

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS
UK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, 7THMAY 2015

VERIFICATION AND COUNTING OF VOTES

**ACTING RETURNING OFFICER'S OUTLINE PROPOSALS AND RESPONSE TO
THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This document sets out the Acting Returning Officer's approach to planning for the verification and counting of votes at the UK Parliamentary election in Tower Hamlets in May 2015. It also provides an outline of the practical plans already in place and of progress made so far made against those plans.
- 1.2 The document is both a position statement at the date of preparation and a framework for further planning work. It is published for consultation with all interested parties, who are invited to submit comments to inform that further work.
- 1.3 The Electoral Commission's report of July 2014 into the verification and counts for the combined elections held in Tower Hamlets in May 2014 recommended that the Acting Returning Officer should publish certain information as part of his plan for the management of the May 2015 UK Parliamentary election count at the beginning of December 2014. The report also stated that the Commission would wish to satisfy itself, by the end of September 2014, that the Acting Returning Officer has made sufficient progress towards addressing the recommendations in its report.
- 1.4 The Acting Returning Officer has been in periodic contact with senior Electoral Commission representatives since July 2014 and shared with the Commission his outline plans for the May 2015 count at the end of September in accordance with the above. The Commission confirmed at that point that they were satisfied with the Acting Returning Officer's preparations including the developing plans and contingency/risk register for the election count.
- 1.5 This document sets out for the Acting Returning Officer's considerations in relation to planning for the 2015 elections both in terms of practical arrangements such as potential count venues and improvements to the counting process itself; proposals to enhance the dedicated management capacity allocated to the count; and developing best practice, drawing on the learning points from May 2014 and previous elections and engaging relevant expertise available from both internal and external sources.

2. BACKGROUND AND ELECTORAL COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 For a decade or more, election counts in Tower Hamlets have given rise to a range of challenges for successive Returning Officers. They have often proved lengthy affairs, sometimes overrunning planned timescales by many

hours especially when major elections have been combined (e.g. the UK Parliamentary and council elections, and mayoral referendum in May 2010). In this and other years, including the UK parliamentary election in 2005, council elections in 2006 and the council by-elections in 2012, there have been allegations of poor conduct by candidates, agents and guests attending the count; and successive elections have also given rise to claims of fraudulent activity by campaigners or others.

2.2 Most recently in May 2014, the verification and counts for the combined Tower Hamlets mayoral, council and European Parliamentary elections overran the planned timetables by 7.5 hours (mayoral, including verification), 17.5 hours (council, not including recounts) and 7.5 hours (European Parliamentary). The Electoral Commission in July 2014 published a report into the verification and count, which found that there were *“two primary factors which appear to have caused the overall delay in completing the counts for the May 2014 elections in Tower Hamlets:*

- ***Access to the count venue on Friday 23 May:*** *delays in allowing count staff and those entitled to attend the verification and count meant that verification was delayed by approximately two and a half hours.*
- ***Inadequate resource management during the verification and count on Friday 23 May and Saturday 24 May, and on Sunday 25 May:*** *in addition to the significant delay to the start of the verification process on Friday 23 May, the number of count staff available was insufficient either to recover from the initial delay or to manage the number of ballot papers to be verified and counted within the Returning Officer’s planned timetable.”*

2.3 The Electoral Commission in its report recommended (inter alia) that:-

Ahead of the scheduled Parliamentary General Election in May 2015:-

- *The Returning Officer publishes his overall plans for the management of the count at the 2015 Parliamentary General election by no later than the beginning of December 2014, five months before polling day.*
- *The Returning Officer consider all possible options for suitable venues for future counts, with space for sufficient numbers of count staff and others entitled to attend. These details should also be published by December 2014.*

For counting at all future elections:

- *To ensure transparency of communication between counting staff and other attendees at the count (including counting agents) the Returning Officer should make clear in instructions to those attending any count that any such communication should take place in English only.*

- *Those attending the count should behave according to the rules set out in advance by the Returning Officer and should respect and immediately accept the Returning Officer's instructions if he considers their behaviour unacceptable.*

- 2.4 A countermanded poll in Blackwall and Cubitt Town Ward (where the Council election was delayed following the death of a candidate before the election in May) provided an opportunity to apply some alternative measures at the count, developed in consultation with an external expert consultant. These resulted in a calmer and more orderly process which was generally well received and, were it not for the need for two recounts in a very close contest, the whole process would have been completed by 1.10 a.m, just over three hours from the close of poll. Two respected representatives from the Association of Electoral Administrators were invited to observe the count proceedings and endorsed the procedures used.
- 2.5 The current (Acting) Returning Officer, John Williams, is also the Council's Service Head, Democratic Services, a post which he has held since March 2007. The Council currently has no Chief Executive, the holder of which post would normally be appointed as Returning Officer. In the absence of a Chief Executive, Mr Williams was appointed by the Council as Returning Officer (and also Electoral Registration Officer) in January 2013.
- 2.6 This consultation paper sets out information on the planning process so far for the May 2015 UK Parliamentary Election count in Tower Hamlets. The proposals aim to ensure a calm, orderly and efficient process which is completed in the shortest time possible.

3. ELECTION COUNT MAY 2015 – THE TASK

- 3.1 The UK Parliamentary election will take place on 7th May 2015. There are two parliamentary constituencies within Tower Hamlets:-
- Bethnal Green and Bow; and
 - Poplar and Limehouse.
- 3.2 There are no cross-boundary issues at the UK Parliamentary election, the two parliamentary constituencies together being coterminous with the local authority.
- 3.3 The current electorate in the two constituencies, and the respective turnout figures in the 2010 UK parliamentary election, are as follows:-
- Bethnal Green and Bow – Electorate (September 2014) = 80,931.
Turnout in May 2010 = 63.25%
 - Poplar & Limehouse – Electorate (September 2014) = 79,337.
Turnout in May 2010 = 62.98%
- 3.4 The UK Parliamentary election in 2015 is not scheduled to be combined with any other election and in the count will therefore be a less complex event than

those in either 2010 or 2014. Nevertheless the Acting Returning Officer intends to put in place sufficiently robust arrangements to ensure an orderly and efficient count in the most demanding circumstances.

4. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION/LEARNING POINTS FROM MAY 2014 AND PREVIOUS ELECTION COUNTS

- 4.1 The Electoral Commission, in its report of July 2014, found (inter alia) that there were two primary factors that caused the delays to the count in May 2014 and further that:-

“Underlying both of these main factors were plans for the management of the verification and count on Friday 23 May which proved inadequate for the number of ballot papers to be counted and the intense focus of candidates and agents on the count process. Given the context for the elections, summarised in Chapter 2 of this report, the Returning Officer should have anticipated many of the factors which appeared to have contributed to the length of the count.

Notwithstanding the difficulty in identifying a larger venue within the borough for the verification and count, a realistic assessment of the potential for higher than average turnout in such a close and hard-fought contest should have identified the need for more staff in order to meet the Returning Officer’s planned schedule. Likewise, given the large number of count staff and other attendees expected to enter the count venue through a relatively small foyer area, the Returning Officer should have been able to anticipate that there would be problems ensuring everyone was in place inside the venue in time to begin counting according to the planned timetable.”

- 4.2 The Acting Returning Officer has identified a number of specific issues and learning points from the events of May 2014 and previous election counts in Tower Hamlets and these have guided his planning for the 2015 election counts. Key issues identified include:-

- Election counts at Tower Hamlets are complex, tense and demanding events which require excellent and detailed planning and management. The count must be considered as an event in its own right with dedicated organisational resources separate from other aspects of the election. In view of the many other demands on the Acting Returning Officer and his staff in the run up to the election and on polling day – many of which are accentuated in the Tower Hamlets context, there is a need for additional resources to ensure adequate and dedicated management capacity to manage the count.
- For example In May 2014, the Returning Officer and his Deputy were undertaking a very significant workload relating to polling day itself and the final postal vote opening (which finished at approximately 4.45 a.m. on Friday 23rd May) including security and anti-intimidation measures in conjunction with the Metropolitan Police. This impacted on their ability to

ensure that all necessary arrangements at the Count venue were set up well in advance and ready to commence quickly.

- Effective measures to promote security, integrity and transparency of the count are essential in the Tower Hamlets context in order to build confidence in the electoral process, but such measures have the potential to cause delays. Therefore adequate staffing – and the appropriate level of delegated authority – is also essential.
- For example, entry to the count needs to be managed strictly – as it was on 23rd/24th May 2014 – and this principle must not be compromised purely in the interest of speed, but equally the procedures in place must not delay the process. This means that all entry lists and adequate staff and processes to manage security must be in place well in advance to allow for speedy access for candidates, agents and their guests.
- Similarly the number of counting staff available – both counting assistants and supervisors, and by extension the size of the venue used to accommodate them, is crucial to a successful event. This is probably the most important single factor in determining the duration of the count. It has been problematic to identify a venue in the borough that is large enough to cope efficiently with a complex count. Various venues have been used over the years by successive Returning Officers but all have been criticised in some way. A number of potential venues have been considered for the UK Parliamentary count on 7/8 May 2014 and the Acting Returning Officer welcomes the Electoral Commission's recommendation that he should look outside the borough if necessary to secure a large enough venue.
- The layout of the count tables is also important and can significantly affect both the efficiency of the count and confidence in the process, and the ease with which the conduct of observers can be managed. The successful arrangements trialled at the Blackwall and Cubitt Town election on 3rd July can be built on in this regard.
- In the complex and hotly contested politics of Tower Hamlets, a higher than average turnout should be anticipated and planned for, along with relatively high numbers of challenges and requests for adjudication of doubtful ballot papers and (in a council election) high levels of 'mixed' votes.
- The decision to commence the verification of votes on the morning of Friday 23rd May, rather than straight after the close of poll on the Thursday evening, did provide staff with a break and enabled experienced staff who had worked as presiding officers or poll clerks on polling day, and who would therefore otherwise have been excluded from working on the count, to do so. However, given the complexity of the election, it was over ambitious to try to conduct the combined verification followed by a two-stage mayoral count, and then 19 council ward counts, one after the other straight through from Friday morning and with a single set of staff. At

future combined elections consideration should be given to undertaking the verification and at least some of the count(s) at separate sessions with different teams of staff.

- In addition to process improvements, the projected timings of each stage of the count need to be more realistically estimated for the benefit of all concerned. Significant improvements were achieved for the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward count on 3rd July and further enhancements are possible.
- Although Tower Hamlets has a history of problematic and/or protracted counts under successive Returning Officers which suggests that there are significant local factors at play, other authorities have encountered and dealt with some if not all similar issues. There is a need to learn from best practice wherever it is identified. There is a great deal of expertise and experience available to draw on from Returning Officers and others across the country which will be utilised.

5. PLANNING FOR MAY 2015

- 5.1 The Electoral Commission included in its report of July 2014 the following recommendations:-

“The Returning Officer should ensure that plans for the resourcing and delivery of the count are based on realistic and robust assumptions about key factors, including turnout, the number of candidates and the speed and capability of count staff. Plans should identify the expected timing for completion of all stages of the count, and should be flexible enough to be revised to reflect changes if those assumptions change.

The Returning Officer should consult local political parties, elected representatives and prospective candidates in developing his plans for the resourcing and delivery of future election counts, to help build confidence in his proposed approach.

The Returning Officer should ensure that there is a contingency plan in place for managing the count if the original plan is no longer sufficient, including what actions will be taken if the count process is taking longer to complete than planned. The Returning Officer should identify key points during the count process – including commencement and completion of the verification stage – at which he will review progress against the expected schedule. This progress review should be used to inform a realistic assessment of the likelihood of delivering the overall plan for the count, and whether and when it may be necessary to implement contingency plans; [...] and

The Returning Officer should ensure that detailed plans for the resourcing and delivery of future counts are reviewed by a selection of other Returning Officers with relevant experience, particularly including running elections in London, to ensure that planning assumptions and the overall management approach for the count are appropriate and robust.”

- 5.2 The Acting Returning Officer is determined to ensure that mistakes which have been made and other circumstances which have obtained to cause delays at previous election counts in Tower Hamlets should not recur in May 2015.
- 5.3 The Acting Returning Officer has therefore taken into account the Electoral Commission's findings and the above learning points in developing his plans for the May 2015 election counts. In addition, he has sought and will continue to seek to draw on additional expertise and resources available both within the local authority and outside.

6. ELECTION 2015 – COUNT VENUE

- 6.1 In relation to the count venue, the Electoral Commission has recommended:-

“The Returning Officer should consider all possible options for identifying suitable venues for future counts, with space for sufficient numbers of count staff and others entitled to attend, including:

- *Considering venues located outside the borough.*
- *Where multiple elections are held on the same day, considering conducting counts consecutively, rather than simultaneously.*
- *Where multiple elections are held on the same day, considering conducting counts in more than one venue.*

The Returning Officer should consult locally on possible options, taking into account views from local political parties, elected representatives, the police and others, before publishing details of the proposed venue and approach for future counts and clearly communicating the basis for the proposed approach.”

- 6.2 The Acting Returning Officer has looked at the widest possible range of venues for the verification and counting of votes in May 2015. All potential venues have been considered including a number which have been used at recent elections i.e.:-

- The Troxy, Commercial Road (used for the combined elections in May 2014)
- York Hall, Bethnal Green (used for the mayoral election count in October 2010 and historically for numerous elections)
- Mile End Leisure Centre (used for the European Parliamentary elections in June 2009 and May 2014 and the combined elections in May 2010)
- East Wintergarden, Canary Wharf (used for the UK Parliamentary election in 2005 and the AV referendum in May 2011)

- 6.3 In addition, the Acting Returning Officer has investigated a number of further possible venues of which he is aware, including:-
- Queen Mary University Great Hall (not used for an election count in recent years); and
 - The ExCel Centre (used for London mayoral/assembly sub-regional counts in May 2008 and May 2012, but not previously used for a single-borough election for Tower Hamlets)
- 6.4 In considering the potential alternative venues, the priority has been to secure a venue of sufficient size to accommodate enough staff to ensure a speedy count. However, other factors are also relevant including accessibility and ease of policing/crowd control outside the venue.
- 6.5 The Troxy was the venue for the combined election count in May 2014 and as such has been subject to some criticism in view of the extended duration of that count. However, the Acting Returning Officer notes that of all the other venues within the borough suggested by interested parties (as listed above), none are as large as the Troxy or can accommodate as many counting staff. For example the available floorspace at the Troxy is 1050 sqm, which can accommodate 184 counting assistants. The equivalent figures for East Wintergarden are 682 sqm and approx. 130 counting assistants; for York Hall 557 sqm and 108 counting assistants; and for Queen Mary University 300 sqm (estimated fewer than 100 counting assistants).
- 6.6 The layout of the Troxy however (with asymmetrical upper- and lower- ground floor spaces) does not lend itself ideally to two equal-sized counting areas such as would be required for the two parliamentary constituencies.
- 6.7 Of all the venues considered, the ExCel Centre is by far the largest and there is a wide range of flexible spaces available within the centre. Although not located within the borough of Tower Hamlets, the ExCel Centre is close to the borough boundary and is readily accessible by public transport (and for the purposes of delivery of ballot boxes, by car). It is likely to be a relatively expensive option but the Council's Corporate Management Team have confirmed that additional resources will be made available to ensure the efficient conduct of the election if the Acting Returning Officer considers that this is necessary.
- 6.8 The Acting Returning Officer has considered splitting the event so that the counts for the two parliamentary constituencies take place simultaneously in separate venues, although this would not be an ideal solution either from the point of view of management control, media facilities or agent attendance.
- 6.9 On balance, taking all relevant factors into account and subject to consultation with interested parties, the Acting Returning Officer proposes that the verification and counting of votes for the two Tower Hamlets constituencies at

the UK Parliamentary elections in May 2015 should be held at the ExCel Centre.

7. ENHANCING MANAGEMENT CAPACITY AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT

- 7.1 The Acting Returning Officer has taken steps to ensure that adequate senior expertise and capacity are available for the preparation and management of the count, in addition to the Acting Returning Officer, his deputies and staff:-
- 7.2 In relation to the technical electoral activities, the Acting Returning Officer intends to procure an experienced senior election official as a consultant to advise on and oversee the development and implementation of the count plans – including identification of risks and contingencies, procedures for setting up the venues and instructing count staff - both in the weeks and months before the election and on the day(s) itself. This will enable the proper focus to be maintained on the count-related work regardless of the other demands placed on the Acting Returning Officer and his Deputy/ies prior to and on polling day.
- 7.3 In addition to enhancing the senior electoral expertise available, the Acting Returning Officer has identified the need for a dedicated senior officer to take responsibility for managing the count as an event - i.e. aspects including venue liaison, communications, refreshments, set up of equipment, layout, logistics and contractor liaison, transfer of ballot boxes etc. The Acting Returning Officer is therefore in discussion with the Council's Service Head, Corporate Property and Capital Delivery, to identify a dedicated senior Facilities professional to undertake this role. The intention is that the person identified will be freed up from more general council duties for a period and will have minimal involvement in other aspects of the elections which could distract from the count preparations.

8. PROCESS FOR THE COUNT/CONDUCT OF ATTENDEES ETC

- 8.1 In relation to transparency of the verification and count processes, the Electoral Commission has recommended that:-

“The Returning Officer should ensure that all verification and count processes are transparent and provide appropriate opportunities for those who are entitled to observe and to object to doubtful ballot paper adjudication decisions. This should include ensuring that bundles of counted ballot papers are stored in full sight of counting agents in a way which allows them to monitor progress of the count.

To ensure transparency of communication between counting staff and other attendees at the count (including counting agents) the Returning Officer should make clear in instructions to those attending the count that any questions should be communicated via count supervisors rather than counting assistants, and that any such communication should take place in English only.

The Returning Officer should ensure that the process for adjudicating doubtful ballot papers is transparent and clearly understood by those entitled to observe and formally object to the Returning Officer's decision to reject a ballot paper. The Returning Officer should hold specific briefing sessions to explain and demonstrate the adjudication process to candidates, election agents and counting agents, using materials developed and provided by the Electoral Commission for use by all Returning Officers, including doubtful ballot paper placemats; and

The Returning Officer should ensure that progress of the verification and count process is communicated to all attendees, providing regular updates throughout the process."

- 8.2 Following the May 2014 combined elections, and before the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward countermanded poll, the Returning Officer contracted with a reputed election count expert who is the Chief Executive of another local authority and who has advised the Cabinet Office on best practice in the area, to provide his expertise and to advise on how the processes used could be redesigned and improved for the countermanded poll count.
- 8.3 Arising from this, a number of successful innovations were introduced for the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward count, including:-
- A higher ratio of count supervisors to counting assistants
 - Double width counting tables to ensure staff were not being intimidated by candidates and/or agents with the adjacent area for seated count agents
 - A roped barrier behind the counting agent chairs to stop overcrowding at the count tables and to prevent other observers from crowding the tables.
 - Clearer written briefing to candidates, agents and guests regarding explicit standards of conduct required, and attendees to sign this code of conduct as a condition of entry.
 - Improved communications including more announcements regarding progress at each stage
 - Large format (A3) counting sheets and other stationery for ease of completion by counting teams
 - Appointment of an additional Deputy Returning Officer for the count, and DRO adjudication of doubtful votes wherever possible.
- 8.4 These improvements were well received and the ward count proceeded in an efficient and orderly manner as previously described. The Acting Returning Officer therefore intends to retain and build on the above measures for the counts in May 2015.
- 8.5 The aim is to have sufficient staff so that each pair of counting assistants will verify the ballot box(es) from a maximum of two polling stations.
- 8.6 Depending on the number of candidates at the elections, use will be made of the system whereby in the first instance trays are set out only for the

candidates (no more than 4 or 5) who are expected to poll the majority of votes between them, with other candidates' votes being placed in an 'others' tray which will subsequently be counted. Although this will introduce a further stage into the process, advice from experts elsewhere is that it will overall speed up the process, removing unnecessary complications and use of table space at the first round of counting.

- 8.7 In relation to behaviour and management of attendees at the count, the Electoral Commission has recommended:-

“The Returning Officer should ensure that all attendees at the count, including candidates, their guests, election agents, counting agents and the media, are briefed on and fully understand the process for conducting the count and the standards of behaviour which are expected of them at all times. This should aim to ensure that count staff are able to carry out verification and count activities without interference from counting agents and other observers, including leaning over or onto count tables or distracting count staff by speaking loudly with them or among themselves. This should also include appropriate restrictions on the use of mobile phones in the count venue to ensure the secrecy of votes on ballot papers during the count.

The Returning Officer is ultimately responsible for managing behaviour and maintaining order during the count, and has the authority to exclude anyone from the count venue if their behaviour interferes with the effective conduct of the count. The Returning Officer should make clear in both written and face-to-face briefings for attendees at the count how this authority will be used and enforced, including excluding attendees from the count venue if their behaviour interferes with the effective conduct of the count. Attendees at the count who have been briefed on standards of acceptable behaviour should respect and immediately accept the Returning Officer's instructions.

[.....]

The Returning Officer is responsible in law for the conduct of the count. He must make clear to all other participants that he alone is responsible for managing the count, while acknowledging the important statutory role of those entitled to observe and formally object to decisions by the Returning Officer to reject doubtful ballots.

The Returning Officer should make clear on what basis he will make decisions about the management of the count, including any decision to suspend the count. This should include identifying in advance those decisions which must be taken in consultation and agreement with candidates or election agents, such as suspending the count during the specified hours.”

- 8.8 Clear signage will once again be used to reiterate the rules of conduct that apply to all attending the count - including no use of mobile phones or other devices in the count hall – and all attendees will again be provided with a written briefing and required to sign a code of conduct as a condition of entry.
- 8.9 CCTV recording will be in place in the count hall.

8.10 To alleviate delays into the count centre for the UK Parliamentary election in May 2015, additional staff will be appointed at reception to control security, badges, cloakroom assistance and signature of the code of conduct. My intention is to use external professional security staff rather than council officers for this role. Attendees will be required to wear a security wristband throughout the event.

9. STAFFING THE COUNT

9.1 The number and quality of the staff employed at the count, and the thoroughness of the training provided to them, are clearly key factors in the success or otherwise of the event and this was recognised in the Electoral Commission's report. A good team of staff was assembled for the May 2014 election counts and all were subject to mandatory training before undertaking their duties. Nevertheless, not everything went smoothly on the night and particularly in view of the extended duration of the count, many staff became tired and less efficient as the event wore on.

9.2 In relation to the staffing at the election counts in May 2015, the Acting Returning Officer intends that existing good practice will be built on in a number of ways:-

- Additional staff will be employed over and above the numbers used in May 2014, both counting assistants and supervisors, up to the capacity of the venue. Based on the ExCel Centre, the proposal would be for 80 counting assistants and 10 count supervisors per constituency.
- Count staff training will be further enhanced to include not only more detail on the practical process to be followed but also a greater emphasis on the conduct of staff (including not conversing - in any language – or engaging with the agents or candidates) and dealing with misconduct or aggressive challenges by any persons present (by referring the matter to the supervisor and if necessary the Deputy Acting Returning Officer).
- Count staff will be assigned a team number and supervisor prior to their training session and detailed briefing will take place for each stage of the count. Count staff will be asked to sign a post training evaluation document confirming their understanding of the processes to follow.
- The application and recruitment process for count staff will build on current good practice by including more information on previous experience and a more detailed question regarding any previous or current political affiliation of the applicant and whether he or she is known to any candidate at the election.
- Recruitment of staff will start earlier than in previous years in view of the numbers required and the enhanced measures to scrutinise applications.

- Staff who are appointed to work as presiding officers or poll clerks at polling stations on election day will not on this occasion also be considered as count staff, except in the event that a recount is required, when they may be used as part of a fresh team of staff who will be on standby in case of such an eventuality.
- There will also be a much higher ratio of supervisors to count teams as applied in 2014. The supervisor role is a crucial one and was identified as such in the review of the 2014 count, both for good – experienced staff dealing well with queries and instructing their teams clearly; and for bad – stretched between too many teams, they can hold up the process if they are required to resolve a lengthy query at one team. Therefore in accordance with the measures implemented successfully for the Blackwall and Cubitt Town ward election on 3rd July 2014, the resource will be increased, with each supervisor responsible for only eight counting assistants.
- 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.
- 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.

10. DURATION/TIMING OF THE VERIFICATION AND COUNT

- 10.1 For the stand-alone UK Parliamentary election, the Acting Returning Officer intends that the final postal vote opening session, verification and counts will take place as one continuous event immediately after the close of poll.
- 10.2 Based on a 70% turnout for planning purposes (this is actually higher than previously achieved in Tower Hamlets) and 80 counting assistants per constituency, this would require each pair of counting assistants to verify an average of approximately 1400 ballot papers. The Acting Returning Officer estimates that this can be completed 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 p.m.)
- 10.3 Allowing half an hour for checking of the verification statement and sharing this with the candidates and agents, it should therefore be possible to commence the constituency counts by **1.45 a.m.** Again using the high 70% turnout figure and say, 10 candidates per ballot paper, it is estimated that it will be possible to complete the counts within approximately a further two

hours, i.e. by 3.45 a.m., given that the UK Parliamentary election is a first-past-the-post contest with only one vote per elector.

- 10.4 Allowing 15 minutes for sharing the provisional results with candidates and agents, this will give an estimated declaration time for each constituency contest (barring any recounts) of no later than **4 a.m. on Friday 8th May 2015**.
- 10.5 Progress against all of the above timetables will be monitored at the count by the externally procured Count Consultant, whose role once the count is underway will be to focus on the logistics of the process, identifying any bottlenecks and/or areas that are starting to cause problems and to report to the Acting Returning Officer on these and with a proposed solution. Specific review meetings between the Acting Returning Officer and the consultant will be programmed for the beginning and end of each distinct stage of the process – i.e. delivery of boxes, verification, count(s) and declaration or recount(s)). The consultant will be an experienced senior election professional and so will be in a position to make such recommendations, but he/she will be able to focus on the process unencumbered by having to deal with the numerous challenges, queries and adjudications that will fall to the Acting Returning Officer during the count. He/she will also liaise with the Facilities Manager to anticipate problems and respond (or refer to the Acting Returning Officer as necessary) on issues such as liaison with premises management, provision of refreshments, staff breaks, policing and crowds, entry to the venue etc.

11. COUNT PLAN & IMPLEMENTATION - OUTLINE TIMETABLE FOR FURTHER WORK

- 11.1 The table below sets out the outline timetable and milestones for further planning and implementation work in connection with the election counts in May 2015.

November 2014	<p>28th – Launch of consultation with local political parties and other interested parties re: plans.</p> <p>Identification of key staff and other resources:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DROs, supervisors, good experienced count assistants - Facilities Management lead officer
December 2014	<p>1st - Publication of revised Register of Electors 2015</p> <p>2nd – Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>5th – First meeting of the project team including representatives of relevant council services and the Metropolitan Police.</p> <p>10th – Report to General Purposes Committee</p>

	<p>12th – Publication of plans for election counts May 2015</p> <p>Completion of polling district/polling place review</p>
January – February 2015	<p>Identify and recruit staff (inc. reserve teams)</p> <p>Finalise and draw up floorplan for venue. Facilities Management lead to oversee preparation of practical plan/layout and venue liaison</p> <p>Initial meeting for agents, prospective candidates and others</p> <p>Finalisation of communications plan for the elections.</p>
March 2015	<p>Consultant to commence regular 2/3 days per week to co-ordinate implementation of detailed plan, in liaison with DRO and FM lead</p> <p>Publication of Notice of Election – Monday 30th March 2015</p>
April 2015	<p>Further meeting with venue management to finalise plans for the day and prior set up – secure storage and access, count area, refreshment, observers, guests and media, communications.</p> <p>Meet transport/logistics contractors to finalise detailed plan of action for the day and set up. Including delivery of ballot boxes, transfer from/to secure storage.</p> <p>Agents and Candidates meetings – to cover all matters relating to the elections including the count arrangements – code of conduct, process, Local Protocol, demonstration of the adjudication process, security and arrangements for appointing count agents.</p> <p>Media briefing on the election and count plans and arrangements for accreditation.</p> <p>Finalise appointments and undertake detailed training for all staff including supervisors, counting assistants, accountants, FM and runners.</p> <p>Finalise, check, print all stationery, trays and labels, accountants' spreadsheets, procedural instructions.</p> <p>Final day for Receipt of Nominations and Withdrawal of Candidates – Thursday 9th April 2015</p>

	Appointment of Poll and Count Agents – Wednesday 29 th April 2015
May 2014	<p>Send authorisation to the count letters, prepare lists and plan entry to venue etc.</p> <p>Consultant and FM lead to maintain close contact with venue and contractors re: setting up.</p> <p>Thursday 7th May – Polling day 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., receipt of ballot boxes and verification to commence at close of poll.</p> <p>Friday 8th May – midnight to approx. 4 a.m.– completion of verification and constituency counts</p>

12. NOTE: CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- 12.1 Consultees will be aware that the Tower Hamlets mayoral election held in May 2014 is currently the subject of an Election Petition which is progressing towards a hearing in the Election Court, possibly during the first part of 2015. Mr Richard Mawrey QC has been appointed as Commissioner to preside over the court.
- 12.2 The Acting Returning Officer makes no comment in this document on the content of the election petition or the matters to be considered by the court. It is however incumbent on him to take account of every possible eventuality in his planning for the elections in May 2015.
- 12.3 The Acting Returning Officer is therefore cognisant of the possibility that, in the event of the Election Court finding in favour of the Petitioners, the result of the mayoral election held in May 2014 could be set aside and a further election held. Depending on the timing of any such judgement, it may be necessary for that further election to be combined with the UK Parliamentary election on 7 May 2015.
- 12.4 The Acting Returning Officer has therefore developed contingency plans that would provide for this eventuality. In relation to the verification and counting of votes, the proposed use of the ExCel Centre – the largest venue readily available – would facilitate such a combined event. Indeed in light of previous experience as outlined in this paper, it would probably be the only practicable option that would ensure an efficient combined verification and count.
- 12.5 Certain details of the count plans would of course be reviewed in the event that a combined election is held. For example the number of counting staff would be further increased to cope with the additional work required. In relation to the timing of the various stages of the process, this would be subject to further consideration and consultation, but the Acting Returning Officer's initial thoughts are that he would still intend to conduct the

verification of all ballot boxes for the combined election immediately following the close of poll (this would be estimated to complete at 4.00 a.m.), followed immediately by the counts for the two parliamentary constituencies, with declarations estimated by approximately 7.00 a.m.

- 12.6 There would then be a break before the mayoral count would commence either on the afternoon of Friday 8th, or the morning of Saturday 9th May 2014, using a fresh team of staff. Following verification, the mayoral ballot boxes would be sealed and transferred to a secure and guarded storage area at the count venue, with observers from each political party if required and a police guard. The mayoral count itself would be predicted (without any recount) to take up to three hours (if a candidate achieves more than 50% of the first preference vote) or 4.5 hours (if the second preference stage is required).

John Williams,
Acting Returning Officer,
28th November 2014