


Non-Executive Report of the:  <b>General Purposes Committee</b>  Monday 2 December 2024	 <b>TOWER HAMLETS</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Stephen Halsey (Acting Returning Officer)	<b>Classification:</b> [Unrestricted]
<b>General Election – Thursday 4 July 2024</b>	

<b>Originating Officer(s)</b>	Robert Curtis, Head of Electoral Services
<b>Wards affected</b>	(All Wards)

### Executive Summary

This information report details the administrative progress, preparation and delivery of the General Election held on Thursday 4 July 2024 by Stephen Halsey (CEO) in his role as Acting Returning Officer (ARO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO).

Following on from the GLA polls held on Thursday 2 May 2024 the General Election, by virtue of it being a “snap” poll proved to be a considerable administrative exercise with the continued implementation of the requirements of the Elections Act 2022 tested to the limit and for the first time cross border arrangements agreed with Newham’s ARO in a new Parliamentary Constituency of Stratford & Bow which adopted three wards from Tower Hamlets, namely Bow East, Bow West and Bromley North.

The General Election had to be held on or before Thursday 23 January 2025 and the sudden announcement of polling day on Wednesday 22 May 2024 meant that there would be 30 working days for the preparations to be made for polling day on Thursday 4 July 2024.

The statutory timetable is attached at **Appendix A**

The Electoral Commission post poll summary and recommendations from the polls held on the 2 May and 4 July 2024 was received on Wednesday 13 November 2024 and the summary is attached at **Appendix B**

The detailed Commission's report can be found 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 General Election are attached at **Appendix C**

### Recommendations:

The General Purposes Committee is recommended to

1. Note the report and make recommendations to the Acting Returning Officer where considered applicable.

## **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 information report details the administrative progress, preparation and delivery of the General Election on Thursday 4 July 2024 by Stephen Halsey (CEO) in his role as Acting Returning Officer (ARO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO)

3.2 The roles as ARO and ERO are distinct from each other but in principle are impartial to ensure that the conduct of the polls is undertaken in accordance with the law and are held in a personal capacity distinct from the duties as an employee of the Council.

As the Acting Returning Officer (ARO) SH 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.

3.3 Following the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) Parliamentary Constituencies review that concluded in 2023, there are now three parliamentary constituencies in Tower Hamlets.

Two constituencies lie wholly within the boundary of the Borough of Tower Hamlets, and one crosses the borough boundaries into the London Borough of Newham incorporating three Borough Wards from Tower Hamlets.

This is commonly known as a “give away” set up from a Tower Hamlets perspective.

The constituencies are as follows.

1. Bethnal Green and Stepney Borough Constituency (wholly in TH)
2. Poplar & Limehouse Borough Constituency (wholly in TH)
3. Stratford & Bow Borough Constituency (partially in TH with Newham adopting 3 wards)

The three wards, Bow East, Bow West, and Bromley North have been merged with four wards from the Newham Borough Council area, Forest Gate North, Forest Gate South, Green Street West, and Stratford & New Town to create a new Parliamentary Borough Constituency called Stratford and Bow Borough Constituency.

3.4 Given the uncertainty of when the General Election would be called and the date for the GLA polls on Thursday 2 May 2024 already known, preparation for potential combination 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 significant implications if this were to occur.

Initially, because the GLA was a scheduled poll the project planning was 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 required but also the distinct possibility at this stage of a general election being called on the same day.

This uncertainty added to the complexity of the pre planning in the event of combined statutory timetables overlapping.

External stakeholders who were part of the preparations included

- The Electoral Commission

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

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

- The London Elections Management Board (LEMB) - 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

3.6 The Tower Hamlets Elections Project Group was also convened, chaired by the ARO. 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

3.7 Following the announcement of the general election all stakeholders in 3.4 – 3.7 above were contacted immediately and meetings arranged to discuss the general election statutory timetable and the implications of delivery.

3.8 In addition, a meeting was also held with Newham's electoral services team to discuss the implications of cross border parliamentary constituencies and the administration of their adopting three Borough Wards from Tower Hamlets. To assist in these meetings a separate cross boundary project plan was drafted and agreed, and it was this document that was used for the first time to ensure that all elements of the "give away" areas were agreed with Newham's ARO.

The items covered are detailed in **Appendix D** attached

#### 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 impacting also 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 but their franchise does not allow them to vote at Parliamentary elections.
- The registering to vote for electors resident overseas was extended to these polls.
- 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. This was a repetition of the successful arrangements for the GLA.

#### 4.4 **Observations include**

- The additional comprehensive engagement programs undertaken by the Electoral Commission, Government and Tower Hamlets appear 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 paper.

- There was certainly a knock on effect from the GLA with electors having been to polling stations already with Voter ID to receive their ballot papers.
- Polling Station staff were trained again 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 polling stations for the Bethnal Green and Stepney Constituency
  - 6 electors were refused a ballot paper because they did not have any ID at all
  - 5 returned and were issued with their ballot paper
  - 1 elector did not return
  - 59 electors used a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC)
  - 155 electors requested that they show their ID in private
  - 99 electors were unable in the first instance to produce acceptable ID and were refused a ballot paper.
  - 76 returned to the polling stations after being initially refused with appropriate Voter ID and were handed a ballot paper and were able to vote.
  - 23 electors who were initially refused did not return to the polling stations.
- In total across the polling stations for Poplar & Limehouse
  - 1 elector was refused their ballot paper because they did not have any ID at all and did not return
  - 60 electors used a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) including an anonymous elector
  - 186 electors requested that they show their ID in private
  - 170 electors were unable in the first instance to produce acceptable ID and were refused a ballot paper.
  - 151 returned to the polling stations after being initially refused with appropriate Voter ID and were handed a ballot paper and were able to vote.
  - 19 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 correctly on every occasion, the elector had to complete a form to declare who they were and for whom they were handing postal packs in for and were restricted to 6 packs including their own. There were no recorded attempts made to hand in more postal packs than was allowed.
- The government online portals were, for the first time because the numbers for the GLA were comparatively low, put under considerable pressure with numbers far exceeding those experienced at the GLA with concern expressed during the timetable across the UK that the system was struggling to cope with the sudden surges in applications received.
- With the portals not operating as they should this resulted in significant pressure on the electoral services team throughout the statutory timetable to process applications that were extremely complex with portals not integrated or compatible even though applications were linked to each other e.g. a postal vote application made on the absent vote portal by an overseas elector who was not registered to vote but had applied on a separate portal to do so.

- Overseas electors franchise was extended by the Elections Act 2022 to enable any British Citizen abroad to register to vote at a general election removing a 15 year limit and this change proved extremely difficult to manage. Applications had to either show previous registration, or an elector having lived in the area where they wished to register. This was not limited so could go back several decades.
- This resulted in every application being complicated and extremely resource heavy to process particularly if the information provided by the potential elector could not be verified. Utilising historical digital records of the electoral register helped but many applications were from electors who moved away many years prior to the introduction of digital storage with manual checking of paper electoral registers having to be undertaken by the team.
- The numbers of applications received as recorded were as detailed in **Appendix E**
- Across the three parliamentary constituencies all polling places opened and closed on time.

## 5. **Best Value Inspection**

- 5.1 On 22<sup>nd</sup> 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 Following the announcement of the General Election the BVI was extended to cover these polls as well.
- 5.4 The granting of the extension placed additional administrative burdens on the electoral services team and the Acting Returning Officer with extensive scrutiny of process continuing through the new formal timetable including once again scrutiny of postal vote opening sessions, polling day and the verification and count held at the Excel Exhibition Centre.
- 5.5 It was very important, as was the case with the GLA polls, that all aspects of the General Election were open and transparent, with the inspectors accredited observer status from the Electoral Commission still valid. Consequently, appropriate and necessary access to all aspects of the elections continued.

## 6. **Staffing**

- 6.1 Staffing proved once again, as was the case at the GLA, to be 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 again 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 dropouts appear not to be exclusive to Tower Hamlets with many authorities reporting that this was an issue post polling day but is unacceptable with the majority of drop outs being employees of Tower Hamlets. This 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 and a number had to be changed again for the general election.

7.2 A list of polling places and stations for polls held in 2022 and 2024 is attached at **Appendix F** 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 had already been put on standby prior to the announcement and was booked by the ARO as the appropriate venue, our having used the premises for the GLA and previous elections in recent years including the 2019 General Election.

8.2 A comprehensive count plan was drafted with onsite visits made to agree the following

- Security arrangements
- Access for candidates/agents/guests
- Layout of the venue e.g. tables, chairs, IT points, Wi-Fi, parking, stage provision and audio
- Delivery and security of ballot papers following the close of poll
- Verification and count methods used
- Secure data exchanges within the venue for the results to be published
- Admission for media contacts arranged
- The collection and secure transfer of ballot papers and sensitive material to and from the venue

8.3 The General Election is different to the GLA in that counting of the ballot papers must commence within 4 hours of the poll closing or the Electoral Commission have to be informed to explain why this has not happened. This was not the case but having staff working until the early hours of the Friday morning is complex with this impacting on service delivery within the council on the Friday with confusion whether staff had to return to work after a 5.30am finish at the Excel. This will be reviewed in 2025, and clearer messaging provided.

8.4 To date the feedback from the Commission, the BVI Inspectors, candidates and political parties on the count process and arrangements has been positive.

## 9. **Recording of issues**

9.1 On polling day the recording of incidents were monitored by a Tower Hamlets Senior Officer recruited specifically to undertake this task sited in a separate room away from the electoral services team from 6.00am until 10.30pm. This set up was observed and applauded by the Best Value Inspectors. Every incident, action and resolution were formally recorded and passed immediately to the police if the accusations/observations made were beyond the remit of the Acting Returning Officer.

9.2 A dedicated telephone link was set up solely for this integration with the Police along with separate telephone links for the Presiding Officers and political parties.

9.3 This is now a well-established set up here in Tower Hamlets for all major polls held.

9.4 There is also an established online portal available for anyone to use which has been in place for more than 5 years that is linked directly to the Electoral Head of Service and the Metropolitan Police Special Enquiries Team (SET) where the detail is immediately triaged. If the matter cannot be dealt with by the Tower Hamlets electoral services team e.g. a registration enquiry, the Police are informed and the information dealt with by them.

9.5 A number of accusations of intimidation and aggressive behaviour, leaflets without digital imprints and social media posts were received prior to and including polling day by the Best

Value Inspectors from political parties, the receipt of which was beyond their remit with all information passed to the ARO when this was known.

Well established processes are in place in Tower Hamlets which the ARO follows, and any allegations considered to be of a criminal nature are passed to the police, and it is for them to determine the action to take and whether the accusations cross the criminal threshold and further action needed.

The Commission have acknowledged that accusations of this nature were not exclusive to Tower Hamlets and a summary of these concerns is detailed in Appendix B. Their report details recommendations to Government to address in the future. Concerns also included defamatory posters, and mobile displays on polling day.

“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”

- 9.6 The display of Palestinian flags outside polling places was reported and recorded from the outset of the opening of the polling places on polling day.

On receipt of this information a team of Tower Hamlets Officers commenced the removal from those displayed on Council property but were unable to remove flags from private properties.

This was the first time at a national poll in Tower Hamlets that the display of flags had taken place on such a scale and the team continued to remove flags throughout polling day with some reappearing in areas where they had already been removed.

The action taken was agreed with the Police, the ARO, the Electoral Commission and all Election Agents informed and during the day several members of the public were arrested and detained but released later on in the day without charge.

The Electoral Commission subsequently confirmed that they have had several related queries on this subject in other authority areas and while some people may see a particular flag as being associated with a political viewpoint, a flag in these circumstances could not be associated with a political party or stand point and as a direct consequence there is nothing in electoral law that would demand its removal.

If the Acting Returning Officer is of the opinion that he does not have the authority in law to remove flags displayed the matter should be referred to the police if he or the police take a view on whether any local campaigning or display of materials was liable to cause a problem by inciting certain groups of electors.

- 9.7 At the count venue a number of people supporting a particular candidate arrived at the entrance to the count having no authorisation from the ARO and this had to be referred to the police and the security on site. This incident was dealt with very quickly and those trying to gain entrance removed from the venue but highlights circumstances where the photographic authorisation to enter the count worked very well but also that there is still a minority who will try to circumvent the formal process. This will be highlighted to all candidates and agents for all future polls that access into any of the formal venues/processes must have the appropriate authorisation or access will be denied.

## **10. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 There are none specific to this report.

## **11. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 No implications direct to this report



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

- 12.1 All expenses reasonably and necessarily incurred by the Acting Returning Officer will be reimbursed subject to scrutiny of a submission of expenses return from the ARO after the poll has concluded.
- 12.2 A maximum recoverable amount (MRA) is set by MHCLG based on their calculation of the potential cost of the polls and historical amounts incurred.
- 12.3 A 75% advance of the MRA has been provided to the ARO to assist with expenses incurred in the lead up to the poll.
- 12.4 It is anticipated, but not guaranteed, that the expenditure will be reimbursed to a break even sum for the ARO.

## **13. COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES**

- 13.1 The Representation of the People Act 1983 sets out the duties of Electoral Registration Officers and Acting Returning Officers in relation to general elections.
- 13.2 The matters set out in this report demonstrate compliance with these duties.

## **Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents**

### **Linked Report**

- None

### **Appendices**

- Appendix A – Statutory Timetable
- Appendix B – Electoral Commission Summary
- Appendix C – General Election Statistics
- Appendix D – Cross Boundary
- Appendix E – Application Statistics
- Appendix F – Polling Districts and 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: Head of Electoral Services, Robert Curtis

## Timetable for a UK Parliamentary General election on Thursday 4 July 2024

The days which are disregarded in calculating the timetable for a UK Parliamentary election are Saturday, Sunday, bank holidays and any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

Please be aware that the timetable may change in the event of days being appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

The writ is taken to be received on the day following the dissolution of Parliament even in the event that the physical delivery of the writ is delayed. <sup>i</sup>

Event	Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)	Date
Dissolution of Parliament	25 days	Thursday 30 May
Receipt of writ (taken as the day following the dissolution of Parliament)	24 days	Friday 31 May
Publication of notice of election	Not later than 22 days (4pm)	Tuesday 4 June (4pm)
Delivery of nomination papers	Between 10am and 4pm on any working day after the publication of the notice of election until 4pm on the sixth day after the date of dissolution	Until Friday 7 June (4pm)
Deadline for delivery of nomination papers	19 days (4pm)	June 2024
Deadline for withdrawals of nomination	19 days (4pm)	Friday 7 June (4pm)
Making objections to nomination papers  (except for objections on the grounds that an individual candidate may be disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1981 – see Commission guidance)	On 19 days (10am to 5pm), subject to the following:  Between 10am and 12 noon objections can be made to all delivered nominations  Between 12 noon and 5pm objections can only be made to nominations delivered after 4pm, 20 days before the poll	Friday 7 June (10am – 5pm)  10am – 12noon objections can be made to all delivered nomination papers  12noon – 5pm only on those nomination papers delivered after 4pm on 6 June
Deadline for the notification of appointment of election agent	19 days (4pm)	Friday 7 June (4pm)

<b>Event</b>	<b>Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)</b>	<b>Date</b>
Publication of statement of persons nominated, including notice of poll and situation of polling stations	If no objections: on 19 days (at 5pm) If objection(s) are made: Not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 18 days (4pm)	Friday 7 June (5pm) If objection(s) are made not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than Monday 10 June (4pm)
Publication of first interim election notice of alteration	On 19 days	Friday 7 June
Deadline for receiving applications for registration	12 days	Tuesday 18 June
Deadline for receiving new postal vote and postal proxy applications, and for changes to existing postal or proxy votes	11 days (5pm)	Wednesday 19 June (5pm)
Deadline for receiving new applications to vote by proxy (not postal proxy or emergency proxies)	6 days (5pm)	Wednesday 26 June (5pm)
Deadline for receiving applications for Voter Authority Certificates	6 days (5pm)	Wednesday 26 June (5pm)
Publication of second interim election notice of alteration	Between 18 days and 6 days	Between Monday 10 June and Wednesday 26 June
Publication of final election notice of alteration	5 days	Thursday 27 June
Deadline for notification of appointment of polling and counting agents	5 days	Thursday 27 June
First date that electors can apply for a replacement for lost postal votes	4 days	Friday 28 June
Deadline for notification of appointment of sub agents	2 days	Tuesday 2 July
<b>Polling day</b>	<b>0 (7am to 10pm)</b>	<b>7am to 10pm Thursday 4 July 2024</b>
Last time for re-issue of spoilt or lost postal votes	0 (5pm)	Thursday 4 July (5pm)
Deadline for emergency proxy applications	0 (5pm)	Thursday 4 July (5pm)
Last time to alter the register due to clerical error or court appeal	0 (9pm)	Thursday 4 July (9pm)

<b>Event</b>	<b>Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)</b>	<b>Date</b>
Deadline for production of temporary Voter Authority Certificate	0 (10pm)	Thursday 4 July (10pm)
<b>After the declaration of result</b>		
Delivery of return as to election expenses	Within 35 calendar days after the date the election result is declared	If result is declared on 4 July: Thursday 8 August If result is declared on 5 July: Friday 9 August
Deadline for sending postal vote identifier rejection notices	Within the period of three months beginning with the date of the poll	Friday 4 October
Deadline for spending returns of political parties and non-party campaigners who spend less than £250,000	Within three months of the election	Friday 4 October
Deadline for spending returns of political parties and non-party campaigners who spend more than £250,000	Within six months of the election	Monday 6 January 2025

### 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.

**General Election Statistics**

- Poplar and Limehouse eligible electorate - 84,116
  - Verified postal votes – 8,573
  - Overall turnout was – 51.56%
  - 45 polling stations
  - 122 poll clerks
  - 45 Presiding Officers
  - 17 Count Supervisors
  - 93 count assistants
  - 7 polling Inspectors
  - 47 postal vote openers\*
- 
- Bethnal Green and Stepney eligible electorate - 214,134
  - Verified postal votes – 8,728
  - Overall turnout was – 57.67%
  - 47 polling stations
  - 126 poll clerks
  - 47 Presiding Officers
  - 18 Count Supervisors
  - 94 count assistants
  - 7 polling Inspectors
  - 47 postal vote openers\*

\* 47 in total across both constituencies

**Stratford & Bow****Cross Boundary Considerations**

- Statistical analysis of eligible electorate and absent voting (postal and proxy) in the three wards to be adopted calculated and supplied throughout the statutory timetable
- Confirmation of the polling places to be used
- The number of polling stations within the polling places confirmed
- The appointment of officers with delegated authority to act on behalf of the Newham ARO
- Dates for the data exchanges of the electoral register for the nomination of candidates by the Newham ARO. The Electoral Register provided by Tower Hamlets Electoral Registration Officer
- Confirmation of who would undertake the candidates and agents' briefings and confirmation of compatibility of content with the other constituencies
- Dates established for the dispatch of poll cards and absent votes to ensure compatibility of receipt by the electorate
- Each authority's communications/media teams to liaise closely to ensure consistency and timings of communications
- Website messaging to contain links across the two authorities and social media messaging to be consistent particularly if there was a particular issue affecting the register or on polling day.
- Formal procedures agreed for rectifying errors if applicable on the electoral register, absent voting or on polling day and referred to the TH ERO
- Publication of all official notices co-ordinated to ensure commencement of process compatible e.g. Notice of Election dictates the starting point of nomination receipt.
- Layout of the new polling card letters agreed following the changes included in the Elections Act 2022- and one-piece mailer postal packs agreed
- Colour co-ordination of paperwork agreed to distinguish between the cross over boundaries particularly if any additional polls were necessary e.g. by election and receipt of equipment at the count
- Data exchanges tested with both Newham and Tower Hamlets IT input because of the size and scale of files being exchanged e.g. firewalls checked. Egress and Drop Box used by Tower Hamlets.
- Process agreed when undertaking data exchanges, printing deadlines and dispatch to the electorate of postal packs
- A data sharing agreement was not required as data sharing for the register is set out in legislation
- All data exchanges to have integrity checks to ensure when moving data that the right amount of data has been received.
- Agree a contingency if IT fails? Hard copies of postal vote opening data with signatures and dates of birth and hard copy polling stationery e.g. registers, absent vote lists, corresponding numbers Lists etc.
- Agreement re where and how to replace/reissue postal packs if lost or spoiled
- Appointment of staff to be undertaken by Tower Hamlets because of familiarisation of locations e.g. presiding officers, poll clerks & polling Inspectors
- Co-ordinated fees paid across constituencies
- Training of polling staff to be undertaken by Newham supplemented by the AEA digital course



- Polling Inspectors to be trained and provided by Tower Hamlets
- Process agreed for emergency proxies if appointed by Tower Hamlets
- Booking of polling places to be undertaken by Tower Hamlets
- Continuation of the additional set up particular to Tower Hamlets or not e.g.
  - Privacy signage
  - Family voting
  - Translated posters
  - Masked areas outside polling places
  - Police officers on site
- Agree ballot paper numbering so that the figures run consecutively and are not duplicated. Newham provide the ranges they use and Tower hamlets then number outside of that range.
- Provision of polling station equipment and the delivery and collection prior to polling day, on polling day and post polling by the Tower Hamlets facilities/logistics team.
- Printing of the electoral register stationery e.g. polling station registers, CNL's, absent vote lists etc.
- Count planning for Newham to be extended to the PO's from TH working in the Stratford and Bow take on area because not familiar with their processes so they will need training
- Sharing of results after the counts are completed
- Post election arrangements e.g. exchange of marked registers, data of rejected postal vote statements, claims for reimbursements

## Appendix E

### Statistics of applications during the statutory timetable

Service	Total Applications	Digital Applications	Paper Applications	In-Person Applications	Order (33 authorities)
Postal Votes	6,209	6,023	182	4	12 <sup>th</sup> highest in London
Proxy Votes	1,355	1,333	22	0	13 <sup>th</sup> highest in London
Overseas Electors	1,311	1,304	5	2	9 <sup>th</sup> highest in London
Register to Vote Applications including duplicate applications	22,955	22,917	38	0	5 <sup>th</sup> highest in London
Voter Authority Certificates	153	152	1	0	3 <sup>rd</sup> highest in London

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<sup>i</sup> RPA 1983 s 28 (3A) (as amended by Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022)