

Report to the Governance Select Committee

Date of meeting: 3 October 2018

Subject: Local and Parliamentary Elections 2017 – Review



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Recommendations:

(1) To consider a review of the management of the following:

- (i) County Council Elections - 5 May 2017; and**
- (ii) UK Parliamentary Election – 8 June 2017**

(2) To recommend to the Returning Officer any changes to procedure for future elections.

Introduction

Summary

1. This report discusses the planning processes and implementation of the following elections held during 2017:
 - (a) The election of County Councillors on 4 May 2017
 - (b) The snap General Election held on 8 June 2017
2. The report outlines that, in the opinion of the Returning Officer, processes were very effective. The Elections have been reviewed by the Elections Planning Group and any issues identified have been included within this report. Candidates and Agents in the Election have also been asked to comment and the response to those is contained within the report.

Commentary

3. This year has seen no respite in the amount of work carried out by electoral staff in running elections, with an unexpected snap General Election (UKPGE) called for 8 June with many overlapping timescales and actions. The upsurge in registration due to national campaigns has also been a factor in creating a big workload for all those who administer elections across the Country.
4. The UKPGE was announced by the Prime Minister on Tuesday 18 April, at a crucial stage of the timetable for the May polls. This unexpected news threw up the unprecedented challenge of making arrangements for the delivery of the UKPGE whilst continuing with the safe delivery

of the elections that were taking place on Thursday 4 May. With the UKPGE being held so soon after the May polls, there was an obvious overlap in campaigning, introducing confusion for the electorate. In addition, different franchises applied to the two sets of polls, which presented communication challenges with those electors. European Union citizens registered as electors were entitled to participate in the May polls but were then not entitled to vote at the UKPGE five weeks later.

5. The Returning Officer and a team of officers met regularly since the autumn of 2016 in order to plan effectively for the May Election and to ensure that the processes were undertaken at the appropriate times. A Project Plan and a Risk Register for the election were prepared, reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
6. At Epping Forest, Elections are the successful collaboration of a number of teams that cross support each other during the peak in workload in the run up to elections. It is apparent from our connections with electoral colleagues across the country, that this is far from usual practice. The Association of Electoral Administrators, in its most recent annual report has flagged up the concern it has for the wellbeing of many of its members from the workload created by running elections. This system of support has worked here very well this year across both elections and is a credit to the many hundreds of staff involved. The staff ranged from those from Governance Directorate, right across the Council to Facilities Management who get a specific mention for coming to the rescue when an officer snapped the key to the secure ballot store off in the lock and helped us gain access again.
7. As background, the elections team have also organised by-elections in Chigwell, Ongar and Epping this year and at the time of writing this report, a further by-election is planned for later in October 2017 in Lower Sheering ward.
8. At 1 December 2016, on the publication of the electoral register, the District register held 102,472 electors. This was some 1341 electors down on the peak of 103,813 electors who were on the register at the time of the EU referendum. Again, at the annual canvass stage in autumn 2016, we achieved one of the highest response rates in the Country.

Publicity

9. There was, again this year, a national campaign for the registration deadline which publicised the opportunity of registering online. Electoral Commission again made a mistake in their publicity by encouraging people to beat the deadline for registration for the General Election right in the middle of the last stages of May election creating a peak in workload in answering calls and duplicate online registration attempts. The Electoral Commission publicity campaign made many voters think that they had to register again to be able to vote in the referendum. Officers contacted the Electoral Commission and made this point and subsequent publicity seemed to be altered.
10. The Public Relations Section undertook a sustained publicity campaign through registration deadlines and during the run-up to the election days encouraging registration and voting.

Pre-election Period

11. As this year's May elections were for County Councillors only, no local candidates evening was held, although one was held by the County Council. Officers seek members' views about the timing and desirability of an evening in 2017. It could perhaps be scheduled for earlier in the candidate process?
12. All of the county election papers for May and for the UKPGE in June were printed by the Council's Reprographics Section which again provided an excellent service bearing in mind

the tight timescale for printing. All books were hand checked. Division/Constituency names and ballot numbers were printed on the book cover so that PO's could easily check them when issuing, this worked well and no errors in issuing occurred.

13. In the run up to the general election, the Returning Officer had good assistance from the Essex Police Service. Attacks in central London in the weeks before the election meant that additional security measures were drawn up and put in place for polling stations and the count centre. There was a very visible presence by the police in June and the Returning Officer records his thanks to the Divisional Commander Chief Inspector Basford and local liaison PS Lisa Cooke for their help in maintaining security of the election process.

Postal voting

14. Postal voting continues to grow in popularity:
 - 9,724 postal packs were sent out for May on 29 April and this was completed within 3 hours. 5300 packs were returned and counted.
 - 8,305 postal packs were sent out on 22 May 2017 for the UKPGE including 192 overseas electors by airmail. This was completed in a little over two hours with no issues.
 - There were a low number of ballots rejected at scanning stage but there were a number where the voter had failed to enter their date of birth correctly (May – mostly by entering the date of completion of the form) and rather than evidence of any fraudulent activity. Some adjustments to the wording on the form may improve this voter error. A total of 123 postal applications were rejected in June.
 - There was a surge in applications for postal vote applications in the run up to the deadline before the UKPGE, this is thought to be due to the timing of the election, during a holiday period.
 - Despite assurances that a full postal sweep had been completed on the evening of 8 June and three packets being returned by Royal Mail at the count, 45 further late packets arrived at the Council on the Friday and Monday after the election.

Staffing

15. The levels of staffing for polling stations, verification and counts were adequate. However, staffing for June was more problematic as it is generally a staff holiday period. The government will not pay for staff to be kept on standby for UKPGE. Following a review of the likely risk to processes, the decision was taken by the Returning Officer to employ and pay for the staff as two staff had dropped out with injuries very close to the May election.
16. Officers from Democratic Services and other sections provided much needed support to Electoral Services Staff by helping with enquiries about voting and registration.
17. Assumptions made about the level of staff required for the issue and opening of postal votes proved correct as these procedures were all completed in good time. Directors were helpful in making officers available for all of the processes. Staff attended effective training sessions for each stage of the process in accordance with the project plan.

Polling Stations

18. At both elections, all polling stations opened on time and operated all day without problem and procedures planned for queues at close of poll were not required to be invoked on either date.
19. There are a number of changes to Polling Stations:

- The new Polling Station at the Cottage Loaf Public House, replacing the Allotment Building in Willingale Road proved to work well.
- As Loughton Town Council Offices, Buckingham Court were moving to Loughton Library shortly the decision was taken to relocate voters to the existing Grosvenor Hall station with no issues.
- The Head teacher at Willingale School could not accommodate the polling station in June. It was relocated to Barrington Close. This location was adequate but parking was restricted in this location.
- Due to a pre-planned building programme at White Bridge School, voters were redirected to St Michaels Hall in Roding Road with no issues. Signage was displayed at the school and the school assisted in alerting parents through their parent mail system.

20. No further observations regarding polling stations were received during post-election consultations.

Polling day issues

21. All the Districts Polling stations were operational for both the May and the June events. In May, issues were reported by local residents trying to access the polling station in Lambourne due to road resurfacing works. Officers contacted the County Returning Officer and the roadworks were quickly suspended for the day.
22. An alert Presiding Officer in Loughton made a report to the Elections Office of alleged personation (voting as another). This was reported to the police after the election and staff interviewed. As a direct result a man from Loughton received a conditional caution for the offence including a letter of apology to the Council.
23. The Elections Office was busy on both days, especially in June, it was apparent that many of those calling about voting either had never voted, didn't know where to vote or how the process worked.
24. The opportunity was taken this year to purchase some new signs and also some dual use polling screens. These screens have booth shelves at two heights, one suitable for wheelchair/seated users. These worked well and officers are looking at replacing stock of older polling booths over time as resources permit.
25. One complaint was received in May from a member of the public who had experienced delays in an Epping station which had stemmed from the mismarking of the register. This was resolved by the Deputy Returning Officer and a learning point was delivered at the staff briefing session in June and did not re-occur. Three complaints were recorded in June: one from a German national who was not sent a postal vote (EU nationals cannot vote at UKPGE), one related to a teller speaking to voters on the way into the station and one from a postal voter wishing to retract their vote (having returned it) indicated that they wished to vote differently, nationally.

Verification and Counts

26. Verification and counting of County Council ballot papers in May and the UKPGE count in June took place at Debden Park High School. The school, on both occasions, were particularly helpful to staff. This larger hall was required for these elections to enable a greater number of Count staff to be employed. It is the view of officers that where a single type election is concerned that this location is currently the best option. Again this year, officers hired-in PA equipment as announcements had been previously identified as an issue for those attending.

27. In May and June counting started as soon as the polling finished with postal votes. The process went smoothly using a 'mini count' system on both occasions. For the May County Council elections, 14 teams across 7 Divisions counted in pairs with a senior count staff member being responsible for collating a result for the division. For the UKPGE Officers had, by analysis, attempted to balance the likely number of votes on each table and this worked well in practice with the ten mini-count teams finishing well before the previous GE counts, albeit that on the previous occasion in 2015, it had been a combined election.
28. This year, on both dates, a bespoke spreadsheet was again used effectively to simplify procedures at the Count. Officers will continue to develop electronic processes for the count.
29. The Council's Public Relations and Marketing Officer supported by the Website Officer ensured that appropriate publicity was made available at all stages with links to the Council's website. Social media was also used to spread the message. The Council provided effective media facilities at the Count.

Post-Election Consultations/Comments

30. Every Agent has been written to asking for comments in relation to the running of both Elections. Members have also been asked to comment via the Bulletin. By the date of writing this report only the following comments have been received:

Wendy,

Positives: I was a novice parliamentary agent and found our meeting and communication helpful. The refreshments on the evening itself were good.

Negatives: not enough seating in the evening, as none of us wanted to be standing the whole time watching the count,

Angela Ayre

Dear Wendy,

As agent to four candidates (May) I thought that the count was very efficiently organized. The lay-out of the room made the proceedings easy to follow

Peter Sinfield

Future Elections and Lessons Learned

31. It is the opinion of the Returning Officer and his staff that there were no material issues arising at the 2017 elections. All practices were completed successfully
32. In May 2018 there are solely District elections. Lessons learnt will be fed back into the process for next year which begins shortly.
33. Members of the Committee are asked to provide feedback to the Returning Officer for future elections.

Boundary Commission for England - 2018 Review revised proposals for the Eastern Region

34. As part of the next stage of the 2018 Parliamentary Constituency Boundary Review the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) intend to publish their Revised proposals for new constituency boundaries on Tuesday 17 October 2017. They will consult on these proposals for eight weeks, until 11 December 2017. This will be the last consultation during this review of constituencies, and the last chance to contribute views to the Commission on the best pattern

of constituencies to recommend to Parliament when they conclude their review next year, as they are statutorily obliged to do.

35. As when BCE consulted on initial proposals last year, they rely heavily on local authorities to assist in publicising the consultation, so BCE can engage with as many citizens as possible. They will be working with the Local Government Association and preparing a partner pack full of resources. This is the last chance for people to have their say on their proposals. Unlike last year's consultation, BCE will not be hosting public hearings across the country - there is no provision to allow this in governing legislation.
36. The next meeting of the Select Committee is on 3 October 2017 which is in the consultation window. If there are any significant changes proposed for the district a further report would be made to that meeting.
37. All the information people need to see the proposals and contribute to the review will be on the BCE website, at www.bce2018.org.uk, from 17 October 2017.