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| COMMITTEE: | SCRUTINY |
| DATE: | 8 SEPTEMBER 2003 |
| SUBJECT: | SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOTER TURNOUT |
| REPORT OF: | THE SCRUTINY REVIEW TEAM |
| Ward(s): | ALL |
| Purpose: | To report the findings and recommendations of the Scrutiny Review Team appointed to look at the issue of voter turnout at local elections. |
| Contact: | Peter Finnis, Head of Democratic Services, Telephone 01323 415003 or internally on extension 5003. |
| Recommendations: | To recommend the Council to approve the Action Plan appended to this report. |

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| 1.0 | <u>Introduction</u> |
| 1.1 | This Review was commissioned by the Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 9 June 2003 following a decision by the Council to conduct a Scrutiny Review of voter turnout at local elections. |
| 2.0 | Objectives of the Review |

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| 2.1 | <p>The primary objectives of this Review were previously set by the Council. These are as follows:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To review existing mechanisms and make further proposals on increasing electoral turnout. 2. To make clear recommendations on actions to educate and promote participation in Local Democracy. 3. To review how to make the most effective use of Councillors' time, in particular to look at the balance between engaging the local community and attending Council meetings. 4. To assess and make clear recommendations on the use of Information Technology in Democratic Services. 5. To develop a means of assessing the success of local democracy with particular reference to community participation. |
| 3.0 | Evidence |
| 3.1 | <p>The Review Team looked at comparative turnout figures between Eastbourne and a random selection of other Local Authorities. This included:-</p> <p>(a) Authorities on the same election cycle as Eastbourne (Adur, Elmbridge, Maidstone and Reading).</p> <p>(b) Authorities with</p> |

Gateshead, Lincoln City, North Lincolnshire, Stevenage and Trafford).

(d) Authorities that have undertaken electronic voting and other pilots (Bolton, Newham, Stratford, Swindon and Windsor & Maidenhead).

The key findings from the above research are as follows:-

- In comparison with the 4 Local Authorities on the same election cycle, Eastbourne's turnout was 3rd best in 2000, and best in both 2002 and 2003.**

- In comparison with the 4 Local Authorities on whole Council election cycles, Eastbourne's turnout was 2nd worst in both 1999 and 2003.
- In comparison with the 8 Local Authorities who had conducted all postal vote pilots, Eastbourne's turnout was worst in both 2002 and 2003.
- In comparison with the 5 Local Authorities who had conducted other types of electoral pilots, Eastbourne was 2nd best in both 2002 and 2003.
- In comparison with Adur, Elmbridge and Reading, Eastbourne's budget for conducting the local elections in 2003, calculated on a cost per elector basis, was the lowest by a small margin.

Given the generally high turnouts experienced during the conduct of all postal pilots, the Review Team also examined comparisons in the following Authorities between 2002 or 2003 postal pilots and most recent conventional elections:-

(a) North Lincolnshire – 1999 Conventional 33.0%; 2003 Postal 51.0%.

(b) Lincoln City – 2002 Conventional 26.2%; 2003 Postal 48.0%.

(c) Brighton & hove – 2002 Conventional 37.9%; 2003 Postal 45.9%.

(d) Blackpool – 2001 Conventional 28.8%; 2003 Postal 50.4%.

(e) Chorley – 2003 Conventional 32.0%; 2002 Postal 61.5%.

Three Authorities, namely Stevenage, Gateshead and Trafford conducted all Postal Pilots in both 2002 and 2003. Of the six elections the lowest turnout was 52.2% and the highest was 57.3%.

Finally, the Review Team looked at Eastbourne's 2003 turnout in a national context. From a total of 110 Local Authorities the highest turnout was 55.7% and the lowest was 19%. Eastbourne at 33.6% was 52nd out of 110.

In October 2002, a local survey exploring the issues of voter awareness, motivation and turnout was conducted. This covered all households

A recent national public online poll was conducted by the Municipal Journal to coincide with the LGA Conference in Harrogate. The key statistics reported to the conference were as follows:-

Question – What should be the main role of a Councillor?

- To represent the voters in their wards – 77%.
- To help run the Council as a whole – 19%.
- Don't Know – 4%.

Question – Which would be better for local services?

- Local Government run by Managers – 20%.
- Local Government run by elected Councillors – 67%.
- Don't Know – 14%.

Question – Is it better for Councillors to come from major political parties?

- Councillors should continue to come from major parties – 32%.
- Councillors should not belong to major parties – 54%.
- Don't Know – 15%.

Question – Do you think Councillors are honest and trustworthy?

- Yes – 35%.
- No – 32%.
- Don't Know – 33%.

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| 4.0 | Potential Initiatives |
| 4.1 | <p>The Review Team considered the merits of the following internal initiatives to try and help electoral awareness and motivation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Additional advertising ahead of local elections. · Sending birthday cards with electoral information to attainers on the electoral register. · Using Council Tax information to seek out and contact new residents in a pro-active way for inclusion on the register. · Feedback from political groups in respect of new and/or improved activities and considering where officer assistance may be appropriate. · The merits of all postal elections. · Support and lobby for a change to whole Council elections on a 4-yearly basis. <p>Further details of the discussions on various issues are set out in the following paragraphs. The Action Plan arising from this process is attached at appendix 2 to this report.</p> |
| 5.0 | <u>Electoral Cycles</u> |
| 5.1 | <p>The Review Team noted that the issue of electoral cycles is currently the subject of consultation by the Electoral Commission. Having regard to the difficulty members experience in long-term planning against the backdrop of annual elections and the fact that this is specifically referred to in the Council's CPA Peer Challenge Report, the Review Team supports the move towards 4-yearly whole Council elections.</p> |

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| 6.0 | <u>Postal Elections</u> |
| 6.1 | The Review Team fully acknowledges the demonstrably larger turnouts that have been achieved through all-postal pilots. However, real concerns remain in respect of current security issues and the cumbersome administrative procedures required by existing legislation. It is considered that these concerns outweigh the merits at this time. Should these concerns be overcome by future legislative changes it may be possible to support all-postal elections. |
| 6.2 | The Review Team was advised that, in order to carry out a current all-postal election to the same standard as the current traditional election, a budget of around £75,000 (as opposed to current spend of £45,500) would be necessary. This estimate together with a comparison with existing costs is fully broken down in appendix 1 to this report for information. |
| 6.3 | Notwithstanding the concerns raised in respect of all-postal elections, the Review Team felt that the facility for postal votes on request should be promoted as widely as possible. Also, if future changes in the legislation allow, the provision of one-stop-shop voting at supermarkets would be welcomed. This would only work if there was an IT link to the whole electoral register from the voting site or if it were a manual early voting station made available over several days. |
| 6.4 | The Review Team was keen to emphasise that any future fundamental change in the election process would require significant adaptation by the political parties. Also, any new election process must preserve a defined election day and/or common deadline for close of poll and result declaration. |

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| 7.0 | <u>Proxy Voting</u> |
| 7.1 | <p>The Review Team raised concerns in respect of the procedures for Proxy Voting. The following information may assist here:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Proxies have to vote at the polling station allocated to the elector on behalf of whom they are voting. If they cannot attend, they can apply to vote by post as proxy and must meet the same deadlines as any postal voter. · An elector who has appointed a proxy can vote in person provided that the proxy has not voted already. However, if the proxy has |

been appointed and provide the name and address of the proxy and the duration of the appointment.

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| 8.0 | <u>Councillor Activity</u> |
| 8.1 | <p>The Review Team was strongly of the opinion that the issue of motivating people to vote is a matter primarily for the political parties and candidates to address and, in doing so, particular regard must be taken of both the local and national statistical information summarised within this report. It was felt that, whilst officers may be able to help in certain aspects, eg. training and promotion, many opportunities are already in place for members to respond to the desire for better community engagement and embracing of local issues. On balance, it was considered that for officers to assist in constituency based matters may be difficult given the need to retain impartiality and having regard to the varying needs of different Councillors. Also, this would raise significant staffing resource issues.</p> |
| 8.2 | <p>The Review Team was particularly concerned that members had not yet used the Scrutiny process in as pro-active a way as that allowed by the Council's Constitution although it was noted that there is impending training to come on this matter. It was considered crucial that members embrace the spirit of Scrutiny as defined by the legislation and the Council's Constitution and that, so far as the reality of politics allow, this should extend to the overall conduct and performance of full Council meetings. The Review Team did discuss the merits of re-working the procedures of full Council but came to no firm conclusion on this issue.</p> |
| 9.0 | <u>Internal Activity</u> |
| 9.1 | <p>The Review Team noted the current service levels provided in respect of Member Support, Electoral Registration and conduct of Elections. Some suggestions were made in respect of helping to promote elections and members generally and these are set out on the attached Action Plan.</p> |
| 10.0 | Consultations |

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| 10.1 | As referred to in paragraph 3 above, comparable electoral data was obtained from a total of 21 Local Authorities. Also, the October 2002 Voter Turnout Research Survey was sent to every household in the Borough and subject to personal contact by Democratic Services staff in the Town Centre during Local Democracy Week. A total of 9007 responses were received. The key outcomes of the residents survey were the subject of a full page feature in the Eastbourne Herald in November 2002. Internally, the Members appointed to this Review Team have consulted with their political groups and fed back the issues raised. |
| 11.0 | <u>Implications</u> |
| 11.1 | Clearly, initiatives involving additional internal resources will need to be the subject of financial growth bids, redirection of existing funding or redirection of staff duties as appropriate. These are set out on the attached action plan. |
| 12.0 | <u>Summary</u> |
| 12.1 | <p>The Review Team concluded that the Council's internal infrastructure towards member support, the conduct of elections and the administration of the electoral register was appropriate and of good quality. However, it is quite evident from the statistical data set out in this report that the following issues are the key ones to address:-</p> <p>(a) All Postal elections are demonstrably by far the most successful in terms of overall voter turnout.</p> <p>(b) Holding elections every 4 years may generally improve turnout and helps considerably in long term planning and reducing the political impact.</p> <p>(c) There is a huge image problem in respect of local councillors and their activities. The issues of overt politics, constituency roles and voter trust must be addressed at member level.</p> <p>In specifically addressing the objectives set out in paragraph 2 of this report, the Review Team is proposing measures as set out on the attached Action Plan.</p> |

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| Councillor Leggett | Councillor Mrs Murray |
| Liberal Democrat Group | Conservative Group |
| Peter Finnis | Tracey Pannett |
| Head of Democratic Services | Electoral Services Manager |
| David Robinson | |
| Member Services Manager | |
| Background Papers: | |
| 1. Full Statistical Data of Comparisons with other Local Authorities. 2. Full Statistical Data of October 2002 Residents Survey on Voter Turnout. 3. Report Feature in the Eastbourne Herald of 15 November 2002. 4. Municipal Journal Survey Results – July 2003. | |
| (scrutiny/09-07-2003/voter turnout) | |

APPENDIX 1

COST COMPARISON – ORDINARY VERSUS ALL POSTAL ELECTION

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| A. | <u>Cost of Ordinary Borough Council Election:</u> | | |
| | (based on 2003 prices) | | |
| | | | |
| 1. | Polling Stations | £ | £ |
| | Hire of venues | 3,620 | |
| | Staffing | 8,800 | |
| | Booths and notices (delivery and annual storage, maintenance, replacement and insurance) | 2,800 | |

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| | | Other equipment costs | 200 | |
| | | Transport and telephones | 120 | |
| | | Sub Total | | 15,340 |
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| 2. | Poll Cards (for 67,632 electors) | | | |
| | | Print | 1,500 | |
| | | Postage | 10,700 | |
| | | | | 12,200 |
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| 3. | Postal Votes (for 6,335 electors) | | | |
| | | Stationery | 2,500 | |
| | | Outgoing postage | 1,800 | |
| | | Return postage | 1,230 | |
| | | Staff costs and fees | 1,500 | |
| | | | | 7,030 |
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| 4. | Ballot Papers: | | | 3,500 |
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| 5. | Count: | | | |
| | | Staffing | 3,000 | |
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|----|--|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | Equipment | 250 | |
| | | Venue hire (Assembly Hall) | nil | |
| | | | | 3,250 |
| 6. | Other Costs: | | | |
| | | Internal print costs | 820 | |
| | | Other postage costs | 50 | |
| | | | | 870 |
| 7. | Other Staff costs: (Returning Officer, deputies, admin & clerical fees) | | | 3,500 |
| | | | TOTAL: | 45,690 |
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| B. | <u>Cost of All-Postal Borough Council Election:</u> | | | |
| | (based on 2003 prices) | | | |
| 1. | Pre-election letter (see note 1) | | | £ |
| | Options: | (a) | Posted to all households | 8,800 |
| | | | | OR |
| | | (b) | Posted to all electors | 12,200 |
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| 2. | Postal Votes (see note 2 below): | £ | |
| | Stationery | 21,000 | |
| | Outgoing postage | 19,300 | |
| | Return postage | 10,600 | |
| | Staff costs and fees | 14,000 | |
| | | | 64,900 |
| 3. | Ballot Papers (see note 2 below): | | 3,500 |
| 4. | Count | | 3,250 |
| 5. | Other Costs | | 500 |
| 6. | Fees | | 3,500 |
| | | TOTAL (exc item 1): | 75,650 |

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| <p>Notes:</p> | <p>(1) A letter or leaflet could be distributed by other means (e.g. via Advertiser) at less cost. Alternative publicity methods such as newspaper and other media advertising are also possible. Purpose of such advertising would be to raise awareness of election, promote voter registration before deadline and generally encourage voting.</p> <p>(2) These costs are based on using existing method of despatch involving staff inserting ballot paper and return mailer into outgoing mailer, however, a reformed postal voting procedure should allow for the whole despatch process to be mechanised with ballot paper being printed as part of the "package". This should reduce overall cost by several thousand pounds. A "guesstimate" at this stage suggests a saving of c.£5,000 bringing the total cost of an all-postal election to c.£70,000 but without allowing for the pre-election advisory letter/advertising.</p> |
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APPENDIX 2

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOTER TURNOUT

ACTION PLAN

| OBJECTIVE 1. To review existing mechanisms and make further proposals on | | | increasing turnout |
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| ACTION | RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S) | <u>BUDGET ISSUES</u> | <u>TIMESCALE</u> |
| Provide additional advertising material promoting rolling registration, forthcoming elections and the facility for postal votes on request | Head of Democratic Services | Requires financial growth of £1000 | From April 2004 subject to growth bid |
| Respond to Electoral Commission consultation in favour of moving to 4-yearly whole Council elections | Head of Democratic Services | None | By October 2003 deadline |

| OBJECTIVE 2. To recommend on actions to educate & promote participation in local democracy | | | |
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| ACTION | RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S) | <u>BUDGET ISSUES</u> | <u>TIMESCALE</u> |
| Sending birthday cards to coming-of-age voters explaining the democratic process and the importance of participation | Head of Democratic Services | Requires financial growth of £500 | From April 2004 subject to growth bid |
| Provision of PR & Media handling training for members | Head of Communications | To be funded from the Member Training Budget | Within the current financial year |

| OBJECTIVE 3. To review how to balance Councillors' time effectively between community engagement and Council meetings | | | |
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| ACTION | RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S) | <u>BUDGET ISSUES</u> | <u>TIMESCALE</u> |
| Members to re-evaluate their roles having regard to the statistical evidence and guided by the statement of Councillors Roles & Responsibilities set out in Part 3 of the Council's Constitution | All elected Members | None | With immediate effect |

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| <p>More member-led focus on relevant outward looking community based issues of significance and maximising community engagement in particular through Council meetings and the Scrutiny process, using opportunities already provided in the Council's Constitution</p> | <p>All elected Members in liaison with the Head of Democratic Services</p> | <p>None</p> | <p>On-going</p> |
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| OBJECTIVE 4. To assess and make recommendations on the use of IT | | | |
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| ACTION | RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S) | <u>BUDGET ISSUES</u> | <u>TIMESCALE</u> |
| <p>Create full Councillor biographies for placement on the Council's web site</p> | <p>Head of Democratic Services & Head of IT</p> | <p>None</p> | <p>With immediate effect but subject to full co-operation by all Councillors in giving details</p> |

| OBJECTIVE 5. To develop means of assessing success in local democracy and community participation | | | |
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| ACTION | RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S) | <u>BUDGET ISSUES</u> | <u>TIMESCALE</u> |
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| Turnout figures from elections and response statistics to formal consultations particularly noting those from hard to reach groups | Head of Democratic Services and Consultation Officer | None | On-going |
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