

Cheltenham Borough Council
Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community)
27 November 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 Citizenship'. 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 Members of this committee considered a previous version of the project brief and asked that a number of amendments should be made to it before it was approved. These amendments have been incorporated in order to clearly identify the level of consultation that will be undertaken and the level of member engagement.

2.2 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', and to consider the vision proposed for this area of activity. 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. There are two elements to this review. On the one hand, it seeks to consider how Cheltenham Borough Council runs its elections and electoral registration service, and how these might be developed in the future. 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.

- 2.3 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 inclusiveness and ownership on the part of the stakeholders, including members of this council. At the same time, the review needs to maintain a high level of effective challenge.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 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 identify and recommend an improvement plan which enables the authority and its partners to achieve the vision as set out in the attachment to this report.
 - ♦ 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: 27 November 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

May 2003	Initial project meeting
June 2003	Consideration of working group representation
July 2003	Consideration of scope of project
September 2003	Consideration of vision and project brief
Sept, Oct and Nov 2003	Evidence gathering including focus groups
27 November 2003	Overview and Scrutiny (Social and Community) considers the project brief. Key stakeholders views identified, as outlined in the consultation strategy below.
December 2003	Results from viewpoint questionnaire to be analysed
January 2003	Working group to draw up position statement from evidence based on focus group results, analysis of best practice and viewpoint questionnaire
23 February 2004	Position Statement presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community), outlining where the service is now.
March 2004	Discuss findings, agree upon key issues and propose solutions, leading to the development of a draft improvement plan through an informal meeting between the working group and Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community), Deputy and group directors.
April 2004	Working group to draft and finalise 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
Kim Gibbon	Massive Co-ordinator
Nick Hatton	Best Value Manager
Rosalind Reeves	Democratic Services Manager
Larry Brown	Retired Elections Officer

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 identify and recommend an improvement plan which enables the authority and its partners to achieve the vision.
- ◆ 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 focus upon the four key areas outlined in the vision statement and to establish a route map for achieving the outcomes listed in it. In so doing, it 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

Consultation with young people, minority communities and with the public at large will be the key to understanding the factors, which influence their involvement in local democracy. Therefore, the project team will need to:

- Review any surveys or related consultation work undertaken to date, including area committee consultation.
- Undertake a Borough-wide survey of residents (including non-voters) using the citizens panel

Although the review team recognises the benefits of questionnaires, it realises that it is far better to explore some issues through the use of focus groups where specific issues can be explored in more detail. The project team will therefore undertake more focused consultation (to drill down further on key issues) with:

- Young people:
 - MAD Youth Council
 - Year 13 students at a number of schools in the town
 - Students
- Black and ethnic minorities via individual community groups
- Older people, via the Pensioners Forum
- Political parties and a broad spread of party members
- Interview the Communications Manager
- Members focus group

Once all the evidence has been gathered and a position statement has evolved, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community) will be involved in an informal meeting with the relevant cabinet deputies and group directors to consider the findings and develop solutions.

Comparison

The review needs to put current service activity into context. The project team therefore need to:

- Review available sources of comparative statistics.
- Undertake survey/benchmarking exercise with other local authorities
- Identify good practice case studies from other local authorities and the Electoral Commission.

Option Appraisal

While the authority has a statutory obligation to register voters and to run elections, there may be scope to introduce alternative methods of delivering all or part of the service.

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. In seeking to achieve this objective, the review team needs to identify all of the key factors which influence potential voters. These include such issues as:

- Whether voting makes a difference
- Whether local democracy is relevant to citizens' lives
- The impact of peer pressure
- A citizens' sense of duty and responsibility towards the community as a whole
- The role of the media and how effectively the issues are communicated

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. By talking to young people in schools and other groups, it is hoped to identify the barriers to voting.

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	<p>Providing well - run elections which:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">give all potential voters the opportunity to vote</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">increase the opportunities to vote in a variety of ways</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">do not disenfranchise potential voters because of their age, gender, ethnic background or disability</p>	increase % electoral turnout
Focus 2 Inclusive citizenship	<p>Taking action to ensure under-represented groups have a voice</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Ensuring young people appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Ensuring ethnic minority groups appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Encourage other traditionally under-represented groups to vote and be involved in community decision-making</p>	<p>increase % of first time voters as a proportion of total voters</p> <p>increase turnout in wards where local election %age was below 25%</p>

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