

# **BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**Committee:** General Purposes Committee

**Date of Meeting:** Tuesday, 5 November 2024

**Time:** 6.35 pm (or at the conclusion of the meeting of the Trustees of the House of Industry Estate Management Committee being held that evening, whichever is later)

**Venue:** The Council Chamber, Borough Hall, Cauldwell Street, Bedford, MK42 9AP

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## **AGENDA**

## **Introduced by**

**1. Questions**

Chair

*To consider any questions from members of the public and Members of the Council.*

**2. To receive any apologies for absence**

Chair

**3. Minutes**

Chair

To confirm the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 10 September 2024 (copy enclosed).

**4. Disclosure of Local and/or Disclosable Pecuniary Interests**

Chair

*Members are reminded that where they have a local and/or disclosable pecuniary interest in any business of the Council to be considered at this meeting they must disclose the existence and nature of that interest at the commencement of that consideration, or when the interest becomes apparent, in accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct.*

**5. Constitution Review (briefing note of the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer copy enclosed)**

D&ES Mgr &  
SSO

*To receive a brief update on current progress regarding the Constitution Review (copy enclosed).*

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|----|--|-----------------------------|
| 6. | <b>Feedback from Elections in 2024 and preparations for elections in 2027 (report of the Chief Executive copy enclosed)</b><br><i>To receive an update from the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer in election related matters from 2024.</i>  | CEX                         |
| 7. | <b>Committee Work Plan 2024-2025 (copy enclosed)</b><br><i>To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025.</i>  | Chair                       |
| 8. | <b>Local Government Act 1972: Schedule 12A (as amended) - Exclusion of Public</b><br><i>To consider whether to pass a resolution under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting on the grounds that consideration of the following item of business is likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act as amended.</i> | Chair                       |
| 9. | <b>Review of Corporate Management Structure (report of the Chief Executive copy enclosed)</b><br><i>To outline the review of the Council Corporate Management Structure.</i>   | CEX                         |
|    |  | L CHURCH<br>Chief Executive |

To: Each Member of the **GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE**  
**(Councillors Atkins, Coombes, Hendrickx, Meader (Vice-Chair), Spice, Thapar and Vann (Chair))**  
All other Members of the Council for information

Democratic Services Contact Officer: Lynn McKenna, Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Tel: (01234) 228193  
Email: lynn.mckenna@bedford.gov.uk  
Date of Issue: 28 October 2024

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*In providing its services, the Council aims to give equal access to everyone and will make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of members of the public with disabilities who wish to attend this meeting. If you would like to know more about access arrangements or if you would like arrangements to be made to enable you to access this meeting, please advise the Democratic Services Contact Officer whose details are given above or Textphone (Minicom): 01234 221827.*

10 September 2024

## Agenda Item 3

For publication

### AT A MEETING

of the

### GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

held at 7.50pm on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of September 2024  
in the Council Chamber, Borough Hall, Cauldwell Street, Bedford, MK42 9AP

**PRESENT:** Councillor Vann (Chair)  
Councillors Atkins, Hendrickx, Spice and Thapar

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Coombes and Meader (Vice-Chair).

Also in attendance: Councillor McMurdo

Officers in attendance: L Church, Chief Executive; L Phanco, Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support; M Birtles, Head of Property Services; L Blue, Manager for Democratic & Electoral Services and Statutory Scrutiny Officer; and L McKenna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

## 12. QUESTIONS

### Councillor McMurdo – Question

I wish to raise a constitutional matter with the Committee in relation to agenda item 14 of tomorrow evening's meeting of the Executive regarding Bedford Business Improvement District (BID). I note that we have Board representation on the BID and in the report, we're questioning the BID's governance where I have looked back over previous minutes and cannot see that the BID has been called to any scrutiny committee in recent times. The report speaks frequently about the Council and its position that it does not agree with a lot of the matters going on within Bedford BID's operations and governance, and I want to make it clear, that constitutionally there is a clear

distinction between the Council and the Executive, and this is at best fuzzy in this report. It is without doubt that the report is silent on more than it is obvious. There are serious risks and reputational damage associated risks, therefore let me leave you with the following:

- i) Redundancies whereby if the vote no is successful, there will be eight redundancies;
- ii) An empty property that the BID office presently occupied; and
- iii) As suggested in the report, it might well be replaced probably by another BID which would not free up the Council from its TUPE obligations.

Therefore, will the Chair allow me to ask, through this Committee that we seek clear clarity around the constitutional issues regarding this report and what it is recommending, as I do not believe that it is constitutionally sound. I refer to page 14(10) to the report for tomorrow evening's meeting and previous minutes from 19 September 2019, item 22; I have looked and cannot see that particular item. Therefore, I ask that this matter is seriously looked at from a constitutional standing point as I consider it to be seriously flawed.

#### Reply by the Chair

As this relates to a meeting tomorrow, it is not something that we can comment on itself during this meeting. However, due to the seriousness of the constitutional concerns that you have raised, I think that it is reasonable to ask for a written note from either the Monitoring Officer or Chief Executive to be circulated to all Members of the Council prior to tomorrow evening's meeting of the Executive, so that Members can be confident regarding the legal position of the report. Thank you, Councillor McMurdo, for bringing this to the Committee's attention.

#### Councillor McMurdo – Statement

Since this matter has been brought to my attention over the weekend, I have been trying to get to the bottom of it and looking at further matters. If you are making that request through the Monitoring Officer that all Members are provided with a very thorough and clear statement regarding the constitutional matters, I also urge the Portfolio Holder for Town Centres and Planning to check the accuracy of the report.

**13. MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 11 June 2024, be approved.

**14. DISCLOSURES OF LOCAL AND/OR DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS**

There were no disclosures of interest.

**15. ADOPTION OF BEST PRACTICE – ENHANCED DBS CHECKS FOR MEMBERS APPOINTED TO SPECIFIED ROLES**

Further to Minute 44 (5 March 2024), Members considered the report of the Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support regarding the adoption of the Government's recommended best practice to require enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks for Members being appointed to roles or committees responsible for education or social services functions.

In response to a question, the Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support advised that relevant officers were putting in place a process to undertake enhanced DBS for specific members and basic DBS checks for all members of the Council, subject to the Committee's consideration of the recommendations.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:

That the following proposals be agreed and recommended to Full Council for approval:

- i) That the basic DBS check should be required for all Members of the Council every three years.
- ii) That the cost of the basic DBS checks should be met by the Council.
- iii) That authority is delegated to the Monitoring Officer to arrange in liaison with relevant officers for the basic DBS checks to be undertaken.

**16. PENSION FUND – REVIEW OF COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

Councillor McMurdo in his capacity as Chair of the Bedfordshire Pension Fund Committee introduced the report of the Fund Administrator for Bedfordshire Pension Fund which invited Members to consider a proposal to revise the Council's Constitution in relation to the Bedfordshire Pension Fund Committee membership, and if in agreement, to recommend to Full Council that the Constitution be amended.

Members were referred to the Governance Policy Statement as described at section 5 to the report, and the proposed change to Part 8 of the Council's Constitution regarding the number of members and quorum of the Bedfordshire Pension Fund Committee.

**RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:**

That the following proposed changes to the Pension Fund Committee be agreed and recommended to Full Council for approval:

- i) Change non-voting Members to voting Members; and
- ii) Amend quorum to any three Members.

**17. COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024-2025**

The Committee considered its Work Plan for 2024/2025 and acknowledged that some items had been delayed due to the General Election in July 2024, which had been rescheduled accordingly.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee Work Plan for 2024-2025, be noted.

The meeting closed at 8.06pm.

## Agenda Item 5

For publication

### MEMBERS' BRIEFING NOTE

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**Date:** 5 November 2024

**To:** All Members of the General Purposes Committee

**From:** Democratic & Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer

**Subject:** Constitution Review Working Group – Update on Progress

#### 1. Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this briefing note is to provide a short update on the progress of the work of the Constitution Review Working Group and the proposed work programme to bring the current work of the Working Group to a close.

#### 2. Detail

- 2.1 The most recent meeting of the Constitution Review Working Group was held on 7 March 2024 and at this meeting there were various discussions and updates of the Constitution and in particular updates in the following sections:
- Budget & Policy Framework Rules
  - Conflict Resolution Procedure
  - Full Council Procedure Rules
  - Overview & Scrutiny Procedure Rules
  - Public Questions
- 2.2 To conclude the current work of the Constitution Review Working Group two further meetings are being scheduled in November 2024 and December 2024. Members are currently being canvassed for suitable dates.



2.3 The final areas for this stage of the Constitution Review to be agreed are in relation to:

- Planning Procedure Rules
- Contract Procedure Rules due to legislation changes
- Call in Procedure Rules due to recent KC Advice
- Scrutiny Procedure Rules

2.4 A final report will be presented to the General Purposes Committee in the New Year to outline the conclusion of the work of the Working Group and to update members of the next stage of the review process which will involve support from the Local Government Association.

<i>Contact:</i>	<i>Lesley.Blue@bedford.gov.uk</i>
<i>Minutes:</i>	<i>7 March 2024</i>
<i>Background Papers:</i>	

## Agenda Item 6

For publication

### **Bedford Borough Council – General Purposes Committee**

**Date of Meeting: 5 November 2024**

**Report by: Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer**

**Subject: Review of Elections held during 2024 and preparation for Elections scheduled for 2027**

#### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to reflect on the successful organisation of the 2024 Elections and to set out some of the key development areas in preparation for the Mayoral, Borough and Parish Elections in 2027. Please note whilst the Council appoints the Head of Paid Service to the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and Returning Officer (RO) positions, they are statutory roles for which the Chief Executive is independently and personally responsible, rather than Bedford Borough Council as a corporate entity.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 2.1 Subject to the views of the Committee it is recommended that the report is noted.

#### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 3.1 The reasons for the recommendation is to ensure that the Committee are fully briefed on the review of processes undertaken for the elections held in 2024 and the actions for further development for future elections.

*(Elections 2024 Feedback Report /General Purposes Committee/ 5 November 2024)*

Total number of Nomination Papers processed	4
Ballot papers printed	3 500
Ballot papers issued (postal votes and polling)	1 013

#### 4. **THE CURRENT POSITION**

- 4.1 The Police & Crime Commissioner Election in May 2024 and the Parliamentary Elections in July 2024 allowed an opportunity to implement the elections project plan which was based on a project plan put in place in 2023 and further enhanced following an in depth review of electoral services' processes. The revised processes introduced a whole Council approach to provide additional capacity and resilience to the complex logistics of delivering elections. A small number of further areas of improvement have been identified and monthly meetings of the Election Project Board will continue to develop and evolve processes for all future elections.

#### 5. **DETAILS**

##### **Election review and election preparedness**

- 5.1 Statistics for the elections were:

Police & Crime Commission Election – May 2024

Total number of Nomination Papers processed	0 (Luton were the RO so they processed nomination papers)
Ballot papers printed	138 500
Ballot papers issued (postal votes and polling)	28 555
Ballot papers included at the count	28 548
Postal ballots issued	21 789
Postal ballots returned	12 117
Number of Polling Stations	132
Number of Polling Station staff	333
Number of Count Staff	87
Count Venue	King's House

Riverfield Borough ward by election

(Elections 2024 Feedback Report /General Purposes Committee/ 5 November 2024)

Nomination papers received	4
Ballot Papers printed	3500
Ballot papers included at the count	1013
Postal ballots issued	551
Postal ballots returned	368
Number of Polling Stations	2
Number of Polling Station staff	6
Number of Count Staff	7
Count Venue	King's House

Parliamentary Election – Bedford constituency

Total number of Nomination Papers processed	7
Ballot papers printed	72 500
Ballot papers issued (postal votes and polling)	40 880
Ballot papers included at the count	40 880
Postal ballots issued	13 500
Postal ballots returned	11 234
Number of Polling Stations	64
Number of Polling Station staff	190
Number of Count Staff	135
Count Venue	John Bunyan Sports Hall

Parliamentary Election – North Bedfordshire constituency

Total number of Nomination Papers processed	5
Ballot papers printed	78 900
Ballot papers issued (postal votes and polling)	51 785
Ballot papers included at the count	51 785
Postal ballots issued	15 048
Postal ballots returned	12 907
Number of Polling Stations	88
Number of Polling Station staff	222
Number of Count Staff	135
Count Venue	John Bunyan Sports Hall

## Wyboston Borough Ward by election

Total number of Nomination Papers processed	3
Ballot papers printed	3 000
Ballot papers issued (postal votes and polling)	1 919
Ballot papers included at the count	1 919
Postal ballots issued	509
Postal ballots returned	317
Number of Polling Stations	7
Number of Polling Station staff	14
Number of Count Staff	4
Count Venue	John Bunyan Sports Hall

- 5.2 For polls in 2024 additional improvements were put in place. The Police & Crime Commission election was first-past-the-post. There were changes to Parliamentary Constituency boundaries. Changes in Parliamentary boundaries have triggered changes to Polling Places and Districts which were agreed at Full Council on 10 January 2024. Updated Registers were published on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024. As a result of the Elections Act 2022, there were further reforms including Overseas Voter registration and changes to the way that postal votes can be handled and received.

These changes required additional training for staff at Borough Hall and Customer Services and for Presiding Officers and Polling Clerks. This was put into place.

- 5.3 Elections in 2024 required photographic Voter ID. The Electoral Commission campaign had already started on voter ID with the reminder of the documents that can be used and the availability of free voter ID. The closing date for applications was Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2024. <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/your-council/elections-and-voting/voter-id-requirements>. Only 2 voters did not have acceptable photographic ID for the Police and Crime Commissioner Election and 59 voters did not have acceptable photographic ID for the UK Parliamentary Election..

## **Review of elections and lessons learnt**

- 5.4 The lead authority for the Police and Crime Commissioner Election (PCC) was Luton Borough Council, with the Police Acting Returning Officer (PARO) being Robin Porter. This was a relatively straightforward election with a lower turnout which allowed an opportunity to consider whether the election plan was robust. No significant issues were identified but a small number of areas for improvement were considered and built into the emerging plan for a Parliamentary Election.

### **Parliamentary Election and Lessons Learnt**

- 5.5 The Parliamentary Election was a snap Election requiring significant work across the Election Team and wider Democratic and Electoral Team. In addition to the whole Council approach a small number of additional resources were brought in to assist. Overall the plan was effective and built on the PCC election. A number of improvements had been incorporated and the support team were available but were only called on a small number of times. The drive through drop off of ballot boxes worked well; the running of two counts simultaneously was efficient and visibility of the total ballots for each candidate as the count progressed was effective and clear for all in attendance.

There were a small number of lessons learnt which will need to be built into the Election Plan:

- (i) Further work with Government on the on-line portal and the information provided. For example, registration to vote and registration for a postal or proxy are two separate processes and this was not clear enough on the national Portal.
- (ii) A pre-nomination session with Election Agents to confirm when uploads of the Register work best with national updates.
- (iii) Development of training for Presiding Officers to focus on testing of scenarios and risks.
- (iv) Training and assessment of counters to improve on speed, accuracy and skill levels for the different style of count processes, which is particularly important for the local elections in 2027.
- (v) Refinement of the Count Layout to allow space for the Count Supervisors to be able to pass in front of the count table.

### **5.6 Preparation for Local elections in 2027**

The following areas are being developed and actioned in preparation for the local and mayoral elections in 2027:

- (i) Focus on electoral registration and the canvass, including some targeted canvassing in low response rate wards. Some additional funding has been secured and this will be used for a dedicated resource to provide additional capacity in the team to make further improvements to electoral registration processes. .

- (ii) An early briefing in November 2025 and November 2026 with Agents to discuss issues such as uploading of the electoral registers

## 6. **ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED AND REJECTED**

- 6.1 An option to make no changes to the Elections processes was rejected and not considered an option.

## 7. **KEY IMPLICATIONS**

<b>7.1 Legal Issues</b>	There is a wide range of legislation, statute and case law covering elections. The latest changes to legislation were set out in the Elections Act 2022 covered the administration and conduct of elections.
<b>7.2 Policy Issues</b>	There are no specific policy issues related to this report.

<b>7.3 Resource Issues</b>	The funding of the local elections is through a reserve built up over 4 years. All other elections are funded by the Government. The AEA review highlighted that there is a need for additional people resource in the Elections Team and this will need to be resolved. Taking a “One Council” approach to elections will also mean that resources from the across the Council are supporting the elections.
<b>7.4 Risks</b>	<p>The Elections Project Plan contains a risk log which is reviewed as part of the Election Project Board. Key risks identified are around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of staff for Polling Day and the Count – No significant issues have been identified at this stage. Information is being shared to encourage additional staff;</li> <li>• Business Continuity Planning for the Count – An updated Business Continuity Plan is being developed for the count venue.</li> <li>• Adverse weather – This needs to be planned for in more detail if polls take place in winter months.</li> <li>• Sufficient provision for security at the various stages of the election timetable</li> <li>• Implications of the Elections Act 2022 and Parliamentary boundary changes on voters.</li> </ul>
<b>7.5 Environmental Implications</b>	There are no significant environmental implications of this report.
<b>7.6 Equalities Impact</b>	<p>There are specific requirements under legislation relating to the accessibility of polling stations and assistance for voters with disabilities. One of the specific issues identified in the May 2023 election was support for adults with learning disabilities. This is an issue that will be followed up with the Electoral Commission.</p> <p>There will be continued work to raise awareness of Voter ID to ensure that individuals and groups are not disenfranchised.</p>
<b>7.7 Impact on Families</b>	No specific impact on families has been identified.
<b>7.8 Community Safety and Resilience</b>	No Community Safety issues have been identified. However, the recommendation on clarity on teller guidance will ensure that there are not any tensions on this matter.
<b>7.9 Impact on Health and Wellbeing</b>	<p>The One Council approach to elections is to support the wellbeing of everyone involved in the elections.</p> <p>Actions being taken in relation to the approach to the count should help to make sure that the process is completed efficiently to ensure that health and wellbeing is improved.</p>

## 8. SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS AND OUTCOME

8.1 The following Council units or Officers and/or other organisations have been consulted in preparing this report:



Election Team  
Elections Project Team

## 9. **WARD COUNCILLOR VIEWS**

9.1 A number of ward councillors provided feedback on the election.

## 10. **CONTACTS AND REFERENCES**

Report Contact Officer	<i>Laura Church</i>
File Reference	
Previous Relevant Minutes	<i>General Purposes Committee 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019</i>
Background Papers	
Appendices	<i>Appendix A Review of May 2023 Action Plan Appendix B AEA Report Appendix C AEA Response Action Plan</i>

**Action Plan – Arising from the Borough Elections in May 2023**

**1. Electoral Registration and General Updates**

- (a) To review the Electoral Registration process including data sharing across the Council. **To be in place for the 2024 canvas.**
- (b) To provide additional briefings with elected Members and Agents in July ahead of the canvass and in November to debrief the canvass. **To be in place for the 2024 canvas**

**2. Support prior to the Election**

- (a) To provide on a daily basis to candidates and agents on the postal vote turnout broken down by ward. **To be in place for the PCC election in May 2024.**
- (b) To provide candidate and agent briefing in early March ahead of any polls in May; **March 2027. Luton are doing for the PCC.**
- (c) To provide a briefing at the count venue to run through exact arrangements for the Count; **Date to be agreed for late April 2024 and future years.**
- (d) To provide in advance draft protocols and scenarios for recounts for discussion. **Requested from the PARO for PCC and 2 weeks prior to count for any other election.**

### 3. Polling Day

- (a) To provide more practical training for Presiding Officers as part of the training. **April 2024 as part of training and then future years.**
- (b) To provide clear guidance to Polling Station Inspectors and Presiding Officers on the role of Tellers. **Requested from the PARO for PCC and then as part of the training for future years.**
- (c) To provide clear guidance to Candidates and Agents on the role of Tellers. **Requested from the PARO for PCC and then for agreement with agents 2 weeks before Polling Day.**

### 4. The Count

- (a) To agree the preferred location for Count. **3 months prior to any poll at the latest.**
- (b) To review and revise the training provided to Count supervisors, particularly for the Mayoral and Borough elections. **December 2026 for Mayoral and Borough elections.**
- (c) To provide candidates and agents with greater detail of the provisional results at each mini-count site. **To be built into Count plans for each election.**

# **The Association of Electoral Administrators**

## **Review of Electoral Services at Bedford Borough Council**



**BEDFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

### **Report compiled by:**

Peter Stanyon – Chief Executive  
Laura Lock – Deputy Chief Executive

**1 December 2023**

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 In July 2023, the Electoral Registration and Returning Officer for Bedford Borough Council approached the AEA to undertake an independent health check of electoral services delivery in the borough.
- 1.2 As part of the Association of Electoral Administrators' (AEA) ongoing commitment to help our membership develop good practice, we undertake service reviews at individual authorities. This programme is designed to give Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and Returning Officers (ROs) an independent assessment of their electoral services function.
- 1.3 Using a blended approach, we consider areas of good practice and offer constructive challenge. We validate existing working practices and make recommendations for potential changes where we believe they are necessary.

## **2. Reasons for the review**

- 2.1 Laura Church is ERO and RO for Bedford Borough Council. She is also Chief Executive. Appointed in 2021, the 4 May 2023 polls were her first major elections in Bedford.
- 2.2 Bedford's May 2023 elections were not run to the standard the RO expected and hoped to deliver to. She was disappointed with various aspects of the election, particularly the count.
- 2.3 Being new to elections at Bedford, she based assumptions about preparedness on overarching knowledge from her previous authority plus the information presented to her at Elections Project Board meetings. This information was, not unreasonably, generally accepted as accurate, rather than requesting it be evidenced.
- 2.4 The RO is very clear the issues faced in May 2023 must not happen again. She requested we carry out a thorough review to consider all aspects of electoral provision in the Borough.

### **3. Review methodology**

- 3.1 It was agreed the review would be carried out on site over two days. This is longer than a standard review and ensured both electoral registration and the count could be looked at, along with the conduct of the May polls.
- 3.2 The review was carried out by Peter Stanyon, AEA Chief Executive and Laura Lock, AEA Deputy Chief Executive. Peter has over 35 years' experience of delivering elections and Laura more than 20.
- 3.3 In advance of in person interviews held on 20 and 21 November, we reviewed the following documentation:
- Our pre-review questionnaire, which was completed by the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
  - The project plan and risk register for the 4 May 2023 mayoral, borough, parish and town council elections
  - Training and briefing documents for candidates, agents and staff
  - Financial information including election accounts
  - Canvass information
  - Count layouts and communication information
  - Relevant structure charts
- 3.4 After the review, the RO sent us feedback on the May 2023 polls provided by the Conservative group, Liberal Democrat group and individual councillors.
- 3.5 We would like to place on record our thanks for the cooperative way all interviewees approached the review. All questions were answered openly and candidly, which greatly assisted our independent analysis.

## **4. Key Recommendations**

4.1 We have set out below a summary of our recommendations. We will consider each in more detail from section six.

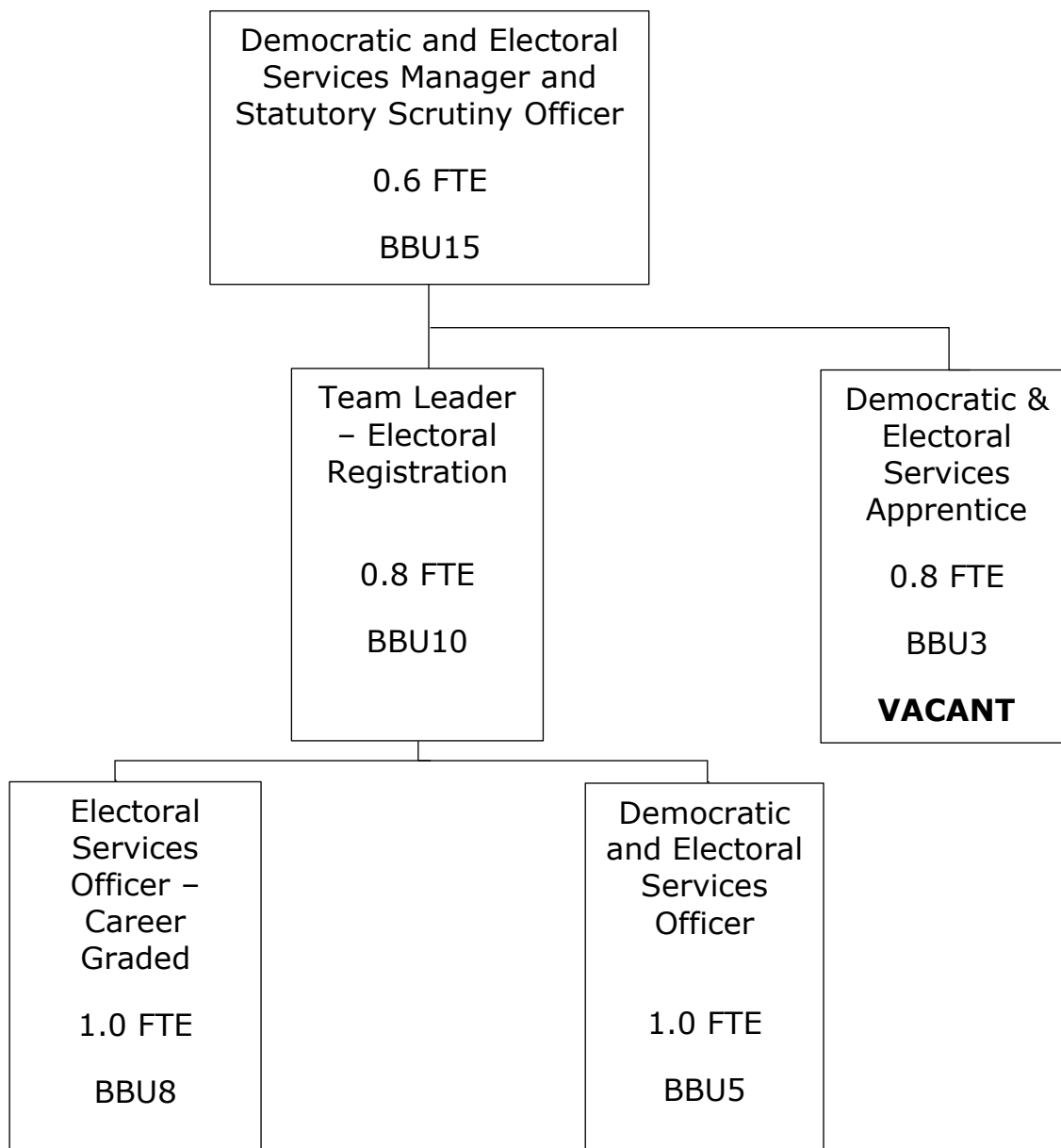
1. To redistribute key election responsibilities to officers outside the elections team.
2. To reconsider the membership and remit of the elections project board.
3. To engage with candidates and agents more effectively before a poll, and with elected members throughout the year.
4. To consider resource in the core electoral services team and the structure of the wider democratic and electoral service.
5. To undertake root and branch reviews of postal vote openings and election counts.
6. To examine how to increase the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register and how registration will be managed ahead of a major poll.
7. To accelerate planning for the next UK Parliamentary general election as a matter of urgency.

4.2 We have outlined some additional operational recommendations for consideration in section 13.

## **5. General position statement**

- 5.1 There are 140,000 electors registered to vote in Bedford, with more than 22,000 postal voters.
- 5.2 The Council has 46 councillors representing 28 wards. There are also 47 parishes in the Borough.
- 5.3 Bedford also has a directly elected mayor, with the poll taking place in the same year as all-out elections to the Borough. This scheduling means a significant peak in workload every four years and increased complexity in key areas, such as nominations and the count.
- 5.4 There are 132 polling stations for a Borough Council election, rising to 163 for the two parliamentary constituencies.
- 5.5 Electoral services sits within a wider team alongside Democratic Services. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager has responsibility for 16 members of staff and directly manages 10 postholders.
- 5.6 At present the core electoral services team has 3.4 full-time equivalents. This includes the assumption the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager allocates 60% of her time to electoral services, with the other 40% dedicated to democratic and governance work.
- 5.7 The structure of the electoral services team is shown below:





- 5.8 The team is hugely dedicated. They want to deliver a great service to the residents of Bedford and work incredibly hard. However, they are a small team, with one team member only recently finishing an apprenticeship programme. They accept the demands of the job and will do whatever is necessary to deliver.
- 5.9 The staff do a great job in many areas, especially given the resources available and the ever-increasing complexity of delivering electoral process. They should therefore be proud of what they deliver.
- 5.10 It is clear however that they take to heart stakeholder criticism that is often fixated on granular issues with little appreciation of what has been achieved and the landscape it has been delivered in.

- 5.11 They currently undertake all key elements of election and registration processes. This includes dealing with all direct customer calls through a dedicated phone line, responsibility for all staffing and recruitment, and managing all key electoral processes in their entirety, including postal vote openings and counts.
- 5.12 It is apparent the core team believes they are operating in an environment that introduces unnecessary risk to service delivery and employee wellbeing. They do not feel the council as a whole understands the complexities involved in running elections. While the team recognises senior leaders understand the importance of elections, the need to treat polls as a priority does not cascade through to all service areas. Although there are pockets of support, the core team does not feel they receive the assistance they need from across the whole organisation.
- 5.13 There is a need for both the core team, and those that support them, to consider measures to:
- reduce the risk to successful delivery
  - raise awareness of the challenges already being faced
  - increase understanding of the challenges due to come, including those in the immediate future introduced by the Elections Act 2022 and UK Parliamentary constituency boundary changes
  - protect the wellbeing of everyone involved.
- 5.14 We believe, in addition to other measures outlined, the core team would benefit from a revised structure. We discuss this in section nine.

## **6. Recommendation One – To redistribute key election responsibilities to officers outside the core elections team**

- 6.1 In the last 20 years, electoral service provision has altered dramatically. Year-round registration, individual electoral registration, the ability to register online, event-led registration, postal voting on demand, and the introduction of a plethora of additional requirements has fundamentally altered ERO and RO duties and responsibilities.
- 6.2 We have long believed electoral services teams cannot deliver democracy in isolation. What was possible 20 years ago no longer remains the case. There are too many deadlines during the election timetable and too much complexity to navigate the peaks in workload.
- 6.3 Many councils now advocate the 'whole council' approach to delivering elections. We strongly support adopting this concept and believe it is necessary to derisk delivery.
- 6.4 We believe the core team is not able to focus on the technical elements of elections and electoral registration delivery because it is trying to do too much. This is bringing risk to the process with mistakes made as a result.
- 6.5 There are likely other council officers who are equally well, or even better placed, to deliver key tasks that do not need detailed electoral knowledge.
- 6.6 We strongly advocate the ERO/RO considering delegating operational responsibility for the following tasks outside the core team for scheduled and national polls:
- **Staff recruitment**, including polling station, postal vote and count staff, plus necessary employment processes such as right to work checks and collecting bank details for payments.
  - **Polling station arrangements**, including liaison with booking contacts and arranging delivery of election equipment.
  - **Postal vote opening**, including all elements of the process from liaison with IT, to booking accommodation, to managing staff, determining signature validity, auditing records and handling provisionally rejected ballots. This should extend to all postal votes opened at the count.

- **The count**, including receiving ballot boxes at the close of poll; all logistical arrangements such as generic stationery; laying out the venue; allocating, training and managing staff; acting as count manager.

6.7 In addition, we believe all electoral services calls should be handled by the council's call centre. This will especially benefit the core team over the election period but should happen year-round.

6.8 It is our view the core team should critically analyse how each function is currently delivered. They should consider which elements need to be delivered by electoral experts and those that could be delivered, with relevant supervision and oversight, by other council officers.

## **7. Recommendation Two – To reconsider the membership and remit of the elections project board.**

7.1 The current Board structure includes:

- The ERO and RO (Chief Executive)
- Three deputy ROs (Director for Environment, Chief Officer for Legal and Democratic and Electoral Services Manager)
- All other members of the core election team
- Two communication specialists (Communications and Communities Manager and Communications Officer).

7.2 It meets every 2-3 weeks year-round, increasing to weekly two-months before a poll.

7.3 We understand the narrow membership of the Board given the way electoral services is managed at the council. However, we believe membership should reflect all areas of responsibility. If the ERO/RO is minded to delegate tasks to a wider pool of officers, it will be imperative to include them on the Board.

7.4 For example, we would expect management of the count to be delegated to one officer, such as the Director for Environment. They would be the responsible officer for the count in the project plan and at the Board. They could then call on those with delegated responsibility – the officer responsible for the receipt of ballot boxes for example – to present at a meeting focusing on count

arrangements. This would provide greater reassurance to the ERO/RO that the planning is progressing smoothly.

- 7.5 We are also aware a Senior Programme Support Officer has started work to review project management of electoral events. We believe this is a helpful resource to bring overarching oversight. However, we believe the current scope of the work will be insufficient to embed the required level of change. We also feel the current core team structure means there is insufficient resource for project management to be their sole responsibility.
- 7.6 We are aware of other local authorities taking a stronger project management approach. Using a project manager who is not part of the core team enables them to make sure electoral event demands do not compromise oversight and scrutiny of progress. We recommend the ERO/RO considers this approach.
- 7.7 In terms of the Board's remit, we believe there should be a stronger focus on electoral registration. Making sure the electoral register is as complete and accurate as possible is vital to mitigate the risk of an increased registration burden at election time. This is particularly important ahead of a general election. It is imperative registration is seen as a more corporate responsibility, with the ERO given access to records held across the council to which she is entitled, to help maintain a complete and accurate register.
- 7.8 Key annual registration canvass decisions should be made by the ERO at the Project Board. We have addressed registration more fully in recommendation six.

**8. Recommendation Three – To engage with candidates and agents more effectively before a poll, and with elected members throughout the year.**

- 8.1 We spoke to four councillors, three from the Liberal Democrats and one from the Conservative Party. The Labour and Green Party representatives were unfortunately unavailable on the day as planned.
- 8.2 After the review, we looked over feedback on the 2023 polls from the Conservative Group as well as Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors.
- 8.3 It is clear there were issues for all political parties, and likely independent candidates, across the board. The main issue was the

election count, but this was by no means the only problem raised. Problems mentioned included republication of the electoral register because of a boundary review; poll card design; polling station staff and tellers; training; communication with candidates and agents and non-receipt of postal votes.

- 8.4 It is also worth noting, 2023 was not an isolated event. Councillors touched on various issues from over two decades, including historically slow counts. However, we feel they do not recognise the part they have played in delays at counts. We do not believe they appreciate the independence of the RO and their personal responsibility. We do not feel they trust the decisions made and put undue, and unnecessary, pressure on key staff. We are also not clear they appreciate it is the RO's decision, and the RO's decision alone, whether to hold a recount, including a 'bundle flick'. Bundle flicks should not be necessary as a matter of course.
- 8.5 Councillors in Bedford have a largely negative opinion of the electoral services team. Work needs to be done from both sides to improve relationships. It must be noted that no members of the team were in place before 2019. There needs to be an appreciation that the current team are not responsible for historic issues.
- 8.6 It is imperative there is more open and constructive dialogue both in advance of any major election and year-round between the elections team and political stakeholders.
- 8.7 While there were three election briefings for candidates and agents, they were not well attended leading to the core team needing to unnecessarily duplicate a lot of information. Non-attendance at key briefings also saw candidates and agents put pressure on the RO during the count as they were not clear of arrangements. It is imperative going forward, that plans are discussed at briefing sessions in advance and candidates and agents understand processes will not be changed during the count. There must be an acceptance that the count has been planned in advance and cannot be changed on the day.
- 8.8 Although candidates and agents appeared happy with the counting boards used for multi-member counts, they did not feel well informed about the count as a whole.
- 8.9 We believe a regular briefing needs to be set up for elected members, and candidates and agents where appropriate, with the ERO/RO and core team to discuss relevant issues year-round. For example:

- a meeting in July ahead of the canvass to talk about plans and see how councillors could help with communications
  - one at the end of November to debrief the canvass and discuss register distribution
  - when applicable, one in February or early March to look ahead to scheduled May polls
  - another once nominations have closed that focuses on postal votes and polling day
  - one at the count venue a week or so before polling day to run through exact arrangements. This should also make very clear the RO's plans for adjudication processes, agreement of results, recounts and tolerances
  - one immediately after the election to capture feedback and consider what went well and where lessons can be learnt.
- 8.10 These meetings would also offer opportunities to talk to members about legislative change, for example postal vote handling and new UK parliamentary constituency boundaries.
- 8.11 We also consider it essential for elected members and political party representatives to engage in and support any service transformation plans, particularly by drawing a line under the past. The ERO/RO has recognised failings from 2023, which is why she commissioned our review. She is committed to delivering successful elections in Bedford. For this to be successful, political stakeholders engaging with the change, while still giving their constructive thoughts and feedback, will be vital.

## **9. Recommendation Four – To consider resource in the core electoral services team and the structure of the wider democratic and electoral service.**

- 9.1 Recommendations in this section are made on the basis of recommendation one being taken forward. We have worked on the assumption the ERO/RO does decide to derisk the electoral process by redistributing key tasks.
- 9.2 It is worth restating that electoral registration has fundamentally changed since 2014, with constant amendment ever since. Nothing we say in this section is a reflection on the willingness of the core

team, who work incredibly hard. The issues are a result of too much work coupled with too much change.

- 9.3 The electoral services team as a whole lacks experience and capacity. Its workload is too great and, as a result, is not delivering to the necessary level. They are carrying a 0.8 FTE vacancy at an apprentice level.
- 9.4 While the team are part of the wider democratic and electoral structure, with a manager overseeing both services, they generally work in isolation.
- 9.5 We believe exploring the capacity democratic services staff could bring at election time would be useful. While some democratic team members help with certain tasks, there does not appear to be a general joint delivery approach.
- 9.6 In terms of the core team, we believe the structure and resource needs changing. We do not agree casual support in the run up to an election will remove enough of the burden. We think year-round registration capacity is needed, with other services supporting peaks.
- 9.7 As far as establishment size is concerned, the Electoral Commission<sup>1</sup> has previously recommended an adequately resourced core team should have a manager plus one full time equivalent staff member for each 40,000 electors.
- 9.8 It should be noted the Commission's recommendations were made in June 2008 and relate to a London Borough, which is not comparable to Bedford. It was an area of relatively stable growth, unlike Bedford. It was prior to the introduction of individual electoral registration in 2014, and canvass reform in 2019, both of which significantly changed electoral registration processes.
- 9.9 There have been significant other burdens added in this period, including Neighbourhood Planning Referendums, Community Governance Reviews, statutory polling district and places reviews, and amendments to election timetables. Elections Act 2022 provisions have added further ongoing administrative burdens.
- 9.10 The Electoral Commission metric is a useful indicator for bare minimum requirements. However, we do not believe it remains appropriate considering the significant and technical changes made to

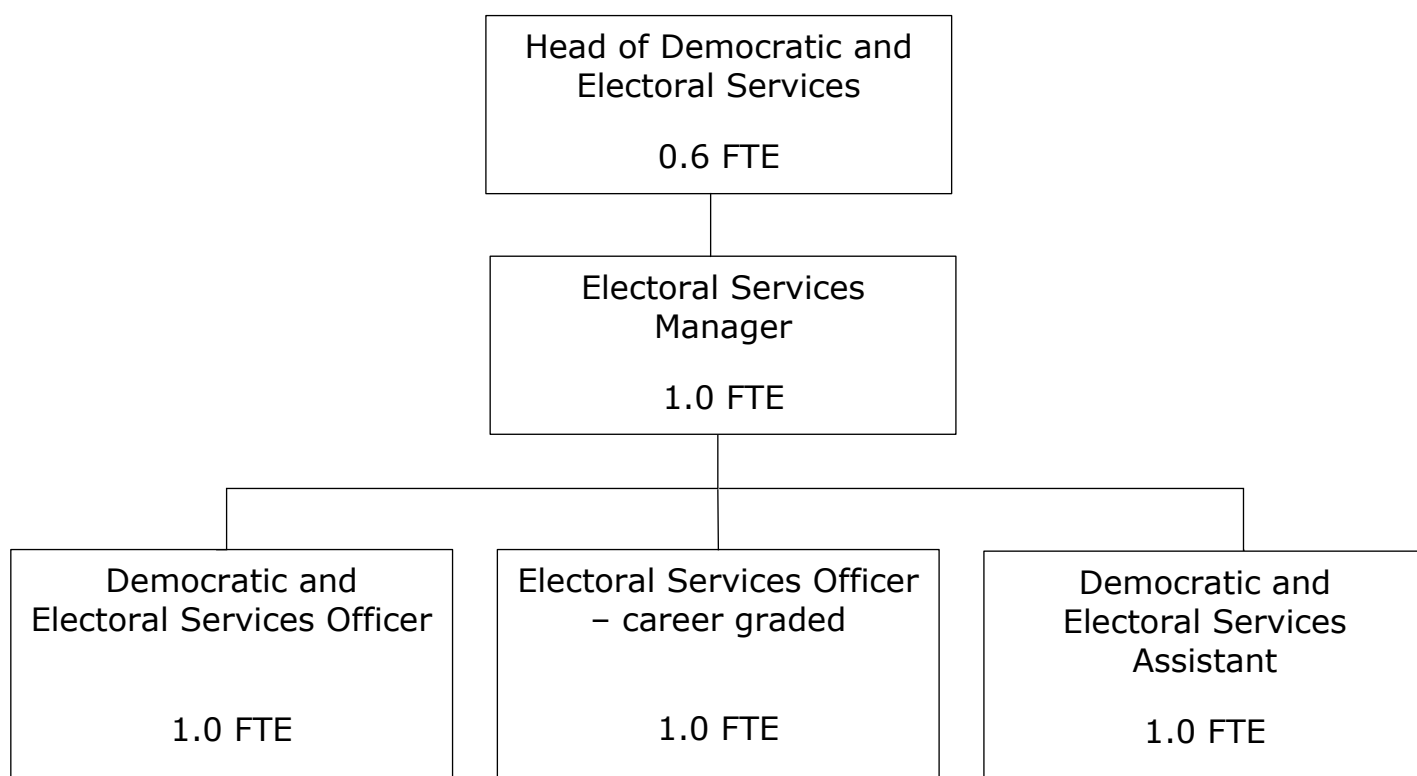
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[https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/electoral\\_commission\\_pdf\\_file/D esigning-A-New-ES-Final.pdf](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/electoral_commission_pdf_file/D%20esigning-A-New-ES-Final.pdf)



electoral processes since 2008. We are clear the core team is under resourced.

- 9.11 We suggest in addition to a full-time manager, a minimum ratio of one FTE for every 35,000 electors would better reflect the needs of the service. This is in conjunction with the recommendations that follow, suggesting elections delivery is supported through enhanced corporate expertise.
- 9.12 Bedford's electorate of approximately 140,000 requires 4.5 full time equivalents (FTE) using the Electoral Commission's 40,000 ratio. The current staffing resource is a manager of 0.6 FTE plus 2.8 FTE staff, equalling 3.4 FTE. The establishment list allocates 4.2 FTEs. Using a ratio of 1:35,000 would see 5.0 FTE in the electoral services team.
- 9.13 We suggest a revised structure that delegates the team's line management. This should increase the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager's capacity to consider wider challenges and focus on key strategic direction. For example, there is currently limited ability to plan for the next UK Parliamentary general election, little work done on accessing data to improve the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register or undertaking procurement exercises. This is all due to capacity, but to deliver a successful service, the manager needs to be able to work at the level they are employed at.
- 9.14 It is equally true the Team Leader is frequently working below her paygrade to 'get the job done'.
- 9.15 While we accept there are other possibilities, and understand local government finances are increasingly squeezed, we would suggest the following may be an appropriate structure going forward.



- 9.16 We have not suggested pay scales for the roles but can provide details of other positions advertised with us if it would be helpful.
- 9.17 This structure should bring the resilience and capacity the team is missing.
- 9.18 Finally, we believe the core elections team should also be able to help with democratic functions as part of a wider integration plan. This will help build relationships, engender a collaborative approach and increase resilience across the whole service.

**10. Recommendation Five – To undertake root and branch reviews of postal vote openings and election counts.**

- 10.1 We feel full reviews of the postal vote opening process and the count are vital. We have outlined below some of the issues we have identified, but this should not be treated as an exhaustive list.
- 10.2 While not as high-profile as an election count, we believe the postal vote opening process would benefit from review. It consumes too much core team resource during the peak two weeks before polling

day, is inefficient and has suffered from a lack of IT infrastructure investment.

- 10.3 We were told 3,000 postal votes can be opened on a good day. However, we were also told that of the two scanners used, one or the other is frequently broken. This leads to staff sitting with nothing to do. The team's efficiency is also impacted by Royal Mail delivery problems.
- 10.4 By way of contrast, another council we work with would expect to open 7,500 to 8,000 postal votes in a day with the same level of staff resource and scanners.
- 10.5 We were also told there were small variances between the number of postal votes counted at the postal vote opening, and the number verified at the count in several wards. Appointing a postal vote opening manager with responsibility for all checks and signing off daily totals would be sensible, as would a review of the processes and paperwork.
- 10.6 In terms of the count, the RO acknowledges the speed and efficiency of this year's Mayoral, Borough and Parish election count was unacceptable. Although accurate results were calculated, she accepts she did not necessarily make the most appropriate decision on some aspects of the event. In hindsight, she trusted that work was being done in the weeks leading up to the count to ensure delivery of an efficient and effective count without asking for detail about the robustness of the plans.
- 10.7 We identified five key issues from May 2023 that should be addressed before the next major election, likely to be the Police and Crime Commission poll on 2 May 2024, but possibly the next UK Parliamentary general election due no later than 28 January 2025.

## **1. The number of count assistants and supervisors**

- 10.8 We believe there are currently too many count assistants with insufficient supervision.
- 10.9 Working with fewer people, who are utilised full-time due to some basic changes to processes, would create a more efficient system.
- 10.10 For May, teams varied in size between eight and 12 count assistants with one supervisor. A team of up to 12 people would verify one ballot box, which, based on the May 2023 verified totals, could have anywhere between 41 and 1,178 ballot papers in it. We recommend looking at good practice elsewhere. For example, we are aware of an

exemplar authority that uses teams of nine across the count, generally working as three groups of three. Each is supported by a count supervisor and an assistant count supervisor.

- 10.11 We believe count supervisors should be given the ballot paper account to stop any bottlenecks at the top table. This should produce a quicker verification.
- 10.12 We also urge the RO to consider giving count supervisors a laptop to collate multi-member ward results, using the assistant count supervisor to keep feeding the teams ballot papers. They should also explore options to network computers so the top table can monitor progress.

## **2. The count manager**

- 10.13 When asking those we interviewed outside the core team who was responsible for managing the count, nobody was able to confidently say.
- 10.14 We feel the RO needs to appoint a Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) to manage the count. They would then act as a single point of contact for all issues. They need to support the RO by giving clear advice on count progress, and be given the authority to make decisions. We suggest the count manager should also have responsibility for managing ballot box receipting, the reception desk and documents received from polling stations.
- 10.15 The count manager DRO should be on the Project Board as lead contact for the count, signing off all training and procedures, including the recount procedure.

## **3. Communication and training**

- 10.16 Communications with candidates and agents was not consistent, with some reporting they did not receive key information.
- 10.17 The Count Information pack was welcomed, but could have included additional information such as the count layout and where the designated location for sharing provisional results would be.
- 10.18 We were told count supervisors did not receive specific training on their role, although they did attend the count assistants' training. We firmly believe there should be a full 'dress rehearsal' with all senior count staff ahead of the 2024 polls. We believe this should be extended to all count staff ahead of May 2027.

- 10.19 We also feel ahead of May 2027, there should be a count walkthrough with candidates and agents. This would give them an opportunity to understand processes in detail, especially around the movement of ballot papers, where provisional results will be given and how any recounts will be conducted - both bundle flicks and full recounts.
- 10.20 We believe senior count staff should be specifically trained on recount processes so they can confidently manage any process for their team.

#### **4. Movement of ballot papers**

- 10.19 We are not entirely clear on all details of the count as our review did not solely look at count processes. However, we believe all mayoral ballot papers were left within count teams while the provisional result was shared with candidates and agents.
- 10.20 We believe this decision led to much of the count delay. Traditionally for polls electing one candidate, ballot papers are counted in mini-counts before being moved to a central point.
- 10.21 We were also told about ballot papers being added to ward boxes from other areas of the count without a clear explanation about where they were from. Stressing to count staff the reason for and importance of moving ballot papers, and the level of expected transparency needed for candidates, agents and counting agents, is key.
- 10.22 We would suggest any review looks at how many ballot papers are included in each mini-count. It should design a system to make sure counting agents are satisfied by the mini-count total meaning ballots can be transferred to the centre. Any bundle flick can then take place within that team. This would mean the RO can be confident each mini-count has been signed off by counting agents, only needing to run a tabulation check of mini-count totals if the result is close.

#### **5. Recount procedures**

- 10.23 We feel the RO was underprepared for a highly likely recount request.
- 10.24 All recount scenarios should be planned for in advance with clear written protocols for each option.
- 10.25 Draft protocols can be shared with candidates and agents for information in advance and discussed. This will give political stakeholders the opportunity to not only understand, but also comment on, the RO's plans.

- 10.26 It should be clearly understood by everyone involved that it remains the RO's decision whether or not to grant a recount and the circumstances she would, and would not, agree to one. She should also be clear about the type and extent of recount she will consider under each scenario.
- 10.27 Candidates and election agents must understand and respect the RO's independent role. They are performing a role distinct from their substantive council position and are ultimately personally responsible to the courts. They are responsible for all decisions in relation to the poll and their decision is final. This includes any actions of their deputies with appropriate powers. Any decision around recounts, and related decisions, need to be accepted as being within the RO's gift.
- 10.28 While we can help with either or both reviews, we equally think these could be managed by council officers adept at business process re-engineering.

**11. Recommendation Six – To examine how to increase the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register and how registration will be managed ahead of a major poll.**

- 11.1 We do not believe the electoral register is as complete and accurate as it could be.
- 11.2 The electoral services team does not have access to other council records to help with automated data-matching and data-mining.
- 11.3 While they can access some records, namely council tax, checks are made manually on a record-by-record basis.
- 11.4 No data is provided by the education team, which would be particularly beneficial given the recognised issue canvass reform has brought to identifying 16 and 17 year old attainers.
- 11.5 Using data can not only help make sure everyone eligible is given the opportunity to vote but can also deliver cashable savings during the annual canvass.
- 11.6 Bedford is a major growth area, but information on when new properties become occupied is not made available to the team in an organised way.

- 11.7 Looking at housing completions and register growth shown in table one below, even with franchise differences, it is clear more needs to be done.
- 11.8 The core team are aware of the issue but have not yet addressed it.
- 11.9 We believe the ERO should be using the Project Board to focus on data sharing issues. She should also be monitoring canvass progress and plans for each stage of the project from July to December.
- 11.10 Since online absent vote applications were introduced in late October 2023, many councils are struggling with functionality around paper application processing. The ERO being alert to potential postal voting resource demands would be sensible. This could be done through the Project Board.
- 11.11 This leads to the need for the ERO to work with the core team and consider resilience around the registration process. This is particularly important in years where significant changes are required. For example, in 2024, there is a need to review the eligibility of European Union nationals during the annual canvass period, which will impact on resources.
- 11.12 Voter registration is now largely accepted as being event led. Ahead of the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election, 3.85 million people registered to vote<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, it was clear there was a huge increase in the number of people registering in Bedford, as shown in Table One.
- 11.13 Now absent vote applications have moved online, we fear the volume of applications will significantly increase.
- 11.14 Thought should be given now about who can help process applications for registration and postal votes. This is a particular concern as the next UK Parliamentary general election will include an extension to the overseas franchise. This means many more British citizens living overseas will be eligible to register to vote, with very complex and lengthy processing times. The core electoral services team will need to be able to focus on these more involved applications.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-overview-2019-uk-parliamentary-general-election/depth-delivering-2019-uk-parliamentary-general-election>

**Table One**

Register Publication Date	Local Government Electors <sup>3</sup>	Electorate Increase	Financial Year	Summary of Net Housing Completions <sup>4</sup>
1 December 2015	126,671		2015/16	964
1 December 2016	128,200	1,529	2016/17	1,255
1 December 2017	129,657	1,457	2017/18	1,350
1 December 2018	129,244	-413	2018/19	1,359
1 December 2019 <sup>5</sup>	132,441	3,197	2019/20	1,026
1 December 2020	133,441	1,000	2020/21	1,199
1 December 2021	133,286	-155	2021/22	1,019
1 December 2022	134,042	756	2022/23	1,465

## **12. Recommendation Seven – To accelerate planning for the next UK Parliamentary general election as a matter of urgency.**

- 12.1 While many areas discussed in this report will apply to the next UK Parliamentary general election, we do not feel enough has been done to de-risk a potential snap poll.
- 12.2 It is possible, and arguably likely, there will only be 25-working days' notice given for the next UK Parliamentary general election, the bare legal minimum.
- 12.3 In addition to the plan for the PCC election on 2 May 2024, we believe the ERO/RO should commission plans for a UK Parliamentary poll on 2 May 2024 – combined with the scheduled Police and Crime Commissioner election – and a stand-alone UK Parliamentary election at some point before January 2025.

<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/elections/electoralregistration/datasets/electoralstatisticsforuk>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/media/6320/download?inline>

<sup>5</sup> Likely impact of UK Parliamentary general election on 12 December 2019



- 12.4 It is particularly important to plan for a short notice combined poll, as the number of postal votes to be processed would double. Changes to polling station and count plans would also be necessary.
- 12.5 We feel procedures and protocols should be worked on now to make sure the ERO/RO and the authority are as ready as possible.

### **13. Other recommendations**

- 13.1 In addition to the key recommendations above, we also believe the ERO/RO should consider:
- appointing a senior polling station inspector responsible for recruiting and training all other inspectors
  - increasing the remit of polling station inspectors to make them the primary contact for polling station staff, including their own WhatsApp group and being responsible for morning check ins
  - expanding the role of the response team to give more resilience on polling day
  - request a business continuity exercise takes place to test back-ups of the Electoral Management Software (EMS) to include the EMS being taken down and reinstalled
  - take HR advice on holiday pay, pension schemes and right to work checks
  - consider how to make sure all levels of council staff understand the importance of elections and supporting their delivery
  - make sure she is happy with the council's approach to delivering the final elements of the Elections Act 2022, especially postal vote handling.

## **14. Summary**

- 14.1 The delivery of electoral services across the UK has experienced significant and ongoing change over the last 20 years. This has introduced challenges for all local authorities. Electoral services teams are no longer able to deliver elections independently. A corporate approach is both recommended and, practically, required.
- 14.2 We have no doubt the May 2023 polls, and feedback after the event, has impacted the wellbeing of core electoral services team members. They are a close team who clearly care about each other and support one another. They want to do a good job and care deeply about making both elections and electoral registration a success – and generally the processes they run are successful. They said ahead of an election they would “work 17-hour days for three months if necessary”. This is not sustainable, and we know the ERO/RO would never want them to feel that was necessary.
- 14.3 However, we are concerned the core team would rather try to do it all themselves than give up responsibility for certain elements of running elections. We believe the ERO/RO will need to be firm about any changes to avoid the team trying to remain in control. Delegating tasks is not enough to bring much needed resilience. The responsibility for key elements of scheduled and major polls needs to be removed from the core team so they can focus on registration, technical aspects and managing the overall programme.
- 14.4 The ERO/RO needs to take a more active role in decision making. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager can help this by making sure the Project Board agenda is designed to help her focus on key areas. The ERO/RO also needs to challenge any areas where she is not confident of being able to fully appraise plans.
- 14.5 Politicians are understandably still disappointed about the administration of elements of the May 2023 polls. We would urge them to give the ERO/RO time to implement the changes we have suggested and support her by constructively engaging when asked for input. By asking for us to review the service, the ERO/RO has demonstrated her desire to improve, and for there to be no repeat of the issues faced in May and at previous polls. She needs to be given the opportunity and collective support to be able to do this.

**Peter Stanyon**

Chief Executive

**Laura Lock**

Deputy Chief Executive

1 December 2023

**Association of Electoral Administrators Review Recommendations Action Plan**

AEA Recommendation	Response and Action	Current Progress March 2023
<p>1. To redistribute key election responsibilities to officers outside the elections team.</p>	<p>Agreed Key areas of responsibility identified outside the elections team for: HR and Payroll Count and Logistics Postal vote opening Polling station inspector arrangements</p> <p>Support for the integrated project plan identified.</p>	<p>Election Payroll set up Lead officer for count identified; site visit undertaken and walk through of plans completed for ballot box drop and count layout. Workshop planned for count process.</p> <p>Postal vote lead identified. Workshop planned for postal vote opening.</p> <p>Polling station inspector arrangements lead identified. Meetings with lead and workshop planned for polling station inspector arrangements</p> <p>Detailed project plan completed and becoming embedded in the team with project management support to monitor and further integrate the project plan</p>
<p>2. To reconsider the membership and remit of the elections project board.</p>	<p>Agreed and project Board expanded.</p>	<p>Membership has been increased to include key lead officers and officers supporting the Leads. Remit and Governance Structure for the Project Board have been agreed</p>

<p>3. To engage with candidates and agents more effectively before a poll, and with elected members throughout the year.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <p>The briefings for the PCC election will be managed by Luton Borough Council as the PARO. A briefing at the Count venue will be put in place.</p> <p>Recommended meetings in July and November will be put in the diary.</p>	<p>Initial briefing with Candidates and Agents led by Luton PARO on 5 March 2024 at 5.30pm</p> <p>Meeting at the venue will be arranged for the PCC when the agents have been confirmed.</p> <p>July and November meetings will be put in the diary and additional meetings when the general election is called.</p>
<p>4. To consider resource in the core electoral services team and the structure of the wider democratic and electoral service.</p>	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Resource and structure need to be considered and agreed structure put into place as quickly as possible.</p>	<p>Interim Monitoring Officer and the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager are considering the structure of the service to make recommendations to the Chief Executive. Proposed structure and business plan including liaison with finance on funding for revised structure completed</p> <p>Additional casual support is in place.</p> <p>Recognised the capacity issue needs to be resolved with 1 FTE; but to enable this requires a review of the cost of existing structure</p>
<p>5. To undertake root and branch reviews of postal vote openings and election counts.</p>	<p>(a) Postal Vote Opening Review agreed;</p> <p>(b) Election Count process review agreed. Number of count assistants and supervisors has been considered and a different approach to ballot paper account</p>	<p>As at 1.</p> <p>Both elements will be reviewed as a follow up to the PCC election.</p>

	put into place. (seen at Mid Beds bye-election). Additional training in development. Count Operational Lead identified.	Count Operational Lead in place with assisting officers from within his service area to provide resources for set up, logistics, health and safety and continuity planning
6. To examine how to increase the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register and how registration will be managed ahead of a major poll.	<p>The Elections Team need access to the occupation data from Council Tax rather than completions.</p> <p>Automation options are limited at the present time but will need to be explored.</p>	<p>Further campaigns on Vote Registration are planned including attendance at events with a QR code to take people to the registration portal.</p> <p>Voter Registration to be included on the Council Tax envelope.</p> <p>Discussion with Council Tax to consider refining the information provided to the Elections team.</p>
7. To accelerate planning for the next UK Parliamentary general election as a matter of urgency.	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Project Plans prepared for a number of scenario dates. Blueprint project plan that can be used for all forthcoming elections with amendments to suit the type of election</p>	<p>As set out in the Action.</p> <p>All plans for PCC Election are also being mindful of potential combined poll with Parliamentary Election and implications of a combined poll</p>
8.Appointing a senior polling station inspector responsible for co-ordinating and training all other inspectors	Agreed and Senior Polling Station Inspector identified.	<p>As set out in the Action.</p> <p>Polling station inspector arrangements lead identified. Meetings with lead and workshop planned for polling station inspector arrangements</p>

9. Increasing the remit of polling station inspectors to make them the primary contact for polling station staff, including their own WhatsApp group and being responsible for morning check ins	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>Polling Station Inspectors will have responsibility for ensuring stations open on time.</p>	As set out in the Action Procedure adopted by neighbouring authority has been obtained to amend for Bedford Borough purposes
10. Expanding the role of the response team to give more resilience on polling day	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Role and remit of the Response Team is being developed and agreed prior to the PCC election.</p>	As set out in the Action Work in progress and remits developed on this
11. Request a business continuity exercise takes place to test back-ups of the Electoral Management Software (EMS) to include the EMS being taken down and reinstalled	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>Working with Chief Officer for Technology on how this could be done.</p>	Not progressed to date.
12. Take HR advice on holiday pay, pension schemes and right to work checks	<p>Agreed</p> <p>Advice taken with HR and more involvement from HR specialists into the process.</p>	<p>Reviewing the HR resource required with the HR Service.</p> <p>Separate payroll for elections put into place; and resources to support receipt of Right to Work documentation of staff</p>
13. Make sure she is happy with the council's approach to delivering the final elements of the Elections Act 2022, especially postal vote handling.	<p>Agreed.</p> <p>Reviewed as part of the Project Board.</p>	



**BEDFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

**Agenda Item 7**

**For publication**

# **GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN and ACTION LIST 2024/25**

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## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

### ACTIONS LIST

Action number	Title	Action Owner	Originating Meeting/Item	Due Date/Comment
1.				
2.				
3.				

**N.B. once concluded** – actions should remain on the list marked “complete” for the remainder of the municipal year.



## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

15 MAY 2024			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS
1. Terms of Reference (Annual Item)	To review the Committee's Terms of Reference and proposed delegations from the Committee.	Lee Phanco, Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support	
2. Personnel Appeals Sub-Committee (Annual item)	This report requests the General Purposes Committee, whose responsibilities include the personnel function, to appoint seven Members to a Sub-Committee to hear appeals by staff in respect of dismissal or redundancy.	Lee Phanco, Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support	
3. Appointment of Constitution Review Working Group (Annual item)	To appoint six Members to a Constitution Review Working Group Sub-Committee to identify and consider areas of the Constitution that require review and develop recommendations thereon.	Lee Phanco, Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support	

## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

11 JUNE 2024			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS
1. Committee Work Plan 2024-2025	To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025	-	

10 SEPTEMBER 2024			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS
1. Adoption of Best Practice – Enhanced DBS checks for Members appointed to specified role	To consider a report regarding the adoption of the Government's recommended best practice to require enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks for Members being appointed to roles or committees responsible for education or social services functions.	Lee Phanco, Interim Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer for Assessment, Application and Business Support	Full Council 9 October 2024
2. Pension Fund – Review of Committee Membership	To consider a proposal to revise the Council's Constitution in relation to the Bedfordshire Pension Fund Committee membership	Andy Watkins, Fund Administrator	Full Council 9 October 2024
3. Committee Work Plan 2024-2025	To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025	-	

## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

5 NOVEMBER 2024			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS
1. Constitution Review	To receive a brief update on current progress regarding the Constitution Review.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	
2. Corporate Restructure	To consider final restructure for the Corporate Leadership Team of the Council.	Laura Church, Chief Executive	Full Council 27 November 2024
3. Feedback from Elections in 2024 and preparations for elections in 2027	To receive an update from the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer on election related matters from 2024.	Laura Church, Chief Executive	
4. Committee Work Plan 2024-2025	To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025.	-	

## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

7 JANUARY 2025			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS
1. Community Governance Review: Kempston Rural and Kempston West – update report	To receive an update report regarding a request from Kempston Town Council to undertake a Community Governance Review of Kempston Rural and Kempston West.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	
2. Councillor Health & Wellbeing Policy	To consider a Health & Wellbeing Policy for Councillors.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	Full Council 15 January 2025
3. Appointment of Independent Person to the Council's Audit Committee	To consider the appointment process of an Independent Person to the Council's Audit Committee.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	
4. Committee Work Plan 2024-2025	To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025.	-	

4 MARCH 2025			
REPORT TITLE	BRIEF SUMMARY	LEAD OFFICER	OTHER CTTEE MEETINGS

## GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE WORK PLAN 2024/25

1. The Council's Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 ( <i>Annual item</i> )	This report sets out the Council's Pay Policy as required by the Localism Act 2011. The Pay Policy describes how the Council pays and rewards its employees.	Director of Corporate Services	Full Council 19 March 2025
2. Member Attendance Statistics ( <i>Annual Item</i> )	To receive a report on Member attendance for the previous Municipal Year.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	
3. Constitution Review Working Group – final report	To consider the final report of the Constitution Review Working Group.	Lesley Blue, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Statutory Scrutiny Officer	Constitution Review Working Group – final report
4. Committee Work Plan 2024-2025	To consider the Committee's Work Plan for 2024-2025.	-	

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