

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 11th November, 2016

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Attwood (Deputy Chairperson) (in the chair);
The High Sheriff, Alderman Rodgers;
Alderman Convery; and
Councillors Graham, Hargey, Jones, O'Donnell,
Reynolds and Walsh.

Also Attended: Councillors Dudgeon and Spence.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, Town Solicitor;
Mr. S. McCrory, Democratic Services Manager; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies for inability to attend were reported.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland

In accordance with its decision of 23rd September, the Committee was advised that Mr. Graham Shields, Chief Electoral Officer, was in attendance to address the Committee on proposals to close regional electoral offices and the future plans for electoral services.

Mr. Shields reminded the Members that there was currently a public consultation document in circulation from the Northern Ireland Office entitled "Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland" which had been issued on 12th October, with the closing date for receipt of responses being 9th January, 2017.

He advised the Members that there were three main drivers for change. Firstly, the use of technology and the introduction of a digitised registration system. The Electoral Office was currently developing an online registration service for Northern Ireland, a system which had been introduced into Great Britain in 2014. The experience there was that it had worked extremely well, with in excess of 90% of all new registration applications being done online. The new Northern Ireland system would go live in 2017 and it was expected to have a substantial impact on the working practices of the Electoral Office. It would significantly reduce the paperwork currently associated with the registration process, with an expected take up in the use of the new system to be similar to that in Great Britain and, consequently, over a short period of time lead to a big reduction in the amount of manual processing required.

The online process would also make the registration process much more convenient and straight forward for electors who would be able to use a range of electronic devices to register within approximately three minutes.

The second driver for change would also give a greater role potentially to local councils in the delivery of the electoral process. There was a general desire to see the electoral process consistent with that which occurred in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This would be achieved by giving local councils a greater role in the electoral process. The Electoral Office was the main repository for electoral knowledge in Northern Ireland and would continue to be so, but it was a small organisation and it had limited resources. He explained that a greater involvement of council staff would enhance the resilience of the electoral process by substantially increasing the number of experienced individuals who could assist with the running of future elections.

The third driver for change was the sustainability of the Electoral Office, that being the financial sustainability of the organisation. The Chief Electoral Officer pointed out that, like most other parts of the public sector, the electoral office had been subject to austerity measures and budget cuts. For example, the organisation's budget had been reduced from £2.6 million in 2010/11 to just over £2 million in the current year and it was expected to continue to fall in the current spending review period until 2019/20 when it would be £1.85 million. Therefore, changes to the operating structure of the Electoral Office were required in order to put it on a sustainable financial footing in the longer term. The Chief Electoral Officer stated that things needed to change and that the Electoral Office could not continue to deliver the service in the way it was done currently into the future without changing its practices.

He referred again to the consultation process and indicated that the outcome was expected to be known by the end of January or early February, 2017 and encouraged the Council to make a submission to the Northern Ireland Office on such an important issue.

The Consultation paper described how councils could potentially play a bigger role to support the Electoral Office by assisting in the delivery of elections, in the provision of limited counter services in some council headquarters, but not Belfast, and in the provision of accommodation for electoral office staff at a limited number of council premises outside Belfast.

He explained, in relation to election delivery, those changes could entail councils playing a greater role in assisting the Electoral Office to run elections in Northern Ireland. It could mean that council staff, who currently undertook a series of statutory roles in respect of local council elections, could take on similar responsibilities in future Northern Ireland Assembly and UK parliamentary elections, such as processing nomination forms and taking responsibility for the running of counts. He emphasised that the Electoral Office would retain responsibility for polling day arrangements and the staffing of polling stations. The Chief Electoral Officer would retain overall responsibility for the effective delivery of the process.

He then referred to the counter services which could be provided by councils outside of Belfast and elaborated on what would be required, such as assisting with the completion of electoral registration. He referred also to the issue of the provision of council accommodation for staff and stressed again that this was not an issue which would affect Belfast City Council.

Finally, in relation to financial costs and the concern of Members about any additional costs on the rate payers of Belfast, he stated that any reasonable costs associated with assisting in the delivery of elections would be charged to the relevant election account so that it would not impose an additional financial cost on the Council.

The Chief Electoral Officer then answered a number of questions from the Members in relation to staffing, Trade Union involvement, funding of elections and potential electoral registration fraud.

The Deputy Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked Mr. Shields for his presentation.

After discussion, the Committee agreed that officers prepare a corporate response to the Northern Ireland Office's consultation the Future Delivery of Electoral Services in Northern Ireland and that it be submitted, in the first instance, to a Party Leaders meeting prior to submission to the Committee.

Chairperson