Cheltenham Borough Council

Social & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee

11 April 2005

Elections and Citizenship Review

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

1. Executive summary and recommendation

1.1 This report brings to a conclusion the council's review of Elections and Citizenship.

1.2 The review commenced on 27 November 2003, when a project brief and vision statement were approved by this committee. The project brief is attached for reference as Appendix B.

1.2.1 The review was conducted by the then Best Value Manager, Nick Hatton, and a working group led by Councillor Anne Regan.

1.2.2 During the latter stages of the review process the Best Value Manager left Cheltenham Borough Council. As a result of this, and the lack of a suitable replacement officer at the time, the review was temporarily put on hold.

1.2.3 The Performance Management Officer eventually replaced the Best Value Manager on the review and has assisted in bringing it to a conclusion. Despite the change of review officer, every attempt has been made to fully reflect the work undertaken during the early part of the exercise, which was considerable.

1.2.4 The attached report sets out the council's current position is relation to Elections and Citizenship. It also sets out an improvement frame work for how progress could be made in these areas in future.

1.3 **I therefore recommend that the Social & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee:**

1.3.1 **Considers the contents of this report and approves the improvement framework for Elections and Citizenship.**

1.3.2 **Undertakes to monitor progress against the improvement framework on an annual basis.**

1.3.3 **Consider what further role members can play in supporting the citizenship agenda.**

1.4　Summary of implications

1.4.1 Financial　　　　　None, given the non-financial scope of the review.

1.4.2 Legal　　　　　The manner in which elections and electoral registration are conducted are prescribed by statute and regulations. There are only are only limited areas of choice which allow going beyond the statutory minimum.

1.4.3 Human Resources　　　　　The promotion of citizenship does require employee and member input. Local democracy week is included within the service plan for the Policy and PR division.

1.4.4 Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty　　　　　The review and its associated recommendations need to promote non-discriminatory practices.

1.4.5 Environmental　　　　　None.

2　Introduction

2.1　Using the objectives set out in the approved project brief, this paper sets out the results of the consultation and research work undertaken in respect of Elections and Citizenship. This data then enabled the review team to establish a baseline assessment of where both Cheltenham Borough Council is in terms of delivering electoral registration and election management, and where Cheltenham is in terms of how its citizens engage with local democracy.

2.2　The data was then considered in relation to the aspirations set out in the vision statement. The result is an improvement framework which aims to fulfil that vision through identifying areas of focus and related performance indicators.

2.3　Efforts have been made 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 has necessitated a degree of challenge.

2.4　Consultation took place with Kingsmead, Bournside and Cleeve Schools, the MAD Youth Council, the Pensioners Forum, the Hindu Community, and the political parties within the town. A useful meeting also took place with a number of members to obtain their views. Information concerning elections was collected from a number of similar town and cities across the country. Information was also obtained from the Electoral Commission and other published sources.

2.5　Table 1 overleaf provides an overview of the key messages received during the review.

Table 1: Vision Statement and Key Findings

Areas of focus	Aims	Key findings
Focus 1 Management of elections	Providing well - run elections which:	The management of elections is well regarded, and compares well with other authorities.
	give all potential voters the opportunity to vote;	Use of canvassers is standard practice among authorities, but is expensive. Use of canvassers may be reduced through others means – e.g. Royal Mail.
	increase the opportunities to vote in a variety of ways;	The election is well advertised but alternative voting methods could be considered.
	do not disenfranchise potential voters because of their age, gender, ethnic background or disability.	Younger people have difficulty relating to councillors or the process. Ethnic background does not appear to present any special issues.
Focus 2 Inclusive citzenship	Taking action to ensure under-represented groups have a voice by:	
	Ensuring young people appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making;	Young people and students do not see voting as relevant. However, MAD provides a good example of how young people can be encouraged to participate
	Ensuring ethnic minority groups appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making.	Limited discussions suggest that this is indeed the case, but that greater dialogue/representation may be needed.
Focus 3 Working with partners to improve active citizenship	Maximising involvement by community groups and political parties to:	
	promote elections and voting and participation in the democratic process;	Political parties have limited resources which means they need to focus their activities.
	inform the citizens of the choices available to them;	Older citizens feel that they are well informed. Young people generally do not.
	help citizens to take decisions.	See above.
Focus 4 Registration of electors	Maximising the number of people registering by:	
	promoting elections and voting;	Successful efforts have been made to promote registration and rolling registration. These have had limited impact upon people's likelihood to vote, however.
	encouraging citizens to have their voice heard.	New methods of engaging with young people, and potentially other groups, are available and could be adopted by CBC,

		where appropriate.

3 The Present Position

3.1 The service activity under review needs to be split down into its constituent elements in order to be clear about what the aims and scope of this piece of work were. Electoral services splits down into electoral registration, which seeks to manage and maintain the electoral roll and to ensure that the list is accurate and up-to-date; and the management of the elections themselves, which involves preparing for and running elections, registering candidates and ensuring that all appropriate returns are completed. Electoral registration is the responsibility of the council, but the management of the elections is the personal responsibility of the returning officer.

3.2 The citizenship agenda is much broader and focuses upon the relationship between potential voters, their involvement in community activities and their view of local democracy. These factors have an impact upon their propensity to vote and ultimately upon the health of local democracy.

3.3 How efficiently and effectively is the elections and registration service run?

3.3.1 This is a difficult area to obtain valid feedback as voters often only experience the service once a year or less. Exposure to the service is also limited. In this sense, the best source of feedback comes from the party agents who need to work closely with elections staff.

3.3.2 Feedback from the parties has generally been positive, with the service from Cheltenham Borough Council being compared favourably to that received from other authorities. The only real criticism was in respect of the location of polling stations – more specifically the removal of one such station, which has since been reinstated.

3.3.3 Both elections and electoral registration are statutory functions. However, this still allows scope to develop the service further, so that it continues to encourage voter turnout, meet its customers' needs and deliver its statutory functions within the resources available. Cheltenham's particular electoral cycle imposes certain restrictions, however. By having an election every other year, each individual election is less likely to receive publicity, compared to those of councils where an election is held once every four years. The latter arrangement is much more likely to be seen as an event, and may encourage people to turn out. An election once every four years will also cost less, as there are fewer elections during any given period.

3.3.4 The comparison with other, similar authorities highlighted these issues. It also showed that:

> ❖ The percentage voter turnout is regarded as a key performance measure by all of the authorities, while the percentage of Form 'A's returned is used by a majority of the authorities asked.

> ❖ Most of the authorities have undertaken some initiatives to encourage young people to become involved, while only three authorities have sought to provide information in other languages.

- ❖ The majority of the authorities asked have made an effort to persuade people to adopt postal voting. Two authorities adopted other means of voting – on-line and text message – with limited success.

- ❖ All authorities made provision for blind people, as they are required to do by law. However, nothing special appears to be done for speakers of other languages during an election – though such activities should always be proportionate to demand.

- ❖ Cheltenham's electorate is average for the group of ten authorities selected with some 83,516 electors, compared to an average of 82,336. However, it has higher than average costs (£237,000, compared to an average of £211,875, excluding those authorities providing incomplete data). However this result was somewhat distorted by the fact that no other authority in the comparative study had the same electoral cycle as Cheltenham. Cheltenham also uses canvassers to a greater extent than many other authorities. This is more costly, but it helps to ensure the integrity of the register.

3.4   How well does Cheltenham Borough Council engage with its residents to encourage a more representative voter turnout?

3.4.1   Consultation highlighted the fact that engaging with the public is a key element in promoting active citizenship and encouraging voter turnout. Research suggests that people are more likely to engage if they feel that their problems are being addressed and that their quality of life is being improved. Much of the disaffection with local democracy appears to stem from a lack of knowledge about the role of the council and councillors. This lack of knowledge also means that it is harder to dispel negative reports in local media.

3.4.2   This feedback needs to be seen within a broader context of voting patterns within Cheltenham, and trends in voter turnout nationally. Over the last 25 years, the percentage of the electorate turning out to vote in borough elections has gradually declined. The peak in 1979 was achieved because of the combined national and local election that took place that year. The low point appears to have been reached in 1999. Research by the Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA) suggests that the trend may continue, as the population ages and those who have already developed the habit of not voting make up an increasingly large part of the electorate.

3.4.3   Cheltenham has done well in terms of voter turnout, with the 2002 result, 35.5%, being on the threshold of the upper quartile nationally, but it should be noted that these were whole council elections. Cheltenham also had above average turnout for the most recent national and European elections.

3.4.4   This result does disguise the fact that the variation in ward turnout locally is greater than the national variation in these elections. This is demonstrated by the fact that the gap between the upper and lower quartiles at the national level is 4.7%, while the same variation within Cheltenham is 15.1%. It is also worth noting that the percentage postal vote is twice as high as the overall turnout figure (71.8%), which does flag up the fact that postal voting does represent a positive line of enquiry for future methods of voting - a fact recently highlighted by The Electoral Commission. Postal voting is not without its problems and potential for abuse, however, as recent cases in Birmingham have shown.

3.4.5   The second point to make with regard to the 2002 election results in Cheltenham is that the variations in turnout between wards is greater than the variation between authorities nationally. For example, the highest non-postal turnout was found in Leckhampton (55%) and the lowest in St Pauls (17%). This would suggest that while the decline in turnout is a national phenomenon, local factors play a part in the variations found – e.g. high student population.

3.4.6   In terms of local factors, there is a reasonably strong negative correlation between relative deprivation and percentage voter turnout. This implies that the greater the relative deprivation, the less likely voters are to turn out and vote.

3.4.7   In terms of engaging with residents, Cheltenham Borough Council has put effort into highlighting the need to vote. The best example of this was the 'Use Your Vote' campaign with the posters of Naomijo Hughes, which was principally aimed at encouraging young people to vote. However, resources have meant that it has not been possible to undertake significant media campaigns on a consistent basis. Generally, the council has relied upon the Clarion in the past, and upon press releases being run in the local media to advertise an election. For the current county council elections the internet is being used to promote key dates, encourage voters to register and apply for postal votes. A media strategy has also been developed to issue media releases at key stages in the process.

3.4.8   Voter turnout is also relevant to the political parties within Cheltenham, and they also seek to raise awareness of elections and encourage people to vote. However, a clear distinction needs to be made between the role of the Council in promoting local democracy, and the role of individual councillors and their respective parties in promoting their particular policies. Needless to say, promotion on the part of individual councillors and their parties depends ultimately on resources, which have to be focused where they are believed to have the greatest impact.

3.4.9   Feedback from the local population was obtained via a survey. A word of caution needs to be placed upon these results, however, as 49.5% of the respondents to the survey were aged 60+, even though this group accounts for only 22% of the local population. On the other hand, 11.1% of the respondents were under 39 years of age, while this age group accounts for 52.9% of the population. The views expressed are therefore more likely to be representative of the older members of the population.

3.4.10 The survey suggests that while people do take an interest in what is going on in the community, few actively participate in voluntary or community activities, or belong to clubs or societies. Respondents felt that voting was a duty, that they were reasonably well informed and knew when and where to vote. Respondents were also broadly in favour of some less traditional approaches to voting by putting polling stations in alternative locations, or by using alternative methods of voting such as postal or on-line voting.

3.4.11 These results contrast with national findings which indicate that young people view voting as a positive consumer choice based upon issues rather than political party lines. Alternative methods of voting such as text messaging also tend to be favoured by young people, even though this method was unpopular among older people within the Viewpoint survey.

3.4.12 The results from discussion groups, which included both young and older people, suggest that many people do not know who their local ward councillors are. Local politicians are generally viewed in a negative light, while local politics is not perceived as relevant to people's lives. Indeed, some people feel that members will simply do what they want to do regardless of public opinion, which comes back to the issue of how we engage with the public and demonstrate to them how decisions are made. Consultation results would suggest that the public need feedback and a decision-making process which is transparent. This is something that has been highlighted previously and officers are looking at ways in which feedback can be given to residents following consultation exercises.

3.4.13 Many of the people questioned did not see local government as having any real power, and that therefore the capacity to have a positive impact in the locality. The Council has made efforts to address these issues. For example, during the last two years the Council has been involved in the Local Government Association's (LGA) Local Democracy Week. A number of event have also been held with schoolchildren to encourage them to have a better understanding of local democracy and the role it can play in their lives.

3.4.14 The impact of any engagement does not therefore appear to have been that significant, but it is not clear from the foregoing results what forms of communication or activity would be effective. Needless to say, these issues have been picked up in previous best value reviews – most notably the review of Effective Communications – and there are developments in the pipeline. However, it should also be noted that any engagement requires resources and these need to be used in the most cost-effective way.

3.5   What alternative methods of voting exist and what is their likely impact upon voter turnout?

3.5.1   In April 2000, the Local Government Association published a paper entitled: "The only way is up! - Increasing turnout in local government elections" In this paper, the LGA highlighted a number of the issues identified above. They mention that the decline in the already low rate of turnout threatens the legitimacy of local councils. They note that participation in local elections is linked to voters' perceptions of whether or not it is worth voting. They make reference to European practices which due to statutory constraints we would be unable to adopt even though these may assist us:

- compulsory voting;
- raising a higher proportion of finance locally; and
- operate a system of proportional representation, rather than first past the post.

3.5.2   e-Democracy is a recent innovation which has the potential to expand the range of voting methods and democratic participation, and thereby allow greater voter involvement. There are three key objectives; to *facilitate, broaden and deepen* participation in the democratic process, and two separate but linked strands to the policy proposals:

–   e-Participation – using ICT to develop new channels through which people can participate effectively in the democratic process between elections;

–   e-Voting – utilising ICT to provide new methods of casting votes in elections or other ballots under statutory control. This also covers

activities that underpin the electoral process, such as registration and absent voter application.

3.5.3   This initiative is still relatively untested and therefore it is too early to say whether it will be successful. However, the Electoral Commission allowed a number of authorities to undertake pilot studies using some of the alternative electronic voting methods available. Results were mixed and the Commission has for the time being suspended further pilot studies.

3.5.4   The Commission was initially more positive about the postal voting option, suggesting that all local elections should be run as all-postal ballots, but with staffed delivery points so that people could deliver their completed postal vote if they wished to do so. The Commission has back-tracked on that position more recently, in light of the alleged electoral abuses in Birmingham.

3.5.5   While innovation in this field is to be welcomed, and should be embraced where appropriate and possible, simply increasing the range of means by which people *can* vote will achieve nothing if people are not inclined *to* vote.

3.6   What alternative methods of service delivery exist?

3.6.1   The project team has not come across any evidence of the elections service being provided by an outside company or agency. Indeed, it is open to question whether a local authority would have the statutory power to run the service in such a way. The matter of registration is a little different as the council currently employs canvassers to maximise the potential voters on the electoral roll. Cheltenham's response rate at the last canvass was 97.3%, which compares to results from other similar authorities ranging from 88.8% to 97.5%.

3.6.2   The results of further comparisons with other local authorities indicate that other authorities also use canvassers. However, the extent to which authorities use these canvassers vary. Some authorities hand deliver the original forms, with canvassers delivering reminders too. Others send out the original registration form in the post, followed by two postal reminders, before using canvassers.

3.6.3   One authority indicated that a large proportion of households do not respond to the original form and reminder letter, and that therefore the register would be much less accurate if canvassers did not make contact. Another authority indicated that their canvassers increased the response rate by some 7 – 8%.

3.6.4   The other issue is whether electoral services have obtained its supplies cost-effectively. Evidence exists to show that the procurement of ballot papers, canvassing leaflets and reminder letters have all been subject to tender and that the best price was obtained.

3.7   What has the service achieved in relation to its strategic objectives?

3.7.1   The service delivery plan for the Legal and Democratic Services Division states that the electoral services section: "…organises all elections and compiles and publishes the register of electors in accordance with the law."

3.7.2   The plan notes that: "recent legislative changes have seen the introduction of the rolling register of electors, reductions in the period for preparing the register of

electors, changes in the eligibility rules for postal votes and the preparation of separate 'full' and 'edited' registers. These have all imposed additional pressures on the section. There were, for example, 1,397 claims for changes to the rolling register between December 2001 - August 2002, with 396 in May alone, and the number of postal votes at the last local election showed a 66% increase over previous elections."

3.7.3   The plan also notes that: "a number of significant changes have been made to modernise aspects of electoral law and procedures during the past three years. This process seems set to continue with the Government indicating that it will be issuing a number of consultation papers about further changes. The Section will need to respond to whatever changes are made. In 2001 new wards were established which were used for the first time in the May 2002 Borough elections. The boundaries of the parliamentary constituencies, the County Council electoral divisions and the parishes are all at differing stages of review. The Section will need to assist the Council in responding to draft recommendations as they emerge and, of course, to implement the final proposals, when they are made." Most of this work has now been completed, with the exception of that relating to the parliamentary constituencies, which should be in force by 2006.

3.7.4   A great deal of work has been undertaken in terms of reacting to and meeting the agenda for change set out by the Government. Official public participation has been encouraged through the introduction of public question time and the public's attendance at meetings. However, the downward trend in turnout does highlight the fact that one of the section's key indicators has shown a gradual decline since 1979 – though this must be seen within a national context. It is worth noting that while % Voter Turnout is highlighted by this and other authorities as their key indicator, further measures should be used to highlight specific service objectives. Proposals regarding these measures are incorporated within Appendix A.

3.7.5   It is also worth noting that, during the course of the review, the Democratic Services team has been transferred from Legal Services to Policy & PR. This should afford the opportunity to look at innovative ways at increasing participation through better links with the policy and communications teams – thereby picking up many of the citizenship issues highlighted in this report.

4   Conclusions

4.1   The findings of this review are mainly positive. In overall terms, Cheltenham Borough Council's elections and registration service is very well regarded. The service has a long record of effective delivery in a hugely complex, highly prescribed area of work, where any error can have serious consequences both for local democracy and the Council's reputation. Staff within the service are extremely conscientious and make a concerted effort to stay up to date both with changes in legislation and good practice. Therefore, on the issue of competence, members can be assured that they and the public are well served by the elections and registration staff. However the issue of cost also needs to be monitored, to ensure that the Council continues to get value for money from its use of canvassers.

4.2   Cheltenham has suffered a gradual decline in voter turnout, along with many other similar authorities. Indeed this is not just a national but an international trend. Consultation indicates that there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, members of the public need to have a greater understanding of what the council does, and in order to dispel mistrust, the council needs to engage with the public better. Secondly, for the public to engage, they need to feel that they have real policy choices. The voter turnout in Cheltenham at the 2002 election, 35.5%, put it on the threshold of the upper quartile nationally. In 2004 the figure rose to 39.4%. Despite that, there is still a long way to go if turnout is to return to former levels.

4.3   On the issue of voter turnout, the Electoral Commission have carried out extensive research, and they make the point that:

"….civic duty and habit are the key motivators to voting…"

4.4   This view is borne out by local consultation work, which also highlights the fact that people need to feel that what they are voting for is relevant to their lives, and that their vote will make a difference. Many people do not see local government as having any real power, therefore lacking the capacity to have a positive impact in the locality. The level of disenchantment with national politics cannot be overlooked as a contributory factor either.

4.5   Responsibility for change in relation to the issues raised in this paper cannot rest with the elections and registration service alone. Indeed it cannot rest with officers alone. Members must also play a role in ensuring that local government is seen as relevant and credible. If the Council is to close the gap between where it is now and its future vision it will require a flexible, co-ordinated approach that is focused upon the areas most likely to produce results. However this approach must compliment the Council's existing commitments and improvement activities – e.g. the Business Plan and CPA Improvement Plan.

4.6   An improvement framework has been developed to start this process. It is attached overleaf as Appendix A.

APPENDIX A: IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

A conscious decision has been made not to apply too prescriptive an approach to defining progress in this area. The elections service is highly specialised, heavily prescribed and politically sensitive. The team is small and resources are limited. The other issues, those relating to citizenship, are complex, societal in nature and difficult to remedy. To take account of these factors, an improvement framework has been developed against which progress can be measured and reported on an annual basis. Aims have been identified, stemming from the vision, and relevant indicators have been suggested to measure progress against them. Within the framework, however, flexibility has been allowed for determining the most appropriate means of achieving progress – be it at a service or a corporate level.

Focal point 1 – Management of elections

Aims – 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, sex, ethnic background or disability
- Minimise costs without impacting adversely upon service quality – e.g. the accuracy of the register

Suggested performance indictors/measures:
- Increase % turnout - e.g. to 41% from 39.4%
- % return of electoral canvass forms
- Method of voting - % of votes cast by post, proxy, electronically and in person at the last election
- % polling stations with disabled access
- Cost comparisons with similar authorities using same electoral cycle

Responsible officer:
- Elections and Registration Officer

Focal point 2 – Inclusive citizenship

Aims – Ensuring under-represented groups have a voice by:
- Trying to ensure that young people appreciate the needs to vote and be involved in the community
- Ensuring that ethnic minority groups appreciate the need to vote and be involved in community decision-making
- Encouraging other traditionally under-represented groups to vote and be involved in community decision-making

Suggested performance indicators/measures:
- Rising participation in Local Democracy Week

Responsible officers:
- Assistant Director Policy and PR, Democratic Services Manager, Corporate Improvement Officer

Focal point 3 – Working with partners to improve active citizenship

Aims – Maximising involvement by community groups and political groups and political parties to:
- ❖ Promote 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

Suggested performance indicators/measures:
- ❖ Increased attendance by the public at Council, Cabinet and committee meetings
- ❖ Increase number of column inches regarding elections and the need to vote
- ❖ Increase number of public questions at council meetings

Responsible officers:
- ❖ Assistant Director Policy and PR, Democratic Services Manager, Corporate Improvement Officer

Focal point 4 – Registration of electors

Aims – Maximising the number of people registering by:
- ❖ Increasing the % of Form As returned

Responsible officers:
- ❖ Elections and Registration Officer

APPENDIX B: 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

27 November 2003   Overview and Scrutiny (Social and Community)
                              considers the project brief. Key stakeholders views
                              identified, as outlined in the consultation strategy below.

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

29 March 2004   Discuss findings and agree upon key issues, leading to the
                              development of a draft improvement plan with Overview
                              and Scrutiny Committee (Social and Community).

                              Discuss with and propose solutions to the key issues
                              with the Deputy and responsible Group Director.

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
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

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'