

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERS SERVICES SCRUTINY
STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 3 JULY 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1
AT 7.30 - 9.35 PM**

Members Present:	R Morgan (Chairman), M Cohen (Vice-Chairman), Mrs P Brooks, R Church, M Colling, R D'Souza, Mrs A Haigh, J Markham, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs P Smith and Mrs L Wagland
Other members present:	Councillor Mrs D Borton, Mrs D Collins, D Jacobs, D Kelly, P McMillan, Mrs C Pond, B Sandler, D Stallan, Ms S Stavrou and Mrs J H Whitehouse
Apologies for Absence:	J Demetriou
Officers Present	I Willett (Head of Research and Democratic Services), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), P Seager (Chairmans Secretary), W MacLeod (Elections Officer) and Z Folley (Democratic Services Assistant)
Also in attendance:	(none)

10. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Noted.

11. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

Noted that Councillor M Colling was attending the meeting as a substitute for Councillor J Demetriou.

12. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interests were made pursuant to the Member Code of Conduct.

13. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

Noted.

14. MAY 2006 ELECTIONS

The Head of Research and Democratic Services presented a report reviewing the May 2006 local elections. This covered the electronic electoral pilot, turnout, polling stations, postal votes, spoilt ballot papers, police liaison, complaints the count and budget issues.

(a) Ballot Papers

In relation to paragraph 21 (Spoilt Papers) it was clarified that around 20 papers were rejected at the election as they did not bear the official stamp. A Member urged that performance be improved in this area.

(b) Count

The Panel expressed views on arrangements for the count for future elections.

Support was expressed for a larger venue and a centralised count. It was requested that refreshments be on sale at future counts. **Agreed** that further comments on this be submitted to the Returning Officer.

The Elections Officer advised that the emerging Electoral Administration Bill would introduce a new identification procedure for postal and proxy votes to be carried out at the count possible using a manual method or a computerised system. This was a further factor that should be borne in mind when determining count arrangements and could possibly require a larger venue.

In relation to paragraph 30 (venue for the count) a Member expressed dissatisfaction over the communication arrangements at Theydon Bois Village Hall. It was requested that steps be taken to ensure that those in the side hall were kept informed about announcements and results through signage. The Returning Officer undertook to take this up.

It was suggested that the policy restricting candidates guests to partners only at the count be relaxed. Reported that this was electoral law which the Council was powerless to change and must adhere to.

(c) Postal Votes

Reference was made to a past system in which details of permanent postal voters were made available at an early stage. It was suggested that information on this could be obtained from other authorities.

(d) Poll Cards

A Member requested that the circulation arrangements for poll cards be looked at to ensure all registered voters received one. He reported on incidences of non – receipt in North Weald. A Member stated that similar complaints were also made in Shelly Ongar. It was agreed that these discrepancies be looked into and that any other occurrences be reported back. It was suggested that steps be taken to ensure voters were aware that they could still vote without a card.

It was suggested that information be placed in the Forester and the local Guardian Newspaper detailing wards up for/ not up for election at each forthcoming election.

The Returning Officer undertook to take these issues up.

(e) Polling Stations

In relation to alternative venues, a Member stated that the Community Centre at Saxon Way in Waltham Abbey was an unsuitable alternative to the Breach Barns portacabin as it was not serviced by the local bus route and suggested that the Town Hall be looked at as a possible alternative. Also suggested that the Boat Club in old Nazeing be considered as a station venue. Officers welcomed proposals regarding other alternative locations.

(f) Pilots

The Panel noted and supported action to recover the costs incurred by the aborted electronic aspects of the pilot and steps to facilitate this.

A Member referred to successful past pilots and was of the view that the Council should give careful consideration to participating in them in the future. Consideration was given to possible conditions for this.

(g) Budget

The Panel noted the reasons for the budget overspend for 2006/07 arising from the unforeseen staffing costs incurred from the aborted election and the difficulties in trying to estimate costs. The Panel noted that the Returning Officer would seek approval for a supplementary estimate to cover this. A report would be submitted to the Cabinet.

The Panel also noted the action to budget on a different basis in the future to estimate afresh the election budget each year rather than provision by inflation.

15. REVIEW OF CIVIC CEREMONIAL - SCOPING

The Panel were asked to consider the scope of the review to be carried out on the civic ceremonial.

The Panel were advised that any budgetary proposals would need to be prepared and submitted by September 2006 to be considered for the 2007/08 budget.

Several past Chairmen in attendance reported on their experience in office. The 2005/06 Chairman, Councillor B Sandler, reported on practices elsewhere suggesting that consideration was given to increasing the civic car budget possible to cover all events, staffing support and the custody arrangements for the chain of office and other civic regalia.

Past Chairman Councillor R Morgan suggested that consideration could be given to the budget for the Vice – Chairman, some increases to the car budget possible through a relocation of existing resources and the provision of a safe at the Civic Offices for civic regalia.

Past Chairman Councillor D Kelly reported his views. Councillor Mrs S Stavrou, the current Vice – Chairman of Waltham Abbey Town Council reported on the expenses she had personally incurred to support her work.

The current Chairman Mrs A Haigh expressed a wish to see the function used to promote particular issues from a non political position for example women's involvement in voting.

It was suggested that consideration be given to transferring funding away from the Council meeting refreshments budget funded through the Civic Budget to cover some of the areas possible more in need in the budget.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer highlighted a number of possible areas for consideration as part of the review such as:

(a) exploring the nature of the current provision to identify whether it was spent effectively,

- (b) officer support especially at events
- (c) a criteria to determine use of the civic car

Agreed that a Portfolio of information be gathered on the following:

- (a) the current Chairman's budget
- (b) historic information on support for civic events
- (c) the provision allocated to the Civic role at similar sized Councils in Essex.

It was also proposed that the taxation arrangements for the Chairman's allowance be looked into to see whether a more favourable fee could be achieved.

Agreed that the arrangements for recognising retiring long service members be reconsidered.

Agreed that an informal Sub – Group open to all Members be set up to take on the review and an item be placed in the Members Bulletin.

The following Members undertook to become a Sub-Group Member:

Councillors Mrs A Haigh, R Church, M Colling, B Sandler, Mrs J H Whitehouse, D Stallan, R D'Souza, R Morgan.

16. REVIEW OF AREA PLANS SUB - COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Noted that the review was considered at the last Local Liaisons Committee on 22 June 2006 where it was agreed that a more formal consultation with local representatives be pursued.

Noted that the Panel had supported a move to a three Sub – Committee system with a three weekly cycle. The main issues now were whether they should remain local in nature or replaced by general committees that considered applications as and when they became ready to speed up the decision making process at Committee and Membership principles for any changes.

A Member expressed concern about any move to a three committee system on the basis that it would increase the geographical area/population covered by each Sub – Committee diluting representation and mean that Members would have to travel longer distances for site visits especially in rural areas which was not practical. It would also not facilitate local democracy. He referred to a five committee solution which he had devised to address these shortcomings.

Agreed that the Sub -Committee should remain area based and that a three Sub – Committee structure with a three weekly cycle be pursued.

Agreed that a formal consultation be carried out with Local Council's to ascertain their views on the principle of three areas sub-committees and whether these should remain local, areas to be grouped together and Membership principles.

Agreed that further consideration be given to the review at the 10 October 2006 mtg.

17. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Noted that there were no reports to be made.

18. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next meeting of the Panel would be held on 7 August 2006 at 7.30 p.m in CR1.