REPORT of
DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES

to
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
30 AUGUST 2017

ELECTIONS UPDATE

1.   PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1   To provide a report to the Committee documenting the effectiveness of the Council's ability to deliver both the Essex County Council Election on 4 May 2017 and the Parliamentary Election on 8 June 2017.

2.   RECOMMENDATION

That the contents of this report and Action Plan (**APPENDIX 1**) be noted.

3.   SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

3.1   **Background**

3.1.1   Reports were presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 August 2015, 10 February 2016 and 20 July 2016. These reports reflected on learning arising from the combined Parliamentary, District and Parish elections in 2015, progress made on improvement work identified and the delivery of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) election and UK European Union membership referendum.

3.1.2   The Essex County Council (County) Election was held on 4 May 2017 and the General Election on 8 June 2017.

3.2   **Delivery of Essex County Council Election**

3.2.1   Project Planning

3.2.1.1 In advance of the election a detailed project plan was created and fortnightly team meetings took place to monitor progress against this plan. Team meetings included the following individuals; Chief Executive, Director of Resources, Legal and Democratic Services Manager, Senior Accountant and Facilities and Contracts Manager.

3.2.2   Registration

3.2.2.1 Whilst there were some duplicated applications for registration the key resource restraints in advance of the election were due to two of the four key core members of

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the Election team having annual leave authorised two weeks in advance of the election date. This was compounded by the calling of the snap General Election which meant that the team was dealing with a large number of advance registration queries for the General Election at the same time as co-ordinating the County Election. *< Action One>*.

3.2.3   Polling Stations and Ballot box preparation

3.2.3.1 The majority of staffing vacancies for polling stations were filled quickly. There were two very late notifications of staff unable to work and these positions were replaced by Maldon District Council staff.

3.2.3.2 There were issues over lighting at Great Braxted and Maldon and Tiptree Football Club and these were resolved with uplighters delivered directly to the stations by station inspectors.

3.2.4   Processing of postal votes

3.2.4.1 The processing of postal votes went well. Fusion postal packs were used and this appeared to reduce the number of 'orphans' received as a result.

3.2.4.2 There were a small number of unreceived postal votes which were dealt with by replacement ballot papers being issued and being hand delivered to residents.

3.2.5   Count

3.2.5.1 The count started at 11pm and was completed at 2am. Three count tables were used; one for each division. Whilst the count appeared to be smoother than at previous elections we noted the following issues:

1. There were periods of time where not all counters were occupied. *<Action Two>*

2. There was a longer than necessary time between verification and the start of the count. *<Action Three>*

3. There were some delays in entering the information into the count spreadsheet from the ballot paper returns which led to delays in calculating turnout and delays to the start of the count. *<Action Four>*

3.2.6   Conclusion

3.2.6.1 A debrief was held after the election which was then used to inform the project plan for the General Election. Actions have been recorded in the action plan in **APPENDIX 1** accordingly.

3.3   **Delivery of Parliamentary Election**

3.3.1   Project Planning

3.3.1.1 The parliamentary election area is different from the district and county area and therefore there is the requirement for us to "give away" electorate to Braintree District Council and for us to "take on" electorate from Chelmsford City Council. An early

project meeting to discuss this was held with Chelmsford City Council and a planning phone call was held with Braintree District Council. It was noted that there was an absence of a similar meeting at Returning Officer level and it has been agreed that this will take place in advance of future parliamentary elections < *Action Five*>. There are some decisions that only the Returning Officer can take and it would have been useful for the Returning Officers to all agree a consistent line on dealing with complex queries, especially those which then, for example, require a late alteration to the register to take place.

3.3.1.2 In advance of the election a detailed project plan was created and fortnightly team meetings took place to monitor progress against this plan. Team meetings included the following individuals; Chief Executive, Director of Resources, Legal and Democratic Services Manager, Senior Accountant and Facilities and Contracts Manager.

3.3.2 <u>Registration</u>

3.3.2.1 There were a large amount of duplicated applications for registration which added significantly to the registration workload. Residents were highly emotive and there were a large number of overseas electors to deal with. The Council attempted to gain additional temporary qualified staff through the Association of Electoral Administrators but resource was scarce. All registration queues were cleared by the deadline but some errors were found in the process later which could have been avoided if more resource within the Council were fully trained to be able to deal with the registration process *<Action Six>*.

3.3.3 <u>Polling Stations and Ballot box preparation</u>

3.3.3.1 The Council is required to deliver in excess of 60 polling stations for the Parliamentary Area (this is a significant increase in the number required for local elections (approximately 45)); be able to staff standard polling stations fairly easily and fill count vacancies quickly. However, there remained a number of Chelmsford area polling stations which were not fully staffed until Monday 5 June. Our nearest neighbouring authorities were in the same situation and a back-up plan was created whereby Maldon District Council (MDC) staff would cover the duties at the remaining stations. This plan was not needed and all stations were fully staffed without issue. The need was recognised however, to engage all Council staff earlier and recruit and train more volunteers to be available at polling stations < *Action Seven*>.

3.3.3.2 Three members of staff worked on the Saturday before the Parliamentary election filling ballot boxes and all ballot boxes were ready for collection as planned at 12.30pm on Tuesday 6 June.

3.3.4 <u>Delivery and Processing of postal votes</u>

3.3.4.1 We encountered two key issues in terms of the delivery and processing of postal votes. The first issue was that approximately 22 duplicate postal votes were created and delivered by our printers due to an error in their processes. We immediately hand delivered letters to each resident giving them clear instructions on how to vote in the event that they received two postal packs.

3.3.4.2 In addition there were in excess of 100 postal voting packs that the Royal Mail failed to deliver. Each of these votes had to be spoiled, then a new postal vote created at the Council offices and then delivered by hand which was a significant use of limited resources.

3.3.5   Count

3.3.5.1 The count started at 11pm and was completed at 3am. The Director of Customer and Community Services gave a briefing to all count team leaders and four count tables were used. Ballot boxes were issued to count tables in accordance to their distance from the count centre and count staff were allocated accordingly to reduce delays to counting and ensure continuous counting. Revised procedures for entering information into the count spreadsheet were used and there were no delays between verification and count. The count was completed by 3am; this is believed to the earliest parliamentary election for Maldon in some time.

3.3.6   Conclusion

3.3.6.1 A debrief was held after the election. The debrief covered the key areas discussed above. It was recognised that whilst the Count process had improved significantly there remained other areas of the preparation for an election which could be improved.

3.3.6.2 It was also recognised that our overall resilience for an election remained low as the majority of knowledge on election preparation sits within one member of the team. It was therefore resolved that a full suite of process notes covering every area of the elections process would be produced and regularly tested to improve our resilience and mitigate the current business continuity risk < *Action Eight>* .

4.   CONCLUSION

4.1   The embedding of the project plan approach has been successful and has provided assurance to the Returning Officer that forthcoming elections will continue to be delivered in accordance with Electoral Commission (EC) Standards and directions as issued. The Team will be working towards condensing the learning from the past year of elections in order to compile precedent project plans and risk registers for each type of election and which can then be populated with project specifics when an election event is actually called.

4.2   There has been some further useful learning and development points gleaned from the County and General Elections, which have been recorded in the Action Plan. Implementation of this Plan will help us to continue improving service delivery. This will be overseen by the Director of Resources.

5.   IMPACT ON CORPORATE GOALS

5.1   Delivery of an efficient, effective and transparent election function will assist in delivering the corporate goal of providing good quality, effective and valued services.

6. IMPLICATIONS

(i) **Impact on Customers** – Effective electoral registration and election processes are essential to ensure that customers achieve their democratic right to vote.

(ii) **Impact on Equalities** – Maldon District Council is committed to providing equal opportunity of access to services and this is particularly relevant to the delivery of electoral registration and election services.

(iii) **Impact on Risk** – Effective mitigation against project risk assisted in delivering smooth election processes. Project Plans and risk logs were compiled for the delivery of both the County and General Elections and these will now be stripped back to provide a working template for future elections and referendums to support effective risk management.

(iv) **Impact on Resources (financial)** – The Council is able to recharge the costs of the County and General Elections to Essex County Council and Central Government. For the County Election the budget allocation was up to £55,221.59 and for General the budget allocation was up to £107,756.00.

(v) **Impact on Resources (human)** – None.

(vi) **Impact on the Environment** – None.

Background Papers: None.

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