

Minutes



Listening Learning Leading

OF A MEETING OF THE

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

HELD AT 6.30 PM ON TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER 2015

in MEETING ROOM 2, 135 EASTERN AVENUE, MILTON PARK, MILTON, OX14 4SB

Present

Paul Harrison (Chairman), Nigel Champken-Woods, Margaret Davies, Anthony Dearlove and Bill Service

Also present:

Mr John Fox (Wheatley resident), Mr John Boden (Chairman of Great Western Park Residents Association) and David Slingo (Vice Chairman of Great Western Park Residents Association).

Officers present:

David Buckle (Returning Officer), Margaret Reed (Head of Legal and Democratic Services), Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Sarah Ling (Elections Team Leader), Philippa Rugman (Electoral Services Officer)

Mr Service chaired the meeting until the arrival of Mr Harrison (Chairman) during minute 9.

6 Apologies for absence

None

7 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 6 January 2015 as a correct record and agree that the Chairman sign them as such.

8 Declarations of interest

None

9 Final report of the Returning Officer on the delivery of the May 2015 Elections - Henley, Oxford West and Abingdon and Wantage parliamentary constituencies; South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts; and various parish and town councils

Mr John Fox addressed the committee on his views concerning Wheatley Merry Bells polling station at the May elections.

His address covered the following points:

- The rights of tellers were not clear in the Electoral Commission guidance;
- The tellers did not wear name tags;
- The apron and wooden porchway on the front of the Merry Bells polling station had multiple tellers which was intimidating for some voters;
- The tellers were asking for detailed information from voters, sometimes in an aggressive manner.

David Buckle, Returning Officer, explained that neither the presiding officer nor the polling station inspector had reported any problems at the polling station. There was a police liaison officer on duty that day. Any reported issues would have been dealt with by the police, who are responsible for matters outside of the polling station. Officers agreed to inform the Electoral Commission of Mr Fox's comments regarding their guidance for tellers and to attach his letter to the minutes of this meeting.

The returning officer presented his final report to the committee. The committee discussed the following issues:

- Paragraph 19 regarding the absent votes which were not sent abroad. The returning officer explained that although this was an unfortunate error, it was mitigated by offering proxy votes to those affected. An estimated 123 voters, at most, were affected across the three parliamentary constituencies.
- Paragraph 21 concerning the second issue of absent votes in Oxford City. This error was due to a data transfer issue. The returning officer referred to his recommendation that protocols for data transfer with both Oxford City and Cherwell should be put in place ahead of the next cross boundary election to ensure this error is not repeated.
- Paragraph 18 which details parish ballot papers for Watlington parish were erroneously sent to voters in North Hinksey and Wheatley. Officers clarified that this was only the second issue of postal votes which were sent out so only small numbers of electors were effected, about 70 in each instance. This issue was quickly identified and those affected were hand delivered a correct ballot paper within 24 hours of the error being discovered.
- Willowbrook polling station. Officers explained that as this was the only station which there were significant queues, it was not thought to be an issue with staffing levels. The combination of the parliamentary, district and parish elections meant issuing ballot papers took more time. In order to improve the situation polling station inspectors were sent out to manage queues with police assistance. Officers would review the provision of polling places prior to the next scheduled elections in May 2016.

- The use of counting sheets rather than grass skirts as a method for counting votes. The committee agreed that grass skirts offered a more transparent method of counting. Officers agreed to review the options for counting votes in multi-member wards in time for the district and parish elections in 2019.

The committee discussed the order and accuracy of the electoral registers. Officers clarified that work was currently being done with the elections software provider, Xpress, in order to improve how registers are run from the system.

The committee noted and supported the key action points and recommendations in the returning officer's report and were satisfied these measures would alleviate issues going forward.

10 Community Governance Review-Great Western Park

Mr David Slingo (vice-chairman) and Mr John Boden (chairman) of the Great Western Park Residents Association addressed the committee in support of a petition to establish a new parish council for that part of Great Western Park within South Oxfordshire. Mr Slingo clarified that although the petition was not submitted in time for the previous community governance review, the Residents Association still considered it a pertinent and valid petition. Mr Boden then addressed the committee and summarised the reasons, contained in the letter attached to the report of the head of legal and democratic services to this meeting, why the Great Western Park Residents Association would like to establish a parish council.

The committee considered the report of the head of legal and democratic services on a petition request for a community governance review of the Great Western Park area of South Oxfordshire. The committee considered that because the majority of development had not been completed it would be premature to undertake a review. Any consultation conducted now would not take into account the views of the numerous future residents of the area. The committee agreed that a review should not commence until the construction and occupation of 75% of the homes on Great Western Park.

RESOLVED: not to undertake a community governance review of Great Western Park (the establishment of a parish council for the area) at this time, but to review the situation when 75% of the development is complete and occupied.

11 Further community governance review requests

The committee considered whether to invite parish councils to submit further proposals for changes to community governance arrangements. The committee considered that as a major review had just been undertaken the council would deal with issues on an ad hoc basis in response to requests rather than inviting another full review.

The meeting closed at 7.49 pm

Chairman

Date

ISSUES RAISED BY MR JOHN FOX – A WHEATLEY RESIDENT

I've lived in Wheatley (London Rd) 42 years. I also did my stint as a parish councillor when pterodactyls flew overhead. In June this year at the first post-election WPC meeting I was the member of the public who raised the behaviour problem on Polling Day at the Merry Bells.

On Election Day 8 May before voting ended I wrote to David Buckle SODC Electoral Officer, and copied to Joanna Simons, OCC. My letter to them was also read out to the WPC in June with an accompanying letter and more information. I appreciated the respectful hearing which councillors gave to my concerns which I know for certain are shared by others. Let me summarise them so far.

The following have come to my attention:

- outright **'bullying' or harassment** (two tellers, from two parties, were challenged publicly and named to me afterwards
- **no name tags** on tellers. In fact tellers cannot be distinguished from activists.
- **too many people on the narrow (10-15 feet) apron in front of the Merry Bells** One WPC councillor described it as 'quite a party atmosphere' . I likened it to drinkers clustered outside at the pub door.
- **the 'gauntlet' of tellers in the wooden porchway** - intimidating *or perceived to be* incriminating. Both are criminal offences. Local authority 'Tellers' Advice' (Parish Clerk has copies) demands **'numbers should never be capable of being seen as intimidation in any way'**. One WPC councillor called blocking the porch 'an invasion of body space'
- the demand by one **for a phone number from a current WPC councillor**. (My neighbour claims to have been a **sked outright about his voting** at the previous election)
- **three of us, complete strangers, requested the supervising official on 8 May to clear the porch**, which she did: the porch filled as soon as she went back in
- A lady stood on the corner at the bottom of the Car Park steps and told me **'I don't want to go in there'. She had come to vote.**

It is now more than three months since I sent my initial concerns to Mr Buckle (elections@southandvale.gov.uk). I have had no response at all, not even to acknowledge receipt. I know the fire at Crowmarsh disrupted many things, but an acknowledgement would have helped. I read this officer's interim report on the conduct of elections in which it seems all is well on his patch.

Where do we go from here ?

This morning I met an old villager with a record of service - I told her of my concerns and that I was raising the matter, to which her reaction was 'About time too'. I believe the porch should be off limits. The apron should also be free of crowding and of activist-spectators. The numbers should be limited as *Tellers Advice* requires and individuals made identifiable. I know this year's elections were unusual - three on one day - but it will happen again, and we have the EU referendum coming up soon. At the end of the day if only one person is being intimidated or even feels intimidation, we should be taking it seriously.

Best wishes

John Fox