all the key roles. There was a high proportion of new staff recruited who can now be approached for future elections. Around 50% of the staff at the local count on the Friday were new. While this addressed the problem of the experienced staff being very fatigued having worked the previous day it did mean that some were slower than more experienced staff might have been.

(e)   All staff who worked on the election, either at Polling Stations or at the counts had attended training and polling station staff were required to pass an online test. On the day, where there were inexperienced staff in polling stations, they were prioritised by the inspectors to ensure they were confident in what they were doing and that all was being correctly.

(f)   Other issues included:
•   During postal vote opening, there were several challenges to processes from observers. Once the process was explained the observers were satisfied but this took time away from those who were working on postal vote opening.
•   Poor quality nomination papers also caused issues with some having to be returned to candidates three or four times before they were correct. For future elections it would be helpful to have more colleagues working as Deputy Returning Officers and supporting the nominations process.
•   The length and size of the 'grass skirt' sheets used to count ballot papers with multiple votes together with changes in voting patterns which resulted in fewer block votes posed a challenge for counters on the night, as did the requirement to count votes not cast. For future similar elections, having two Count Supervisors per ward may be advisable.

- The target time to complete verification and commence counting for the Parliamentary election was not met. Part of the delay came after the check in process, which worked very effectively, when ballot boxes were then checked again when they reached the count areas. This delayed the boxes being opened and verification commencing.

(g) Positives from the election included:
- The large number of new voters registered in time for the election;
- Effective management of the increased turnout, including management of queues where they occurred;
- The significant number of new staff used, increasing the pool of experienced and trained staff for future elections;
- The successful and accurate processing of the large number of postal votes, while under significant scrutiny;
- Very positive feedback on the training for polling and count staff;
- A successful election with no complaints of fraud.

During questions from Councillors the following points were discussed:

(h) All staff who participated in the election were trained, depending upon which role they performed and were required to answer at least 80% of online questions correctly. A view is also taken to match experienced individuals with those new to the role however, due to the number of people who drop-out the Council is often left with inexperienced individuals filling the void;

(i) There were four wards in particular that which declared outcomes significantly later than others, such as Berridge, Radford and Park, Sherwood and Wollaton West. This is largely due to the number of ballot papers issued which were issued in those wards and the number of candidates standing for election in each ward. Consequently, counting the votes took substantially longer;

(j) Some candidates had to queue for up to 30 minutes when entering the Tennis Centre for the Local Election Count on Friday 8 May. In the future, it would be useful to make use of the number of entry points and have two queues for entry;

(k) Where citizens provide alternative forms of contact, such as an email address or a telephone number, it is placed onto the electronic system and stored, but this is currently optional and not mandatory. Currently, Elections staff is carrying out their canvass over the phone where possible but there are some practices that require a formal letter to meet statutory duties;

(l) There is no set time limit for presiding officers to escort their ballot box over to the verification and count at the Tennis Centre and most stations are situated within 30 minutes of this location. Where there are queues, polling station staff are told to call to inform Inspectors of queues, as was the case at the Cathedral in Nottingham the election in May. In this case, all of those queueing were able to vote.

RESOLVED to

(1) Thank the Ian Curryer for his informative presentation and responses to questions posed during the discussion;

(2) Request that Nottingham City Council produce an instruction manual on the nomination process and how to successfully complete the nomination paperwork;

(3) Circulate the local electorate and turnout figures for the elections held in May 2015 to Committee members;

(4) Encourage periodic dialogue with local political parties on best practice in order to improve the standard of submissions in the future.

16   PROGRAMME FOR SCRUTINY

Rav Kalsi, Senior Governance Officer introduced the report of the Head of Democratic Services setting out the programme of activity for this Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Review Panels for 2015/16.

RESOLVED to agree the work programme for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Review Panels for 2015/16, as summarised in the report.