

<p>Non-Executive Report of the:</p> <p><b>General Purposes Committee</b></p> <p>10th January 2022</p>	 <p><b>TOWER HAMLETS</b></p>
<p><b>Report of:</b> Will Tuckley, Tower Hamlets Chief Executive and Returning Officer</p>	<p><b>Classification:</b> [Unrestricted]</p>
<p><b>Elections/Polls update – Thursday 5 May 2022</b></p>	

<b>Originating Officer(s)</b>	Robert Curtis, Head of Electoral Services
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### **Special Circumstances Justifying Urgent Consideration**

This report has been compiled to update General Purposes Committee on the administrative preparations currently being undertaken for the Elections in May 2022.

The report has been subject to continued alteration and precise content affected due to the recent updates to the Covid precautionary measures and preparations already put in place with candidates/agents and political party briefing undertaken early along with continued liaison with the Police and Electoral Commission.

Given the commencement of the formal timetable in March 2022 this report updates the Council on the progress thus far before the statutory timetable commences.

### **Summary**

This information report informs the Committee of the administrative progress and preparation being undertaken for the Borough Council Elections and the Executive Mayor election scheduled to take place on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

### **Recommendations:**

This report is an information item with no recommendations for the committee.

## **1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS**

1.1. This report is an information item.

## **2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

2.1 None.

## **3. DETAILS OF REPORT**

3.1 This report details the planning currently being undertaken for the delivery of the Tower Hamlets Borough Council Elections and the Executive Mayor election scheduled to take place on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

3.2 Will Tuckley in his capacity as Returning Officer has the overall responsibility for the conduct of these elections.

3.3 His role as Returning Officer is a personal responsibility independent and separate from his duties as an employee of the council.

3.4 He is appointed under the Representation of the People Act 1983.

3.5 The Returning Officer may appoint one or more persons to discharge all or any of his/her functions and has appointed the following officers as his formal deputies with full powers.

- Janet Fasan - Director of Legal (Monitoring Officer)
- Denise Radley - Corporate Director Health, Adults and Community and Deputy Chief Executive
- Robert Curtis - Head of Electoral Services

The following officers are appointed with limited powers

- Paul Hallett - Deputy Electoral Services Manager (Elections)
- Stacey Kennedy-Clarke - Deputy Electoral Services Manager (Registration)

3.6 The Returning Officer plays a central role in the democratic process ensuring that elections are administered effectively and that, as a result, the experience of voters and those standing for election is a positive one.

3.7 His role includes ensuring the following are undertaken:

- publishing the notice of election
- administering the nomination process
- printing the ballot papers
- publishing the notice of poll, statement of persons nominated and notice of situation of polling stations
- the provision of polling stations
- appointing Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks
- managing the postal voting process
- verifying and counting the votes &
- declaring the result/s

3.8 The Council elections will elect 45 Cllrs in total for twenty Borough Wards.

- 7 wards will have 3 Cllrs elected each (Total 21)
- 11 wards will have 2 Cllrs elected each (Total 22)
- 2 wards will have a single Cllr elected (Total 2)

- 3.9 External stakeholders' meetings have already taken place and include
- FDM data print mail, an established specialist elections printer based in Canning Town, who will be producing and printing the following.
    - polling cards
    - postal vote packs
    - Ballot papers
    - Mayoral Booklet
    - Associated stationery
  - Civica Xpress (Electoral Services Software) who will provide the appropriate software modules for the electoral register and elections management
  - Royal Mail who will deliver the poll cards and deliver/return the postal packs and have the following set up
    - Individual postal vote dispatch licences
    - Pre sortation return postal vote licences
    - International dispatch licences
    - Polling day sorting office sweep
- 3.10 To assist in the project planning and risk assessments there have been several meetings and /or conversations already held in November and December 2021.
- The Electoral Commission - The Returning Officer is required to satisfy performance standards set by the Commission.
  - The Metropolitan Police
    - Major Investigations Support, Special Enquiries Team (SET)
    - Central East BCU (Hackney & Tower Hamlets)
    - The police will compile their own project plan for elections held across London and will liaise directly with the Returning Officer on the preparation and delivery of the plan here in Tower Hamlets and they are represented at the Project Board.
    - Allegations of electoral malpractice can be reported
      - directly to the electoral services team,
      - through the Tower Hamlets web portal here [Report electoral fraud \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)
      - by email to [SETElections@met.police.uk](mailto:SETElections@met.police.uk)
      - Telephone 101
      - Contact Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111
  - The London Elections Management Board (LEMB) consisting of senior officers from throughout London to ensure consistency of approach
  - The London Branch of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) – the professional organisation who will assist elections officers and teams throughout London.
  - The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)
- 3.11 After the publication of the electoral register on 1 December 2021, the Tower Hamlets Elections Project Board, chaired by Will Tuckley, was convened for the first time on Thursday 16 December 2021.
- 3.12 The Project Board will meet regularly throughout the 5 months lead in to polling day and will concentrate initially on the commencement of the statutory timetable which commences on Monday 28 March 2022 when the Notice of Election is published.
- 3.13 Monday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022 is the date that purdah officially commences for the Council and the implications will be formally communicated to all members and officers directly from the Monitoring Officer before this date.

- 3.14 The make-up of the Project Board consists of internal department leads and external stakeholders as follows
- Legal
  - IT
    - A separate IT delivery plan is being compiled by the Head of External IT
  - Communications
    - A separate communications plan is currently being compiled by the Head of External Communications
  - Facilities/Logistics
    - A separate plan for the delivery/movement of boxes and equipment to the polling stations and the count is being prepared by the Head of Facilities.
  - The Metropolitan Police (SET and Central East BCU)
  - The Electoral Commission
    - The Commission are currently updating the nomination papers which will be prepared for all known candidates and parties when received.
  - Electoral Services
  - Democratic Services
  - Finance
- 3.14 On Thursday 16 December 2021 a briefing was held for all potential candidates/political parties and agents, this likely to be replicated in the New Year as the timetable approaches and interest in standing at the elections increases.
- Issues covered at the briefings include:
- Key dates of the election timetable
  - Nomination of candidates – what to do and what not to do
  - Agent types
  - Absent votes
  - Polling day arrangements
  - The count
  - Candidates Expenses
  - An open question and answer session – Police/Electoral Commission/Returning Officer
- 3.15 The official timetable can be found on the councils Elections 2022 web page here [Council elections and election of the Tower Hamlets Executive Mayor – Thursday 5 May 2022](#)
- 3.16 The Councils web page will be updated throughout the statutory timetable to include
- All statutory notices
  - All validly nominated candidates
  - Information on the Polling places and venues being used
  - Interactive map to search for polling places
  - All officially declared results and statistics
4. The Count
- 4.1 The count venue has been confirmed as the East Wintergarden in Canary Wharf.
- 4.2 The venue is within the borough and has been subject to two meetings on site in 2021 with all the stakeholders including the Police and Canary Wharf Security and will be subject to further onsite meetings in 2022.
- 4.3 The count is subject to its own formal plan with the stages of the count as follows
- The verification of the content of the ballot boxes delivered from Mulberry Place for all the polls will take place on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2022 commencing at 8am.

- On completion of the verification for all polls the counting of votes cast for the Executive Mayor will take place on the same day and the result declared on completion of that process.
- The counting of votes cast for the Borough Council Elections will commence at 8am on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2022 until all votes are counted and results declared.

4.4 Further information relating to the count will be provided to all candidates and agents once their candidature has been confirmed.

5. Covid

5.1 Following the suspension of all polling in 2020 through to May 2021 significant work has been undertaken to try and predict how restrictions to normal working practices will affect the way people will cast their votes, postal voting, polling day and the operation of the count venue.

Following on from May 2021, with the help of the stakeholders, risk assessments remain in place that not only cover the usual risks experienced at a normal poll but also those that must be considered as we approach the polls in May 2022.

The documents cover concerns relating to

- Electoral registration
- Continued project management
- Staffing & training
- Printing & postage
- Polling day
- Postal voting
- Proxy voting
- Ancillary activities e.g., equipment, receipted postage, nominations
- The count
- Candidates & agents

5.2 Risk assessments are regularly reviewed to ensure best practice for a Covid affected poll.

An example of the considerations for polling places is attached at Appendix B.

There is however a sense of caution given the uncertainty of where the pandemic will be by 28<sup>th</sup> March next year when the statutory timetable commences and how the public will react if the infection rates are high which could deter people from attending the polling places.

5.3 Following the suspension of the polls in 2020 through to May 2021 there has been a necessity to keep in touch with all stakeholders both external and internally and this continued for the polls held in May, the Weavers Ward By election and the Spitalfields Neighbourhood Planning Referendum.

5.4 To ensure consistency of approach risk assessments and project plans continue to reflect not only the considerable work undertaken prior to the suspension and throughout this and last year but all arrangements look ahead to the polls in May 2022, continually assessing the implications of infection rates and Government advice.

If infections start to abate or are complicated by the emergence of variants the primary concern is to ensure that polling is undertaken safely for everyone associated with the polls.

## **5. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **6. LEGAL COMMENTS**

The duties of a returning officer are set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983 and are set out in this report.

## **7. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS**

7.1 There are no equalities or diversity implications arising from this report

**8. BEST VALUE (BV) IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no implications arising from this report

**9. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT**

9.1 There are no SAGE implications arising from this report.

**10. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 There are increased risks with combined polls and the implications of Covid.

10.2 The Council and Mayor Polls are combined with 2 ballot papers having to be issued to the electorate with different ways to cast their vote and different counting methods to determine the results.

10.3 Some may find the receipt of 2 papers difficult to deal with in the polling booths and when receiving postal packs given that the voting methods are different.

10.4 It is therefore very important that the guidance and information communicated to the electorate is clear as is reasonably practicable.

**11. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 There are no implications arising from this report.

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**Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents**

**Linked Report**

- NONE.

**Appendices**

Appendix A: Count methods

Appendix B: Covid considerations

**Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended) list of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report**

- NONE.

**Officer contact details for documents:**

- Robert Curtis, Head of Electoral Services

## Counting Methods

### 1. Tower Hamlets Executive Mayor – Supplementary vote system

- Each voter has a first and second choice vote.
- If a candidate receives more than half of all the first choice votes they are elected.
- If this does not happen, the two candidates with the most first choice votes go through to a second round.
- All other candidates are eliminated.
- The second-choice votes of those candidates eliminated are then counted.
- Any votes for the remaining two candidates from the ballot papers of those eliminated are added to their first-round totals.
- The candidate with the highest combined total of first and second choice votes wins the contest and is elected.

### 2. Tower Hamlets Borough Council – First past the post

- The 20 Borough Wards are counted using the ‘first past the post system’.
- This means the candidates with the most votes in each ward, subject to the number of Councilors required, are elected.
- If three Cllrs are required, then the first three candidates with the highest number of votes are elected.
- If two Cllrs are required, then the first two candidates with the highest number of votes are elected.
- If a single Cllr is required, then the candidate with the highest number of votes is elected.
- In the event of there being a tie the contest is determined by lot.

## COVID19

The more an individual interacts with others, and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread.

Elector's voting is a higher risk for COVID-19 spread because there will be potential for people to be socially closer as they wait and cast their vote.

The virus that causes COVID-19, is mostly spread by respiratory droplets released when people talk, cough, or sneeze. It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.

Personal prevention practices such as hand washing/sanitizing are important actions that election officials, polling staff, and voters can take and encourage to help lower the risk of COVID-19 spread.

### Recommendations for staff

Promoting behaviors that reduce the spread of Covid19

- All staff are appropriately trained
- Polling staff who are sick, have tested positive for COVID-19, or have recently had contact with a person with COVID-19 should stay home.
- Ensure that poll locations are adequately staffed to cover any sick workers who need to stay home.

### Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette

- Alcohol-based hand sanitiser with at least 60% alcohol will be provided where voters interact with polling staff, after using the polling booths, and as the final step in the voting process.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitiser will be placed in visible, frequently used locations such as the issue desks and entrances/exits.
- Staff will be encouraged to wash their hands frequently e.g., before entering the polling location, before and after breaks, after touching or handling masks or PPE, after using the restroom, after touching shared surfaces or objects etc. with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Encourage staff and voters if sneezing to use a tissue or use the inside of their elbow.
- Used tissues should be thrown in the bin and hands washed immediately with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use the hand sanitiser that contains at least 60% alcohol.

### Masks

- Recommend and reinforce the use of masks for all staff and electors where possible.
- Encourage voters to use masks while in the polling place.
- Where voters' masks need to be removed to speak perhaps, alcohol-based hand sanitiser containing at least 60% alcohol should be provided at the station so voters can sanitise their hands after removing their masks.
- A plastic barrier between the voter and the poll worker has been provided to provide additional protection.
- Signs have been provided for all places.
- Please note: Masks should not be placed on:
  - Babies and children
  - Anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious
  - Anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance
  - Masks are meant to protect other people in case the wearer is unknowingly infected but does not have symptoms.
  - They are not meant to be a substitute for personal protective equipment such as surgical masks, respirators, or other medical personal protective equipment.
- Masks can make it more difficult for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to lip-read, hear, or understand what people are saying. Communication can be supported with written communication,



posting information/instructions, and decreasing background noise. Lip reading can be supported with clear masks, face shields, or plexiglass barriers where possible.

- Clear face coverings are available for polling staff, to ensure that voting is accessible to people with disabilities.

### **Adequate Supplies**

- Adequate sanitiser will be provided to last the day at each polling station. The hand sanitiser contains at least 60% alcohol and will also have paper towels, tissues, and disinfectant wipes.

### **Signs and Messages**

- Information will be displayed in highly visible locations and describe how to stop the spread of germs such as hand washing and the wearing of face masks.

### **Social Distancing**

- Remind voters upon arrival to leave space between themselves and others where possible and encourage voters to stay at least a metre to 2 metres apart.
- Polling places will provide signage and other visual cues such as floor markings and/or decals, to help voters and staff.
- Social distancing will be encouraged.
- Points of entry and exit will be highlighted to avoid bottlenecks and elector cross over.
- Voters and staff will be discouraged from greeting others with physical contact e.g., handshakes.

### **Maintaining Healthy Environments**

#### **Disinfect surfaces**

- Surfaces that are frequently touched by multiple people, for example door handles, registration tables, pens, booths will be wiped down frequently using the sanitising products provided.
- If the surface is dirty, it should be cleaned before disinfecting.
- After the polling place closes, all high-volume touch points will be cleaned/wiped down including all tables, chairs, door handles used by polling staff or voters.

#### **Clean and disinfect voting equipment**

- Reusable items will be disinfected routinely.
- Follow the manufacturers guidance for appropriate cleaning and disinfection procedures for voting equipment and polling booths.
- Signs will be displayed throughout the polling places.
- After the polling location closes, all equipment will be wiped down prior to the pick up from the facilities team.

#### **Shared objects**

- Single use pencils will be provided, and the electorate may use their own pencil or pen if they want to do so to mark their ballot paper.
- Polling cards should be retained by the elector but if insistent to hand to staff then will be placed in a suitable container/rubbish bag.

#### **Ventilation**

- Ventilation will be mandatory when setting up the polling place ensuring an increase of circulation of outdoor air as much as possible, for example by opening windows and doors. It will be colder particularly first thing in the morning and early evening, but it is better to have ventilation than not.
- Windows and doors will not be opened if doing so poses a safety or health risk to polling staff, voters, or children accompanying voters (e.g., risk of falling or triggering asthma symptoms).

#### **Crowd and line management**

- The number of polling places is well established and there isn't any necessity to increase the numbers with all electorate allocation in line with the Electoral Commissions guidance.
- Unless there is no other option, we will not increase the number of potential registered voters assigned to each polling place.
- Floor markings or decals and signs to encourage voters to maintain social distancing will be in place.

### **Modified layouts and procedures**

- The polling booths will be separated to encourage social distancing
- Where practicable a one-way system will be introduced.
- Staff will be informed of the alternative arrangements and will enforce if considered necessary.
- Any changes to operations will not limit accessibility to voters with disabilities.

### **Physical barriers and guides**

- Physical barriers, such as sneeze screens, will be in situ on the desks to protect staff and voters when physical distance cannot be maintained.
- Decals will be placed on the floor to encourage voters to maintain at least 1-2 metres from each other.

### **Recommendations for voters**

- Handwash/sanitise before entering and after leaving the polling location.
- While in the polling location, use alcohol-based hand sanitiser containing at least 60% alcohol frequently, especially after touching surfaces frequently touched by multiple people, such as door handles or voting booths.
- Sanitiser will be provided.
- Anyone who coughs and/or sneezes will be encouraged to use a tissue or to do so into the inside of their elbow.
- Used tissues must be thrown away.
- Encouraged to wear a face covering or mask.
- Children and anyone who has trouble breathing, is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance should not wear a mask.
- Electors must be encouraged to maintain social distancing of at least 1-2 metres.
- Consider voting at off-peak times.
- If there is a queue, consider voting later?

### **Be prepared**

- Check where your polling place is on your polling card or online on the council's web site.
- Check that there are different requirements in advance because they may have changed due to COVID-19.
- If you have any concerns, please contact the electoral services team
- Please contact the team or go online if you have any concerns for voters with disabilities casting their votes.
- Make sure you have your polling card with you to avoid delays at the polling location.
- Where possible, try and understand the ballot process to speed the process of casting your ballot at the polling location.
- Bring your own black ink pen or pencil to the polling place if you want to.