

<b>Committee:</b> Policy and Resources	<b>Date:</b> 8 June 2017
<b>Subject:</b> Increasing Diversity in the Court of Common Council - Update	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Town Clerk	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report Author:</b> Angela Roach, Principal Committee and Members Services Manager	

### Summary

1. This report updates Members on the work being undertaken by the Policy and Resources Committee to enhance the diversity of the Court of Common Council. This would have included: regular meetings of a Member-level Diversity Group; a series of 'Road Shows' about the City Corporation; engagement with staff networks in City businesses; the delivery of a more extensive communications plan, and; a review of the by the Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council about the timing of Committee meetings. The review's findings are set out in Appendix A of this report; it concluded that "*there is significant effort and no obvious gaps in the work the City Corporation is undertaking to engage with its voters and encourage prospective candidates*".

### Recommendation

2. Members are asked to:-
  - a. note the work undertaken; and
  - b. and to consider whether any action should be taken with regard to the findings of the Review undertaken by Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council, as set out in Appendix A of the report.

### Main Report

#### Background

3. The Policy and Resources Committee has been undertaking work to enhance the diversity of the Court of Common Council. The following activities have been undertaken in the last year as part of this work:-
  - an informal Member-level Diversity Group helped steer matters and act as a sounding board for some of the activities being undertaken;
  - a series of Road Shows took place, the purpose of which was to reach out to larger firms about matters of concern for people working in the City, such as air quality; to encourage voter registration and to get people engaged in the democratic process;

- an early evening event was held on 13 October 2016 to brief and engage employee networks operating in businesses across the City about the City Corporation, its work and the benefits of undertaking civic duties;
- the Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council was engaged (at no cost) to review whether the timing of committee meetings was a deciding factor in candidates standing for election, as well as information and resources aimed at encouraging and informing potential candidates; and
- communication on how to become a Common Councilman was improved.

### **Informal Member-Level Diversity Group**

4. In light of numerous discussions at Committee, a small group of Members was convened to explore the issue of diversity and the barriers which might deter people from standing for election to Common Council. The Group is comprised of the following Members:-
  - Henry Colthurst
  - Marianne Fredericks
  - Wendy Hyde
  - Dhruv Patel
  - Tom Sleigh
  - Alderman Sir David Wootton
5. The Group met on several occasions and instigated some of the activities referred to in this report, namely the welcome pack, an event to engage employee networks operating in businesses across the City, and the creation of an abbreviated version of the “Becoming a Common Councilman” to assist Members in playing their part in promoting the benefits of standing for election to Common Council.

### **Engaging with City Businesses and Staff Networks**

6. To encourage increased voter registration and to highlight matters of concern for people working in the City, a series of road shows were held at some of the City’s larger firms e.g. CBRE, UBS, Accenture and M&G. Events were also held in Guildhall Yard. The Road shows were also used as opportunity to encourage people to get engaged in the democratic process.
7. Following a suggestion that more outreach work should be undertaken to brief and engage employee networks operating in businesses across the City, an early evening reception was held last October to promote the City Corporation’s work and the benefits of undertaking civic duties. Attendees heard about what it is like to be an elected Common Councilman and it was emphasised that the City Corporation welcomed candidates from all backgrounds in the then forthcoming elections. Whilst take up for the event was not as good as hoped, the smaller, more intimate gathering that took place worked well and was appreciated by all those present.

### **Improved Communication and Member Engagement**

8. Members were also encouraged to share information and publicise the benefits of public service. Two documents were created to assist with this – an electronic

introduction to the organisation which was designed for use as a first point of contact and which could be emailed to those who were interested or unfamiliar with the City Corporation. Members were also provided with an abbreviated electronic version, of the guide to Becoming a Common Councilman to send to individuals who expressed an interest in standing. Both documents are attached to Appendix A as Annexes 1 and 2.

## **Working Practices**

9. The timing of committee meetings at the City Corporation were discussed by the Policy Committee in April 2016 and then by the Member-level Diversity Group as something which might deter candidates from standing for election to Common Council. In light of this the Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council was commissioned (at no cost) to conduct a review into this aspect of the Corporation's working practices (see Appendix A). The main findings of the review are as follows:-
  - While it is important to maintain flexibility over the timing of meetings, a collective decision on the best arrangement for when to holding meetings is required;
  - Delivery of improved communication and targeted engagement should continue with prospective candidates, and this work should be regularly evaluated;
  - Consideration should be given to surveying those candidates who expressed an interest in standing for election but who eventually chose not to in order to ascertain what influenced their decision;
10. The issue of remuneration has been considered on a number of occasions, including at an informal meeting of the Court in February 2015 where reference was made to the facilities offered under the Financial Loss Scheme. The majority of Members who participated in the review process felt strongly that the provision of facilities rather than remuneration was a core part of the City Corporation's working practice and that the lunchtime tradition assisted business and provided an invaluable opportunity for informal discussions and networking.
11. With regard to the timing of meetings, this too has been considered on a number of occasions previously and significant changes to timings have been rejected. It was last considered at an informal meeting of the Court in November 2015. Whilst it was felt that there was nothing to prevent a Committee from altering its start time, the majority of Members felt that the status quo should be maintained.

## **City Elections**

12. The total turnout figure for the recent City-wide elections was 33.41%, in which 19 wards were contested. This represents a total of 4779 votes cast, of which 2803 were postal votes and 1976 were cast in person, meaning just under 59% of all votes cast were postal votes. The percentage turnout compares favourably to that of the previous 2013 City-wide election, which saw an overall turnout of 24.93%. In terms of postal votes, the 2013 elections saw a fraction over 57% of votes being cast in this manner, so the 59% figure from this year represents a marginal increase. A breakdown of the figures by Ward, for both 2013 and 2017, is available in Annexe 3.

## **Conclusion**

13. A lot of work has been undertaken in the last year to publicise the work of the City Corporation and to promote candidates for election to Common Council from a range of backgrounds. An independent review of some of the City Corporation's working practices has been undertaken; it concluded that a lot of effort has already been made and that there were no obvious gaps in the work undertaken to engage with voters and encourage prospective candidates. The current effort would however need to be maintained. Your views are now sought on whether any further action should be taken, particularly with regard to the findings of the Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council.

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