



promodo

Plymouth City Council

Review of Progress in the Registration and Election  
Service

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## Plymouth City Council - Review of Progress in the Registration and Election Service

### **1) Introduction**

1.1 Following the Council's adoption of my review report and recommendations into the issues relating to the management of the 2017 General Election, the Council asked me to undertake a review of progress and to make any recommendations that might assist the Council with its progress in implementing the recommendations and meeting the Electoral Commission standards. This report provides my assessment, conclusions and recommendations.

### **2) Terms of Reference**

2.1 The Council provided me with the following terms of reference for this review: -

#### BACKGROUND

In June 2017, Plymouth City Council experienced issues with the administration of its General Election. This resulted in an independent investigation by Dr Dave Smith, the results of which identified the reasons for the issues and comprised ten recommendations for improvement. The investigation report was considered by Council on 25 September 2017.

The purpose of this independent follow-up review, to take place in January 2018, is to assess progress and preparedness for May 2018 local elections (addressing Recommendation 10).

For continuity and in recognition of his status as a leading national authority on elections, the Council has asked Dr Smith to conduct the follow-up review.

#### TERMS OF REFERENCE

To assess the Council's preparedness for the May 2018 Local Election and any snap General Election, including to consider:

- The extent to which the Council has addressed each of the ten recommendations from the original September 2017 investigation, including the quality and sustainability of responses put in place in the context of best practice.

- The extent to which the Council is taking account of the Electoral Commission performance standards for Returning Officers.
- Any gaps in the Council's preparations for running an election and related recommendations for improvement.
- Any other matters that might be relevant to the preparations for the Local Election and any snap General Election. **TIMELINE** The follow-up review will commence at the beginning of January 2018 with submission of key documentation to Dr Smith, and a site visit on 12, 15 and 16 January 2018. The final report, including recommendations, to be received by the end of January 2018.

### **3) Methodology**

3.1 I have conducted this review through a combination of written evidence and a series of interviews. I have asked for and been provided with a range of documentation produced since the adoption of my recommendations addressing a range of operational requirements including risk management, planning, operating procedures, information related to the conduct of the canvass, performance management and quality assurance documentation. The Council has provided me with written evidence to demonstrate governance and oversight of the improvement progress, resourcing and the planning, preparation and implementation of next steps. I have interviewed 14 officers of the Council including the Returning Officer, senior management, advisors and the core team. I have attended a meeting of the Constitutional Review Group, interviewed the Chair of this group, the responsible Cabinet Member, The Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Council. I have also interviewed the new Electoral Services Manager and I have spoken to the regional lead from the Electoral Commission.

3.2 I have had the full cooperation of the Council and its staff. All my requests for information have been responded to positively, fully and effectively. I have had the full cooperation of those I have interviewed, all of whom have approached this in an open manner.

### **4) Assessment**

4.1 Resourcing, operational management and operating processes

4.1.1 My report made 4 recommendations to the Council addressing the resourcing, operational management and operating requirements of the Registration and Elections Service. Specifically, the recommendations stated:

*1) The Council needs to take urgent action to review its recruitment strategy to attract appropriately skilled and experienced registration and elections staff.*

*2) The Council needs to act without delay to recruit additional permanent and technically capable staff to the core team and achieve a compliment of staff and management consistent with the levels recommended by the AEA and by the Council's own analysis*

*3) Pending these appointments, the Council needs to recruit temporary staff who have the salient detailed operational experience to manage the team, build capacity, provide focus, direction and integration*

*4) Resources need to be sufficient and experienced to undertake the canvass and maintain the register, plan and prepare for the possibility of a General Election and plan for the local election in 2018. This needs to include properly documented operating procedures, systems and process to ensure continuity, robust quality assurance and checking procedures, effective communication and completion of tasks.*

4.1.2 The Council has successfully recruited an experienced permanent Electoral Services Manager and has successfully recruited permanent staff with experience to the core Registration and Elections team. The team is now well resourced in terms of skill sets and overall numbers. The Electoral Services Manager is due to start in January. In the interim period there is evidence of strong operational grip being provided by a seconded member of staff from within the Council and an AEA consultant.

4.1.3 The core team and service has had the benefit of additional support resources addressing communication, customer care, transformation and more latterly team development. These additional skills have played a major role in achieving the rapid pace and focus on change and improvement. It has also had the positive effect of opening up the registration and elections process to the wider Council and encouraging a much wider appreciation and engagement with those processes and requirements.

4.1.4 The core team and the wider Council has rightly taken confidence from a successful and well managed approach to the annual canvass. The Council slightly increased its registrations in a post referendum/general election period when you would expect some level of decline in registration. The canvass was conducted in accordance with EC guidance and achieved 100% coverage.

4.1.5 The focus on the canvass inevitably meant the core team could not fully engage in the development of new “how to” operating procedures and much of this work relied on the inputs of the transformation team in their first iteration. There is further work to be done to this draft guidance to marry the law and EC guidance as reflected in the documents with operating practices and experience within the team. This need is fully recognised by the Council and two of the operating guides have so far been amended through direct engagement with the core team. The need to continue this process is critical, as recognised by the Council, in ensuring effective procedures and effective embedding within the team. **I recommend that there continues to be a focus on the engagement of the core team and the new Electoral Services Manager in the editing of the “how to” guides so that they reflect the operating needs of service and the need for continuity, quality assurance and the meeting of standards.**

4.1.6 There is a clear and well produced set of documents supporting the planning and preparation for registration and elections. This includes robust approaches to quality assurance, performance management, business continuity and risk management. Most importantly these documents are consistent and accurate in representing to strategic management and the Returning Officer a realistic assessment of the operating environment. There is now a clear line of sight between the strategic requirements on the service and the operation of the service.

4.1.7 In creating a new operating environment for the core team and for the core team working with wider council resources, the Council has achieved as much as it possibly could in the time available and in the absence of a permanent Electoral Services Manager to lead the team and the arrangements. There is a renewed sense of confidence which is well founded in planning for the local elections. The new Electoral Services Manager will need to build on this to help the team develop a new sense of identity, refine the organisational arrangements within the team to further shape roles and responsibilities, embed new working practices as a team and refine the operating procedures as discussed above. All parties, including the new Electoral Services Manager understand this challenge and have begun work

on this, with planning for the election being the focus. **I recommend that the Electoral Services Manager gives priority to the shaping of the new team to develop a team ethos, to improve organisation, delineation and delegation of tasks, to improve understanding of roles and responsibilities and to ensure delegations to the right levels.**

#### 4.2 Technology, business process and integration with wider Council functions

4.2.1 My report recommended that the Council seek ways of transferring and embedding non-specialist roles in other parts of the Council and make better use of technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Specifically I recommended: -

*5) The Council should refresh and extend its business process analysis of the service activities with a view to improving their efficiency and effectiveness, including the full migration to the new EMS system and its embedding within operating procedures of the service. This should also address the implementation of proposals to embed non-specialist roles in other parts of the Council and particularly customer/elector contact.*

4.2.2 The transition to the new electoral management system has been completed and it was used to good effect in the canvass and registration process. It has yet to be fully embedded for the election. Some limitations in its use are currently being experienced as a consequence of cyber security issues with the product that the Council identified during testing. As a consequence the full functionality of the system is not being realised at this time. The Council is aware of this and is taking steps to resolve the position. **I recommend that The Council works with the EMS supplier to resolve the outstanding integration issues associated with the full implementation of the Electoral Services Management System as a matter of urgency.**

4.2.3 In line with the migration to the new Electoral Management System, much work has been undertaken to analyse and reshape the way the service is delivered. This has been captured in the written plans and the draft “how to” guides. There remains work to be done to assist the team to take ownership of the new ways of working and to prevent a slip back into practices that were exposing the service to avoidable operational risks. The core team have been necessarily preoccupied with the canvass and this has limited their involvement in the design of new ways of working. More recently with the completion of the canvass the core team has been engaged in

workshops to help shape and refine the new operating procedures. There remains a job of work to be done in resolving the debate over the technical processes and work is also required to win support and understanding amongst the team in embracing the proposed changes. These challenges are understood by the Council. The Electoral Services Manager will be key to navigating a course between existing practice and proposed new ways of practicing. The Council has factored in the issue of continuity in the transition to the new management by retaining the support of the seconded operational manager until after the local elections alongside the continued work of the transformation team.

4.2.4 The service is preparing to introduce the support of the contact centre to more effectively, efficiently and consistently address the frequent questions and issues raised by the public, particularly in the run up to an election. This is planned to be introduced in March. There remains much to be done to prepare for this and there will not be much leeway in the process given the election timetable. Continued careful management of this tight timetable and the quality of the interface between the contact centre and the core team will be required. **I recommend that the Council closely monitors progress on the intended transfer of first point of contact responsibilities to the Contact Centre to ensure a safe and timely transition is achieved.**

### 4.3 Communications

4.3.1 A key element in binding together the administration of the registration and elections process, the wider running of the Council and the electorate, candidates, agents and other stakeholders is the effectiveness of the Council's communications. I recommended that this was further developed as part of the improvement plan: -

*6) Further and more detailed planning should be undertaken with regards to communications during an election period; including in the handling of communications when an error occurs. The development of such a plan should engage key stakeholders including the local media, politicians and their agents, the Electoral Commission and the Council's contact centre. This plan needs to be embedded within the operating procedures of the registration and elections service and in the civil emergency procedures.*

4.3.2 There is clear evidence that the Council has progressed this recommendation. Communications of the registration and election processes is better planned, more structured and there is evidence of effective joint

working between the management of the elections and registration service and communications. The respective contribution of the registration and elections service and communications is better understood and there are effective arrangements in place for planning and implementing communications. As in other areas of the improvement plan there is a recognised need to embed the progress made so far

4.3.3 In recognising the importance of the whole Council approach to registration and elections, internal communications strategies have been deployed to raise awareness of the work, seek support for critical roles in canvassing and in roles at the election. Members are now regularly briefed on the preparations and timetable for registration and the election. The messages are consistent, well-structured and timely.

4.3.4 In a similar vein the communications service has sought to have a dialogue with the media and with candidates and agents to understand what will constitute effective communications to these stakeholders. Members have engaged in discussions on messages that are impactful with the electorate. Critically there is evidence that the leadership within the communications service are seeking to better understand the messages which need to be communicated and the target audiences who need to receive the messages.

#### 4.4 Governance

4.4.1 The final group of recommendations addressed the need for the arrangements to oversee, plan and performance manage progress on the improvement journey. Specifically, I recommended:-

*7) The ARO should establish an improvement plan taking account of these recommendations and maintain sufficient frequency of the elections project board to hold line management to account for the delivery against the improvement plan*

*8) The Council should hold the ARO to account for the overall delivery of planned improvements through a cross-party committee of the Council*

*9) The ARO and the Electoral Commission should agree a process and a frequency of reporting to enable the commission to offer ongoing*



*advice and to satisfy the commission that the necessary improvements are being delivered.*

*10) The ARO should consider a further independent review in January 2018 to assess progress and preparedness for May 2018 elections.*

4.4.2 The ARO has established and maintained a robust improvement plan and implementation process. There has been close and detailed oversight of progress both at officer and member level. The Constitutional Review Group as a cross party group has provided effective political leadership of the issues requiring to be addressed. This forum has provided assurance to the wider Council on progress. The Strategic Elections Board has operated as an effective vehicle for the ARO to examine progress and to engage in the change process. Reports provided to both the ARO and to Members have been an accurate representation of progress, properly risk assessed and with realistic and accurate representation of mitigating actions. There is evidence of appropriate debate, challenge and support to ensure transparency and accountability.

4.4.2 The Electoral Commission has been engaged in this process by the ARO and has seen the evidence of the actions being taken to address the RO standards which need to be achieved. Through effective project management the Council has maintained its focus and has achieved a considerable amount in a relatively short period of time. There is evidence both in the detail of the improvement programme and in my review that the Council has continued to maintain an open, learning culture and one driven with ambition and commitment by both officers and elected members.

4.4.3 As the Council is fully aware, the risk that comes with this pace of change is that there is insufficient time and attention to embedding the improvements within the core service and between the core service team and the wider council support services. Much has been done to take account of this risk though the Council's plans and resourcing. This includes maintaining operational management continuity alongside the new ESM until after the election, workshops with the core team on operational procedures and team development activities.

4.4.4 Whilst maintaining transparency and accountability there will also be a need to enable the Electoral Services Manager to take decisions and actions required within the service and ensure she is in a position to exercise her authority and shape the culture of the service in line with the vision and

ambition of the ARO for the service. This is particularly necessary in the preparations for the local elections in 2018. **I recommend that the Council review the current governance arrangements to achieve a new balance between the operating decisions delegated to the Electoral Services Manager and the assurance framework to maintain accountability and transparency.**

## **5) Conclusions**

5.1 The Council has acted with rigour and focus to address the improvement needs in the registration and elections service and to address the Electoral Commission's standards for Returning Officers. Elected Members and Officers of the Council have demonstrated a concerted will to challenge, support and enable a process of improvement within the registration and election service and between that service and the wider Council's resources.

5.2 The pace of change has ensured that The Council is in a strong position to address its needs in the administration of the local elections in May 2018 through a process that is secure and consistent with Electoral Commission guidance. The Council is aware of the key risks attendant to change at pace; particularly the need for the new Electoral Services Manager and the core team to embed these changes and work as a team to fulfil the operational needs of the election.

5.3 The Council delivered an effective canvass and has done much to promote registration and elections as a whole Council issue requiring the commitment and engagement of the wider Council. There has been a renewed focus on effective communications with stakeholders.

5.4 I have not identified any gaps in the Council's approach to the improvement of the registration and election service. The breadth and quality of the responses has delivered the level of progress the Council wished to see to this point in time. In order to ensure that the progress is made sustainable the new Electoral Services Manager will need to provide the leadership and operational grip to manage this into through the local elections with the continued support of the wider Council.

## **6. Recommendations**

**6.1 I recommend that there continues to be a focus on the engagement of the core team and the new Electoral Services Manager in the editing of the “how to” guides so that they reflect the operating needs of the service and the need for continuity, quality assurance and the meeting of standards. (Para 4.1.5)**

**6.2 I recommend that the Electoral Services Manager gives priority to the shaping of the new team to develop a team ethos, to improve organisation, delineation and delegation of tasks, to improve understanding of roles and responsibilities and to ensure delegations to the right levels. (Para 4.1.7)**

**6.3 I recommend that The Council works with the EMS supplier to resolve the outstanding integration issues associated with the full implementation of the Electoral Services Management System as a matter of urgency. (Para 4.2.2)**

**6.4 I recommend that the Council closely monitors progress on the intended transfer of first point of contact responsibilities to the Contact Centre to ensure a safe and timely transition is achieved. (Para 4.2.4)**

**6.5 I recommend that the Council review the current governance arrangements to achieve a new balance between the operating decisions delegated to the Electoral Services Manager and the assurance framework to maintain accountability and transparency. (Para 4.4.4)**

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