



Allerdale
borough council

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Democratic Participation in Voting Task and Finish Group Report March 2023

Introduction and background

Elections took place across Allerdale in May 2022 for elections to the new Cumberland Council.

Allerdale Councillors were involved in these elections both as candidates for the new authority and as sitting Councillors for Allerdale Borough Council.

Councillors are keen to support improvements and use their recent experience in the process with the aim of maximising democratic participation from all residents.

The statutory responsibility for reviewing UK Parliamentary polling districts and places rests with each relevant local authority in Great Britain for so much of any constituency as is situated in its area. In Allerdale, this responsibility rests with full council.

Councillors have expressed the desire to ensure effective working at community / parish level. The abolition of District Councils and the creation of Cumberland Council may present a widening of the gap between each community and the new Council.

This Task and Finish Group will give an opportunity to look at this issue and understand the role of Community Governance reviews and how they relate to arrangements for organising effective and efficient Parish and Town Councils under Section 100 of the Local Government and Public Involvement and Health Act 2007

Councillors are concerned with the introduction of voter ID and the consequential need to a) ensure voters are able to get suitable ID; b) consider the implications for the internal layout of polling stations.

The Task and Finish Group membership consisted of:

Councillor Carni McCarron-Holmes

Councillor Alan Smith

Councillor Michael Heaslip

Councillor Peter Kendall

Councillor Malcolm Grainger

Councillor Carole Armstrong

At their meeting on 27 May 2022 OSC members were supportive of the establishment of a task and finish group to consider this review topic.

Review scope

The review was intended to focus on the following:

- Examine the process of identifying the location of polling stations, consultation processes, requirements for the size and number of polling districts and the timetable for review
- Community Governance Reviews
- Voter ID and the consequential need to a) ensure voters are able to get suitable ID; b) consider the implications for the internal layout of polling stations.

The intention of the review is to identify recommendations that can be implemented by Cumberland Council.

Methodology

The TFG held two meetings. Both meetings were supported by Lee Jardine, Senior Specialist – Elections. The second meeting had the benefit of the Chair of the Allerdale Committee of the Cumbria Association of Local Councils, Councillor Mary Bradley.

The meetings looked at a range of documentation, including from Allerdale Borough Council, Northumberland County Council, Cumbria Association of Local Councils, the National Association of Local Councils, and the Electoral Commission.

All Allerdale Borough Councillors were surveyed to find out their views on the function / role / effectiveness of parish councils and ideas for improvement, what opportunities exist to promote and engage with parish councils and their views on the figures from the 2019 local elections (attached at Appendix 1).

Elections Act 2022 and Voter ID requirements

The TFG considered the significant changes taking place from the Elections Act 2022 and the preparations being made by electoral services as a result of this. The headline of the new requirement for photo ID contained within the new Act is one measure that the Act contains. Other major changes being made include requirements of accessibility for polling places, changes to postal vote rules, , end of automatic voting for EU citizens in local elections, extension of franchise for overseas electors to beyond 15 years and changes to the voting system for elected Mayors and Fire, Police and Crime Commissioners.

The TFG were concerned at the amount of work required to meet the new requirements and received some reassurance that the government has included extra staffing for elections and some support for the implementation of photo ID.

With only parish elections taking place in May, Cumberland will be of interest to the Election Commission who have notified that they may be sending election observers

and be interested in the post-election review. From October the new regulations will also apply to General Elections.

The requirement for photo ID is based on a narrow list of approved ID. Those without an approved photo ID can apply online for a voter authority certificate. To do this the voter will need to provide a digital photograph alongside their National Insurance Number and upload this on the gov.uk website. Once the DWP has verified identity and Electoral Register has been checked, the certificate is issued centrally. For those without access to a computer, web cam etc then an appointment can be made with electoral services who can assist in applying.

The legislation sets out that no exceptions can be made on checking photo ID at the polling station. This will create an enhanced risk to staff and relies on the compliance of voters to understand the new situation that Polling Station presiding officers will be in. Given the new requirements, extra training and procedure guides will be used to ensure that the likeness of the photo can be checked taking into account cultural sensitivities arising from religious face coverings etc.

The TFG received assurances that a wide range of engagement had already taken place on these requirements and further publicity opportunities were being followed up including engaging with local colleges, parish councils, the homeless team and third sector organisations. Nationally key groups are being targeted by information campaigns including elderly, LGBT, Traveller etc.

Accessibility to vote

A new polling scheme will be required, and this will take place from October 2023 and must be completed within 15 months. This is an opportunity to look at the number and suitability of polling stations. To balance best practice with practical arrangements. Good practice now requires polling stations to be fully accessible and to have hearing loops and doorbells.

A significant issue is the availability and suitability of buildings for polling. Schools can only be compelled if maintained by the local authority, with Academisation having taken place comparatively few schools can now be requisitioned into use.

This is compounded by the loss of community facilities such as pubs and village halls. When facilities have survived, they have often changed remarkably and will often have partner organisations on a commercial bases for example nurseries, lunch clubs or foodbanks. It is not possible therefore to 'free up' these community spaces for one day's use.

Community Governance Reviews

Community Governance Reviews take place regularly. At the moment there are several in review across Cumberland. Reviews are run by the principal authority responsible for elections, currently the District Councils and from April the new unitary Cumberland Council.

Reviews are ad-hoc and the guidance is open to interpretation, reviews for example usually reduce the number of councillors or wards.

Consideration does not start from asking what the purpose of a Parish Council is and clarity of purpose is not defined before moving on to see if they function properly and are then fit for the defined purpose.

A wider issue is that a lot of the parishes do not fully function in that they do not generate contested elections. The smallest parish electorate is seventy.

Reviews are also used to create new parishes in 'unparished' areas. Reviews have been instigated by way of petition with an aim of creating the "Stanwix Village Parish Council" Stanwix in Carlisle and Barrow Borough as a result of Local Government Reform, instigated by Barrow in Furness Borough Council as the principal council.

Parish Governance

With the standalone elections for parishes taking place this May, the cost of elections being carried solely by parishes is a significant concern. Cumberland has allocated £90,000. The estimated cost of running elections for Workington Town Council as an example to show scale is £40,000. Each Polling Station costs between £2,000-3,000 to run. The problem is then compounded with multiple polling stations in some parishes / towns.

Appendix 1 indicates the level of active democratic elections in the parish elections in 2019. It was agreed that a sign of good democracy is a combination of contested elections and filling vacancies as they arose in good time.

In 2019 there were contested elections in only five parishes out of sixty, four of which were towns, which is not a good sign of healthy democracy. It may be that Town Councils with more capacity and more resources, were more attractive to people to stand for them: but not all towns had contested elections. Further consideration of this situation is needed.

With the advent of Local Government Reorganisation in Cumbria displacing a large number of experienced Councillors at both District and County level, this may bring a more competitive landscape to parish elections.

This may create a more competitive set of elections than has been seen before. At the same time, these elections are a test bed for the new requirements from Voter ID, and the other requirements contained in the Elections Act.

Postal Voting has its own issues, including ensuring security of the ballot. This also impacts on the number of polling stations needed alongside the high cost of the postal voting pack. This in turn impacts on the parish council budget

The issue of budgeting for parish council elections was discussed and the good practice at many Town Councils to set aside a sum in every year's budget to be able to run contested elections.

Some parish councils hold over vacancies and seek consensus not to call elections when vacancies arrive to avoid the costs and process of by-elections outside of regular election cycles.

It is normal practice to review how many councillors a parish has and how many polling stations are provided as part of a community governance review. It was therefore important to encourage reviews on a regular basis of all parish councils to ensure that they were efficient and effective.

In tandem with regularly reviewing the functioning of parish councils, the TFG felt that the new Cumberland Council in partnership with parish councils should support residents in getting to know what a parish council is, how to get involved, how to stand for election etc

It was noted that devolution of aspects of unitary Council functions to town and parish Councils is a growing feature of unitarisation around the country, but there must be doubt as to whether any PCs in Allerdale, outside of the towns (which were urban districts prior to 1974) would have the capacity and resources to take this on. Cumberland may need to consider, in CGR, whether more parish mergers or groupings would be appropriate. Clustering of parishes is a workable way forward, examples being the Derwent seven and the five rivers at Muncaster.

How parish councils interact with the new place-based boards in Cumberland is vitally important. It was agreed that parish boundaries would have been the natural building blocks for the new Cumberland Council place boards because they do not change but the boundaries for Cumberland wards will change in the review due to commence in October 2023. How representatives from parish councils will be found / elected or selected is an issue being worked on by Cumbria Association of Local Councils.

The new Cumberland Councillors will have a number of parishes in their wards, and so regularly visiting them and keeping in touch with them will be more difficult than with the former district councils.

Recommendations

To Cumberland Council

- R1** Use the power of compulsion to use maintained schools and to make available any property in its portfolio
- R2** To support a promotion and marketing campaign in association with parish councils that would support residents getting to know what a parish council is, how to get involved, how to stand for election.
- R3** To ensure that every parish has the right number of councillors and the right number of polling stations for their effective operation and promotion of democracy through.
- R4** In 12 months to conduct a review on how effective the new Cumberland Council place boards are and how parishes interact with the new council.
- R5** Undertake a review of the principles of parish governance starting from "purpose" and consider whether mergers, groupings or less formal clustering may be needed to enable the parish tier to fulfil its purpose more effectively

To Parish Councils

- R6** To consider their own buildings meet the requirements for accessibility and useability for elections. To actively co-operate with returning officers on establishing polling stations.
- R7** Recognise that democracy is expensive and ensure that an appropriate sum is set aside in parish budgets to cover the cost of elections /by-elections per polling district as part of in-year budgets / elections reserve?

Appendix list

Appendix 1

An analysis of the 2019 local elections in Allerdale. This shows the number of seats, the number of contested elections and the number of vacancies.