



ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

NORTH WEST BRANCH MEETING

15 JULY 2015

BARROW IN FURNESS BOROUGH COUNCIL

Present:

Authority	Name	Authority	Name
Sefton	Neil Middlehurst (Chair)		
Allerdale	Linda Lawty	Cheshire East	Diane Todd
Barrow in Furness	Joanne Bull	Chorley	Phil Davies
Barrow in Furness	Brenda Gill	Copeland	Stephanie Shaw
Barrow in Furness	Jon Huck	Democracy Counts	Simon Verdon
Barrow in Furness	Judith Swarbrick	Electoral Commission	Kathryn Dunn
Barrow in Furness	Paula Westwood	Fylde	Hazel McNicoll
Blackburn	Sean Gambles	Lancaster	Lisa Vines
Blackpool	Steve Atkinson	Lancaster	Debbie Chambers
Blackpool	Gwyn Hughes	Preston	Peter Welsh
Blackpool	Joanne Johnson	Print Image	Tony Slater
Carlisle	Ian Dixon	South Lakeland	Claire Marsh
Cheshire East	Rose Hignett	South Lakeland	Tom Benson
Cheshire East	Marion Hancock	Stockport	Karen Randles
Cheshire East	Sandra Hobbs	Wyre	Joanne Porter

1. Apologies for Absence:

Apologies for absence were submitted from Gina Armstrong (AEA), Julie Baron (Wigan), Paul Beaumont (Stockport), Karina Bilham (Hyndburn), Janice Bisset (Halton), Steve Callender (Stockport), Carol Clawley (Barrow), Stephanie Cork (Pendle), Cynthia Dixon (Eden), Gareth Evans (Denbighshire), John Fielding (Retired), John Foster (Print Image), Jennifer Greenwood (Burnley), Lesley Hales (AEA), Linda Harling (Blackburn), Gulderen Harwood (Stockport), Beverley Kenrick (St. Helens), Charles Lasham (Retired), Christine Lawley (Halton), Sally Little (Carlisle), Anne Loftus (Wigan), Elisa Love (St. Helens), Hazel Major (South Lakeland), Alison McDonald (Warrington), Andrea Mullin (Wyre), Rosemary O'Hare (Fylde), Sandra Parnell (South Lakeland), Clare Poole (Rochdale), Stephen Power (Print Image), Jane Smith (West Lancs), Joanne Smith (Rossendale), Sylvia Smith (West Lancs), Claire Standing (Preston), Alison Stirling (Burnley), Angie Taylor (Fylde), Karen Thompson (Eden), Sandra Tibbets (Carlisle), Gill Turpin (Pendle), Hannah Unsworth (Bury), Ben Walker (Manchester), Alistair Woodhouse (Fylde), Roseann Worthington (High Peak).

2. Current Membership

The Secretary reported that the Branch currently has 180 members. The following new members had joined the Branch:

Angie Taylor – Fylde
Amerjit Kang – Allerdale
David James – Wirral
Alison Mountney – Wirral
Paul Walker – Copeland
Dawn Ashcroft – West Lancs
Caron Parmenter – Preston
Stuart Sugarman – Rossendale
Marc Schmid – Blackburn with Darwen

3. Branch News

The Secretary informed the group that Paul Beaumont (Stockport) and his wife welcomed their baby son Jacob Charles born on 9th June 2015.

The Chair informed the group of the recent engagement of Karen Randles

The Chair also informed the group that there are a large number of colleagues who are leaving/have left the elections field and asked the group to offer their best wishes to the following:

Anne Loftus – Wigan
Jane Smith – West Lancs
Karen Gunter – Preston
Rosemary O'Hare – Fylde
Stephanie Cork – Pendle
Kate Gascoigne – South Ribble
Dave Cookson - Sefton

AGREED: the branch offered their congratulations to Paul and Karen and their best wishes to those that have left.

4. Minutes:

The group AGREED that the Minutes of the Branch meeting held on Wednesday 21st January 2015 be accepted as a correct record.

5. Items arising from the minutes:

None

6 AEA Board, Management Team, and other Minutes:

The Secretary submitted the Minutes of the following meetings:

(a) AEA Board Minutes (& Round Table Discussion):

1 February 2015

(b) AEA Management Team Minutes:

18 March 2015
1 June 2015

(c) North West Management Board Minutes:

13 February 2015

7 County Sub-Group Minutes:

Cheshire
Cumbria
Greater Manchester – 3 June 2015
Lancashire – 26 June 2015
Merseyside

It was AGREED that the Minutes referred to in agenda items 6 & 7 be noted.

8. Parliamentary, Local and Parish Elections 2015

The Chair led the group in a discussion on the difficulties of running a Parliamentary election particularly in areas that were combined with Locals and Parishes. The Chair commended the Electoral Commissions report on “hidden costs” as it is a good reflection of the difficulties faced by administrators in combined elections. A number of authorities reported difficulties regarding cross-boundaries particularly around data sharing on postal votes and re-issues. Cheshire East informed the group that due to combinations of elections and the 186 Parishes that they have, they began counting at 10pm on Thursday night and did not complete all counts until 12 midnight on Saturday night, this effectively meant that election staff were working for 72 hours.

There were additional complications experienced by some authorities such as Wyre who give-away to two other authorities and take in from a third authority. This causes problems in combined elections when there are two different Returning Officers for an area, particularly when deciding who books polling stations, employs and trains polling station staff, who prints and proofs poll cards and postal packs etc. As detailed in the hidden costs report, this can often lead to some authorities doing a lot of work and not receiving the Returning Officers fee for that work.

One member reported that at a recent meeting Colin Dingwall had confirmed that following EC guidance the EU referendum would not be held at the same time as any other election and that this is now in legislation. He was asked at the meeting if the Cabinet Office could ensure that future Parliamentary elections would not be combined with any others, however he had suggested that the AEA should make representations to request this. The group discussed the merits of holding a stand-alone Parliamentary election and although some concerns were raised regarding the cost to Local Authorities and the timing of other elections around the Parliamentary the group agreed the a stand-alone Parliamentary election would be preferential. The group also agreed that the Returning Officer should be given discretion to allow them not to run any other elections within 6 months of a Parliamentary election and to abolish the rule to enforce RO's to start the Parliamentary count within 4 hours of the close of poll.

The group discussed various count methodology, Sefton council increased the number of count staff by 50% and used Aintree Racecourse, Lancaster postponed their Local and Parish counts until Saturday and did not experience any opposition to this from members, South Lakeland counted their Parliamentary papers and then continued straight onto their local election count and finished at 7am Friday morning. A lot of authorities had to increase the payments to count staff due to the excessive hours taken to count. The group also

agreed that the increased complexity of elections and the issues regarding Real Time Payments was causing problems in recruiting staff to work at elections and they requested that the Cabinet Office review the payments to polling station staff and increase the Maximum Recoverable Amount accordingly.

The group discussed issues with nomination papers the two main issues were the descriptions information for candidates wishing to stand for a political party and that this is often not completed correctly, secondly the advice from the Electoral Commission regarding the use of “commonly used names”. A number of authorities reported difficulties with candidates regarding the use of commonly used names, Blackpool reported one candidate had 7 names and did not wish to use all of them but had to under the latest guidance.

The group also discussed the issue of political parties being allowed to register and/or amend descriptions and emblems on the register of political parties up to a deadline that was after the nomination period had started. This caused major issues with two of the main parties whose logo’s were changed after the start of the nomination period, in addition a number of smaller parties who had registered in the weeks leading up to the election found that their details were taking a long time to show on the website and this had a major impact on accepting nomination papers. The group agreed overwhelmingly that the legislation should be amended to ensure the closing date for amendments or additions to the Register of Political parties should be prior to the Notice of Election being posted. The group also agreed that it would have been helpful for the EC to have notified all Local Authorities and printers that two of the main political parties had changed their logo’s as this resulted in a huge impact on printing particularly for postal votes.

The group discussed the issue of overseas electors at the recent elections and all members agreed that the deadline for overseas electors to register to vote and apply for a postal vote needs to be extended or the provision for postal votes for overseas electors needs to be abolished as the current system does not work. A number of local authorities reported problems specifically with postal votes for France. The EC report highlighted the need for the correct postage to be used on overseas postal votes, however Tony from Print Image indicated that whilst this was possible for outgoing envelopes it would be impossible to do this for the return envelope inserts.

The group discussed the significant increase in emergency proxy applications this year and felt that whilst other absent voting arrangements required a lot of checks it seemed that emergency proxies were not as strict and there are very few guidelines on what is acceptable, particularly as there appeared to be a sudden increase in self-employed electors. The EC report confirmed that there has been an increase from 2010 (835) emergency proxy applications to 8500 in 2015.

The group discussed further the issue around HMRC real time payments for Election staff and the complex systems that now appear to be in place for staff who work one day a year and should not pay tax. There still appears to be a number of different practices in place within different authorities and the group agreed to invite someone from HMRC to the next meeting to discuss this issue again.

The group also requested that the EC reconsider having three publication dates for the register in the month prior to the election as there is no evident benefit to this. The group again questioned the merit of completing the Form K’s after the election as there is still no evidence of why this information is required or what it is used for, although some members agreed that the software companies have assisted greatly in collating this information, much of the information required is pointless and impossible to collate.

The group discussed a number of issues regarding expenses for candidates, it was agreed that the expense forms sent out to Parish candidates were excessive and it costs a lot of

time, money and resources chasing these forms when they are usually “nil” returns. The group requested that the EC look at this for future and possibly develop a simpler form for those candidates who have nil returns particularly at a Parish election.

The branch AGREED that the above be noted, the Secretary would request a member of HMRC to attend the next branch meeting and make representations to the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office requesting a review of some current practices.

9. Election Accounts

Finally the group discussed the ECU and election accounts, a number of authorities are still waiting for their European accounts to be signed off more than 8 months since the deadline for submission. This caused problems for authorities who are waiting for money to be paid to them from the ECU, also as ERO's prepare accounts for the Parliamentary election it is difficult to know what is acceptable if previous accounts are still outstanding. The group agreed that they would like the deadline for expenses to be extended from six months to nine months which would also prevent the ECU from receiving everyone's accounts in the last week prior to the deadline.

The branch AGREED that the information be noted and that the branch would request the ECU review their deadline for submission of accounts.

10. Cabinet Office & IER

The Chair informed that group that he had spoken to Mark Hughes who was unable to attend the meeting due to the imminent announcement to be made by the Minister John Pearson which was scheduled for Thursday 16th July regarding IER.

The branch AGREED that the information be noted.

11. Canvass 2015

The group briefly discussed plans for the canvass, most authorities have just started the process and it was too early in the planning to identify problem areas or good practices. The group unanimously agreed that the annual canvass as we know it should be abolished completely and that it should be replaced with a Household Notification Letter that only requires action if there are any changes. The group agreed that it was not a productive use of administrators resources and a waste of valuable finance to continually chase residents who do not want to register to vote and have no interest in voting.

The group AGREED that the information be noted.

12. A.O.B.

The secretary informed the group that she would be writing out shortly to encourage members to apply for the bursary place to attend the AEA Conference in Blackpool early next year. The secretary will also request nominations to be submitted for the AEA awards and the deadline for both of the above will be 31st October 2015.

Kathryn Dunn (Electoral Commission) asked the group how they felt about the new centralised call centre for the EC and the group agreed that it seemed to work well in most cases, although some authorities did report that the person they spoke to did not have extensive knowledge about their queries.

The branch AGREED that the information be noted.

14. Date and Venue of next meeting:

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 4th November 2015 at Liverpool