SUBMISSION BY DEMOCRATIC & LEGAL SERVICES CABINET MEMBER

REVIEW OF STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTIONS 2013

1.	PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1   The Staffordshire County Council Elections were held on 2nd May 2013 and the Count relating thereto held on 3rd May 2013.

1.2   This report reviews the operation of the election and count.

2.	BACKGROUND

2.1   Diane Tilley, as Returning Officer is responsible for the administration of elections held in the District whether it be Parliamentary, Parish, District, European, Referenda or County Council elections. Diane is assisted by a Core Support Team and other Officers as appropriate.

2.2   The Staffordshire County Council election was held on Thursday 2nd May 2013 and the Count took place on Friday 3rd May 2013. There were eight divisions which were contested by four candidates in each division.

2.3   Preparations for the elections start **several months** in advance with a Project Team formed comprising the Chief Executive, the Director of Democratic, Development and Legal Services, the Licensing and Electoral Services Manager, the Electoral Services Officer and the Land and Property Manager. Other Officers from the Council are brought in as and when required to deal with specific matters such as IT.

2.4   Some of the numerous tasks that need to be undertaken to ensure a successful election include:

- Booking over 100 polling stations
- Managing contractors to produce poll cards, postal vote packs, equipment, printing of ballot papers and postal votes
- Processing last minute voter registrations, postal and proxy applications
- Appointing over 200 Presiding Officers/Poll Clerks as well as Polling Station Inspectors
- Issuing of postal votes and opening of postal votes upon their return. 4,832 postal votes were received for this election with 7,324 issued.
- Organisation of the Count including appointment of over 100 count staff
- Dealing with Nomination Forms for those standing for election
- Training of polling station staff
- Provision of stationery for all polling station staff
- Publishing Notices including Statement of Persons Nominated, Notice of Election etc
- Following the election, completion of all paperwork and finalisation of election accounts
- Payment of all people involved in the election and count and payment to premise owners
- Completing performance standard information for the Electoral Commission

2.5   Feedback has been sought from staff involved with the election as well as Candidates and Agents to identify possible areas where improvements can be made. A full schedule of comments raised is attached at APPENDIX A and some examples are given below:

2.6   In terms of feedback from Count Staff, Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks, the following key points were identified: -

Training

Training of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks is undertaken by the Director of Democratic, Development and Legal Services. Of the feedback received from those people trained, 89 people thought the training was excellent, 98 people thought the training was good and 5 people thought the training was reasonable. No-one considered the training to be poor.

A point was raised that the training should be at a more basic level for those people working on the elections for the first time. It was also suggested that more time should be devoted to explaining to Polling Staff which documents go into which envelopes at the close of the Poll.

Accommodation/Venues

Concern was expressed about the older wooden polling booths that are used in some stations, although these are being phased out in favour of newer plastic booths. Other points made included the need for improved access for disabled at two stations. We will consider all options for alternative venues, but these are limited given the costs associated with mobile provision. All issues of cleanliness of facilities are addressed to the best of our ability.

General Matters

Another suggestion was that the hours of opening of the poll should be reduced, however, this is set by legislation, the Returning Officer has no discretion. A comment was also made that there should be less polling stations and more voters on each register.

A comment was made that there was a lack of knowledge amongst voters regarding the candidates that were standing and this is an issue that needs to be taken on board by the parties and candidates.

Paperwork/Equipment

Comments made included a request for the Ballot Paper Account, which the Presiding Officers fill in at the end of the Poll, to be made clearer and for the Electoral Register to be made clearer. Comments were made about the quality of the stationery (namely masking tape/Sellotape) that was used. These comments will be taken into account and any improvements that *can* be made will be implemented for the next elections. It is important to note that much of the paperwork and its content is prescribed by the Electoral Commission and we do not have discretion over it.

The Count

A request was made that the arrival and departure time at the count be altered so that it does not clash with the opening and closing of King Edward's School. There was too much 'down time' during the count. Other comments included: - insufficient seating at lunch time and no safety briefing given at the count.

2.7   **Comments from Candidates and Agents**

Attached at APPENDIX B is a schedule of comments received from candidates and agents and some examples are referred to below:

Positive comments were received regarding contact with the elections office in particular how helpful the staff were within the elections office.

Positive comments were also received regarding the staff at the count.

Comments included that the count was well organised and processes and procedures were explained well and a comment was made by one person who had been involved for 33 years in elections saying it was one of the best organised elections ever.

Suggested improvements

There was too long a gap between the verification of the ballot papers and the commencement of the count into candidates. (Notification has to be given in advance of the day of the count, regarding the commencement of the count which was stated to be around 1.30 pm on 3rd May).

It was anticipated the verification of the votes would take longer based on previous experience. The verification of votes went extremely smoothly, however, which caused a longer period of downtime than would have been necessary if the count had started earlier. This is a point that will be factored in, in determining future count times, alongside local considerations, nature of election and anticipated turnout.

A comment was made that a candidate's agent could not see where crosses had been placed on the ballot paper during the verification process. This could have been raised as an issue with the Team Leader at the time.

Concern was expressed that no chairs were available for agents and candidates, which was a legitimate concern and was rectified on the day.

Some concern was also expressed regarding the quality of the PA system which will be checked at any subsequent elections.

It was also felt by some candidate/agents that the process could have been communicated more clearly during the verification and count process and the Returning Officer will take this into account in describing the process at future elections.

Some concern was expressed regarding the quality of the catering for candidates/agents.

Conclusion

Overall, the County Council Elections were administered efficiently, both on the day of the poll on 2nd May and at the count on 3rd May 2013, nevertheless there are areas that can be improved upon, most notably a reduction in the time between the end of verification and the start of the count.

All of the points that have been raised will be considered for the European Elections in 2014.

3.	COMMUNITY BENEFITS

3.1   The efficient and lawful administration of elections is key to the democratic process.

4.	RECOMMENDATION

4.1   That the contents of the report be noted.

5.	FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1   Any improvements that can be made in the administration of the elections will be implemented in connection with the 2014 European Elections and the financial implications of any changes will be borne in mind.

6.	RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Risk Description	Likelihood / Impact	Risk Category	How are the Risks being Managed	Responsibility
A legal challenge to the administration of the elections	low / high	reputation/ legal	A risk log is prepared dealing with all aspects of the electoral process to ensure risk procedures are in place in terms of the holding of the election and the count	Electoral Team

Background Documents:

Feedback forms from staff, candidates and agents on the 2013 County Council Elections

	LOCATION	COMMENT	THEIR SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT	ACTION	CATEGORY
1	Count	When meeting & greeting candidates and their guests unsure about where they were allowed to go	Briefing about candidates and protocols etc before the count	Staff on reception were new to the process. Review and improve training for reception staff	1
4	Count	Some POs tried to park on the road and walk the wrong way at the Count Venue	Inform all PO s they must follow set route, there are no exceptions	Reinforce process at training event. Will depend on election e.g. EU count on Sunday	1
5	Count	Ballot papers folded in four made opening them difficult.	Need to stress at PO training how ballot papers should be folded	Reinforce at training but cannot control individual voters response/action	1
6	Count	At receipting some PO put used ballot paper counterfoils in their rubbish bags which caused some delay as they had to be retrieved	Re-emphasize at training the words "counterfoils" and "fully used books" are used specifically both there and in any written guidance. Also that Polling Station Supervisors are asked to check this specifically on their second visit of the day and that those who take in the black bags at receipting also ask before the PO come down the line	Reinforce process for where documents go at end of polling	1
8	Count	Black Sacks handed in without numbered tags and with documents in that were needed at the count causing delays as bags had to be opened	Spare tags with string attached to be given to receiptors. Improved training regarding contents of black bag	Reinforce at training; as 6 above	1
9	Count	Candidates, guests etc should watch in silence and not tell the count assistants they have "missed one"	Tell them " 1 metre" rule so not too close to tables	Links to comments by candidates. Need balance between purpose of agents presence and disturbance to count staff	1
25	Polling		Increase font size on slides at training session and incorporate actual paperwork to be actioned on data slides so that the precise actions are demonstrated	Noted. Training session to be reviewed	1
26	Polling	Lack of adequate parking facilities when collecting box	Perhaps collect boxes later when parking would be easier	We try to stagger collection times and will seek continual improvement	1
28	Polling	PO training to be same day as picking up ballot boxes to save one journey	Remove one PO session	Prevents opportunity for reinforcing key messages and questions	1
30	Polling	Voters did not look at signage where multiple stations were in one building causing confusion on which polling station to go to.	Use third polling clerk to direct voters to correct polling station	Reinforce in training. This is the purpose of a third clerk	1
31	Polling	Difficulty climbing stairs and congestion on stairs to the designated area for checking contents of ballot box on collection	Weather permitting, in the past it has been easier to check ballot boxes on the car park	On balance process worked better but will be considered to achieved continual improvement	1

Cat 1 = Training
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Cat 6 = Roles

	LOCATION	COMMENT	THEIR SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT	ACTION	CATEGORY
38	Polling	In training session go through which documents go into which envelope to help new PO's at the end of polling		Review and improve training	1
61	Polling - Edingale	Not clear where used counterfoils were to be put.	Needs to be covered better at training	Reinforce at training	1
63	Polling - Fradley	Suggest more attention to first timers at training session	Need not be Richard or an officer - an experienced PO could spend 10 minutes talking through what to expect at a poll station	To review training process; use of experienced PO would be good	1
79	Polling - Scotch Orchard	Additional instructions to PO para 12 (e) is ambiguous. Not clear which bag should be tied with tag.		Reinforce in training	1
85	Polling - Wigginton	Ballot paper account not as user friendly.		Format set by electoral commission. Reinforce at training	1
15	Count	More seats required for candidates		Agreed	2
17	Count	Sound system could be improved, difficult to hear at the end of the room		Check audio/microphone and ensure sound check carried out	2
25	Polling	Some voters did not recognise new polling booths and wanted to only use wooden booths	Do not mix old and new booths at the same polling station	Old wooden booths hard and heavy to erect. Noted mix not preferred	2
29	Polling	Wooden polling booths cumbersome to put up and take down and splinter	Supply modern plastic polling booths	See 25. Old booths being phased out	2
32	Polling	Temperature of the polling station		Noted. Advised in training	2
42	Polling	Too far to travel to polling station from home (PC)		We always consider allocations of staff to venues	2
48	Polling - Alrewas	Several people tripped up over the step due to change of light (bright light outside, dull inside) and height of step	Need a ramp in place	Looking at alternatives as problem is recognised	2
49	Polling - Anchor Inn	Difficulty in attaching posters to mobile	An A-Board would be ideal	Equipment to be reviewed	2
50	Polling - Anchor Inn	No outside light on mobile and pub car park was unlit		To be checked	2
51	Polling - Anchor Inn	Could not have heater and lights on at the same time as the lights flashed so if it had been a cold day would have been cold in the station		Unavoidable constraint of mobile; all alternatives are considered; costs need to be considered	2
53	Polling - Armitage & Box 94	Unclear which polling station voters should use when there are 4 in the room.	Better system of barriers needed & supply a specific free standing notice board for the lists of roads to be displayed.	To reinforce in training. Use of 3rd poll clerk to direct; advice of Supervisor to be accepted	2

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54	Polling - Boney Hay School	Notice required for side gate to notify voters they need to come to front entrance of the school to vote		Noted	2
59	Polling - Chase Terrace Tech	Not enough large polling notices due to the school being extended and now having two entrances	Extra large notices required	Noted	2
62	Polling - Elmhurst	Difficult trying to recycle/save as many signs as possible	Look into purchasing magnetic signs	This is accepted. Magnetic signs would be cost prohibitive	2
64	Polling - Fradley	Was nice to have the arrangement to use a resident's toilet but felt a bit awkward		Balance of neighbours or port-a-loo considered each election	2
65	Polling - Fulfen	School bells and telephone were rung frequently throughout the day which was annoying		Not able to control	2
68	Polling - Holly Grove	Lack of signage at rear entrance gate	Two large plastic polling station signs needed for rear entrance gate	Noted; will consider cost issues	2
69	Polling - Holy Cross	Difficulty placing polling station board in Chapel Lane had to place on wall sideways		As above but often need improvisation to reduce costs	2
72	Polling - Longwood	No toilet facilities until 10.00 a.m. when the cleaners started work at the pub. Pub staff were unaware these were the only toilets		To investigate	2
73	Polling - Longwood	4 polling booths will not fit in a mobile - 3 is sufficient		3 maximum to be supplied	2
75	Polling - Morrisons	Would be helpful to have instructions for generator with the election information (Mobile)		To ensure access to instant mechanic/engineer	2
76	Polling - Morrisons	One generator between two mobiles is insufficient, no spare capacity.		To review and assess cost	2
77	Polling - Robinson Rd	Mobile toilet ran out of washing gel too quickly		Check supplies previous day	2
78	Polling - Scotch Orchard	One booth with lower shelf for wheelchair users between two stations		Continual shortage of booths is acknowledge. Continually try to improve	2
80	Polling - St Johns & Chadsmead	Access for disabled is not easy		Will inspect and consider alternative	2
84	Polling - Wigginton	Church Hall tucked away off a side lane, local pub more central and may be better location		To investigate and consider	2
86	Polling -Alrewas	Had not used new polling booths before so had problems erecting them	Should be covered in training session	Noted - cover in training	2

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87	Polling - Box 77	Toilets at polling station were in need of a clean		Noted - no alternative venue	2
88	Polling - Hill Ridware	More disabled access signage required		Noted	2
27	Polling	Confusion arises with poll cards	Poll cards to say "You need not bring your polling card with you but it will save time if you do." Also "If you normally wear spectacles for reading, please bring them with you"	Set by Electoral Commission	3
34	Polling	Have less polling stations and more voters on each register to save money		Based on electoral commission guidance	3
37	Polling	Remove open questions from the prescribed questions that require a subjective assessment of answers by PO.		Based on electoral commission rules prescribed	3
39	Polling	Payment was less than in November		Prescribed by electoral commission dependent on type of election	3
41	Polling	For local elections good PO & PC can do multiple wards easily - save money		Best practice prescribed by electoral commission	3
56	Polling - Box 15	Why can't a line be put straight through name & ref no. when voters have been in the same way that appears when it's a postal vote?		Electoral commission guidance to be followed	3
57	Polling - Box 77	Not enough chairs or tables - venue dirty		To be address; no alternative venue	3
60	Polling - Co-op	Reduce hours of opening of polls for non major elections and reduce number of poll stations		Prescribed by law; not a matter of choice or discretion for LDC	3
70	Polling - Little Aston	Did not need three poll clerks.	Maybe at General Election a third poll clerk would be handy	Stipulated in electoral commission guidance	3
71	Polling - Little Aston	So many postal votes on record at this polling station, question the need for a poll clerk		Postal vote numbers are extracted before calculation of required PO & PC as per electoral commission guidance	3
82	Polling - Wall	At rural polling stations where turn out is less than 25% only offer postal votes to save money		Not permissible by law	3
22	Polling		Ballot paper account should be consistent re ordinary and tendered ballot papers. Both should start with total received	Paperwork to be checked and improved where possible	4
23	Polling	Presentation of electoral roll. Struggle with the street number being after the elector's name.	Can electoral roll be set out in three columns House No. - Street Name under which appears the Elector's Name - Elector's Number?	Paperwork to be checked and improved where possible	4

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	LOCATION	COMMENT	THEIR SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT	ACTION	CATEGORY
35	Polling	Masking tape poor quality - not useable		Change supply	4
36	Polling	Sellotape did not stick properly and not enough blue tac to counteract this		Change supply	4
43	Polling	Improved signage required at Whittington Barracks		Noted	4
44	Polling	Slot on ballot box to small to allow ballot paper to be folded off centre		Standard size, fold centrally	4
45	Polling	Payment to be made through bank instead of cheque as you have to wait for cheque to clear		This process is being implemented for next election	4
46	Polling	Do stop the question "Is it a tick or a cross"	Notices to say "Mark your selection with an X"	Notices do indicate this	4
47	Polling	Can the wording be clearer on Ballot Paper Account - Tendered Ballot Papers section on section (a) and (b)		This will be addressed as had already been highlighted by staff	4
52	Polling - Armitage	Polling station number unclear on polling cards	Make number bigger and more visible on cards	To review font size	4
55	Polling - Box 15	Where house numbers on the polling form could you have house number written on the top. One of the poll clerks got confused when looking for the ref. no.		Staff to seek clarity on issue and review paperwork. Reinforce at training	4
58	Polling - Box 77	There is a need for large directional signs which could be laminated which would roll up and be more portable and easier to attach to fencing/wall		This would be cost prohibitive but need for signs noted	4
66	Polling - Hill Ridware	Print the ballot paper number upside down on the paper so it can be checked more easily before it is torn out the book		To consider. Would make receipting easier too	4
67	Polling - Holly Grove	Make paperwork easier at end of day	Could paperwork at the end have colour coded stickers on matching form to envelope?	To consider; could reduce confusion	4
74	Polling - Morrisons	Voters confused between two mobiles	Larger print for road names relevant to each mobile would be helpful	Larger print sizes available at multiple stations	4
81	Polling - Stonall	Where two polling stations at one venue, distribution of numbers of voters were uneven - one station had approx 300 more than the other one		It is not advisable to split streets as this leads to additional confusion. Pragmatic approach taken	4
83	Polling - Wigginton	Ballot papers not neatly stapled together which made it difficult to select just one paper and did not give good impression to voter		Quantity was checked and was within acceptable parameters. Quality has to be balanced against cost when we consider % destroyed/unused	4

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2	Count	Ballot boxes are placed on the floor for collection at an angle so 'agents' can see they are empty but it is not obvious when they are ready for collection	Team Leader to place ballot boxes flat when they have finished with them?	Accepted. Revise approach and build in to process	5
3	Count	Traffic problems arriving and departing	Change arrival/departure times so that they do not clash with the school	Timing always considered but limited options for venue and timing	5
7	Count	Counting Assistant kept getting cramp	Review the equalities aspects of the Counting Assistant role - should we ask if any staff have any particular needs and consider accommodation these. Remind staff they will be sitting for long periods	Agreed	5
10	Count	Too much waiting time		The process this year and proposed timings were based on previous counts. The year's went very smoothly. Each election is different. Time delays are inevitable	5
11	Count	Teams worked well so should try and keep the same teams next time		Agreed	5
12	Count	Did not like catering		We try to offer easy and reasonable priced food. Could ask count staff to bring own lunches as alternative	5
13	Count	Tables a little narrow		Tables are as supplied	5
14	Count	Not being able to get a cup of tea and lack of seating at lunch time		Noted	5
16	Count	Registration time to be later so that there is less time waiting for the start		Process was smoother this year; timing to be reconsidered for each election	5
18	Count	Is it possible to use scales to count votes similar to way notes are counted in banks?		Not allowed by law	5
19	Count	Confusion over start time - asked to arrive 8.45 a.m./9.00 a.m. for 9.30 a.m. start, didn't start until 10.30 a.m.		Noted. Clearer timing to be agreed and communicated	5
20	Count	Did not receive a safety brief at the count venue		Agreed. Include in process in future	5
21	Count - Receipting	On initial receipting tables and only served 14 PO's, partly because were furthest away from the door and a queue formed in front of the desk as PO had to wait to be served at Packet 2 & 6 desks.	Perhaps require more receipters on Packet 2 & 6	Process worked faster and smoother than previous years	5
24	Polling	Less paper	Could some forms be completed electronically?	Within cost envelope as much as possible is done electronically	5

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33	Polling	Lack of voters and quite a few who voted did not know much about the Candidates		Issue for parties and candidates	5
40	Polling	Ensure the Supervisor is more constructive and does not follow the book so explicitly		Review process for Supervisors	6

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EVALUATION OF COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTION 2013

LOCATION	COMMENT	THEIR SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT	ACTION	
Agent	Everything went very well	Less paperwork if possible		
Agent	Most aspects of the election process worked very well. Time between verification and count was too long. Some Counters made it difficult to see for whom a vote had been cast by keeping votes too close to their body	Address the problem with Counters letting the Agents check the voting slip. Shorten the waiting time	Candidates and Agents to raise concerns with Team Leader at the Count and it will be covered in the briefing of count staff.	
Agent	Staff helpful and Polling Stations well run. Very long wait for the final count. Prefer Thursday night for the Count as some people have to work on the Friday	Evening Count and avoid the long gap between the two stages	The hours of Poll were extended from 7 am to 10 pm a few years ago as opposed to 8 am to 9 pm for most Polls. It is unreasonable to expect staff that have been working for 16 hours to then continue to do the Count that evening	
Agent	Well organised on the Thursday. Time lapse between verification and count was too long	Avoid the long gap	This will be factored in when determining future count times.	
Agent	Everything was fine except for time between verification and count	Remind all non Count staff to bring their own lunch	Catering to be looked at for Candidates/Agents	
Candidate	Lack of seating for Candidate etc., could not always hear the results when announced. Very impressed with Count Staff	Provide more seating. Improve PA system	Seating will be provided and the PA system will be checked.	
Candidate	Count efficiently organised and staff were helpful	Too long a gap between verification and count. Catering arrangements were poor	Covered above	
Candidate	Election Team very helpful and patient. The paperwork was laborious and time consuming	Limit the admin side and maybe a clearer PA system at the count venue	The administration of the Count is dictated by legislative requirements.	
Candidate	Good communication from/with elections office. Too long a gap between verification and count	Don't commit to a start time for the count	We are statutorily required to give a start time for the count.	
Candidate	Took too long	Start the verification/count on the Thursday night or at the latest 9.30 a.m. Friday so completed by Friday lunch time	We wil take these comments into account in determining future arrangements	
Candidate	Count went very smooth except for the long delay. Lack of seats. Lack of refreshments	Speed up the process. Provide more seating and refreshments	Covered above.	
Candidate	Needed to visit Council Office on at least two occasions to get the electoral roles for Handsacre/Armitage	Have a system in place for a designated phone contact at the Council offices	There is a number always available to contact the Elections Office.	

LOCATION	COMMENT	THEIR SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT	ACTION	
Candidate	Count went on too long	Start count on Thursday evening	Covered above	
Candidate	Count process too drawn out. Tamworth count was much more expeditious	Speak to Tamworth to pick up a few tips	The Director of Democratic, Development and Legal Services has observed a count at Tamworth. Tamworth is different to Lichfield District in that all Polling Stations are within a few minutes of the count centre and Elections are by thirds.	
Candidate	Appreciated direct contact with elections office, requests for postal votes dealt with promptly. Pleased about service received following complaints about polling cards and that a locked gate was opened promptly on Thursday. Count arrangements not communicated clearly. Gap between verification and count too long	Chairs to be provided and more space for candidates, agents etc. Candidates and their teams treated as an afterthought	Candidates and Agents were certainly not an after thought. Space is quite constrained at the Sports Hall, but every effort will be made to accommodate Candidates/Agents	
Counting Agent	Count well organised except not enough chairs in main hall. Could not find a designated drop-off point outside venue	Designate a drop-off point when parking not required. Provide more chairs in main hall	This will be borne in mind.	
Observer	Parking, reception, issue of security pass were all good as were the location, catering (sandwiches may be preferred) and set up of the room. Too long between verification and count	Try to avoid wasted time between verification and count	Covered above	
Observer	Very well organised except of long gap	Avoid the long gap	Covered above	
Vigilator	Access to the Counters except in one instance where the Counter hid the voting slip so could not see where cross had been placed	Inform Counters that vigilators are not there checking up on them but to ensure that everything is done properly and fairly	This can be covered in the briefing to Counting Staff.	