

General Purposes Committee

Meeting of held on Monday, 9 October 2023 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,
Katherine Street, Croydon, CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Chair);
Councillors Samir Dwesar, Lara Fish, Joseph Lee and Matt Griffiths

Apologies: Councillors Appu Srinivasan(Vice-Chair), Stella Nabukeera, Patricia Hay-Justice, Karen Jewitt and Fatima Zaman

PART A

19/22 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Appu Srinivasan (Vice-Chair), Stella Nabukeera, Patricia Hay-Justice, Karen Jewitt and Fatima Zaman

Councillor Matt Griffiths attended as reserve for Councillor Stella Nabukeera.

Apologies of lateness were received from Councillor Kola Agboola.

20/22 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were none.

21/22 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.

Councillor Kola Agboola joined the meeting during this item.

22/22 **Proposed Changes to the Constitution Relating to Pension Matters**

The Pension Fund Investment Manager, Matthew Hallet, presented the report which proposed changes to the Constitution relating to pension matters. He informed the committee the changes were recommended by

the Constitution Working Group (CWG) and the proposals were developed in consultation with the Pension Committee, Pension Board and Aon (the pension fund advisers) to improve governance and update the constitution. He advised the committee to recommend the changes to full Council for adoption.

The committee expressed confidence the changes had been subjected to a robust process which involved due diligence performed by officers with the relevant expertise and approval by the Pension Board and Pension Committee.

RESOLVED to recommend the proposed changes in the Constitution relating to pension matters be to Council for adoption.

23/22

Independent Review of the Verification and Count Arrangements for Croydon Council Elections May 2022

The Director of Policy, Programmes & Performance, David Courcoux, presented the report which set out the independent review of the verification and count arrangements for Croydon Council elections. He informed the committee that the report had concluded that the outcome of the verification and count was transparent, safe and secure.

He highlighted the following sections:

Section 5.1 - which stated that the election fulfilled all of the statutory requirements and was an accurate reflection as it was confirmed that no potential candidate was denied the right to stand for office and no voters were disenfranchised by the politically neutral way the election was conducted

Section 5.3 – which acknowledged, at time of the elections, the Council was going through significant challenges and had more ballot papers to count than any other London Borough because of the combination of the Mayoral with other elections. Though the 600 votes difference in the Mayoral elections led to significantly tight processes being employed throughout the counting process, which made the count slower, but this safeguarded the integrity of the outcome and the review found that this was the right thing to do. However, there were lessons to be learned with regards to resource arrangements and the effectiveness of the processes and policies in place.

Section 5.7 which summarised the areas of challenge and improvement for the Council, such as, the planning for the election process, the capacity of the core elections team, the reception arrangements at the count venue, the contingency planning and escalation procedures, and the processes employed in the counting process which added to the delay.

He informed the Committee that the report set out eleven key recommendations which were for change, reiterations of best practice, and some the Council had already adopted and enacted. The action plan at Appendix Two, which was still being developed, set out the Council's intended response to the recommendations, as well as provided detailed updates on the progress to date. The Action Plan was developed by an independent person, the Head of Electoral Services at Sutton Council and she would work closely with the Head of Elections Croydon during the implementation.

The Chief Executive Katherine Kerswell and the Deputy Chief Executive Elaine Jackson, the Director of the Director of Policy, Programmes & Performance, David Courcoux, the Head of Elections Seth Alker, provided answers to the following questions from Members.

In response to a question about an informal response to the review and if officers were confident the action plan would result in significant improvement over 2022, The Chief Executive advised the report had been helpful as a learning experience and had positively impacted the Council's culture around elections and the structure of the electoral service was being redesigned with the understanding that it had to be well resourced to support the delivery of well-run elections. Also the culture around elections was changing to give elections a central position in the council's thinking.

Members asked what lessons had been learnt about logistics of holding elections in Croydon and ensuring that the process was accessible to all. In response, officers explained that the fundamental point was the change to how elections were viewed. The count in particular is viewed as an event that needed to be managed, as well as being a verification and count process. Additional resources were needed so the Returning Officer can have staff with dedicated focus on each aspect and to run them effectively. The Returning Officer was changing the management of the count so that the venue and event management is separated from the management of the count process. Event and project management support was being brought in toto manage the venue for the count.

Members expressed concerns that the issues with the venue used for the 2022 verification and count could repeat next year. Officers explained that the Returning Officer did not have a choice of large suitable venues as other Councils but had rely on School premises which presented a unique set of challenges. However the problems that were identified in 2022 were known and will be addressed at future elections. Some of the challenges of using a school, such as time available for the set-up of the venue, will not be a problem at Fairfield Halls.

Members asked what contingency plan had been put in place in case of another over-run. Officers explained that an extra day had been booked at Fairfield Hall.

In response to the question about lead time for staff training, officers informed the Committee that the Association of Election Administrators would hold a half-day session with the Returning Officers next week and the core Electoral Services team would be trained on the changes brought about by the Election Act. All polling station staff would receive in-person training on the duties, and there would be training count supervisors and assistants.

Members expressed concern that a contractual agreement was not signed with Trinity School last year and asked about the process for feedback from staff at the Count. In response, officers explained that a contract for 2024 elections was already in place with Fairfield Halls and that there was a process in place for feedback from staff and election agents after the count.

The Chair of the committee, Councillor Sean Fitzsimons advised that it be noted that the Committee wished:

- To receive an update, post the Mayor of London GLA elections to enable discussions on further lessons to be learned.
- The data of the 2022 elections be released by ward.
- That it be noted that a good precedent had been set by the Returning Officers acknowledging there were lessons to be learnt and paying for the review by not taking their fees. The report had put the Council on track to meeting the broad goals in the government guidance for Elections.

RESOLVED TO:

1. Note the report of the review of the verification and count arrangements for Croydon Council Elections May 2022 at Appendix 1, in particular its finding that the election was conducted lawfully and that it was transparent, accurate, safe and secure.
2. Note the recommendations of the review in full.
3. Note the action plan for implementing the review recommendations at Appendix 2.
4. Note the progress made against each recommendation since May 2022, as detailed in the action plan at Appendix 2.
5. Note that the Returning Officer and Deputy Returning Officer did not take the RO fees for the May 2022 Election and that the £8k fee for the independent review was paid from that unclaimed RO expenditure.

Process for and Initiation of the Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024-2025

The Head of Elections, Seth Alker, introduced the report which sought for approval for the proposed timetable and processes for the next review, and to delegate authority to the (Acting) Returning Officer (ARO) to amend the timetable as necessary if the next scheduled general election fails to take place in May 2024.

He highlighted the timetable, process, and the criteria for the assessment of polling districts and polling places and informed the committee the recommendations would be presented to the committee for approval.

In response to a question about the location of polling places, the officer explained that the starting point was to try and locate the polling places within the polling district but sometimes it could not be helped if issues such as closure of a venue means the next available polling place may fall out of the polling district.

A Member asked for the number problematic polling places and the decision timeline. The officer explained there were about ten polling places that were being reviewed but not all outcomes were negative. Sometimes the outcome could be positive such an additional polling place in a polling district.

The Chair thanked the Head of Elections for the Report.

RESOLVED TO:

1. Agree the proposed timetable for the next statutory review of polling districts and polling places set out in section 4.2.
2. Agree the criteria for assessment of polling districts and polling places as set out in section 4.5.
3. Agree to the proposed consultation process as set out in Section 6, whilst noting that this is in accordance with the statutory requirements in this regard.
4. Delegate to the (Acting) Returning Officer authority to amend the timetable as necessary if the next scheduled general election, which must take place by January 2025, does not take place in May 2024.
5. Note that this was a statutory process and that the period in which it must take place, and a number of the steps in the review process are set out in legislation. The outcome of the statutory consultation as well as the recommendations arising from the consultation will be reported to members for decision.

The committee adjourned for 5 minutes at this point due to technical issues and reconvened at 7.12pm.

25/22

Implications of The Elections Act 2022

The Committee received the presentation from the Head of Elections which set out the changes to the Elections Act, how they would affect voters, when the changes would take place and how they would be implemented.

He highlighted the following changes:

- Voter ID - electors would be required to show photo ID before voting at a polling station (in force)
- Accessibility - supporting voters with disabilities and an extension to rules for companions (in force)
- First Past the Post (FPTP) - all elections in the UK were now FPTP (in force)
- Absent voting - rules regarding handling and processing absent vote applications (for May 2024 elections)
- Postal & proxy voting at election - electors would be able to apply to vote by post online - existing
- postal voters would need to renew every 3 years under the new rules (October 2023)
- Overseas electors - 15-year rule removed (no upper limit) and registration period extended to 3 years (January 2024)
- EU Citizens' voting and candidacy rights - EU citizens would no longer automatically be entitled to register to vote and stand for election. Two groups of EU citizens will retain rights (June 2024 – 1 Feb 2025).

He advised that most of the changes would be implemented ahead of the Mayor of London and London Assembly elections.

In response to concerns about acceptable forms of ID and IT issues the elderly might encounter during the application for the ID, the officer advised that other acceptable forms of identification were photo IDs, blue badges, identity cards, and bus passes and there was the option for people to apply for a voter authority certificate.

A Member asked about the availability of staff training and officers advised the government was providing funding to train staff in helping to explain about the various forms acceptable ID to voters. Also, the communication team was working on an engagement plan to reach councillors, political parties, and community organisations and MENCAP were developing communication materials for residents with learning difficulties.

In response to a question about an advertising campaign to highlight the change to EU citizens voting and candidacy rights, the officer advised the changes would not take effect until June 2024 and presently, there was no detailed guidance from the government but officers were expecting a campaign from the Electoral Commission before June 2024, which would provide resources that could be used locally to create awareness and highlight this change to Croydon residents from the European Union.

The Chief Executive also advised there would be an all-Member briefing for all Councillors on these changes.

RESOLVED TO: Note the presentation.

26/22

Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting ended at 8.15 pm