

Information/Discussion Paper

Social and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 13 September 2004

Best value review of elections and citizenship

This note contains information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee but where no decisions from Members are needed.

1. Why has this come to scrutiny

This committee approved the project brief for this best value review in November 2003. A project team was set up to undertake the review, which included Councillor Anne Regan as a representative of this committee. The intention was to bring a report to this committee in May but due to workloads within the business support division and for other members of the project team, this timetable has not been met. It was agreed at the last meeting of this committee that an update report should be brought to this meeting setting out progress to date.

2. Summary of the Issue

The project brief which was approved last November set out the scope of the review which included a review of the efficiency of the elections and electoral registration service, as well as consideration of how well we engage with residents to encourage more participation in the democratic process.

It should be noted that the Best Value Manager who was leading on this project has left the council but before he went he produced an interim report which has not yet been reviewed by the project team. The Performance Management Officer from Business Support Division will be picking up the review. He will clearly need to review the working papers and familiarise himself with the project before he can advise the project team as to what additional tasks need to be undertaken in order for the review to be finalised. It should also be noted that he will be involved with the production of the CPA improvement plan and other members of the project team have busy schedules over the next few months. In recognition of workloads it is proposed that a final report be brought back to this committee for consideration early next year which should give the project team sufficient time to consider information gathered to date and to undertake any additional aspects of the review.

3. Summary of evidence/information

- Given the nature of the area under review there is limited scope for competition although there may be alternative ways of providing parts of the service or scope for identifying joint partnership work with other councils. This element of work has yet to be undertaken and will form part of the remaining review.
- Consultation events have been held with 3 schools, the youth council, the pensioners forum and the hindu community, as well as involving the agents from the political parties and councillors.
- The review has collated information from other councils and from the Electoral Commission and other published sources.
- Evidence from the work undertaken to date suggests that there are a number of factors why people do not vote or participate in democracy. Much of this is beyond the control of the

council, but the data will be reviewed to identify any aspects, which can be addressed.

- The data collected to date suggests that there is a significant variation in participation in elections across the borough. Although this is not a surprise and was indeed highlighted before the review commenced, further work needs to be undertaken in identifying examples of good practice which can lead to greater involvement in citizenship.
- It should also be noted that in parallel to our own review, work has been undertaken nationally highlighting the benefits of alternative voting methods. Given the national research it is envisaged that no further work will be undertaken in this area as it is likely that the government will bring out proposals on how such alternatives can be used successfully. A recent report from the electoral commission has highlighted the difficulty of full postal ballots without alternative ballot methods for the public.
- The council has seen an increase in the use of postal voting and it is likely that this trend will continue
- Comparative data has been collected but due to workloads this has not been reviewed with the service manager to establish what improvements it is highlighting.
- The review to date has focused mostly on elections and this is reflected in the evidence and information shown above so it is recognised that more work needs to be done in relation to democratic participation. This work will now be undertaken to identify key comparators in performance and identify areas of good practice, which can be adopted by the council at minimum cost.

4. Next Steps – possible next steps for the committee to consider e.g. potential witnesses, further report, site visit etc.

- The project team will be reconvened, with Cllr Regan continuing to represent this committee
- The scope of the review will be considered in light of national and local agendas and priorities, which have emerged since the review commenced.
- The working group will bring a report to a meeting of this committee early next year, to enable the review of elections and citizenship to be finalised before the end of the financial year so that any improvements can be implemented with effect from 2005/6.

Background papers

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