MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
SOUTHERN BRANCH OF THE AEA
Friday 5 September 2014 at 10:00 a.m.
Held at the offices of Test Valley Borough Council

PRESENT

Berkshire: Glenda Favor-Ankersen, Claire Le Moual, Iain McGlashan, Sridevi Sridharamoorthy (Bracknell Forest); Jane Aston (Reading); Clare Ockwell, (West Berkshire); Wendy Allum, Gail Barrons (Windsor and Maidenhead); Margaret Good (Wokingham);

Buckinghamshire: Lesley Blue (Chiltern); Pamela Loose (Milton Keynes); Kully Tumber (South Bucks); Rob Curtis (Wycombe);

Dorset: Coleen Long, Matt Pitcher (Bournemouth); Debra Harrod, Debbie Turkoz (Poole);

Hampshire & IoW: Wayne Dash, Gary Lingham (Basingstoke and Deane); Penny Bradley, Andy Tiffin, Clare Griffin (Hart); Clive Joynes (IoW); Tina Harwood (New Forest); Kirsty Alford, Marijke Elst, Sheila Whitfield, Matthew Yeo (Southampton); Leigh Binks, Frances Cleland, Sue Gamalatge (Test Valley Jenny Newman, Karen Vincent (Winchester);

Oxfordshire: Rachel Dunn (Oxford); Kathy Fiander (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse);

Others: Kath Richards, Chris Solich (AEA).

1. APOLOGIES

Ann Moore (Bracknell Forest); Chris Brooks, Silvana Hindry, Julie Kempen, Hannah Miles, Ashlyn Mortimer, Sophie Small, Gill Smith, Claire Woodford (Reading); Elizabeth Bielski, David Holling, Phil Runacres (West Berkshire); Melanie Dark-Gale, Kevin Gordon, Sofia Iqbal, Catherine Meek; Nicholas Pontone (Slough); Anne Hunter, Julie Kent, Andrew Moulton, Jennifer Phillips, Jayne Stanley, Sam Whitcher, Alison Wood (Wokingham); Chris Sheard (Aylesbury Vale); Mathew Bloxham, Charlotte Gordon, Barbara Jeffries (Chiltern); June Allen, Saranjeet Chana (Milton Keynes); Elly Cook, Anneri Kotzee, Bob Wearing (South Bucks); Marie Cunnington (Bournemouth); Claire Procter (Christchurch); Julia Duncan, Richard Jones (East Dorset); Jacqui Andrews, Sandra Deary, Amanda Powell (North Dorset); Paul Morris (Poole); Leigh Johnson (Burbeck) Mike Hickman (West Dorset); Sue Bonham-Lovett (Weymouth and Portland); Geraldine Hagley, Emma Hayton (Basingstoke); Kerry Crimble, Sam Jones (Eastleigh); Jayne Day, Maureen Evans, Lisa Sayer (Havant); Simon Baxter, Jill Laurence-Tilley, Paul Littler, Chris Mathews, Simon Wiggins (IoW); Debbie Everett, Chris Kiessling, Rosemary Rutins, Richard Woods, David Yates (New Forest); Mark Heath, Pat Mitchell (Southampton); Carole Murray (Test Valley); Kim Beaumont (Winchester); Louise Aston, Natasha Clark, James Doble, Lesley Farrell, Aaron Hetherington, Sharon Hickson (Cherwell); Sarah Claridge, Rachel Drinkwater, Lynne Lee, Martin John, Mathew Metcalfe, Suzette Starmer, Catherine Stone (Oxford); Marcia Beviere, Steven Corrigan, Samantha Ebsworth Fiona Leighton, Margaret Reed, Philippa Rugman (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse); Keith Butler (West Oxfordshire); Nigel Hurll (AEA); Robert Wardle, Alan Winchcombe (Retired Members).

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Southern Branch held on 13 June 2014 were approved as a correct record. There were no matters arising.
3. MANAGEMENT TEAM/BOARD MEETINGS
The minutes of the meetings of AEA Management Team on 4 June 2014 and 5 August 2014, and the AEA Board on 9 July 2014 had been circulated.

Andy Tiffin, as Branch Representative on the AEA Board, reported that a paper was being produced by Management Team to present to the Board regarding whether the AEA should consider providing electoral services. He also stated a comment had been made that, in the event of a hung parliament after the elections in 2015 there may not be a coalition which could lead to a vote of no confidence – and another parliamentary election. The outcome of the Scottish Referendum on 18 September could also have an effect.

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

4. CHAIRMAN’S UPDATE
The AEA policy update had been circulated and Members were invited to make any comments. The increase in candidates’ expense limits was raised as something to be aware of.

5. ELECTORAL COMMISSION UPDATE
No Electoral Commission representative was in attendance. Branch Members were invited to raise any issues which could be fed back to the Commission, but all were raised under the IER agenda item.

6. CABINET OFFICE AND INDIVIDUAL REGISTRATION
Mark Hughes, Head of Funding, Legislation and Relationships and Julian Bassham, Regional Delivery Manager for the South West Region, were in attendance. Mark started by reporting that the Cabinet Office was aware of the issues faced by administrators now that IER had been rolled out in England and Wales. He stated that the implementation had been a success for the citizen, with high levels of satisfaction being reported by electors who had used the digital service and confirmation, meaning most were moved to the new register without having to do anything.

However, the Cabinet Office recognised that there were problems for administrators, including issues with the way electoral software was dealing with the changes. The Cabinet Office was in daily contact with the providers and was interested in how they prioritised fixes and how quickly these fixes were released. Members felt that communication from software providers could be improved by telling authorities when there were known problems, and avoid unnecessary phonecalls to helpdesks. It was clear that there were capacity issues at the software companies and this was impacting on the service being received. Despite all this, Members did feel that, generally speaking, the software was performing well – particularly with the connectivity to the GDS and how records were uploaded and downloaded into the EMS.

Mark commented that the expectation of administrators was that the registers produced on 1 December 2014 should be the best they could be, but EROs’ ability to optimise the registers would potentially be affected by any delays to the write out or problems with electoral software functionality. Administrators were also adapting to the unanticipated reaction from householders in receipt of HEFs – the majority being unreturned with recipients opting to pursue the online channel and not complete the HEF. Apart from the need for administrators to react quickly and sensibly to this unanticipated behaviour, it would be interesting in due course to see the analysis of the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office evaluation of IER implementation and the write out. The self-shift of
citizens to online registration and not sending back the Household Enquiry Forms could not have been anticipated, the Cabinet Office would be looking at where efficiencies and improvements should be made to the customer transaction and registration process, including possible changes to regulations and legislation. Many authorities were considering mini-canvasses in early 2015 for the first time, in order to ensure that their registers were up to date for the Parliamentary elections, especially considering some properties wouldn’t have been canvassed since October 2013. This would obviously incur additional costs, and the Cabinet Office was in the process of talking to authorities about future funding.

One of the main concerns raised by Members was the wording on the confirmation letters. Offices were inundated with phonecalls and emails from electors when these were sent out, due to the conflicting wording regarding the Open Register. This had led to a large number of complaints and problems for administrators, which Mark acknowledged had been dealt with extremely professionally by local authorities. It was felt that there had been an assumption on the part of the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office that these letters would not have an impact on offices. However, concerns about the wording of all the IER letters had been raised at the beginning of the year verbally and in writing to the EC, which appeared to have been ignored. It was suggested that administrators and the AEA should not roll over so easily when the EC was involved in making decisions and that this should be fed back to the Board and Management Team.

The issue of funding was raised and what would be made available next year to authorities. This was still to be decided and the £10 million that had been set aside as part of the Maximising Registration Fund was being discussed at the moment.

Additional comments made by Members included:

- Electors still did not know what IER is and what it means for them, as the confirmation letters did not go into enough detail.
- There were problems with the evidence request letters, following a non-match with the DWP, which seemed to mainly affect married women. Mark commented that it was up to ERO discretion as to whether or not to add someone to the register. However, it was recognised that this had led to a number of confused and upset electors who did not understand why they were being asked to provide this information.
- Reports on how many electors were likely to lose their postal votes in December would be required, but were not yet available.
- HEFs were not being returned by electors who were going directly online and registering themselves, despite the requirement to return the hard copy form as well.
- The amount of letters being produced, particularly by one provider, was greatly increased from the old system and therefore was costing a lot more in printing and postage. Although there was the ability to email letters to electors, this was too time-consuming.
- There was great concern over what would happen on -12 and how applications should be processed.
- Now that more people were going online, there was no real audit trail for checking applications and ensuring that they were correctly received and processed. This was due to a worry that the IER-DS could lose applications, which had been the experience already of some authorities, but there was no way currently of knowing if this had happened.
- There were also some issues over the publication of the Open Register and when exactly this should be, as electors believed it to be immediate. This could perhaps be communicated better, but also didn’t stop people using old registers.
Mark summarised by stating that generally IER had been rolled out well and that this was down to the amount of work being done by everyone involved to ensure that it continues to run smoothly. The benefits of this programme would not be realised immediately, as there was still a long way to go, but that the structure of IER was sound.

RESOLVED:
(i) That the AEA Board and Management Team be advised the Branch recommend that the AEA ensure that all documents provided by the Electoral Commission are fully scrutinised and user-tested and the outcomes shared with stakeholders in the future in the future.

The Branch thanked Mark and Julian for their attendance.

7. BRANCH TRAINING
Matthew Yeo, Branch Training Officer, was in attendance and commented that there was an AEA information session to be held after the meeting for any member that wished to stay to learn more about the AEA and the role of the Branch officers. It had been agreed at the previous meeting to look at having a session on the 2015 elections, but that the training courses being provided by the AEA would have to be taken into consideration.

The Chairman then reported that this would be Matthew’s last meeting as he was leaving electoral services in November to take up a role in academia. Matthew was thanked for his contribution to the Branch over the past few years, including his work as the Branch Training Officer in the last year.

8. CONSULTATIONS PAPER PANEL
It was noted that Matthew Pitcher, Bournemouth, had been appointed as Chairman of the Consultation Papers Panel. Matthew was thanked for agreeing to take on this role.

(a) Parliamentary Boundaries and how they should be withdrawn
The Branch noted that, since its last meeting, the Panel had agreed a response to the above consultation for the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, which had been circulated.

(b) Post Legislative Assessment of the Electoral Administration Act 2006
The Branch noted that, since its last meeting, the Panel had agreed a response to the above Cabinet Office consultation, which had been circulated.

(c) A Manual of Guidance on Policing Elections
The Branch noted that, since its last meeting, the Panel did not feel that a response was necessary from the Branch on this consultation. It was raised, however, that members should be aware of the additional expectations on communication and training between the police and elections offices.

RESOLVED: That (i) the responses prepared by the Consultation Papers Panel in respect of the above matters be noted; (ii) the Panel be thanked for its work and (iii) that Members be encouraged to use the Consultation Papers Panel responses to form their own individual responses to consultations.

9. AEA ANNUAL AWARDS
Nominations were invited from the Branch for the AEA Annual Award Scheme. The scheme was set up to recognise contributions by a Member to the work of the Association or to the furtherance of electoral administration in the UK. Members were
asked that, if they had a nomination, that this be sent to the Secretary by Friday 7 November 2014 for consideration.

10. **AEA CONFERENCE BURSARY**  
Nominations were invited from the Branch for both the National and Southern Branch Conference Bursaries. Applications could be obtained from the Secretary and the deadline for applications was Friday 9 October 2013.

11. **NEW MEMBERS AND MEMBERSHIP**  
Richard Woods (New Forest); Suzette Starmer (Oxford) and Philippa Rugman (South Oxfordshire and VoWH) had joined the Branch since the last meeting  
Branch Membership was 179 at today’s date.

12. **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.

13. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**  
The Chairman reported that Bev Lee from South Oxfordshire was leaving electoral services and thanked her for her contribution to not only elections, but to the Branch during her time as Branch Training Officer. A small gift to thank her would be arranged.

A reminder had been sent to Regional Returning Officers from the ECU, asking them to remind administrators to submit their European Election claims. To date, only 4% of claims had been returned, although it was recognised that the implementation of IER would have had some bearing on this. Members reported that there were issues with the ECU’s spreadsheet, as some of the cells were locked. The spreadsheet would have to be completed as much as possible and then sent to ECU, to request additional cells to be unlocked.

There had been a recent article on the AEA website, regarding the supply of transitional IER information to political parties, which members were advised to read.

A member raised the issue of registration forms used by Bite the Ballot, which state “tick this box to ensure your information is not sold onto third parties who may send you junk mail”. The Electoral Commission had confirmed that, although EROs were required to use the prescribed wording on forms regarding the Open Register, other organisations were not.

The meeting finished at 12.10 am.