

Committee	Date	Classification	Report No.	Agenda Item No.
General Purposes Committee	10 December 2014	Unrestricted		7.3
Overview and Scrutiny Committee	2 December 2014			
Report of: Acting Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer Originating Officer(s): John Williams		Title: Planning for the UK Parliamentary Election (May 2015): Progress in implementing Electoral Commission recommendations and consultation on count arrangements Ward(s) affected: All		

REASONS FOR URGENCY

This report was not available at the time of the agenda despatch due to the need to collate a large amount of information which did not prove possible in the time available. Nevertheless the Committee are recommended to consider the report at this meeting as it is on their work programme and also that the earlier the Committee consider the report the easier it is to include their comments in the planning for the elections.

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The General Purposes Committee has responsibility on behalf of the Council for certain functions in relation to the holding of elections and the maintenance of the electoral register.
- 1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has previously discussed matters relating to the electoral process and Members have requested an update on progress in implementing the recommendations of the Electoral Commission in relation to the arrangements for the verification and counting of votes at the UK Parliamentary Election to be held on 7 May 2015.
- 1.3 This report provides for Members' information an update on planning work that has been undertaken so far for the UK Parliamentary election. The report focusses mainly on the plans for the verification and counting of votes, in order to comply with the timetable set out by the Electoral Commission. Amongst other things, the Commission's report of July 2014 recommended that the outline plans should be subject to consultation with local parties before being firmed up at the beginning of December.

- 1.4 Accordingly, the proposals in this report are currently the subject of consultation with all interested parties. Any comments received prior to the committee meeting will be reported verbally.
- 1.5 Further rounds of consultation will address other aspects of the election plans including integrity and security measures, absent (postal and proxy) voting and the management and policing of polling stations on election day.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That the report be noted

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Following the events of the May 2014 elections, the Acting Returning Officer (ARO) has been reviewing the arrangements for counting the votes in the two Tower Hamlets constituencies at the UK Parliamentary General Election to be held on 7 May 2015. The proposed arrangements reflect the changes of practice that were used successfully at the count for the Blackwall and Cubitt Town Ward in July this year, and having regard to the recommendations and advice of the Electoral Commission in their report, also published in July 2014.
- 3.2 Two documents are attached which are currently out for consultation with interested parties:-
 - (i) The ARO's considerations and outline proposals for the verification and counting of votes in the Bethnal Green and Bow and Poplar and Limehouse constituencies in May 2015, including his response to the recommendations of the Electoral Commission report of July 2014; and
 - (ii) A first draft of the operational arrangements and instructions for the count, to be issued to all attendees.

4. MAIN PROPOSALS AND PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

- 4.1 The key elements of the ARO's proposals for the election count in May 2015 and the planning assumptions relied upon in formulating these are set out below:-

Count venue and date

- 4.2 The counts will be held overnight, starting at **10.00 pm on 7th May 2015** with the opening of postal votes received during the poll, and proceeding through the verification of ballot papers and the counting of votes until results can be declared.
- 4.3 The ARO proposes that both constituencies will be counted at the **ExCel Centre** (ExCel). Of all the possibilities considered, within and close to the Borough, ExCel is by far the largest and can therefore accommodate

sufficient staff to ensure a speedy process. There is suitable flexible space available for the range of activities required, ExCel offers a comprehensive and professional range of facilities, and the central avenue is capable of accommodating admission arrangements for a large number of people to be processed efficiently. The Council's Corporate Management Team has confirmed that the necessary resources can be made available to meet the potential additional cost of using this venue.

- 4.4 Two areas within ExCel have been provisionally booked – one for counting the two constituencies, and an adjacent area for dealing with postal votes received during polling day, storage for the unused stationary returned from polling stations, accommodation for the ballot boxes once emptied, and provision for a catering facility for staff that is separate from the counting area.
- 4.5 Although not located within Tower Hamlets, ExCel is close to the Borough boundary and is easily accessible by public transport (and for the purposes of delivery of ballot boxes, by car). ExCel has been used successfully as a count venue at previous elections including the London Mayoral and Assembly elections in 2008 and 2012; and by L. B. Newham Council for local and mayoral elections.

Entry to the count and conduct of attendees

- 4.6 All attendees at the verification and count will be required to sign a **Code of Conduct** as a condition of entry. The code will be based on that successfully used at the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward election in July 2014 and will set out the standards of behaviour expected of all attendees.
- 4.7 Additional security staff will be engaged to ensure that order is maintained at the count and to assist the ARO's staff in applying the Code of Conduct. In addition, to alleviate delays into the ExCel centre, additional staff will be appointed at reception to control security, badges, cloakroom assistance and signature of the code of conduct. The intention is that independent professional security staff will be used, rather than Council officers, to manage the reception area and entrance to the event. Photographic I/D evidence will be required to secure entry and no person who is not on the authorised list of attendees will be permitted to enter the count.
- 4.8 All attendees will be required to wear a security wristband throughout the Event.
- 4.9 CCTV recording will be in place within the count hall.

Staffing the count

- 4.10 The ARO intends to appoint a much higher ratio of count supervisors to count assistants than that which applied in 2014. The May elections demonstrated that the supervisor role is a crucial one, with experienced staff being able to deal well with queries and instruct their teams clearly. Additional appointments this time will avoid those staff being stretched between too

many teams, potentially holding up the process when they are detained by lengthy queries. Therefore on this occasion each supervisor will be responsible for only eight count assistants.

- 4.11 Despite the fact that the UK Parliamentary election is not scheduled to be combined with any other poll; and the process (and indeed the voting system used) is therefore much more straightforward than that which applied in May 2014, the ARO nevertheless intends to appoint 80 counting assistants per constituency. This is a higher figure than that used in other comparable elections and should ensure that the process is conducted efficiently. In the first stage of the counts, each team of two counting assistants is planned to verify no more than two ballot boxes.
- 4.12 As the counts will be undertaken overnight, those staff who have worked at polling stations during polling day will **not** be eligible to be appointed as count staff or supervisors. They would however be eligible to be part of the contingency teams to be available for any full recount that may prove necessary. Any such full recount would start, after a break for all concerned, with fresh staff at 1.00 pm on Friday 8th May. NB: a limited recount comprising a simple “bundle flick” would be undertaken by the original staff, with no more than a short comfort break in the proceedings.
- 4.13 The count venue will be set up well in advance and staff will be required to attend for a final training session and ‘dress rehearsal’ at 6.00 p.m. on 7th May. They will then return by 9.00 pm in order to receive a final briefing and to be seated and ready to start work in good time before candidates, election agents and others entitled to attend are admitted. This will avoid any possible conflict at the admissions desks and the need to prioritise between staff and candidates, and also help to assure a prompt start to the count processes.
- 4.14 The recruitment and training of count staff will begin earlier, and the training will be more comprehensive, ensuring that it fully complements the requirements and code of conduct for the candidates, election and counting agents and others entitled to attend the proceedings.

Communications and projected time of declarations

- 4.15 The planning assumptions are for a 70% turnout in each constituency, for a total of 30,000 postal votes to be issued, and for 75% of these to be returned.
- 4.16 On the basis of these figures, it should be possible to complete verification in around two hours (i.e. by 1.15 a.m., assuming that the final ballot boxes are delivered to the count venue not later than 11.15 pm). The ARO will once again be asking the Metropolitan Police to attend polling stations and to be available to escort the presiding officers and ballot boxes in transit to ExCel.
- 4.17 Allowing half an hour for checking of the verification statement and sharing this with the candidates and agents, it should then be possible to commence the constituency counts before 2.00 am which is the statutory target for the start of counting.

- 4.18 Assuming that there are approximately ten candidates on each ballot paper, the ARO estimates that it will be possible to complete the counts within a further two hours. Therefore an estimated declaration time for each constituency contest (barring any recounts) would be approximately 4.00 a.m. on Friday 8th May 2015.
- 4.19 Progress with the count operations and any changes in the planned assumptions will be announced regularly over the PA system, in addition to the Acting Returning Officer's regular briefings in person to candidates and election agents present in the hall.
- 4.20 Supervisory and security staff at the venue will be in constant radio contact with each other to enable any issues arising to be communicated and dealt with quickly.

Enhancing management capacity

- 4.21 The ARO has taken steps to ensure that adequate senior expertise and capacity are available for the preparation and management of the count. In particular, an experienced senior election official will be procured as a consultant to advise on and oversee the development and implementation of the count plans in order to ensure that the proper focus is maintained on the count-related work regardless of the other demands placed on the ARO and his deputy/ies prior to and on polling day.
- 4.22 The consultant will work with a dedicated member of the Facilities Team to ensure the effective management of the count as an event - i.e. venue liaison, communications, refreshments, set up of equipment, layout, logistics and contractor liaison, transfer of ballot boxes etc.

5. NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 Following receipt of comments in response to the consultation exercise and discussion at the relevant council committee(s), the ARO will review the attached documents and make a submission to the Electoral Commission as soon as possible. The ARO will consider any guidance or advice received from the Commission before publicising the final operational plan.
- 5.2 The ARO will circulate revised documentation to interested parties and any known prospective Parliamentary candidates and agents in the Borough at a briefing meeting which will be held, as the first in a series of such meetings, early in the New Year. At that meeting the ARO will also circulate local guidance for prospective candidates and agents that will complement the Electoral Commission's national guidance.

6. THE STATUTORY TIMETABLE FOR THE UK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

- 6.1 I set out below is the statutory timetable for the conduct of the General

Election. The statutory timetable is based on the assumption that the writ is received on the day following the dissolution of Parliament. If in a particular constituency the writ is received on a different date:

- The notice of election in that particular constituency must be published no later than 4pm on the second day following the receipt of the writ.
- The period for delivery of nomination papers will begin from the day after the publication of notice of election. The deadline for nominations will remain the same (i.e. 4pm on 19 working days before the poll).

6.2 Statute provides that some days are disregarded in calculating the timetable and these are each Saturday, Sunday, Good Friday, other bank holidays and any day appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning. Please therefore be aware that the timetable below may change in the event of days being appointed for public thanksgiving or mourning.

Event	Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)	Date (deadline if not midnight)
Dissolution of Parliament	25 days	Monday 30 March
Receipt of writ	24 days	Tuesday 31 March
Publication of notice of election	Not later than 22 days (4pm)	Not later than 4pm on Thursday 2 April
Delivery of nomination papers	From the day after the publication of the notice of election until the sixth day after the date of dissolution	Between 10am and 4pm on any working day after publication of notice of election until Thursday 9 April
Deadline for delivery of nomination papers	19 days (4pm)	4pm on Thursday 9 April
Deadline for withdrawals of nomination	19 days (4pm)	4pm on Thursday 9 April

Event	Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)	Date (deadline if not midnight)
<p>Making objections to nomination papers</p> <p>(except for objections on the grounds that an individual candidate may be disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1981 – see Commission guidance)</p>	<p>On 19 days (10am to 5pm), subject to the following:</p> <p>Between 10 am – 12 noon objections can be made to all delivered nominations</p> <p>Between 12 noon and 5pm objections can only be made to nominations delivered after 4pm, 20 days before the poll</p>	<p>Between 10am and 12 noon on Thursday 9 April objections can be made to all delivered nominations</p> <p>Between 12 noon and 5pm on Thursday 9 April objections can only be made to nominations delivered after 4pm on Wednesday 8 April</p>
Deadline for the notification of appointment of election agent	19 days (4pm)	4pm on Thursday 9 April
Publication of statement of persons nominated, including notice of poll and situation of polling stations	<p>If no objections: on 19 days (at 5pm)</p> <p>If objection(s) are made: Not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 18 days (4pm)</p>	<p>If no objections: at 5pm on Thursday 9 April</p> <p>Objection(s) made: not before objection(s) are disposed of but not later than 4pm on Friday 10 April</p>
Publication of first interim election notice of alteration	On 19 days	Thursday 9 April
Deadline for receiving applications for registration	12 days	Monday 20 April
Deadline for receiving new postal vote and postal proxy applications, and for changes to existing postal or proxy votes	11 days (5pm)	5pm on Tuesday 21 April
Deadline for receiving new applications to vote by proxy (not postal proxy or emergency proxies)	6 days (5pm)	5pm on Tuesday 28 April

Event	Working days before poll (deadline if not midnight)	Date (deadline if not midnight)
Publication of second interim election notice of alteration	Between 18 days and 6 days	Between Friday 10 April and Tuesday 28 April (inclusive)
Publication of final election notice of alteration	5 days	Wednesday 29 April
Deadline for notification of appointment polling and counting agents	5 days	Wednesday 29 April
First date that electors can apply for a replacement for lost postal votes	4 days	Thursday 30 April
Polling day	0 (7am to 10pm)	7am to 10pm on Thursday 7 May
Last time for re-issue of spoilt or lost postal votes	0 (5pm)	5pm on Thursday 7 May
Deadline for emergency proxy applications	0 (5pm)	5pm on Thursday 7 May
Last time to alter the register due to clerical error or court appeal	0 (9pm)	9pm on Thursday 7 May

6.3 On a date to be decided after the close of nominations, the ARO will hold a meeting for all candidates and their election agents to run through the practicalities and timings / deadlines for the rest of the process, including the count.

6.4 At that meeting, the ARO will explain and demonstrate the adjudication process and candidates / election agents will be able to bring those likely to be designated as counting agents along with them to help all those who will have a role at the count to understand the process and the criteria for adjudicating doubtful ballot papers.

7. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Grant allocations will be made by the Cabinet Office in relation to the costs of the UK Parliamentary Election and any additional costs will be met from within budget allocations.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR ONE TOWER HAMLETS

- 8.1 The aim of the election count plan is to ensure that the count is conducted in a fair and transparent manner in accordance with the law.

9. APPENDICES

- 13.1 There are two appendices to this report as follows:-

Appendix A – The ARO’s considerations and outline proposals for the verification and counting of votes in the Bethnal Green and Bow and Poplar and Limehouse constituencies in May 2015, including his response to the recommendations of the Electoral Commission report of July 2014; and

Appendix B - A first draft of the operational arrangements and instructions for the count, to be issued to all attendees

LIST OF “BACKGROUND PAPERS” USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

Brief description of “background paper”

Name and telephone number of holder and address where open to inspection

No unpublished background papers have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report.