



DERBY CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

26 JUNE 2007

Report of the Corporate Director of Corporate and Adult Social Services

Review of May 2007 City Council Elections

RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 To note the review of the May 2007 City Council Elections and approve the attached action plan.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

2.1 Background

This year the City Council Elections took place on 3 May 2007. These were the first elections held since the Electoral Administration Act 2006 was approved by Parliament and therefore a number of new challenges faced the Elections Team in preparing for and running the elections.

- 2.2 The Commission has recently completed an in depth policy review on electoral registration during which many of the changes arising from the Act were identified and discussed. In the run up to the elections there was also a great deal of publicity on some of the problems faced by Elections Teams across the Country, particularly in the area of postal voting.

- 2.3 Although the Council's Elections Team avoided many of the problems highlighted in the media, there is now an opportunity for the Commission to review how the elections went in Derby, and consider an action plan identifying areas to be examined when planning for future elections. A copy of the proposed action plan is attached to this report as appendix 2.

2.4 Agents Meeting

Every year the Returning Officer has organised a briefing meeting for agents before the Notice of Poll is published. The purpose of the meeting is to remind the Party Agents of common practice in Derby, identify changes arising from previous experience and changes in legislation, and to advise agents of important dates and deadlines. It is also an opportunity for agents to raise issues with the Returning Officer and get clarification if required. It is a very useful meeting from both sides and has some very positive outputs. It is recommended that this meeting continues to be an important part of the process.

2.5 Agents and Candidates Meeting

Following recommendations from the Electoral Commission and representations from Derbyshire Police a meeting for candidates and agents was arranged following the close of nominations. This meeting was poorly attended and although it has not received any negative comment it is not believed that there were any tangible benefits arising from it. It is recommended that this meeting is not repeated in future years, but the police be encouraged to provide guidance for candidates and agents to be included in nomination packs.

2.6 Poll Cards

Because of changes in legislation for the first time we were required to send poll cards to all absent voters. Effectively this meant that every elector in the City was sent a poll card. Because we were delivering to every household we were able to obtain significant discounts from Royal Mail and used their services instead of appointing people to deliver by hand. Not only did the use of Royal Mail save us 10 pence per elector we also saved a considerable amount of precious staff time by not having to appoint, oversee and make payments to the people involved in hand delivery. There was also the added benefit that because all the Poll Cards were delivered straight to Royal Mail from the printers they were delivered within two days of despatch.

2.7 We did receive some criticism that as the Poll Cards were sent out on 16 April there was not sufficient time for people to apply for postal votes or to be added to the register. It is always a fine balance between sending out the poll cards early to allow the maximum amount of time for people to make arrangements for absent voting or near enough the elections so the poll card acts as a reminder to vote. In planning for the elections we believed that delivery during the week commencing 9 April would be appropriate and, after discussions with our printers, we agreed that the data would be with them at the end of the week commencing 2 April, which was after the close of Nominations – It is good practice to wait for the close of nominations, before sending out poll cards, although it is very unlikely that any ward in Derby will be uncontested. For various reasons, we missed the deadline and therefore our slot in the printers schedule, so the poll cards were sent out a few days later than we had planned. We have concluded that, although the wording of poll cards is prescribed by regulations, we are currently trying to use the poll card for a number of purposes, none of which it is doing well.

2.8 It is therefore recommended that at around the same time as we publish the notice of election we send a letter to all electors informing them:

- that an election will be taking place soon
- the date of the election
- confirmation about whether they are registered as an absent voter
- if relevant the location of polling station
- how to apply for or cancel a postal vote
- deadlines for absent voter applications
- date postal vote packs will be sent out
- where to get more information

- 2.9 This letter could also include a postal vote application form, reducing the need for political parties to provide forms, an issue that is discussed later. The official poll card can then be sent out much nearer to Election Day and used as a reminder to vote and something to take along to the polling station. I have anecdotal evidence of a number of electors who believed that because they have mislaid their poll card they were unable to vote.
- 2.10 There is a national issue about the capacity of the printing industry which is being taken up by the Association of Electoral Administrators – AEA - with the Ministry of Justice and the National Printing Federation. Only four years ago our ballot papers were printed by a small printing company in Ripley who hand stamped ballot paper numbers on the back and our postal votes could be issued in one evening with a team of volunteers who stayed behind after work for 3 hours. The same printer produced poll cards which could be delivered by hand anytime over a period of three weeks as long as they were delivered by polling day. Now we send polling cards to all electors and have ballot papers which need to have a number, a barcode and a unique identifying mark on the back that many smaller printers do not have the equipment to produce. We also have a postal vote issue of 22,000, and rising, which cannot currently be done in house and must be carried out by a contractor. The last issue we carried out manually in house was for 12,000 packs, the issue of which took four days to complete; it also took a further two weeks to print all the stationery.
- 2.11 The general feeling at a recent meeting of the AEA was that nationally the print industry has not developed alongside this increased demand. To be fair to the printing industry, although significant, elections work is only a small part of their business and takes place during a very concentrated period at best once a year, so it is not worth investing in additional staff and machinery unless it can be offset against other new business. Some printers we have used previously that have taken the risk of investing in new equipment but found they can not find the additional work needed to make the investment worthwhile and have either gone out of business or decided not to participate in elections work.
- 2.12 Every year there are cases where people have placed orders with printers to find that very close to the elections the printers either did not have the capacity or went out of business. For this reason we have tended to only seek quotations from reputable companies, with a good track record, who can give us good references from other Councils. The problem with this approach is that year after year the number of companies who meet this criteria are declining, rather than increasing, and as a consequence orders with well respected companies have to be placed very early.
- 2.13 Approaches to this situation vary – Sunderland City Council have gone as far as investing in purchasing the print equipment needed and providing the service in-house. The benefit of this is that they have much more control over the process and therefore the risks of contracting out to a third party, who may in turn sub-contract some of the work, and it means that other similar work, such as Council Tax Billing and the Annual Canvass, can also be carried out in house. Although it may not be possible to progress this in the short term, it is recommended that further investigations be made into the costs of purchasing or leasing the required equipment, establishing the quantity of high volume printing that is outsourced and comparing the costs.

- 2.14 Even if the cost of providing the service in-house is marginally higher it may be a small price to pay compared to risks involved in contracting the work out. On the other hand because there may be insufficient work at other times of the year the costs may be so high that it is more appropriate to carry the risks of contracting out. In any event it is worth carrying out the exercise.
- 2.15 In the short term it is recommended that the Council continue to use K2 for the printing associated with City Council Elections but subject to the outcome of the investigations into in-house provision, a tender document be prepared for a five year agreement for all elections printing including the Annual Canvass. Not only would this secure the services of the best printing company for a number of years but it would also have a number of added benefits including lower prices per item and contractual penalties in the event of goods not being supplied in accordance with agreed timescales.
- 2.16 **Postal Votes**
- Personal Identifier Collection**
- Due to changes arising from the Electoral Administration Act in January this year the Elections Team had to obtain personal identifiers for all electors who were recorded in the Electoral Register as absent voters. The timescales and process for collecting dates of birth and signatures from absent voters was laid out in regulations and supported by guidance from the Electoral Commission.
- 2.17 In short the process required us to write to all absent voters requesting personal identifiers. If they failed to respond to the first letter within three weeks they were then sent a reminder. If the elector did not respond to reminder after a further three weeks they were to be informed that they had been removed from the list of absent voters and would need to make a fresh application if they wished to vote by post in the future. Funding was provided by the Department of Constitutional Affairs - DCA - for this exercise.
- 2.18 There were a number of approaches available for the carrying out of this exercise:
- a) to forward the data to a third party and they would send out all the letters and reminders and collect and scan the returned forms. (Managed Solution)
 - b) to forward the data to a printing company who would print the letters and reminders but the completed forms would be returned to the Elections Team for processing (Printing Solution)
 - c) to produce the letters and reminders in house and the Elections Team process the reminders. (In-house solution)

- 2.19 The printing solution had to be eliminated because early investigations showed that most printers were unable to supply the service we wanted within the timescales set by the regulations. While the managed solution seemed to be attractive, after identifying the three main providers we had concerns about whether once the data had been collected it could be transferred into our elections system. None of the suppliers could demonstrate whether this was possible so we would then run the risk of being tied into those suppliers' postal vote scanning solution for all future elections. We have since discovered that our concerns were realised and that there was some concern about the integrity of the data collected by one of the suppliers.
- 2.20 The in-house solution involved much more work for the elections team, and a team of four agency staff were appointed to assist with sending out the letters and reminders and processing the returns. The benefit was that we had much more control of the process and as the DCA had provided additional funding this created additional income for the Council House Reprographics Team. Some of the DCA funding was also used to purchase a letter folder/envelope filler to speed up the process. This equipment is now available for use for other large scale mail outs and enhances the services provided by the Reprographics Team.
- 2.21 As a result of using the in-house solution we were unable to realise some of the savings arising from the use of Royal Mail's Walksort Service, but as a consequence the Reprographics Team have made investigations into the software and equipment needed and in the future should be able to offer this service. By scanning the identifiers directly into our own software we opened our options for processing postal votes during elections and had more control over the integrity of the data collected. We did receive some criticism from some electors who received reminders or cancellation letters despite returning forms. This was caused by the very tight timescales which resulted in the letters being run before we had received or input a returned form. While the elections team did try to input all forms before running the data some overlap is inevitable and the occurrence of this issue would have been greater had we decided to use an external printer.
- 2.22 We used the Council's new electoral registration software, Express, to process returns. The returned forms were scanned and because these forms had been generated by the software it had been set up to identify the information on the form needed to process the applications. A barcode assigned the images to an elector, optical character recognition – OCR - identified the date of birth and the elector's signature was stored as an electronic image. A feature of the Express software is that every returned form had to be visually checked by an operator before acceptance. By comparing the scanned image of the whole form against the data collected a visual check could be made to ensure that the software had read the date of birth correctly and that a signature had been picked up before approval. It was at this point that a form could be rejected because all the required information had not been supplied or the quality of signature was not adequate for future comparison.
- 2.23 The software available from some of other software suppliers did only include this manual check for exceptions when the software was unable to read the information on the form. This made the process much quicker and for Derby would have resulted in fewer temporary staff being employed. However we believe that the cost of the additional resources required can be justified by the impact they had on the quality of the data collected.

2.24 Since the elections, Councils that used other systems have discovered that a number correctly completed postal votes returned during the elections may have been rejected because personal identifiers were assigned to the wrong electors because bar codes were misread, dates of birth were misread by the OCR software and no signatures were recorded where people signed outside the box on the form. It is therefore recommended that, despite the additional time and additional costs, the manual checking of all applications should continue.

2.25 Once collected the personal identifiers are valid for five years after which a similar exercise must be completed. Although the in-house solution worked well on this occasion it is recommended that all the options available be reappraised at that time. In between the five year review personal identifiers will be collected when electors make an absent voter application.

2.26 Postal Vote Applications.

It is interesting to note that although 3578 voters were removed from the list of absent voters by election day the number of postal voters had risen to just under 22,000, almost the same number as those registered before the personal identifier collection exercise. This was caused by a large volume of applications being received between the date on which we cancelled those absent voters who had not returned postal vote identifiers and the last date for postal vote applications. Dealing with a high number of applications during a short space of time caused a number of operational difficulties. In order to process the applications to meet the deadlines for sending out postal vote packs we had to retain the temporary staff hired for the postal vote identifier exercise. Because of the new identifier requirements all postal vote applications had to be scanned and images assigned to an elector.

2.27 During the personal identifier collection exercise images were assigned using the barcode printed on the form. When dealing with new postal vote applications the barcode identifying the elector is only pre-printed when the elections office supplies the form. In the run up to elections the majority of applications received are either the generic forms produced by the Electoral Commission or forms provided by political parties, so they must be assigned to an elector on receipt. On checking through some of the applications processed during this intensive period we discovered that some personal identifiers were assigned against the wrong elector. Having looked at the process this is very easily done particularly in households or streets where there are a number of people with the same or similar names and particularly when processing a large number of forms. We have discovered one example where a household occupied by four people with a similar name, three of which had applied for a postal vote and one had not and the personal identifiers of one of the absent voters had been assigned against the elector who intended to vote at a polling station. In this case and other similar ones the errors were either picked up before election day or addressed during adjudication on postal votes, but we intend to put measures in place to make sure this does not happen in future.

2.28 The appropriate checks can only be provided by increasing the resources available to process applications. It is therefore proposed that we double the number of staff engaged on processing postal vote applications in the run up to elections, so that every batch is checked again after processing and also that supervision be enhanced to make sure these checks are carried out.

- 2.29 There has been some comment from some Councils using other electoral registration software that there was a problem with processing forms produced by political parties and some electors had to be sent another form that could be read by the software. This was not the case with Express. Providing a template has been set up, it can read forms in a number of formats and in Derby we were fortunate that in Derby political parties either provided us with an example of the forms they intended to use to test or better still used a form supplied by us.
- 2.30 We have some concerns that because we are now required to check personal identifiers supplied on an application form against those provided with the postal vote pack, the use of party branded postal vote application forms may have an impact upon the secrecy of the vote during adjudication on postal votes, when the voting intentions of an elector may be identified by looking at the application form. It is therefore recommended that the Postal Voting Protocol for Derby be amended to discourage the use of postal vote application forms incorporating party names or logos.

2.31 **Postal Vote Packs**

The postal vote packs used in these elections were produced by K2 in the form of a one piece mailer that incorporated envelope B into which the ballot paper was placed and returned to the returning officer in a covering envelope. We carried out two issues - the first issue included the majority of postal voters who had made their applications before 10 April and anyone who made an application after this date was included in the second issue.

- 2.32 We received an excellent service from K2. We sent the company the data according to the agreed timescales and K2 handed the packs over to Royal Mail on the agreed date. Representative of the Returning Officer were invited to the K2 premises in Manchester to view the operations and spot check packs as they came off the production line. The staff, equipment and security at the K2 site were very impressive and provided added confidence in the process. We believe that the one piece mailer played an important part in ensuring our packs were delivered on time. The addressee information, identity statement and ballot paper envelope, all of which include personalised information were produced as one piece of stationery. The outgoing and return envelopes included windows and therefore did not need to be matched. Although many printers have machinery that match different pieces of stationery there are still increased risks associated with matching.
- 2.33 The most obvious is the risk of mismatches where personalised stationery is sent to the wrong elector. This can cause problems during the opening process and unfortunately lead to an elector's ballot paper being rejected. Matching can also increase the chances of packs being sent out late because of delays in printing other elements of the pack, some of which printers may subcontract to other printers. The national picture for the May 2007 elections shows examples of Councils who sent postal vote packs out late which reduced the time available for electors to respond, cases where mismatches resulted in absent voters being sent the wrong ballot paper and in at least one case where the postal vote packs were not sent out at all. None of these problems arose in Derby and although our choice of printers was a major factor, the decision to use a one piece mailer also helped. It is therefore recommended that this product be used in future elections.

2.34 We did receive a few comments about the size of the envelope provided as part of the one piece mailer. We have looked into this and it would appear that problems arose because electors misunderstood the instructions provided rather than a fundamental flaw with the stationery. Some electors tried to insert the ballot paper without folding it and others tried to place the declaration in the same envelope as the ballot paper. We will be working with K2 to improve the instructions, possibly providing pictures to improve clarity.

2.35 **Postal Vote Opening**

Following experience from previous years we again scheduled postal vote opening sessions daily from the Tuesday following the first issue until the close of poll on the day of the elections. For the first time however we set aside the Monday before the opening started to train up staff and test our systems using dummy packs. Agents were invited to these sessions so they could get a feel for what was to happen over the next few weeks and ask questions. Although there is an additional cost arising from setting up and employing staff for a day it was a good opportunity not only to provide training but also to get to know the staff. It is recommended that this training day be incorporated into future planning for postal vote opening.

2.36 Temporary agency staff were used to carry out the opening of postal vote packs and for the first time to supervise staff. The staff were appointed and paid for through the Comensura system used by the Council to appoint agency staff. Previously we have had problems using the Comensura System to place an order for large groups of people and as a consequence have met with our account manager identify the problems and address them, however the same problems arose again. One of the main difficulties in ensuring that the right number of staff arrive on the appointed date. A number of candidates are appointed and subsequently withdraw but there appears to be no ownership of the order and these withdrawals are not replaced.

2.37 We know of examples where, because of withdrawals, the order was not complete but agencies wishing to submit additional candidates could not because it appeared that the order had been closed. This caused additional unnecessary work for the elections team at a time when they could have been usefully employed on other activities. In the end came to an agreement with Comensura that we could approach a single agency to fulfil the order through the Comensura System. There are other issues relating to the Comensura system that are being pursued through the contract management arrangements. However for the appointment of large groups of agency staff for election duties it is proposed that following the application of usual contract procedures a single agency be appointed to provide the temporary staff required.

2.38 Overall the process went very well with 17,288 postal vote packs being returned and processed without additional the evening or weekend opening sessions experienced by a significant number of other authorities.

2.39 Postal Vote Scanning

Of the many changes arising from the Electoral Administration Act, the one that had the most significant impact on arrangements for the opening of postal votes and the resources required was the requirement to check personal identifiers and, on request, to provide information to electors about whether their pack had been returned. Early investigations showed that this could not be easily archived using a manual solution so investigations were made into electronic automated solutions. The legislation on checking personal identifiers required a Returning Officer to check a minimum of 20% of the packs opened within any one session. It was agreed at an early stage that if possible a 100% check would be our preferred option.

- 2.40 Because there was a relatively short space of time between the passing of the legislation and its implementation, many software suppliers were offering products that although available for demonstration purposes had not been developed or tested for a live situation. Following evaluation of the products available a preferred supplier was chosen and a project plan set up to install the software. The project was so far advanced that at the agents meeting we were able to provide information on the product selected and give guidance on how it would operate. Just days after this meeting the supplier failed to deliver an element of the project within the agreed time scales and approached us about some data compatibility issues they had identified which they claimed could only be resolved with additional programming time and additional costs. After making further investigations we had serious concerns about whether the company concerned would be able to deliver the project within appropriate time scales to allow sufficient training and testing – we have since found out from other Councils that did persevere with this product that our fears were realised and caused problems for those concerned.
- 2.41 Although we had initially rejected the solution provided by our electoral registration software suppliers because it did not provide some of the functionality offered by the other product, they had produced a full product that at the time was undergoing acceptance testing in Sunderland. We were invited to observe this testing and were satisfied that despite us having to make some changes to the planned process, the product had performed well during the tests and would be a much safer choice.
- 2.42 One of the major changes arising from the change in software suppliers was the way in which those statements which did not meet the personal identifiers previously supplied were adjudicated on. Our original intention was that all those statements that required adjudication would be scanned and then put aside for an adjudication session at the end of each day. The new system did not allow this so adjudication had to be done as statements were scanned. To facilitate this we appointed seven adjudicators who worked one hour shifts according to a schedule. In the end this process worked well and it is recommended that this arrangement be repeated in future years.

- 2.43 Of the 17,288 ballot packs scanned 10,218 were approved automatically, 7,070 were adjudicated on and 1,173 were rejected – 6% of all those returned. 477 packs were rejected during the elections held in May 2006 – 3% of all those returned. Feedback from Councils that used other scanning solutions has shown that adjudication levels were much higher and reliability of the systems was poor. Many other Councils who had chosen a 100% check had serious problems with the software they used and were forced to revert to the 20% fall back position. The Express Scanning solution proved to be a reliable and effective system and the candidates and agents who came to see the process in operation were impressed.
- 2.44 There is a facility available in the Express Scanning Solution to also scan ballot papers as they are returned. Although it places a greater demand on the scanners it would avoid having to hand match the numbers on ballot papers against statements. As long as a valid statement has been received and authenticated a ballot paper will be approved as it passes through the scanner. This means that even if a ballot paper and statement become separated or if, as often happens, partners put their ballot paper in each other's ballot paper envelope, the paper will still be matched against a valid statement and included in the Count. In previous elections we have used a spreadsheet solution which, although it does work, is very time consuming to keep up to date and manually match the items as they are received. The software can also make sure that ballot papers are not mixed in with those from another ward and be used as a security check as only appropriately barcoded and unique ballot papers would be authorised. Any unauthorised copies and cancelled ballot papers would be rejected. Because of the relatively late change in software providers we were unable to use this facility because a specific barcode had to be pre-printed on the ballot paper. It is proposed that this element of the scanning software be used and evaluated in the May 2008 elections.

2.45 Replacement of Lost and Spoilt Papers

The changes in legislation also affected the delivery of this element of dealing with postal votes. For the first time replacements could be issued up until 5pm on the day of the poll. This year 52 replacement packs were issued. Because identification is required before handing over the packs this involved either electors coming into the Council House or home visits. While the Visiting and Inspections Team in the Customer Services Inspections Section were able to assist with some of the home visits it still resulted in a member of the elections team being absent from the office for a significant amount of time. For future years we will need to allocate two people to work on this area from at least four days before polling day, when we are first able to issue replacements for lost papers, until 5pm on polling day.

2.46 Polling Stations

In comparison to postal voting there was very little change for those voting at polling stations. After securing grant funding of £42,642 from the DCA – now the Ministry for Justice – our new aluminium polling booths were used for the first time. The new lightweight booths were purchased to minimise health and safety risks arising from the use of the traditional wooden booths and to improve the look and feel of the polling stations.

- 2.47 Much more work could be done to improve the signage and information provided at polling stations and improving the customer service experience. For a significant number of electors a visit to a polling station each year may be the only direct contact a person may have with the Council and this experience may influence their perception of the Council and its services. Although the decoration and condition of polling places is outside our control discussions with other electoral services teams have shown that improved signage and branding can enhance the appearance of the polling station as well as improving access. It is recommended that the signage provided for polling stations be reviewed and a programme for replacing existing signage be produced.
- 2.48 The new legislation allowed the Electoral Registration Officer to authorise changes to the register on election day to address clerical errors. Although there were very few changes made on the day, this new provision did increase the volume of queries dealt with by the elections team during polling hours. In previous years if a person presented themselves at a polling station and they were not on the register the Presiding Officer could simply state that they were unable to issue them with a ballot paper and refer them to the Elections office to make sure they were on the register for future elections. This year, as a consequence of the legislative changes, this was not an option, so every time this happened it resulted in a call to the elections office which had to be fully investigated by going back to the original registration forms. In the majority of cases the research showed that a clerical error had not occurred and the person had not registered. However at certain times at least three members of staff were engaged in this activity.
- 2.49 More work needs to be done on ways to ensure that there is adequate experienced support on polling day to carry out these investigations and other duties. However this is not easily addressed, most of the people with the knowledge and experience needed are also required at the count, because it is unrealistic to expect them to work from 6.30am and still be on duty at 3am the following morning. In an attempt to address this we produced a rota which made sure that those who came in early were able to have a break in duty before returning in the evening and that the others who worked through did not start their duties until the afternoon. While this arrangement did work, because it halved the number of experienced people on duty, it resulted in a great deal of pressure being placed on those individuals while they were on duty, faced with conflicting demands for their attention. It is recommended that more investigations be made in to ways of increasing the number of experienced staff available in the elections office on polling day, while making sure that individuals are not expected to work unreasonably long hours.
- 2.50 On the whole there were very few issues arising from Polling Stations. This highlights a wider issue about the substantial amount of time and resources put into preparing, producing and processing postal votes when they only account for 14% of the electorate. If a similar amount of funding and effort were put into assisting and encouraging those electors voting at polling stations it is possible that turnout could be improved. With this in mind it is recommended that investigations be made into participating in an electoral pilot for setting up polling stations in the city centre or neighbourhood centres to facilitate advanced voting ahead of polling day.

2.51 Ballot Papers

For the first time this year we no longer had to produce ballot papers with a counterfoil on them to be used for recording the polling district and elector number. Instead all ballot papers had to have a unique identifying mark, as well as a ballot paper number on the back. The polling district and elector number were then recorded against the ballot paper number on a corresponding number list. All Presiding Officers and Polling Clerks had received training on the new arrangements so this did not cause too many problems on the day. As a result of feedback received from Presiding Officers we will be looking again at the design of the ballot paper because of some difficulty in tearing the papers out from the books.

2.52 The Count

On the whole the central count at Moorways Sports Centre went very well. The most notable issue was the delay between the verification of the majority of the postal votes and ballot boxes from polling stations and the receipt of postal votes handed in at polling stations. The delay was caused by these packs being taken back to the Council House for scanning and then brought back to Moorways. Because the whole scanning process was new to us it was decided to follow this approach to minimise the risks caused by equipment breaking or technical problems. Although a repeat of this arrangement would not be ideal, there would be a number of issues that would need to be resolved before moving the whole process up to Moorways including; finding somewhere to accommodate the equipment, network connections, additional power points, the purchase of additional hardware. While these issues could be addressed with adequate planning, testing, additional resources and contingency arrangements back at the Council House in the event of equipment failure, there would need to be an assessment whether this additional cost and workload is worth pursuing. In any event there would still be a delay between verifying and sorting, this is unavoidable.

2.53 We also received some adverse comments from candidates and agents about the quality of some of the counting staff. While this has always been an issue because on the whole we do not get to meet the staff before the Count, it was more noticeable because a number of poor staff were concentrated on the Count tables for particular wards. We are taking steps to make sure that in future years large groups arriving together are split up between counting tables, but it does raise a larger issue about obtaining staff for the count. Despite increases in the rates paid for Counting Assistants we still struggle to appoint the numbers required. Feedback shows that many good quality people are not prepared to turn up to Moorways in the late evening until possibly after 3am unless the rates are increased significantly and even then we may struggle. In the past we have used polling station staff but have concluded that it is not acceptable, in terms of both performance and health and safety, to ask people who have been working on a polling station from 6.30am until 10am to remain for the Count.

2.54 There are a number of radical options available which could address this issue and issues around the allocation of staffing resources in the elections team on polling day. These options range from reducing the number of counting tables and each table being allocated a number of wards to count to changing the day on which the Count is held. We will look at the issues and examples of best practice from other Councils and make recommendations to the Council on the conduct of the Count at future City Council Elections. We would be interested to hear the views of the Commission on this matter.

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Background papers: None

List of appendices: Appendix 1 – Implications
Appendix 2 – Action Plan.

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

- 1.1 There are cost implications for implementing most of the actions identified in the Action Plan. In the 2006/07 and 2007/08 budget settlement approximately £85,000 was provided by the Department for Constitutional Affairs, now the Ministry of Justice, specifically to cover some of the costs of implementing the requirements arising from the Act. In both years when setting the budget the Council has agreed to allocate this funding directly to the Electoral Services Budget. Most of the proposals within this report can be contained within this funding, but certain aspects may require additional resources to progress such as; changes to the count arrangements, staffing electoral services on election day and procuring additional equipment.

Legal

- 2.1 The conduct of elections is covered by a number of pieces of legislation and supported by regulations and guidance from the Electoral Commission.

Personnel

- 3.1 The Electoral Services Team comprises three full-time equivalent posts. This was increased from two full-time equivalent posts in October 2006. Benchmarking shows that Derby is still under resourced compared with other similar sized authorities. This report and the resultant action plan demonstrate that the volume and complexity of electoral services work has increased significantly over the last three years.
- 3.2 The planning process required to implement the action plan will need to take another look at the staffing levels in electoral services. A review of electoral services was carried in anticipation of the new legislation which introduced a new post to the team. Now the legislation is in place and various elements have been tested in a live election it is appropriate that staffing levels be re-examined.

Equalities impact

- 4.1 None.

Corporate priorities

- 5.1 By improving the services provided by electoral services the action plan contributes to the Councils priority of Making residents proud of their neighbourhoods by attempting to increase participation in decision making and democratic processes.