

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERS SERVICES SCRUTINY
STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER 2008
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1
AT 7.30 - 8.55 PM**

Members Present: Mrs M McEwen (Chairman), R Morgan (Vice-Chairman), Mrs P Brooks, J Markham, J Philip, B Rolfe, Mrs M Sartin (Environment Portfolio Holder) and D Stallan

Other members present: J Whitehouse

Apologies for Absence: Ms J Hedges and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Officers Present I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), W MacLeod (Elections Officer), P Seager (Chairmans Secretary) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

9. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the last meeting of the Panel on 30 June 2008, be agreed, subject to Councillor Mrs M Sartin being entered on the minutes as a Portfolio Holder, when she was on the Panel in her primary capacity as a District Councillor.

10. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

Noted that Councillor J Whitehouse was attending the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse.

11. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

12. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant to the Chief Executive informed the Panel that item 3 of the Work Programme, Review of Contract Standing Orders – Engagement of Consultants, was being moved from the current meeting date of 8 September 2008 to the next Panel meeting date of 3 November 2008, as it had not yet been completed.

Item 6 on the Work Programme, Government White Paper on Empowerment was being amalgamated with item 7 (b) Review of Constitution – Local Government Act 2007, Overview and Scrutiny. It was unclear as to when these items would be discussed at the Panel. There were parts of the Local Government Act 2007 which were not yet in force and its impact on Overview and Scrutiny was as yet unclear.

13. REVIEW OF CONTRACT STANDING ORDERS - USE OF CONSULTANTS

The report on Use of Consultants had not yet been completed and was going to a future meeting of the Panel.

14. WEEKEND VOTING - MINISTRY OF JUSTICE CONSULTATION PAPER

The Assistant to the Chief Executive presented a report to the Panel regarding the Ministry of Justice's consultation document on Weekend Voting. The government was concerned about low turnouts in elections, a current initiative to raise voter turnout was to provide for weekend voting instead of the more traditional weekday polling day. The District Council had publicised the consultation on its website, but there had been little response.

The Panel discussed the questionnaire from the consultation document which consisted of nine questions:

Q1. Do you think that polling day should be:

a weekday,

a Saturday,

a Sunday, or

take place over both Saturday and Sunday?

The Panel were concerned that voter turnout on weekends would be affected by both days being a Sabbath. Weekends were also leisure days for much of the public who would be less inclined to vote during their time off. Councillor J Markham thought that politics needed to be made more attractive to voters; currently there was a lack of interest. The Panel noted that there would be resource problems in having weekend voting with increased staffing costs, it was also believed that any change to the voting arrangements may be met by public hostility and that consequently, this would lead to a fall in turnout.

Q2. Who would be affected by changing the voting day to a weekend and how?

Members commented that religious observance would be affected by weekend voting, and there would be a reduction in the number of party members who would be available for canvassing during the immediate run up to the election. The Assistant to the Chief Executive advised the Panel that there would be difficulties in booking polling stations and bookings would be at a premium on weekends, and schools would be closed as well. Postal voting arrangements would also be a problem on weekends. Those public buildings that could be utilised would also be using up energy which would not otherwise be used because those premises would normally be closed at weekends. This would have environmental consequences. Councillor J Whitehouse informed told the Panel that some European countries had voting on Sundays. However he felt that staffing in this District would be a problem. The Panel were also advised that some voters may be disenfranchised by a limited access to public transport at weekends. There would also need to be a police presence and this would be more expensive on Saturdays and Sundays.

Q3 Do you think that greater access to advance voting in polling stations should be made available alongside weekend voting? Please explain why?

Members felt that there was already a certain amount of confusion regarding polling days coupled with a general mis-understanding about postal voting. This scheme may well cause more confusion.

The Panel was advised that there was no evidence from previous pilots that voter turnout was enhanced through this scheme. There were other considerations such as security of ballot boxes. These would have to be stored at the Civic Offices and transported to and from the polling stations if both Saturdays and Sundays were voting days. The cost may not justify the additional turnout. There would be added problems of public transport access in remote areas.

Q4. Do you think that greater access to remote voting (whether through traditional postal voting or by electronic means) should be made available alongside weekend voting? Should such arrangements be explored even if polling day were not moved to the weekend? Please explain why?

The Panel believed electronic voting posed a security risk and that this might heighten the public anxiety in relation to postal voting. There was concern about the costs and the lack of a clear audit trail for such voting methods. However it could be an attractive voting method to younger generations.

Q5. What do you perceive to be the benefits and the drawbacks of remote e-voting?

Electronic voting could not be used by voters without access to computers. There had been similar problems with Housing Services' Choice-Based Lettings Scheme.

Q6. Should the Government pilot weekend voting before introducing it across the UK?

The Panel thought that a pilot should take place. The Panel's view did not detract from the Council's opposition to the principle of weekend voting. The Panel took the view that a pilot should take place for a single type of election to avoid confusion.

Q7. What other issues may arise if the polling day is moved to the weekend? What are the issues for:

- **resources?**
- **polling station venues?**
- **security?**
- **administration of the election?**

The Panel were advised that staff covering weekend voting would be entitled to enhanced rates. Staff already worked a full week and some may not wish to volunteer to cover a weekend election. Ballot box security would pose a security problem.

There were issues surrounding the burden of cost if weekend voting went ahead. Under normal circumstances, the District Council paid for its own elections with a government allowance in Rate Support Grant. In the case of County elections, the District Council was reimbursed, similarly reimbursement applied to European Union

elections. Parish Councils would be expected to have some difficulty in financing a weekend election. There would also need to be a review of the election timetable.

Mr S Hill advised the Panel that Saturday post mailings were usually quite sparse, there was no post on Sundays. The District Council was expected to accept postal votes up to the deadline.

Q8. If weekend voting is introduced for local government elections, do you agree that the normal time for holding elections should be moved from the first Thursday in May to the second weekend in May?

If not, please explain which weekend you believe it would be most appropriate for these elections to be held and why.

The Panel thought that the second week in June would be better than the second weekend in May, because of potential clashes with school holidays in May. The Panel was also advised that election clashes with major sporting events could be a problem as well.

Q9. Are you aware of any barriers which prevent individuals from voting? What are the issues and how can they be overcome?

The Panel did not believe there were many physical barriers to voting, the main barriers were the perceptions which many people had of politicians and democracy in general. The Panel also felt that particularly amongst younger generations, there was not enough education regarding the voting process. Citizenship classes, mock elections in schools and the Youth Council can all make a contribution to general awareness of political issues. A councillor added that the current electoral system made election results dependent on perhaps 100,000 votes cast in marginal seats across the country, an election being decided by a relatively small proportion of votes.

Rural polling station accessibility was a growing problem. This was linked to limited public transport links or a complete absence of them.

Even though it was not a part of the consultation, the Panel discussed if compulsory voting should be introduced, however the feeling amongst most members was that this should not happen.

RECOMMENDED:

That the above mentioned views be approved for submission to the Ministry of Justice and the Council's views and that all those views be subject to the overall condition that those views should be seen in the context of the Council's opposition to the principle of weekend voting.

15. SCOPING REPORT - CIVIC CEREMONIAL REVIEW

The Senior Democratic Services Officer, Mr S Hill, presented a scoping report for Civic Ceremonial Review, to the Panel. The review was to concentrate on the operation of the Office of the Chairman, the functions of the Chairman and Vice Chairman, and aspects of the management of the civic aspect of full Council meetings.

The report was covering:

The role of the Chairman of Council

- A response to the report of the Councillor's Commission
- A review of the Council's Protocol and the Status of the Chairman and Vice Chairman
- A review of the member accountability statements contained within the constitution
- How could the Chairman and Vice Chairman be better promoted

Annual Council

- Civic and Business aspects of the Annual Council
- Changes in 2009

The Annual Civic Events

- A review of their: timing, type, relevance and affordability
- What other authorities do

Issues from other reviews

- An update on the last review
- Issues from Audit reports: Gifts and Hospitality, Account Handling, Bank Account Processes

The scoping report was to better promote the Chairman's role as ambassador for the District Council. The Panel wanted past Chairmen and Vice Chairmen to provide feedback to the Panel on their experiences and to receive fresh ideas on the future role of the Chairman of Council.

Councillor D Stellan suggested that it would be useful to find out how other local authorities use their Council meetings, were they more civic orientated as opposed to processing practical Council business.

RESOLVED:

That the scope of the Civic Ceremonial Review be approved as outlined above.

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

The following report was going before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 September 2008:

Weekend Voting plus copy of responses to questionnaire.

17. FUTURE MEETINGS

The following, future dates of the Panel, were noted:

3 November 2008

Constitution and Members Services Scrutiny Standing Panel Monday, 8 September 2008

12 January 2009

6 April 2009