MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
SOUTHERN BRANCH OF THE AEA
Friday 11 March 2016 at 09:30 a.m.
Held at the offices of Test Valley Borough Council

PRESENT

Berkshire: Claire Le Moual, Iain McGlashan (Bracknell Forest); Rob Alexander (West Berkshire); Wendy Allum, Gail Barrons, Guy Hoffelner, (Windsor and Maidenhead);
Buckinghamshire: Charlotte Gordon (Aylesbury Vale); Lesley Blue, Barbara Jeffries (Chiltern); Saranjeet Chana, Pamela Loose (Milton Keynes);
Dorset: Claire Ridout, Matt Pitcher, Lucy Symes (Bournemouth); Claire Procter (Christchurch); Debbie Turkoz (Poole); Kirsty Riglar (Purbeck);
Hampshire & IoW: Beth James, Gary Lingham (Basingstoke and Deane); Jane Hardy (Fareham); Penny Bradley, Andy Tiffin, Clare Griffin (Hart); Tina Harwood, Rosemary Rutins (New Forest); Ian Fitchett (Portsmouth); Kirsty Alford, Marijke Elst, Mike Hickman, Emily Joynes (Southampton); Leigh Binks, Frances Cleland, Sue Gamalatge, Jennifer Newman, Carole Murray (Test Valley); Alyssa Payne, Karen Vincent (Winchester);
Oxfordshire: Steven Corrigan (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse); Keith Butler (West Oxfordshire);
Wiltshire: Jim Waite (Wiltshire Council);
Others: Kath Richards (AEA); Philip Seccombe (Consultant).

1. APOLOGIES

Glenda Favor-Ankersen, Kirsty Hunt, Ann Moore, Phil Sadler (Bracknell Forest); Elizabeth Bielski, David Holling, Clare Ockwell, Phil Runacres (West Berkshire); Mark Griffin, Joanne Sara, Craig Saunders, Bill Ashton, Peter Brown, Rachel Dines (Aylesbury Vale); Mathew Bloxham, Joe Crowley (Chiltern); June Allen (Milton Keynes); Rob Curtis (Wycombe); Marie Cunnington, Julie Hole, Jan Shepherd (Bournemouth); Julia Duncan, Richard Jones (East Dorset); Debra Harrod, Paul Morris (Poole); Leigh Johnson (Purbeck); Sue Bonham-Lovett (Weymouth and Portland); Emma Hayton, Karen Widdowson (Basingstoke & Deane); Sam Jones (Eastleigh); Lindsey Ansell, Leigh Usher, Elaine Wildig (Fareham); Deborah Vaughan (Hampshire County Council); Clive Joynes (IoW); Debbie Everett, Bob Jackson, Chris Kiessling, Richard Woods (New Forest); Stewart Agland, Alison Herrod (Portsmouth); Tash Cole, Mark Heath, Scott Healey, Pat Mitchell (Southampton); Kim Beaumont (Winchester); Rachel Cripps, Sam Ebsworth, Kerry Earp, Fiona Leighton, Margaret Reed, Philippa Rugman (South Oxfordshire/VoWH); Julie Ryan (Wiltshire); Nigel Hurl, Brian Smith (AEA); Robert Wardle (Apologies).

2. MINUTES

Apart from to note that Penny Bradley from Hart Borough Council should have been noted as attending the last meeting, the minutes of the meeting of the Southern Branch held on 4 December 2015 were approved as a correct record.
3. MANAGEMENT TEAM/BOARD MEETINGS

The minutes of the AEA Board and AEA Management Team meetings held 2 December 2015 had been circulated.

The Branch Representative, Andy Tiffin, reported that there was an ongoing query with regards to the issue of pension auto-enrolment, and that the Board had agreed to write to the relevant Government Department for further advice. However, the AEA did not feel that it was within their remit to provide advice on pension matters and that it was the local authority that should advise their Returning Officers. Andy added that some guidance had been produced by the London Branch that members may find useful, he would arrange for it to be circulated, but made it clear that this was not official advice.

Amendments to the Articles of the Association had been due to be voted on at the AGM held at Conference in Blackpool; however several representations had been received on the proposed amendment to move towards elected Board representatives, including from members of the Southern Branch, who were concerned about the possible loss of the link to Branches. The item was therefore pulled from the agenda and further consultation would be carried out.

The Branch was invited to contact Andy should they have any issues or queries they wanted raised at Board meetings, either directly or through the Secretary.

4. CHAIRMAN’S UPDATE

Members noted the monthly AEA Policy Updates.

5. ELECTORAL COMMISSION UPDATE

Phillippa Saray from the Electoral Commission was in attendance. She reported that delivery of the polling station handbooks should be made by the end of the week. She apologised for the delay, however there had been problems experienced by the distributors.

She confirmed that the digital element of the public awareness campaign for the May elections commenced in February, with a focus on ensuring people are registered by 18 April. She acknowledged that the Commission were aware of the issue of duplicate registrations and the pressure this would put on administrators, and that they were looking at including messages in the EU Referendum booklet to remind people that if they were in receipt of their poll card that they were already registered. Publicity for the Referendum would not commence until after the May polls.

Other publicity included social media, a campaign with the cast of Hollyoaks and an animation on how to vote using the Supplementary Vote system, which could be used as part of local publicity.

Phillippa thanked everyone who had responded to the Commission’s request for information and asked that anyone who hadn’t yet supplied the data did so as soon as possible.

Responding to issues faced in 2015 following the changes to some party emblems and feedback received about this, a new webpage had been set up to make it easier to check any changes to descriptions or new emblems. Phillippa added that they were encouraging parties to make these changes as soon as possible, although stressed that changes could obviously be made much later in law.
In terms of the EU Referendum, guidance was out with resources to follow soon. A further direction had been made regarding reply licences for overseas postal votes. Royal Mail would be in contact with authorities shortly to make arrangements for these. During discussion, a request for advice on what the envelope B would look like. Phillippa agreed to look into this and get back to the Branch.

The count collation rehearsal had gone well, with very few glitches. The Commission would be looking at the comments and feedback received from RCOs to try to iron out any future problems, such as some administrators not receiving the text messages that were being sent. There would be a full rehearsal on 24 May between 9pm-midnight which should be run from the local count venues to ensure communications work. An additional desktop rehearsal may also be held.

Queries were raised regarding guidance and the submission of election accounts for the Referendum. Phillippa confirmed that the guidance would be issued by the Commission and that the final version should be published soon. Concerns were raised over the timescales for submission of the accounts, given the fact that the PCC accounts would be being prepared at the same time.

It was suggested during discussion that additional guidance and support would be helpful to administrators, such as factsheets around campaigners, who has what rights, etc, as there was concern that people were not familiar with the legislation. Of particular use would be some guidance on where there are differences between the referendum and other elections.

At the last meeting of the Branch, it had been raised that the Electoral Commission were looking at providing the statutory references in their guidance. Phillippa confirmed that this was being worked on.

The Branch thanked Phillippa for her attendance and comment.

6. **EU REFERENDUM**

Items discussed under this agenda item included:

- The timetable for the EU Referendum had been amended due to the Gibraltar bank holiday. Members commented that it was slightly confusing as the bank holiday was disregarded for some deadlines and not for others. The directions from the Commission had also been updated to include directions relating to postal votes.

- It was raised that there had already been an increase in applications from overseas electors and that many did not have any type of absent vote set up. It was requested of the Cabinet Office that consideration was given to flagging up the fact that they needed to ensure that they applied for an absent vote via the digital service, if it didn’t already.

- It was commented that, although postal packs were being sent out early for those electors that already had postal votes sent up, this did not help those that applied late, as the Royal Mail delivery standard for overseas mail was 10 days. There was concern raised about the need to make it clearer to overseas electors that if they left it late to register or submit a postal vote application, that postal votes may not reach them in time.
Lee Pope from the Policy Delivery Team was in attendance.

Lee commented that, at the last Branch meeting, he spoke about funding and the Minister's vision. He had noted the comments about the submission of the PCC election accounts and discussed this with Paul Docker, who was looking at the comments raised.

He confirmed that that the recent round of Justification Led Bids had been assessed and cleared by the Minister, and were awaiting Treasury sign off on the final amounts, before the funds were released.

He raised the issue of future funding for IER. A bid had been submitted to the Treasury to seek funding support over the next four years. The bid requested that local authorities received similar amounts in the 2016/17 financial year to those that had been received in the past, with these amounts tapering down over the next three years as savings were realised.

Lee stated that the Electoral Commission and the ONS had published reports on the publication of the registers, which showed that nine out of ten of carry forward electors had been dealt with and that, by the end of the transition, the number of red electors had fallen from over six million to approximately 770,000. The majority of entries had been deleted as had been proved to be inaccurate.

Lee acknowledged that there was confusion by electors as to the two stage registration process and that there had been low response rates to HEFs. The attainer levels had dropped by 40%, which was a concern as it was already an under-registered group.

The Cabinet Office were still looking at ways to reduce the cost of IER and making the process more efficient, particularly around the annual canvass. Secondary legislation to make changes, including the inclusion of a single occupancy tick box on the HEF and an option to email ITRs, had been out for consultation and it was hoped that this would be in effect by mid-May. Secondary legislation on canvass pilots, to test alternative approaches to canvass, and been drafted and was also out for consultation, with a view to come into effect by June or July.

Other ideas to make the IER process more cost efficient included:

- Making more use of HNL's instead of HEFs, sending one out in the Autumn and one in February;
- Not having to send paper HEFs, but using other methods, such as telephone canvassing;
- The removal of pre-paid envelopes.

It was reported by members that there appeared to be issues with 16 year olds not having received their NiNo's. It was requested that that Cabinet Office took this up with the DWP. There was also a request that the digital service made it clearer to applicants that, if they did not provide their NiNO that their application would be delayed.

The Branch thanked Lee for his attendance and informative comment.
8. **AEA ANNUAL CONFERENCE**
   It was reported that the Southern Branch had been well represented at the Conference in Blackpool, both as delegates and plenary participants or workshop session leaders.

   Particular commendation was given to Matt Pitcher, Bournemouth, for his presentation on Election Petitions, which had been incredibly thought-provoking and was very well received.

9. **LAW COMMISSION ELECTORAL LAW INTERIM REPORT**
   This had been discussed at the Conference in Blackpool. The final report was due to be published in 2017, with the Bill following shortly afterwards, if the government agree to move forward with it.

10. **BRANCH TRAINING**
    The Branch Training Officer had not received any requests for any particular training, but members were invited to let Keith know if there was anything they wished to see in the future.

    The Treasurer added that the provision of free lunches over the past five years had significantly reduced the balance of the Branch accounts. She confirmed that she would look at this in more detail and would bring a report to a future meeting of the Branch for consideration.

11. **NEXT BRANCH MEETING**
    The next Branch meeting had been scheduled for June 2016, and it was proposed that this meeting was either cancelled or postponed now that the EU Referendum was to be held.

    **RESOLVED:** That the June 2016 scheduled meeting of the AEA Southern Branch be cancelled.

12. **NEW MEMBERS AND MEMBERSHIP**
    Bill Ashton, Craig Saunders (Aylesbury Vale); Lisa Kirkman, Laura Taylor (Basingstoke and Deane); Kirsty Hunt (Bracknell Forest); Yasmin Inkeroe (Eastleigh); Andrew Larkinson (Slough); Ani Sultan (South Bucks); Tom Harte (Swindon); Rachel Cripps, Kerry Earp, Sam Ebsworth (Vale of White Horse); Sonya Anderson (Smartmatic International Holding B.V) had joined the Branch since its last meeting.

    Branch Membership was 192 at today’s date.

15. **ITEMS FOR FUTURE BRANCH MEETINGS**
    Members were invited to put forward any ideas for guests/speakers for future meetings, or items for inclusion in the agenda.

16. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**
    It was noted by the Branch that Chris Sheard had recently left Aylesbury Vale, and that both Sue Gamalatge (Test Valley Borough Council) and Elaine Wildig (Fareham) were shortly due to retire. The Branch wished all three well for the future.

    The meeting finished at 10.55am.