Cheltenham Borough Council

Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community) - 20 October 2003

Best Value Review Project Brief: 'Elections and Citizenship'

Report of the Project Sponsor: Assistant Director Policy and Public Relations

1   Summary and recommendation

1.1   This report introduces the project brief for the proposed review of 'Elections and Civic Administration'. The report outlines the rationale behind the review and provides a vision statement summarising one possible view of what Cheltenham Borough Council might wish to achieve for elections and citizenship in three to five years time. It also identifies the need for member involvement in the review process and the need to engender ownership of a challenging and positive improvement plan.

1.2   I therefore recommend that:

- **the attached project brief is approved; and**
- **the attached vision statement is approved.**

2   Introduction

2.1   The purpose of this report is to enable members of the committee to consider the aims and scope of the proposed forthcoming best value review of 'Elections and Citizenship'. For the purpose of this review citizenship has been taken to mean active participation in elections and the democratic process. The wider issues associated with active citizenship i.e. playing a role in the community, will not be in the scope of the review as they would broaden the review too widely. This review seeks to consider two related issues. On the one hand, it seeks to consider how Cheltenham Borough Council runs its elections and electoral registration service. On the other, it seeks to consider how local residents can be encouraged to have more active participation in local democracy, including voting in elections.

2.2 Since their inception in 1999, some sixteen reviews have been undertaken. The process by which the reviews have been undertaken has changed and developed during the intervening period in response to changing trends in the way reviews are scoped, and to address perceived shortfalls in the approach. The process proposed for this review is no different, seeking as it does to promote a high degree of inclusivity and ownership on the part of the stakeholders, while seeking to maintain a high level of effective challenge.

2.3 It should be noted that there are a number of key stages within this review:

- the project brief, which outlines the aims, objectives and scope of the review;

- the vision statement, which seeks to provide a consensus view of what the review is seeking to achieve in the medium term;

- the position statement, which seeks to summarise where the service or service area is now; and

- the final report, which summarises the issues and builds a case for the actions and recommendations outlined in the improvement plan.

2.4 Ultimately, the improvement plan should provide a set of properly-resourced actions which will enable the service to move from where it is now (the position statement) to where it needs to be in three to five years time (the vision). Undertaking such a review takes time and it is not anticipated that the final report will be presented to cabinet until July 2004. However, this does not mean that ideas and actions which can be implemented straightaway need wait for the approval of the improvement plan, in particular any specific aspects which should be introduced before the elections next June.

3 Background

3.1 The review will cover seven key objectives:

- To consider how efficiently and effectively the elections and registration service is run.
- To consider how Cheltenham Borough Council engages with its residents to encourage a more representative voter turnout.
- To consider alternative methods of voting and their likely impact upon voter turnout.
- To consider how the local electorate can be actively encouraged to become engaged in civic and democratic matters, other than voting.
- To identify and evaluate alternative methods of service delivery.
- To determine what the service has achieved in relation to its strategic objectives and identify what further improvements are needed.

3.2 The review will be conducted by a project team comprising of a project sponsor, who is responsible for ensuring that the review is undertaken in accordance with the project brief and the timetable therein; the responsible Assistant Director; a best value representative; and a member of the council, who is able to guide the review and ensure that it is in-line with the views of members. The views and opinions of the returning officer will also be sought and incorporated in the review.

3.3   It is also important that we work in partnership with those groups and organisations who share the same goals and aspirations as ourselves. Needless to say, these include the local political parties. It is therefore intended to approach the local parties, as well as individual members, in order to gain their perspective on elections and electoral turnout. It must be emphasised though that this review is politically neutral and does not seek to promote the views or policies of the different parties.

3.4   Finally, it should be noted that while the vision statement has been considered by the project team, there needs to be broad agreement that it represents the right outcome for the Borough Council and people of Cheltenham. Therefore, while members have been asked to approve the document, any positive or constructive criticism of the document would be welcome.

4   Implications

Financial	None, given the non-financial scope of the review
Legal	The manner in which elections and electoral registration are conducted are prescribed by statute and regulations. There are only limited areas of choice which generally allow going beyond the statutory minimum.
Personnel	None arising from this report, other than officer time
Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty	The review and its associated recommendations need to promote anti-discriminatory practice.
Environmental	None
Health and safety	None
Background papers	Best Value Review working papers
Contact officer	Nick Hatton, Best Value Manager 01242 775035 NicholasH@Cheltenham.gov.uk

PROJECT BRIEF

Overview and Scrutiny Approval Date: 20 October 2003
Estimated Time: 30 person-days by Best Value Unit

Review Title   **Elections and Citizenship**

Year of Review   **2003/2004**

Project Sponsor   **Jane Grunert**

Timetable for the Review

20 October 2003   Overview and Scrutiny (Social and Community)
                              considers the project brief. Trade unions and key
                              stakeholders views requested.

12 January 2004   Position Statement presented to the Overview and
                              Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community), outlining
                              where the service is now.

February 2004   Discuss findings with staff and Assistant Directors, and
                              agree upon key issues.

                              Discuss findings with unions and key stakeholders and
                              identify any concerns.

                              Discuss with and propose solutions to the key issues
                              with the Deputy and responsible Group Director: agree
                              action plan

April 2004   Draft and agree report

10 May 2004   Report presented to Overview and Scrutiny
                              Committee (Social and Community)

6 July 2004   Report to Cabinet

Monthly project team meetings will be held throughout the duration of the review in order
to monitor progress. These will be chaired by the project sponsor.

The Project Team

The project team will comprise of:

Jane Grunert   Project Sponsor
Gerald Ford   Asst Director Legal and Democratic Services
Cllr Anne Regan   Member representative
Amanda James   Elections and Registration Officer
Antonia Coles   Massive Co-ordinator
Nick Hatton   Best Value Manager
Rosalind Reeves   Democratic Services Manager

Outline Terms of Reference

♦ To consider how efficiently and effectively the elections and registration service is run.
♦ To consider how Cheltenham Borough Council engages with its residents to encourage a more representative voter turnout.
♦ To consider alternative methods of voting and their likely impact upon voter turnout.
♦ To consider how the local electorate can be actively encouraged to become engaged in civic matters and the democratic process.
♦ To identify and evaluate alternative methods of service delivery.
♦ To determine what the service has achieved in relation to its strategic objectives and identify what further improvements are needed.

Scope of the Review

For the purpose of this review "citizenship" has been taken to mean active participation in both elections and the democratic process. The review will not cover the wider issues of citizenship and participation in community issues.

The review will need to consider the registration and election management functions, but it is not proposed to consider the fees and expenses paid to election officials unless they constitute an exceptional expense when compared to other local authorities.

The review will consider the promotion of voting and the active involvement of local citizens in the democratic process. Particular emphasis will be put on involvement by young people.

The review will need to take into account the views of political parties as they represent key stakeholders in the election process. However, the review is not political and will not take account of political opinion. Nor can it consider alternative voting systems unless these are allowed within the constraints of the statutory framework. Those constraints appear to prevent any alternative arrangements being piloted at the combined Borough/European Parliamentary elections in 2004. The review will also focus on the engagement of citizens within the democratic process and identify ways this can be more effective.

The review will also incorporate the findings from the current review of area committees and any lessons learnt from this form of community engagement in the democratic process.

Consultation Strategy

Review any surveys or related consultation work undertaken to date.
The consultation surveys will include:

    Borough-wide survey of residents (including non-voters)
    Survey of councillors and political agents

Options for focus groups (to drill down further on key issues):

    A selection of voters
    Young people: MAD Youth Council
                            Students
    Black and ethnic minorities via individual community groups
    Older people, possibly via the Pensioners Forum

Political parties and a broad spread of party members
Interviewees:
Party agents
Returning Officer
Communications Manager

Comparison

Review available sources of comparative statistics.

Undertake survey/benchmarking exercise with other local authorities

Identify good practice case studies from other local authorities

Option Appraisal

To consider whether some or all of the activities identified with the service can be delivered by alternative means.

Expected Outcomes / Issues

It is worth noting that while the review will focus on developing a strategic approach to improving the service and encouraging more active citizenship by the citizens of Cheltenham, members will be informed if there are particular ideas or recommendations which could sensibly be adopted in the short term. Such ideas do not need to wait for the final report before they can be introduced.

Voter turnout at the last local election overall was 35.5% but the range between wards was 54.9% to 16.9%. Whilst turnout at Parliamentary elections is much higher, voter turnout needs to be improved if it is to be seen to be representative and relevant to people's lives. The key objective must therefore be to improve registration and voter turnout, although it has to be recognised that falls in voter turnout are part of a national trend and not exclusive to Cheltenham.

Citizenship is particularly important among young people as they are the voters of tomorrow. By encouraging them to be involved at an early stage, it is hoped that they would take an active part in local democracy during their adult lives. However, the review will also take account of all groups.

Attendance at public meetings, council and committee meetings is also low and the review will identify ways to encourage more attendance and engagement and for a greater democratic accountability.

Another key outcome is to ensure that elections and registration and democratic services are undertaken in a cost-effective way. These are statutory functions and therefore the Council has no choice as to whether or not to undertake these responsibilities, but the review should consider whether there are alternatives to the present arrangement.

Key documents that are also likely to have an impact upon the review include:
The Electoral Commission: 'Managing Electoral Services'
LGA: 'Hear by right: setting standards for the active involvement of young people in democracy'

Areas of Focus: Future Vision

		Key PIs
Focus 1 Management of elections	Providing well - run elections which: give all potential voters the opportunity to vote increase the opportunities to vote in a variety of ways do not disenfranchise potential voters because of their age, gender, ethnic background or disability	increase % electoral turnout
Focus 2 Inclusive citzenship	Taking action to ensure under-represented groups have a voice Ensuring young people appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making Ensuring ethnic minority groups appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making Encourage other traditionally under-represented groups to vote and be involved in community decision-making	increase % of first time voters as a proportion of total voters increase turnout in wards where local election %age was below 25%

		Key PIs
Focus 3 Working with partners to improve active citizenship	Maximising involvement by community groups and political parties to: promoting elections and voting and participation in the democratic process inform the citizens of the choices available to them help citizens to take decisions encourage citizens to become involved in community issues	increase public attendance at Council, Cabinet and committee meetings. increase no. of column inches regarding elections and the need to vote. increase number of public questions at council meetings.
Focus 4 Registration of electors	Maximising the number of people registering by promoting elections and voting encouraging citizens to have their voice heard	increase the percentage of Form A's returned