

REPORT OF THE DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL – TASK AND FINISH GROUP

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REPORT OF THE DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL – TASK AND FINISH GROUP

1. INTRODUCTION

A research report on turnout at local elections commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2002 stated “The more people that vote, the greater the democratic legitimacy of the elected local authority and the greater its scope to claim a mandate for its actions”.

The percentage turnout at both local and national elections, however, shows a steady decline over the past 20 years. Understandably, this is a matter of continuing concern to the Government, local authorities and political parties.

Turnout figures for Braintree District Council elections since 1987 generally follow the national trend. The table below shows that the percentage poll has declined by 13 points between May 1987 (50% poll) and the last elections held in May 2007 (37% poll).

District Election % Turnouts	
7/5/87	49.12%
2/5/91	50.59%
4/5/95	45.94%
6/5/99	33.96%
1/5/03	33.40%
3/5/07	36.93%

Terms of Reference

Our specific **Terms of Reference** were, therefore, to investigate what can be done locally to improve voter registration and electoral turnout within the District and to make recommendations accordingly.

How We Conducted Our Study

We began our investigation in late September and advertised our study in the local press inviting members of the public and other interested bodies to make written submissions.

The Group has met on eight separate occasions to gather and consider evidence. In addition to the assistance provided by our support officer, individual members researched specific areas reporting back to the Group with their findings. In particular, Cllr. Mrs. R. O’Shea undertook considerable work in researching which schools had embraced the citizenship agenda.

We had a specific session with Stephen Phillips the Electoral Officer prior to him leaving the Council’s employment in October 2007 to take up a similar post with Bassetlaw District Council.

Further evidence was provided by Allan Reid the Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer, and also Janet Goldsworthy, the part-time consultant from the

Association of Electoral Administrators, who took over temporarily from Stephen Phillips.

Craig Horner the Children and Young People's Services Co-ordinator attended one meeting to comment on how his activities with children and young people interfaced with the work of the Electoral Services Section.

We also wrote to the main political agents and the sole independent Councillor, and invited them to submit written views.

A number of organisations representing elderly/disabled/ethnic groups were also written to and invited to submit comments.

In our penultimate meeting, we discussed work priorities for the coming year and other associated issues with Sharon Lowe the Head of Law and Governance, and Steve Daynes the newly appointed Democracy Manager who has taken over an expanded role dealing not only with electoral and electoral registration matters, but also the responsibility for promoting understanding of the democratic process and citizenship.

Contact has also been made with a number of other local authorities particularly those which have achieved 'Beacon Status' for their electoral registration/elections function, to seek guidance on best practice.

Our study also came at an opportune time as it had coincided with the Electoral Commission requesting data from the Council for the first time in relation to prospective national Performance Indicators.

A great deal of helpful documentation has also been downloaded from the Electoral Commission's web site.

We would like to record our thanks to all those persons, organisations and local authorities who contributed to this study.

2. FINDINGS

(1) The role of the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and the Returning Officer (RO)

The ERO is the officer with formal responsibility for the preparation and maintenance of the register of electors and lists of absent voters in the District.

The RO is the officer with formal responsibility for conducting and running the District and Parish/Town Council elections (together with any referenda).

Both the ERO and RO are "prescribed posts" which the Council is required to appoint by law. The legislation provides for the ERO and the RO to have responsibilities vested in them personally and as such they are required to be able to act independently from the Council in the same way as the Chief Finance Officer and the Monitoring Officer. This arrangement is designed to maintain the impartiality of the

ERO and RO and to maintain the integrity of the service. The RO is personally liable for the conduct of the elections.

Allan Reid the Council's Chief Executive is appointed as both ERO and RO.

The Chief Executive also acts as the Acting Returning Officer for the new Braintree and Witham Parliamentary Constituencies.

In addition, the Chief Executive will normally be appointed as a Deputy Returning Officer at County Council elections and as Local Returning Officer at European elections - the Returning Officer for County Council elections being the County Council Chief Executive, and the Regional Returning Officer for European elections being the Chief Executive of Huntingdonshire District Council.

(2) The Electoral Services Section

The Electoral Services Section provides the day to day delivery of the electoral registration/electoral service. As the service is a statutory one, it is subject to extensive prescription and regulation. Most of the activities are cyclical and require compliance with legislative timetables and deadlines.

Recent staff and legislative changes have prompted a review of the establishment of the Section. The Section now comprises the following posts:-

The Democracy Manager
Electoral Support Officer
Electoral Support Officer (Part-time post) (to be appointed – post currently advertised)

The Section is responsible for providing and developing a comprehensive electoral registration/electoral service including the preparation and updating of the Electoral Register and absent voting lists in accordance with statutory deadlines, and the organisation of elections and referenda held in the District in accordance with legislative requirements.

For major elections, the workload necessitates that an Election Team is formed comprising of a number of staff in addition to the Electoral Services Section, who are each assigned specific duties e.g. organising the Count; issuing and opening the postal votes; appointing and briefing polling station staff.

The Section uses the eXpress software system for assisting with the administration of the electoral and electoral registration procedures and processes.

(3) Compiling and updating the Register of Electors

Only those persons who are included on the Register can actually vote. The procedure for compiling and maintaining the register therefore provides the foundation for the whole electoral process.

Canvassers are recruited annually to assist with undertaking the canvass. See

Instructions to Canvassers contained in Appendix 1.

The advantage of using Canvassers is that:-

- (a) Canvassers get to know their area;
- (b) Canvassers deliver registration forms by hand and there is less likelihood of missing new properties than if forms were sent by post;
- (c) Well trained and experienced Canvassers can answer householders queries when making personal calls on non-responding households.

However, we were advised that there are difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of canvassers particularly for the rural areas. This is despite canvassers being paid proportionately more for canvassing a rural or semi-rural area.

Consequently, in compiling the 2007/08 register, a postal canvass only was undertaken for the following polling districts:-

Bocking (Dorewards) (AL) (Part)	Belchamp Walter (DQ)
Rivenhall (AQ)	Borley (DR)
Silver End (AR)	Bulmer (DS)
Cressing (BF)	Foxearth (DT)
Bocking (High Garrett) (BH)	Liston (DU)
Braintree (Maylands) (BM)	Ovington (DV)
Finchingfield (Finchingfield) (CA)	Pentlow (DW)
Great Bardfield (CB)	Alphamstone (DY)
Gestingthorpe (DJ)	Great Henny (EA)
Great Maplestead (DK)	Lamarsh (EB)
Little Maplestead (DL)	Little Henny (EC)
Sible Hedingham (DM) (Part)	Middleton (ED)
Wickham St. Paul (DN)	Pebmarsh (EE)
Belchamp Otten (DO)	Twinstead (EF)
Belchamp St.Paul (DP)	Little Yeldham (EO)

The postal canvass covered 13% of the District's electorate.

The annual electoral registration canvass process is as follows:-

- (i) During August of each year, all households in the District receive an electoral canvass form. This is a personalised form showing the information that is currently held on the electoral register for all the people currently living at an address who are entitled to vote. These are hand delivered by canvassers in areas where canvassers have been recruited, or otherwise sent centrally from the Electoral Services Section via the post;
- (ii) The qualifying date for the Register is 15th October and the householder simply amends the form to show everyone who is living at the address on that day who is entitled to vote. If there are no changes the householder just signs and dates the form. A pre-paid envelope is provided for the form to be posted back to the Council.

Householders are required by law to provide the information requested. Where a

response has not been obtained from a property for two years, the legislation requires that the existing entries that have been carried over are to be deleted;

(iii) Returned forms are scanned in by the Electoral Services Section (all forms are bar coded), and amendments made as necessary to the computerised data-base;

(iii) In the event of non-return, a first reminder is sent centrally from the Electoral Services Section in early October via the post to all households who have failed to respond;

(iv) From the middle of October to early November, canvassers are required to make at least two personal calls to households where the return is still outstanding. If no contact is made a Final Reminder form is left at the property. In rural or semi-rural areas where there is no canvasser (13% of the District's electorate), a Final Reminder form is sent to non-responding households through the post;

(v) A new electoral register is published on 1st December and is used for all elections held for the next twelve months.

To ensure that the register is as accurate as possible, the Electoral Services Section maintains close links with the Council Tax Section (Electoral Services is able to view electronically the Council Tax database), and with Building Control and the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages who provide respectively lists of building completions and recently deceased persons.

Since the introduction of legislation in 2001, a system of rolling registration is also in operation. Persons who are not on the register and who are eligible to vote can register throughout the year by completing a rolling registration form. Similarly, persons who have moved since filling in and returning an annual canvass form can register for their new address by completing a rolling registration form.

The rolling registration process allows monthly updates to be made to the register. However, no updating is done after 1st September each year until a fully revised register is published on 1st December.

The legislation requires that there are two versions of the electoral register – the full register and the edited register. The full register is used for elections, preventing and detecting crime and checking applications for credit. The edited register is available for general sale and can be used for commercial activities such as marketing. An elector's details will appear on the full register, but an elector can choose whether or not their details appear on the edited register.

The Electoral Commission carries out publicity campaigns throughout the period of the annual canvass through the national media to encourage people to register to vote. Its web site also contains a plethora of information on registering to vote and associated issues.

Information on registering is also contained on the Council's web site and in the 'Welcome' guide for residents moving into the District (See Appendix 2).

There is provision within the legislation for the ERO to prosecute non-responders. However, we were advised that few local authorities pursue court proceedings. The main reasons are that the time and cost of preparing for court action is prohibitive, and the courts do not treat it as a serious offence and so impose minimal fines.

(4) Engaging Young People in the Democratic Process

Anecdotal evidence indicated that there was an awareness of local democracy issues in schools and colleges, and that citizenship was included in secondary school curriculums.

However, national voting patterns indicate that the percentage turnout for the 18 to 24 year age group was still significantly lower compared with other age groups.

A number of programmes and initiatives have been introduced in an attempt to enhance young people's participation in the electoral process.

These have included the establishment of youth forums and school councils, and the Young People's Strategic Partnership. Local Councillors are also encouraged to speak to school groups about the democratic process.

Of particular note is the annual Local Democracy Week which in 2007 took place in October. This event is championed by the Local Government Association (LGA) and aims to promote local democracy amongst young people and provide opportunities to bring Councillors and young people together. The Council co-ordinates the event locally in liaison with a number of local schools.

During Local Democracy Week, the Council also participated with a number of local schools in a further LGA initiative entitled 'I'm a Councillor – Get me out of here' which was an online event to get young people engaged with local democracy.

It was noted that feedback from both events had been positive, although the Group commented that earlier notification of the timetable for these events would be helpful to both schools and members in planning their participation.

It was also noted that Indicator 6e of the Council's Electoral Registration Indicators data submission to the Electoral Commission for 2007/08 (see also paragraph (6) below) indicated that the Electoral Registration Officer has not developed relationships with schools/local education authority to provide information relating to the number of potential attainers (young adults aged 16 and 17 who can vote as soon as they are 18) in the area.

(5) Examples of Good Practice From Other Local Authorities

Three local authorities have achieved 'Beacon Council' status for their electoral services function and we made contact with two - Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough (H and F) and Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council (S and A) – who shared their experiences with us.

Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough

In preparing for the annual electoral registration canvass, H and F spend a great deal of effort in recruiting and training canvassers to ensure both their effectiveness and safety. H and F spend about one fifth of the overall electoral services budget on canvassing (£120k out of £587k p.a.).

During the canvass, H and F target non-responding households by means of relentless door knocking at properties from which no forms have been returned. The emphasis is on canvassing specific properties time and time again until a response is obtained.

To ensure that the final Register is as accurate as possible cross checking is carried out with other Council departments where occupancy of a property is unclear. This includes data on Council Tax, parking permits, Council benefits and Social Services.

The percentage return for the canvass in respect of the preparation of the 2008 Register was 97.2%.

A relatively low priority is given to Local Democracy Week and Youth Councils given the emphasis on canvassing. However, it was felt that young people are important in that using your first vote predisposes you to vote thereafter. It might also encourage non-voting parents to mend their ways. It was unclear though just how effective current initiatives really are in terms of their impact on voting capacity among the young who reach voting age.

H and F publish a series of Voter Guides (see Appendix 3) which are delivered to all registered households, either with the Council's magazine or separately, in advance of each local and parliamentary election.

H and F hold an election forum consisting of Council officers, Council members and party organisers to discuss issues of election administration, which meets twice a year. We were advised that feedback from participants was very positive.

Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council

Historically, the annual Electoral Registration canvass return for S and A has been very high. S and A did away with using Electoral Registration Canvassers some years ago – canvassers were difficult to recruit particularly in the rural areas.

One form is now sent to all households through the post. In the case of non-return, one postal reminder will be sent. There is no knocking on doors to chase up any subsequent defaulters. There is a facility to register by telephone and via the internet if there has been no changes to householder details during the canvass. The percentage return for the canvass in respect of the preparation of the 2008 register was 97%.

The Electoral Services Section maintain close links with S and A Property Services for picking up new properties. Similarly, cross-checks are made with Council Tax records, and links maintained with Bereavement Services, and the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

The Council Tax Section issues a Home Pack, including a rolling registration form to people arriving or moving within the district. This helps to keep the Register as up to date as possible.

Voter registration forms are included as part of the handouts at 'Teenage Kicks' events.

Empty properties are targeted by sending information to them several months after the canvass has closed regarding registering to vote, ready for the new occupants.

Other initiatives include:-

- * Liaison with local estate agents concerning property sales;
- * Inclusion of registration form in the citizenship pack for 'citizenship ceremonies' performed by the County Council;
- * Liaison with OAP homes and other types of social accommodation with rolling registration forms issued to new occupants;
- * A 'Welcome Letter' is sent to a child when they turn 18 which wishes them a 'Happy Birthday' and explains how they have now become eligible to vote;
- * When notice of a house move is received, the occupant is asked to supply their previous address so that contact can be made with the new resident of that property;
- * Press releases are issued at various stages of the registration process, and the press is also offered electoral news stories and media information;
- * The Council's website is extensively used to highlight information;
- * Electoral Commission posters are issued to Parish Clerks, the Library, Supermarkets, Colleges, Post Offices and other Council buildings;
- * Electoral Services Officers speak to various disability groups to make sure that there is full access to voting procedures.

(6) The Electoral Commission's Performance Indicators – data submission 2007/08

The Electoral Commission has been given powers under the Electoral Administration Act 2006 to set and monitor standards for electoral services, and collect relevant financial information.

We took the opportunity to examine the Council's Electoral Registration Indicators Data Submission that was due to be submitted to the Electoral Commission in early 2008.

A copy of the submission is included in Appendix 4.

It was noted that the total canvass return in respect of the preparation of the 2008 Register for Braintree District was 92%.

However, it was apparent that in response to a number of questions concerning activities undertaken in connection with electoral registration the Council had either answered 'No' or 'Partly'.

It was felt that the questions answered with either 'No' or 'Partly' indicated areas of

performance and practice that needed to be reviewed by the new Democracy Manager.

We understand that the intention of the Electoral Commission following the conclusion of this first round of data collection, is to use the information returned to determine benchmarks on performance standards for electoral registration by the summer of this year. The performance standards will be used by the Electoral Commission to promote best practice, and there will be a mandatory requirement by the ERO to provide data to the Commission on the level of performance achieved.

(7) The Electoral Administration Act 2006

This Act introduced new duties and wide-sweeping changes to arrangements for the administration of elections and electoral registration. The legislation aims to tackle four key areas at the core of a healthy democracy:-

- * Improving access and engagement in the democratic system;
- * Improving confidence in the electoral system;
- * Extending openness and transparency in political party funding;
- * Maintaining professional delivery of elections.

It includes, for instance, a duty for Electoral Registration Officers to undertake certain steps to maximise the registration of electors. In particular, the Act specifies that house to house enquiries must be made on one or more occasions. It also gives Returning Officers a new power to promote elections and provides a ring fenced fund for publicity and promotional activity.

The implementation of the Act is subject to secondary legislation. Since the Act received Royal Assent on 11th July 2006 there has been a large volume of secondary legislation in the form of Statutory Instruments. A summary of the Act and a list of the Statutory Instruments that have been laid in Parliament and implemented to date, are attached in Appendix 5.

We were advised that in introducing the legislation the Government had accepted that local authorities would incur significant additional costs in implementing the Act (notably the new duty to maximise the Register – and a number of postal voting security measures contained in the secondary legislation). Additional monies had therefore been paid to the Council through the Rate Settlement Grant - £37,000 in 2006/07 and a similar amount in 2007/08.

Of the £37,000 made available for the year 2006/07, £13,500 has been spent and the remaining balance of £23,500 is in the elections reserve account. Of the £37,000 made available for 2007/08, the money has been split evenly into two accounts – “electoral registration” and “district elections”. The money in these latter two accounts plus the sum put in the elections reserve account total £60,500, and the Head of Law and Governance advised that this sum would be available to fund recommendations arising from the Group’s deliberations.

We understand that £37,000 is included in the base budget, and will be met in 2008/09 from a specific allocation in the Formula Grant from Central Government.

The Government had also provided direct Government grants to local authorities to cover the costs of the new postal voting personal identifier provisions of the Act, plus also a one off payment towards the costs of additional barcode scanners. This specific money has been used for the purposes for which it was intended.

We noted that Section 16 of the Act established a framework for electoral administrators to review polling stations regularly to ensure that they provide people with proper access. This particular section came into force on 1st January 2007 and all authorities were required to conduct a review of Polling Districts and Places within 12 months with further reviews taking place every four years thereafter. In this respect, a review report had been considered by the Council at its meeting on 17th December 2007 in compliance with the legislation.

(8) The Views of the Local Political Agents

We sought the views of the Local Party Agents (plus the one independent Councillor), and a summary of the suggestions contained in the responses to improve voter registration and electoral turnout, is given in the table below.

Political Agent	Summary
Rikki Williams, Conservative Party Agent, Mid-Essex Conservatives	<p><u>Voter Registration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral Registration Forms to be given to Estate Agents to pass on to new households. • Developers to include issue of Electoral Registration forms as part of contract. • The Council to hold Electoral Registration Roadshows at train stations. <p><u>Electoral Turnout</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early voting – lengthening the times at certain points when people can vote i.e. Handing in Postal Votes at train stations, car parks etc.; (<i>not permitted under current legislation</i>) • Giving candidates more notice of who has been issued with a postal vote; • Encouraging Parish Councils to push postal votes.
Michael F. Gould, Agent, Green Party, Saffron Walden Constituency	Advocates the Government adopting a system of proportional representation which it is felt will help increase voter registration and turnout.
Jesse Pryke, Chairman, UK Independence	No specific suggestions, but highlights:-

Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much Westminster control; • Councils are not independent enough; • Poor perception of politicians; • The three main parties need to clean up their act.
Peter Long, Secretary/Agent, Braintree and Witham Constituencies Labour Party	<p><u>Voter Registration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voter registration form needs to emphasise more fully legal requirements to complete and return form, and penalties for failing to do so; • Non-return of form should be followed up with doorstep collection. If no contact, warning letter should be left. • Possible high profile action against consistent and wilful offenders; • BDC should use its computerised systems to track persons moving within the District to ensure they register for new address. <p><u>Electoral Turnout</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake leaflet and poster campaigns on 'How to Vote'; • Poll Cards should not be distributed too early, and ideally should contain a simple map showing location of polling station; • As well as publicity, there should also be marketing of elections; • Raises issue of Witham South where over 2000 residents do not have a polling station within their Polling District. Does not reflect well on the Council's priority of locating polling stations near the people (<i>the polling station for Witham South, and also one of the Halstead polling stations is currently being investigated by the Democracy Manager</i>).
Stephen J. Bolter, Braintree and Witham Constituencies Liberal Democrats	<p><u>Voter Registration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve voter registration, the Electoral Register should form the primary basis of recognition of entitlement to local services for those over 17 years of age. (<i>not permitted under current legislation</i>). <p><u>Electoral Turnout</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not unduly concerned by low turnout which it is felt to be due to a general satisfaction with local services and Councils being constrained by Central Government. Against the idea of making voting

	<p>compulsory or introducing inducements to vote;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better media coverage of local government affairs generally, with some form of Government Guidance at election time which encourages active debate; • Government should extend freepost to candidates at County and District elections; • Government should allow all main parties plus independents holding seats, to include information for distribution in a Council newsletter; • A customised system of Proportional Representation would be fairer and encourage turnout; • More use of press releases on specific local government topics.
<p>Cllr. James Abbott, Chairman, Witham and Braintree Green Party</p>	<p><u>Voter Registration and Electoral Turnout</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would support measures to improve participation and turnout; • The Council should devote more resources to what it is already doing well ie publicity in the Council newspaper page, in Contact, on the website, encouraging students who are coming up to voting age etc.; • Wary of electoral ‘pilot’ schemes; • In particular, suggests greater emphasis is made on encouraging younger people to participate in the electoral process – should be conducted on an all party basis facilitating links to policy and campaign information – schools/college based “hustings” events, information fliers – role plays of interviewing local councillors – mock elections in schools to introduce young people to the voting process and encouraging citizenship.
<p>Cllr. Michael Gage, Halstead Residents’ Association</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is felt that the ‘first past the post’ system discourages people from standing as candidates, and from going to vote; • A system of Proportional Representation (based on a Single Transferable Vote) would be more preferable, and encourage voter turnout; • If there is a major issue, people will go out and vote.

The Group felt that the suggestions made by the Party Agents had been helpful. Some of the proposals, however, were not permitted under the current legislation or did not come within the Group’s terms of reference.

(9) The Views of other Bodies Consulted

We advised a number of elderly/disabled/ethnic organisations of our study and invited them to comment if they so wished. These included Ethnic Voice UK, Braintree District Access Group, Essex Coalition of Disabled People, Disability Essex, Age Concern (Essex), Polish Mothers Group, Al Falah Braintree Islamic Centre, Braintree Indian Society, Mencap Adult Caring.

One response was received from Disability Essex highlighting the need to ensure adequate disabled access to polling stations, and the need for election literature to comply with Disability Rights Commission's (DRC) guidance on type-face/colour/font.

We were advised that the recent review of Polling Districts and Polling Places referred to in paragraph 2 (7) did take into account, as far as it was reasonable and practical to do so, the accessibility needs of disabled persons.

As regards DRC guidance in relation to election related literature, the Electoral Commission's Data Indicator 5e refers to documents and promotional material being in a range of formats such as larger font, Braille, different languages. The Council's response to the Electoral Commission in respect of this indicator had been 'No'. This particular issue is covered in our recommendations.

A member of the Group had also made personal contact with the Braintree Office of Mencap Adult Caring to ascertain whether they encouraged their pupils to participate in the electoral process. It was established that pupils coming up to the age of 18 (or new pupils who are already of voting age) are encouraged to participate, and the parents or carers of the pupils are given advice to ensure that pupils are included on the electoral register. Pupils are given guidance by Mencap on how to vote. If pupils are unable to vote in person because of their disability, appropriate advice is given to them or to their parents/carers concerning postal/proxy voting.

We were advised that there are statutory provisions that provide for blind voters to receive assistance from a companion when voting in person at the polling station, and there is also a device at each polling station to assist blind or partially sighted voters. Each polling station also has a specially adapted voting screen for use by disabled voters.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The electoral registration procedure underpins the entire electoral process, and we were pleased to note that the Council's registration processes are well established. A 92% canvass return for the 2008 Register reflects well on the hard work and dedication of the Electoral Services Team.

However, there are a number of initiatives that we feel will enhance the registration process. For example, we would like to see Electoral Registration Canvassers cover the whole District (as opposed to a number of the rural/semi rural areas relying purely on a postal canvass) so that all non-responding households receive personal calls. We would also advocate further publicity measures being undertaken to encourage

attainers to register and vote. In particular, attainers should be encouraged to vote at their first election with a view to them developing a voting 'habit' at an early age.

The Electoral Commission's Performance Indicators submission also identifies a number of areas that need to be reviewed to ensure that we follow best practice, e.g. developing the Council's Electoral Services web page (Data Indicator 5c); developing relationships with schools to provide information on the number of potential attainers (Data Indicator 6e); raising general awareness of the service (Data Indicator 7a); targeting home movers (Data Indicator 7d).

We do not of course underestimate the amount of additional work that the Electoral Administration Act 2006 has created for the Electoral Services Team and the challenges that this poses. The expansion of the Electoral Services Team and the inclusion of the responsibility for promoting democracy and citizenship in the new Democracy Manager's remit should all have a positive impact. We would caution, however, that individual workloads need to be kept under review by the Head of Law and Governance.

In terms of encouraging voters to vote, we are also making a recommendation for the publication of a Voter Guide to be delivered to all registered households or included as a special feature/section in the Council's contact magazine. A recommendation is also made for the setting up of an annual forum on electoral and electoral registration matters which will, we feel, assist with enhancing the communication channels between the Electoral Services Team and the Party Agents on issues of common interest.

Finally, whilst our report focuses on the activities undertaken by the Council's Electoral Services to encourage people to register and vote, we must also state that the candidates and political parties equally have a crucial role to play in enthusing citizens to participate in the democratic process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Group make the following recommendations:-

Recommendations on Facilitating Registration and Voting

(1) A review should be undertaken of those areas that are included in the Council's 2007/08 Electoral Registration Indicators Data Submission to the Electoral Commission (see Appendix 4), but answered either as 'No' or 'In part', to ensure that our electoral registration practices and procedures reflect best practice;

(2) In respect of the annual electoral registration canvass, further efforts should be made to appoint Electoral Registration Canvassers for those rural/semi-rural polling districts which currently rely on a postal canvass, with a view to ensuring that all non-responding households in the District receive personal visits from Canvassers. The payment of Canvassers for canvassing these areas should be reviewed and, if necessary, enhanced, to provide the necessary financial incentives to attract applicants;

- (3) In the case of non-responding households, a final letter should be sent to the householders concerned from Electoral Services drawing attention to the law and forewarning them of the possible penalties for failing to register, and enclosing a rolling registration form for completion;
- (4) Consideration should be given as to whether it would be useful to establish links with external organisations, such as Estate Agents, to help in targeting home movers;
- (5) We should maintain contact with the elderly/disabled/ethnic organisations identified in paragraph 2 (9) in order to encourage and facilitate the members of those organisations participating in the democratic process;

Recommendations on Motivating People to Register and Vote

- (6) A birthday card should be sent to every young person when they reach the age of 18 explaining that they have now become eligible to vote;
- (7) A Voters Guide should be published encouraging electors to use their vote, in advance of all major elections. This should be delivered to all registered households either separately or with the Council's contact magazine, or incorporated as a special section/feature in the magazine (We appreciate that this may not be practicable in the event of a snap General Election where there is no fixed election date and the notice given is minimal);
- (8) Where the location of a polling station has changed, a map should be included on the poll card, if practicable, showing the location of the new polling station. If this is not possible, a small location map should accompany the poll card;
- (9) The ERO/DRO should target a specific publicity campaign on attainments to encourage them to register and to vote;

Other Recommendations

- (10) The ERO/RO should set up an election forum with the local Party Agents (and any independents) to meet at least annually to discuss current issues/new developments/topics on the subject of elections and electoral registration. There are a number of technical issues raised by the Party Agents as part of their contributions to this study - e.g. timing of delivery of poll cards, publication of Absent Voters Lists - that would benefit from discussion at the forum;
- (11) In respect of Local Democracy Week, the Council's lead officer should give earlier notification of the timetable to help schools and local members plan their participation, and liaise as necessary with the Essex County Council on the programming of the event.

The Democratic Renewal Task and Finish Group

Cllr. J. Gyford (Chairman)
Cllr. E. Bishop
Cllr. J. Finbow
Cllr. E. Lynch
Cllr. D. Mann
Cllr. Mrs. R. O'Shea
Cllr. D. Rice
Cllr. A. Shelton
Cllr. R. Wilkins

4. APPENDICES (NOT ENCLOSED)

Appendix 1. Instructions to Electoral Registration Canvassers.

Appendix 2. Examples of information on registering as an elector contained on the Council's website, and the 'Welcome' guide.

Appendix 3. Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough – Voter Guides.

Appendix 4. The Council's Electoral Registration Indicators Data Submission 2007/08 made to the Electoral Commission.

Appendix 5. Summary of the Electoral Administration Act 2006, and a list of the Statutory Instruments that have been laid in Parliament and implemented to date.