


Non-Executive Report of the: General Purposes Committee Monday 2 December 2024	 TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Stephen Halsey (Borough Returning Officer)	Classification: Unrestricted
GLA Polls – Thursday 2 May 2024	

Originating Officer(s)	Robert Curtis (Head of Electoral Services)
Wards affected	(All Wards);

Executive Summary

This information report details the administrative process, preparation and delivery undertaken by Stephen Halsey (CEO) as the Tower Hamlets Borough Returning Officer (BRO) for the Greater London Authority (GLA) polls held on Thursday 2 May 2024 working with Abi Gbago, City and East Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) and Mary Harpley the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO).

These polls proved to be a considerable administrative exercise with new legislation implemented for the first time in London following the Elections Act 2022 and the possibility of the General Election being called on the same polling day. This uncertainty resulting in significant duplication of the preparatory work needed for combined polls with City Hall and electoral services teams across London having to prepare on that basis from the very outset.

The General Election had to be held on or before Thursday 23 January 2025 and could have been called with as little as 25 working days' notice of Thursday 2 May 2024 and as late as Tuesday 26 March 2024.

If this had occurred this would have been five working days after the commencement statutory notices for the GLA elections had already been published.

The additional administrative arrangements considered by the GLRO can be found here in the GLA report to their Oversight Committee on 24 May 2023

<https://meetings.london.gov.uk/documents/s105264/GLA%20Elections%202024%20Preparation.pdf>

The Electoral Commission post poll summary and recommendations from the polls held in 2024 has been received on Wednesday 13/11/2024 and their summary is attached at

Appendix A

Detailed observations from the Commission's report can be seen here

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-2024-uk-parliamentary-general-election-and-may-2024-elections>

Statistics relating to the polls are attached at **Appendix B**

Recommendations:

That the Committee:

1. Note the report.

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1. This report is an information item with no recommendations for the committee preceding a report on the General Election held on Thursday 4 July 2024.

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 None.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

- 3.1 This report details the administrative progress, preparation and delivery by Stephen Halsey (CEO) as the Tower Hamlets Borough Returning Officer (BRO) for the Greater London Authority (GLA) polls held on Thursday 2 May 2024.
- 3.2 The management hierarchy for these polls was as follows in order of seniority.
- Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) was Mary Harpley (Chief Officer of the GLA)
 - The City and East Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) was Abi Gbago (CEO Newham Council). Newham were the lead authority for the constituency by virtue of being the authority with the largest number of registered electors.
 - The City and East Constituency is made up of the following 4 authorities
 - Newham (Constituency Lead authority)
 - Barking & Dagenham
 - City of London
 - Tower Hamlets
 - Stephen Halsey (CEO) acted as the Tower Hamlets Borough Returning Officer (BRO).
 - As Returning Officer (RO) he is not responsible to the local authority but is directly accountable to the courts as an independent statutory office holder and is personally liable for the conduct of the polls.
 - For the GLA this role is different. A BRO is not a statutory position but one subject to a memorandum of understanding agreed with the GLRO and CRO, who are personally responsible, and whilst SH is an employee of the council, at the time of the polls his responsibilities are completely separate.
- 3.3 There are three different 'contests' that make up the GLA elections with three different ballot papers for voters with 650,000 printed for Tower Hamlets alone.
- 3.4 For the first time all votes cast would be counted manually using the first past the post methodology, this change applied specifically to the Mayoral poll. The verification and count would take place over a period of two days in the Excel Exhibition Centre with the verification of the ballot papers on Friday 3 May 2024 and the counting of the votes cast on the Saturday 4 May 2024.

The polls held were:

- the Mayor of London
 - the 14 Members of the London Assembly that represent London's 14 Constituencies
 - the 11 London Wide Assembly Members that represent the whole of London (Votes allocated using the modified d'Hondt formula – proportional representation)
- 3.5 Preparation for these polls started in May 2023 with formal meetings held in Tower Hamlets from October 2023 with all stakeholders both external and internally contacted to discuss the implications and the potential of an extraordinary snap General Election being combined on the same date.

This was in the main a project managed centrally by the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) closely liaising with all London Authorities to ensure consistency of approach and to ensure, with almost daily updates, that the risk assessments and project planning

reflected not only the considerable work but also the distinct possibility at this stage of a general election being called on the same day adding to the complexity of the delivery with combined statutory timetables overlapping.

External stakeholders who were part of the preparations undertaken included

- The Electoral Commission
- The Metropolitan Police (Special Enquiries Team (SET) and local representatives)
- Printers (FDM)
- Civica (Electoral Services Software)
- Royal Mail

3.6 To assist in the project planning and risk assessments in Tower Hamlets meetings were held with the following with guidance continually updated and reviewed, all attended either in person or via Teams

- The London Elections Management Group (LEMG) - CEO's and Returning Officers
- The London Branch of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)
- City and East Constituency Electoral Service Managers and Heads of Service (Newham lead)
- An election's working party (Chaired by the GLRO)
- Combined CROs, BROs and Electoral Services Meetings (Led by the GLRO)
- Frequent updates from the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) - since the General Election changed to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)
- The Electoral Commission

3.7 The Tower Hamlets Elections Project Group was also convened and chaired by the Borough Returning Officer (BRO).

Attendance was either in person or via Teams and included

- Electoral Services*
- Legal
- IT*
- Communications*
- Facilities*
- The Metropolitan Police (SET and Local representatives) Police attendance was always at Superintendent or Chief Inspector level.
- The Electoral Commission
- Finance

* Separate project plans were compiled by these departments and referred to at every meeting

4. **The Elections Act 2022**

4.1 The polls held on Thursday 2 May 2024 were the first to be held in London taking into consideration the implications of the Elections Act 2022, details of which were reported to GPC on Tuesday 13 June 2023.

4.2 The Act received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 and made a range of changes that presented numerous challenges to the Returning Officer, Electoral Registration Officer and electoral administrators also impacting on political parties, campaigners, and the electorate of Tower Hamlets.

4.3 The Act is comprehensive but has not been implemented in a single publication with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), now the Ministry of Housing Communities Local Government (MHCLG), developing a rolling programme of secondary legislation, and statutory instruments to implement the various changes. In addition, guidance was constantly being circulated setting out changes to processes that had to be followed as implementation dates approached.

Changes included

- All electors voting in the polling stations were required to show an approved form of photographic identification, commonly known as Voter ID, before they received their ballot paper/s and, if accepted, the elector could cast their vote. There were no exceptions to this requirement, and this also included those registered as anonymous electors.
- Comprehensive training was provided to all staff including digital training provided by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) for those working in the polling stations, this also provided to a small number of Police Officers to enable representatives to understand the changes and permeate this within their own organisation.
- Those unable to provide photographic ID for the polling stations could apply for a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) via a Government portal or they could attend the Town Hall and apply or post a paper application to the ERO.
- Changes to absent voting applications included the introduction of online portals for postal voters and proxy voters these provided by the Governments Individual Electoral Registration Digital Service (IERDS). Comprehensive training took place for the electoral services team to enable the data exchanges between the IERDS and the Elections Management Software to work as smoothly as possible given the principle was new to all administrators and the public. All letters and emails had to be updated to ensure the correct message was sent to the public and where applications were incomplete enquiries made to try and get applications completed in time for polling.
- Consideration of enhanced accessibility at polling stations is now a statutory requirement for Returning Officers.
- The rights of EU citizens for voting and candidacy were retained for these polls this now subject to a review until January 2025.
- The registering to vote for electors resident overseas was not extended to these polls and came into force for the General Election.
- Changes to the count of ballot papers affecting the Mayoral poll were introduced to first past the post
- The digital verification of the ballot papers and counting of the votes cast was changed to a manual process with two days set aside for this in the Excel.
- The offences of preventing undue influence were extended.
- Handing in of postal votes into the polling stations and into the Town Hall was subject to new rules with forms having to be completed when this occurred. All polling staff and electoral services were trained on what needed to be completed on receipt, and we also set up, from the dispatch date of the postal packs to 10pm on polling day, a member of staff in the Town Hall front foyer to receipt and record postal packs handed in.

4.4 Observations include

- The comprehensive engagement program undertaken by the Electoral Commission, Government and Tower Hamlets appeared to have reached the majority of electors attending the polling stations with a nominal number of electors turned away because they attended the polling station without Voter ID with many returning with the correct ID and able to receive their ballot papers.
- Polling Station staff were trained on how to complete a Voter Identification Evaluation Form (VIDEF) and a Ballot Paper Refusal List (BPRL) to record where electors were refused a ballot paper and those who were turned away and later returned.

- In total across the 110 polling stations
 - 20 electors were refused ballot papers because they did not have any ID at all
 - 68 electors used a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC)
 - 201 electors requested that they show their ID in private
 - 392 electors were unable in the first instance to produce acceptable ID and were refused a ballot paper.
 - 323 returned to the polling stations after being initially refused with appropriate Voter ID and were handed ballot papers and were able to vote.
 - 69 electors who were initially refused did not return to the polling stations.
- There were no recorded breaches of the new legislation relating to the handing into the polling stations or Town Hall of postal vote packs with the required paperwork completed on every occasion and no recorded attempts made to hand in more postal packs than was allowed.
- The government online portals were adequate but clearly needed work to ensure that the administration of applications was efficient and effective and whilst all applications were dealt with and processed in time by the electoral services team the new portals were clearly not ready, and the consensus is that they should not have been introduced at such short notice. Unfortunately, when subjected to the significant increases in numbers at the general election this was a serious issue and is detailed in that report.
- All 76 polling places opened and closed on time with no recorded instances requiring police attendance or further investigation.

5. **Best Value Inspection**

- 5.1 On 22nd February 2024, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities appointed inspectors to undertake an inspection of Tower Hamlets Council under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999.
- 5.2 Specific mention was made in the letter of “functions that relate to the appointment and removal of an Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer, the funding of electoral registration and local elections work, the use of resources for elections and the maintenance of the independence of the Returning Officer”
- 5.3 The BVI undoubtedly added to the pressure on the electoral services team and the Borough Returning Officer with extensive scrutiny of process throughout the formal timetable including postal vote opening sessions, polling day and the verification and counts at the Excel Exhibition Centre.
- 5.4 It was very important, given the content of the initial letter raised in 5.2 above, that all aspects of the administration of the polls were open and transparent, with the inspectors applying for and being granted accredited observer status from the Electoral Commission following advice from electoral services that this was required, enabling appropriate and necessary access to all aspects of the elections.

6. **Staffing**

- 6.1 Staffing proved extremely difficult for polling day, the verification and the count.
- 6.2 Training was provided for all roles undertaken in person and also via Teams, but polling day proved to be very difficult with close to 30% of staff dropping out the week before polling day and late replacements having to be recruited and trained in a variety of roles.
- 6.3 Late drop outs appear not to be exclusive to Tower Hamlets with many authorities reporting that this was an issue post polling day but is something that caused particular administration and resource issues that need to be addressed and will be subject to review in 2025.

7. **Polling Places**

- 7.1 Polling places invariably change from poll to poll with some closing, changes to contracts and simply not being available.
- 7.2 A list of polling places and stations for polls held in 2022 and 2024 is attached at **Appendix C** with all Polling Districts and Polling Places currently subject to a formal review.
- 7.3 On conclusion of the review in January 2025 polling places will be kept informed of scheduled polls to ensure bookings are made in good time before the polls in May 2026.

8. **The verification and count**

- 8.1 The Excel Exhibition Centre was booked centrally by the CRO as the appropriate venue for the City and East Constituency.
- 8.2 There was initial confusion with enquiries initially made to book venues for the verification and count within Tower Hamlets and then permeate the results to City Hall. However, following Kings Counsel advice received by the GLRO, the whole constituency ballots had to be verified and counted in the same location and could not be separate.
- 8.3 A comprehensive count plan was then agreed with the CRO with onsite visits to Excel to agree the following
- Security arrangements
 - Access for candidates/agents/guests
 - Catering for staff
 - Layout of the venue e.g. tables, chairs, IT points, Wi-Fi, parking
 - Delivery and security of ballot papers following the close of poll
 - Verification and count methods used
 - Secure data exchanges within the venue between the BRO, the CRO and the GLRO
 - The collection and secure transfer of ballot papers and sensitive material
- 8.4 The decision to manually count was made by the GLRO and will now be subject to further consultation once the costs are known and any benefits and/or negative comments are collated. A decision will then be made prior to the next GLA polls scheduled for Thursday 4 May 2028 whether to manually count again or to revert back to the digital counts.
- 8.5 To date the feedback following the manual counts has been positive, but opinion appears to be divided on reverting back to a digital count or not.

9. **EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 There is none specific to this report.

10. **OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 N/A
- 10.2 No implications direct to this report

11. **COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

- 11.1 All expenses reasonably and necessarily incurred by the Borough Returning Officer will be reimbursed subject to a submission of expenses return to the GLRO after the poll has concluded.

- 11.2 A maximum recoverable amount (MRA) will be set by the GLA based on their calculation of the potential cost of the polls and historical amounts incurred.
- 11.3 A 90% advance of the MRA has been provided to the BRO to assist with expenses incurred in the lead up to the poll.
- 11.4 It is anticipated, but not guaranteed, that the expenditure will be reimbursed to a break even sum for the BRO.

12. COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 12.1 The legislative framework is set out at the beginning of this report.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- None

Appendices

- Appendix A – Electoral Commission Summary
- Appendix B – GLA Statistics
- Appendix C – Polling Places

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)

List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report

List any background documents not already in the public domain including officer contact information.

- None

Officer contact details for documents: Robert Curtis, Head of Electoral Services

Electoral Commission report summary of the 2024 polls

Overall, we found that the May and July 2024 elections were well-run, and voters continue to have high levels of confidence and satisfaction in the polls.

Electoral administrators delivered in challenging circumstances but there was evidence of new layers of risk and complexity adding to an already stretched process.

The capacity and resilience of suppliers remain a key concern for administrators, as well as ensuring fully functional, joined up digital systems.

Other findings include:

- Postal voting systems did not work well enough for some voters this year, which meant that they did not receive their postal votes in time to return before polling day. The reasons for this included a lack of understanding about the time required to process and issue postal ballot packs and the availability of proxy voting, an increase in absent vote applications close to the deadline, and the fact the election coincided with the summer holiday period in some parts of the UK.
- The voting options for overseas electors did not work well enough with just over half (52%) of registered overseas voters who chose to vote by post successfully returning their ballot paper in time to be counted in the general election.
- While administrators provided support to disabled voters - almost all polling stations provided most accessibility items as set out in guidance - many people were still unaware of the assistance available to them at polling stations.
- The general election saw a record number of candidates standing and voters were able to hear a wide range of views. However, many experienced unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment, in particular women and candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Over half of the respondents to our candidate survey said they avoided some form of campaigning because of fear of abuse.

Our recommendations

We have identified a number of significant improvements to support participation and trust in future elections.

These include:

- Improving awareness of the accessibility support available at polling stations, including through the provision of clearer information both online and offline.
- Reforming absent voting processes (including postal voting and voting by proxy) to improve the service for voters and strengthen resilience for future elections. Key areas for potential reform include:
 - Improving the information given to voters before and after they apply to vote by post
 - Considering whether the current deadline for postal vote applications allows enough time to process and issue postal votes
 - More flexible rules for reissuing postal votes to voters who have not received theirs
 - Identifying ways for overseas voters to be able to vote securely and in time. Key areas for potential improvement include looking at the current application deadlines and exploring alternative methods of getting ballot papers to voters.
- Tackling the issue of abuse and intimidation of candidates and campaigners. We are committed to working with partners across the wider electoral community to understand what is driving abuse and intimidation, and to collectively develop effective responses to tackle these problems.

- Reviewing whether the candidate nominations process should be strengthened to make it harder for candidates to mislead voters about their true identity.
- Addressing the challenges to the resilience of the electoral system, including funding. The UK Government has recently announced a strategic review of electoral registration, and this should consider whether the funding to run general elections continues to be appropriate and adequate to deliver in a way that meets voters' expectations.
- Improving digital systems to better support electoral administrators. The UK Government should work with the electoral community to continue to improve the digital systems that it provides and ensure it carefully manages the implementation of changes to digital systems.

With the next scheduled general election five years away, there is an opportunity to make important reforms to ensure the system is ready and resilient. We are ready to work with the UK government and wider electoral community to ensure the system is best placed to support those that deliver elections. We are committed to the importance of implementing changes in enough time for the electoral community to prepare in advance of future elections.

GLA Statistics

- The eligible electorate for the GLA was - 214,134
- The number of postal vote packs issued - 28,172
 - PV Turnout Mayor - 16,026 (56.88%)
 - PV Turnout Assembly - 15,977 (56.71%)
 - Constituency - 15,983 (56.73%)
- The turnout for each poll was as follows -
 - Mayor - 34.31%
 - Assembly - 34.28%
 - Constituency - 34.28%
- 76 polling places
- 110 polling stations
- 330 poll clerks
- 110 Presiding Officers
- 39 Count Supervisors
- 191 count assistants
- 19 polling Inspectors
- 39 postal vote openers
- **793 roles recruited to in total**