

Report of the Electoral Turnout Scrutiny Panel **B**

OSC/77

Overview and Scrutiny Commission
Tuesday 25 March 2008

General Purposes
Monday 30 June 2008

Report by the Chair of the Electoral Turnout Scrutiny Panel:
Councillor C C Lloyd,

Other Members on the Panel: Councillors A G Brown,
L A M Burke, C A Cheshire, A C W Crane, M T Head and
D P Kavanagh.

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Key Points:

1. This review recommends a range of new initiatives aimed at improving electoral registration and turnout in Crawley.
2. Some recommendations can be implemented in the near future within existing resources:-
 - A wrap around for the Crawley News prior to the May 2008 election
 - The establishment of an Elections Forum
 - Prominent publicity on front page of CBC website in run up to election
 - Recruitment of additional canvassers
 - Development of better connections with schools, colleges and Crawley Young Persons Council.

3. Other recommendations can be implemented in the longer term either within existing resources or subject to the approval of a growth bid as part of next year's budget process. Those likely to require a growth bid are indicated:-
 - Voters' guide for 18 year olds, new citizens and other new electors
 - Enclosure of elections publicity with other communications that the Council sends to every household
 - Placing poll cards in envelopes and including other elections publicity (growth bid)
 - Lamp post banners (growth bid)
 - Cinema advertisements (growth bid)
 - Bespoke press campaign (growth bid)

4. The following matters were considered but are not recommended:-
 - Advertisements on buses
 - Flyers in with the newspaper

5. The Panel were interested in the idea of sending a letter of confirmation of registration to all electors but the cost was considered prohibitive. This could be reconsidered at a later date if other lower cost options proved to be ineffective.

Section 1 – Short Introduction

- 1.1 The Commission, at its meeting on 9 July 2007, agreed to establish a Scrutiny Panel to undertake a review on improving Electoral Turnout and Voter Registration. The justification for this scrutiny review was that concerns had been raised over the historically low voter turnout in Crawley.
- 1.2 The Panel was set a tight timescale for the review, January 2008 – March 2008. The period selected was determined by the window between the end of annual electoral registration period in December and the commencement of the intense period of preparation in the run up to the local Council Elections in May.
- 1.3 The time frame set would also allow some of the Panel's recommendations that did not require formal approval by the General Purposes Committee to be put in place for the May elections.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Commission is asked to consider the report and accept or amend any of the recommendations as appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The General Purposes Committee is requested to approve the report and recommendations as endorsed or amended by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission. *(Please note that this version of the report includes the changes made by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 25 March 2008)*

Section 2 – Information Gathering

- 2.1 It was acknowledged by the Panel at the start of its investigation that the issue of dwindling voter turnout was of national concern and that many reports and examinations into this subject had been produced, both from a governmental and an academic perspective. With this in mind, the Panel examined a range of background information to help inform the review. The Panel received:
 - Local Elections 2006: *Report to the Electoral Commission* by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth
 - 2007 Post-election survey – Local Elections in England: *Report to the Electoral Commission* by Colin Rallings and Michael Trasher, LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth.
 - 2006 Local Elections : Public Opinion by the Electoral Commission
 - Electoral Registration and Turnout in Local Government, October 2006, by Rotherham Metropolitan Council Scrutiny Panel.
- 2.2 The above report by Rotherham Metropolitan Council Scrutiny Panel (RMCSPP), related to a similar scrutiny review of voter turnout.
- 2.3 The data collected by RMCSPP provided a lot of the information that the Panel required.
- 2.4 Members also received a breakdown by ward of the voter turnout in Crawley since 2000.

- 2.5 Through examining the research, the Panel concluded that people were more likely to vote if they knew what they were voting for, (understanding the impact on the Council) and if they believed that their vote would make a difference to the issues that they cared about.
- 2.6 The Panel discussed the possibility of undertaking some local research on why many Crawley residents do not vote and whether their summation was correct. This option was declined as it was felt that local research would not provide any additional information to the national research the Panel had examined.
- 2.7 The Panel considered that it would be helpful to invite an Elections Officer as a witness from one of the three electoral services beacon authorities. The Panel could then consider whether any of the approaches used by a beacon authority might be beneficial for Crawley.

Section 3 – Witness Section and Good Practice Techniques

- 3.1 The Panel invited the Electoral Services Manager from the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) Steve Millar to speak on the techniques he used to improve electoral turnout and voter registration.
- 3.2 Steve Millar emphasised to the Panel that at LBHF, the Electoral Services Division focuses mainly on improving electoral registration, rather than voter turnout.
- 3.3 At LBHF it was considered that improving voter turnout was the responsibility of the political parties. Their role was to engage with the public and to persuade them that it was in their best interests to vote. His Electoral Services team ensures that the electoral register is as complete and accurate as possible, which allows the political parties the greatest opportunity to encourage the potential voters to vote.
- 3.4 The electoral registration in LBHF was at 97.5%. This was the highest in London.
- 3.5 The key techniques used to achieve such a high registration, included:
 - Annual registration forms and reminders delivered by canvassers.
 - LBHF sent out several registration reminders each year.
 - Financial payments to canvassers based on a sliding scale – (All houses must be visited on a minimum of 3 occasions, including delivery of the registration forms). Canvassers received 20p per registration and must have a minimum of 60% success rate, to receive any payment, rising to £3.50 for 100% success.
 - Have over 170 canvassers on their books, of which only 100 are Council employees.
 - Have an ‘Active Citizen programme’ to encourage non Council staff to be canvassers
 - Split wards into small areas for canvassing processes, approximate 200 properties per area.
 - Canvassers are split into teams to cover their areas. The team at the end with the highest success rate receives £1,000 incentive, to split between the team.
 - Active rolling registration – with canvassers receiving a £50 retainer and then £2 per signature.
 - Electoral Registration forms are on the LBFH Website

- Sends out a letter to every household in February confirming who from that property was registered on the electoral register and included a registration form.

3.6 Steve Millar informed the Panel of other methods he used at LBHF to improve and enhance the electoral process:-

- Produces a voter guide to all residents explaining what happens at the polling station and what information they will be receiving. They also produce postal vote guides.
- These guides are on the Council website and are published in the Council magazine, before the election.
- Sending out poll cards on the weekend before the election in an envelope, rather than just the poll card itself.
- LBHF only use consistent sustainable approaches to electoral registration not one off advertising campaigns.
- LBHF heavily train all people who work on the electoral process - canvassers, poll clerks, presiding officers etc as the election is the single biggest interaction of the public with the Council. The Election therefore was seen corporately as an occasion to demonstrate the highest possible level of public service.
- Election Forum (non political) – made up of representatives from all political parties (agents, whip etc), electoral officers and the Returning Officer to discuss all aspects of electoral services to ensure all party political support for any changes on electoral process.
- Link of internal data sources – LBHF linked their electoral systems, with benefits, council tax, parking etc to ensure all records throughout the Council are consistent. The system would tell Electoral Services if a new resident has registered for Council tax, so that they could send them a voter registration form and visa versa.

3.7 Steve Millar emphasised that the most important factor to the London Borough Hammersmith and Fulham success was support, both corporately and politically, from all parties.

3.8 Members were also provided with details of other good practice ideas used at others authorities as recommended by the Electoral Commission: -

- Annual confirmation of registration sent to all households.
- Forms available in different languages
- Promotion of registration outside annual canvass period.
- All year round canvass
- Sending households a general voter's guide and information on absent voting
- Providing an "am I registered?" on-line enquiry service
- Obtaining names and addresses of newly naturalised British citizens
- Send poll cards in envelopes

Section 4 – Publicity for the May 2008 Elections

- 4.1 Following their examination of the background information, the Panel expressed concern over the current levels of voter turnout within the town. The Panel felt that a short publicity campaign for the upcoming election might help increase the potential turnout and help registration.
- 4.2 The Panel was informed that Electoral Services had a limited publicity budget. It was noted that the Electoral Services Manager could arrange to use the current budgetary provision on publicity for the May 08 elections in whatever manner that the Panel felt would be most effective, but that any initiatives that the panel wished to recommend that would require additional budgetary provision would (unless thought sufficiently urgent to justify asking the Executive to approve a supplementary revenue estimate) need to be included in a growth bid to the Budget Advisory Group as part of the budget making process for 2009/10.
- 4.3 The Panel commented that whatever techniques and designs were used to promote the forthcoming election should be consistently used over the next few years.
- 4.4 The Panel were provided with information on various publicity techniques that could or had been used to promote elections. These included
- Producing a bespoke press campaign
 - Using existing LGA Marketing Campaigns and adapting them.
 - Lamp-post banners
 - Crawley News Wraps
 - Advertisements on the side of buses
 - Flyers inserted within local papers
 - Cinema advertisement campaign
 - SMS (Text) Messaging
 - Front Page of Crawley Borough Council's Website
- 4.5 The Panel judged the different marketing methods according to which would have the most impact and be effective in attracting the public to vote, compared to its cost.
- 4.6 They also considered which publicity techniques should put in place for the May 2008 election and whether there were others that could be used in the future.

Section 5 – Recommendations

- 5.1 After examining the information acquired during the review, the Panel decided to split its recommendations into three sections, Internal Process, Short Term (publicity for the May 2008 elections) and Medium to Longer Term.
- 5.2 *INTERNAL PROCESSES*

RECOMMENDATION 3

That improved communication occurs between Electoral Services, Benefits and Council Tax, with regard to sharing information on new properties and new residents.

Comment on Recommendation 3 – Although the system would not be as sophisticated as that operated by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham who use expensive bespoke software, it was thought that extending existing information sharing systems could provide benefits within current resources.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the Electoral Services Manager seeks to recruit additional canvassers for door knocking who have the right skills to obtain good results

Comment on Recommendation 4 – The panel considered the approach adopted by LBHF which involved recruiting from the local community (i.e. not just Council staff) and paying significantly higher rates for obtaining good results. It was acknowledged that CBC could not afford to spend anywhere near as much as LBHF and some panel members questioned whether higher payments ran the risk of results being “invented”. It was concluded that the most effective method for CBC was for the Electoral Services Manager to operate within existing resources but select people who had the type of skills most likely to get good results.

5.3 *SHORT TERM (PUBLICITY FOR THE MAY 2008 ELECTIONS)*

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the decision to arrange a wrap around for the Crawley News publicising the election to appear a week before the election, be noted.

Comment on Recommendation 5 – This was something that could easily be done within current resources and without further member level approval in time for the May 08 election and would hopefully be seen by most electors. Whilst the Panel were content to leave it to officers to settle the detail of the publicity, it was suggested that this might incorporate some of the LGA poster material and a simple graphic guide to voting. To reduce costs, it may be possible to share the publicity wrap with another Council service.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That the front page of the Council’s Website be used in the run up to the election each year to publicise all aspects of the election and encourage people to vote

Comment on Recommendation 6 – Thought to be a low cost but effective option.

5.4 *MEDIUM TO LONGER TERM*

RECOMMENDATION 7

That an informal Elections Forum be established to include councillors, officers, local political agents representing those political parties currently represented on the Council and also some local community leaders.

Comment on Recommendation 7 – This could be a useful forum for officers to use as a sounding board, to discuss proposed new initiatives, to later review their effectiveness and to increase understanding of electoral processes.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That a Voters' Guide be produced and sent to new electors under rolling registration, to 18 year old attainers and to those who have just become British Citizens. Copies of this guide also to be placed on the Council's website and in Crawley Live and made available at the Town Hall.

Comment on Recommendation 8 – Whilst ideally it would be good to provide a voting guide for all electors this could be prohibitively expensive. This suggested compromise represents a more affordable option which would target new electors. 18-year-old attainers already receive a letter from the Chief Executive on their birthday; the voting guide could be enclosed with the letter.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That the question of undertaking a confirmation of registration should not be pursued at this stage on the grounds of cost, but that this option might be reconsidered at a later date if other, more affordable initiatives, proved to be ineffective.

Comment on Recommendation 9 – LBHF had found that sending a confirmation of registration to all households in February had proved to be an effective way of maintaining the accuracy of the register in the run up to an election. However, this would cost around £10 – 12k and could not be achieved within existing resources.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That officers take advantage of opportunities to communicate with electors at lower cost by enclosing additional publicity in communications that the Council is already sending to every household e.g. the annual Council Tax demand.

Comment on Recommendation 10 – This would be a way of reducing the cost of reaching all electors and could be used as a way of publicising the May election.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That Officers and Members make better connections with local schools and colleges and the Crawley Young Persons Council as a way of promoting registration and voting.

Comment on Recommendation 11 – Thought to be an effective way of reaching young people.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That consideration be given to placing poll cards in envelopes, enclosing other election publicity such as the voters' guide, and that, if necessary, a growth bid to cover the cost of this initiative be made to the Budget Advisory Group.

Comment on Recommendation 12 – The cost of enclosing poll cards in envelopes and the cost of including in the envelope, for example, a guide to voting, would be tabled at the Commission.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That further detailed costings be obtained for the following publicity methods and that, if necessary, a growth bid to cover the cost of these initiatives be made to the Budget Advisory Group:-

- ◆ **Lamp post banners**
- ◆ **Cinema advertisements (*As used previously for an Amenities Services campaign to promote recycling*)**
- ◆ **Bespoke Press Campaign**

Comment on Recommendation 13 – The above were thought to be good publicity methods if they are affordable.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the following suggestions should not be further pursued:-

- ◆ **Advertisements on Buses**
- ◆ **Flyers**

Comment on Recommendation 14 – The Council has used bus sides in previous years but has no evidence that the campaign was particularly successful. Furthermore, routes to which individual vehicles are allocated change on a daily basis, so there is no guarantee that the adverts will appear just within the Town. Flyers were thought to be ineffective as they are likely to be treated as junk mail.

Section 6 – Panel: Membership and Attendance

- 6.1 The Electoral Turnout Scrutiny Panel comprises Councillors C C Lloyd (Chair), A G Brown, L A M Burke, C A Cheshire, A C W Crane, M T Head and D P Kavanagh
- 6.2 The meetings of, and attendance at, the panel, were as follows:
- i) **8 January 2008** (Panel Meeting)- Attended by Councillors C C Lloyd, L A M Burke, A C W Crane, M T Head and D P Kavanagh.
 - ii) **24 January 2008** (Panel Meeting)- Attended by Councillors C C Lloyd, A G Brown, L A M Burke, C A Cheshire and A C W Crane.
 - iii) **12 February 2008** (Panel Meeting)- Attended by Councillors C C Lloyd, A G Brown, L A M Burke, C A Cheshire, A C W Crane and M T Head
 - iv) **3 March 2008** (Panel Meeting)- Attended by Councillors C C Lloyd (Chair), A G Brown, L A M Burke, C A Cheshire, A C W Crane, M T Head and D P Kavanagh

Section 7 – Background Papers

- 7.1 Agendas, reports and minutes for meetings of the Electoral Turnout Scrutiny Panels held on 8 January, 24 January, 12 February and 3 March 2008.

ENDS