

Parish council elections – increasing democracy

As part of its Big Society initiative, the Royal Borough is committed to the principle of devolving power to parish councils where local people can take decisions about the neighbourhoods in which they live.

To this end the Council is leading a drive to encourage parishes to favour election over co-option when there is a casual vacancy and to encourage:

- more people to step forward for election to parish councils
- more people to vote.

The Big Society Panel (meeting 17 September 2013) agreed that publicity should be maximised to generate public interest at key times to help:

- raise awareness and encourage local people to stand for parish council elections
- encourage residents to vote at parish council elections
- prompt elections when there is a casual vacancy by securing the 10 required signatures.

Communications objectives

This plan sets out the communications actions in support of the Council's objective to increase local democracy through parish councils by:

- working with parish councils to identify joint communications aims
- delivering an effective public awareness campaign about the opportunities for getting involved in local democracy via parish councils
- helping to educate residents about the value of parish councils to their neighbourhoods and way of life
- encouraging people to put their names on a new register of potential candidates
- helping to motivate younger people to get involved
- encouraging people to vote
- communicating the key dates and information relating to casual vacancies
- communicating key dates and information for parish council elections in 2015.

Key messages

- Local people can make a positive difference by becoming a parish councillor
- Young people can bring a whole new dimension to the work and achievements of parish councils
- Benefits and value of parish councils and the work they do for local neighbourhoods
- Benefits of devolving decision-making to where it is closer to local residents
- Important parish election coming up (as required)
- Importance of registering to vote and having a say
- How to access information about parish councils and candidates
- Have your say at an electing by:

- turning out to vote on polling day
- using postal or proxy votes
- Timetable – key dates for registering for postal and proxy votes
- Voting arrangements – polling stations, opening times etc

Target audiences

Potential candidates

- Residents in parished areas, with a particular emphasis on younger people
- Business and sports communities and special interest groups in parished areas
- Council staff who may be interested in becoming parish councillors
- Media.

Voters

- Residents, including older people (chief users of postal votes) and young people
- Home movers and new residents to help ensure that people moving home do not lose their right to vote.
- Hard-to-reach groups, including ethnic minority communities, people in temporary accommodation, older people in care homes and service voters
- Borough and parish councillors
- Council staff – both as voters themselves and to help spread the message of parish elections
- Media.

Direct targeting to specific groups including:

- Young Farmers' Clubs
- Churches
- Rotaract
- Business networking groups
- School governors
- Parent-Teacher Associations
- Neighbourhood Action Groups
- Issues action groups, e.g. Heatherwood, Ramblers
- Women's groups, e.g. WIs, Townswomen's Guild
- Youth Council and youth clubs
- Library users.

Methods

External

- Council's website with links to relevant information on other sites
- Direct emails to residents on borough database
- Hard-to-reach groups via relevant contacts, for example in adult social care service and youth service
- Briefing notes for all councillors and for parish councils

- Social media – Facebook and Twitter for postings to raise awareness of the need for potential candidates and at key election dates
- Briefing for customer contact centre staff who will may field calls from the public
- Council noticeboards
- Around the Royal Borough
- Community alerts
- Face-to-face sessions in local libraries
- Country fairs and agricultural shows.

Internal

- Regular information and updates on Talking Point
- Briefing for DMTs / CMT / Leadership Group for cascading to all staff
- Briefings for ward councillors
- Managing Directors' Friday message.

Media engagement

- Press releases to be issued at the appropriate times
- Potential interview opportunities identified and put forward to press and broadcast media.

Methods: using what's already available

Identify existing external communications channels including:

- Parish newsletters
- DALC
- Church newsletters
- Residents' and tenants' associations (via housing associations)
- Housing association newsletters
- First Stop Shops
- Identify young parish councillors and enlist their help as role models.

Potential barriers

- Failure of parish councils to engage
- Perceived lack of public interest in local government other than 'bins and roads'
- Young people leaving for university or work opportunities after they reach voting age
- Lack of sustained media interest in what will be a long haul campaign.

Timetable

- This is a drip feed campaign that will get underway immediately to establish a foundation of awareness and interest.
- Key promotion/communication dates will be identified as casual vacancies arise.
- A specific timetable for the 2015 local government elections will be drawn up to capitalise on each key date in the election process.

Evaluation

Evaluation of communications success will include:

- Level of response by those interested in or registering for parish candidature
- Voter turnout
- Positive/negative media stories
- Feedback and comment via social media
- Number of hits to council webpage.

More specific evaluation will be identified for each campaign relating to a parish vacancy and for the 2015 elections.