Non-Executive Report of the: **General Purposes Committee** 8 December 2020	TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Asmat Hussain, Corporate Director, Governance	**Classification:** [Unrestricted]
GLA Polls update – Thursday 6 May 2021	

Originating Officer(s)	Robert Curtis, Head of Electoral Services

Summary

This information report informs the Committee of the administrative progress and preparation being undertaken by Will Tuckley (CEO) as the Borough Returning Officer (BRO) for the Greater London Authority (GLA) Polls to be held on Thursday 6 May 2021.

Following the suspension of all polls until that date at the earliest because of the Covid pandemic, Will Tuckley (CEO) in his role as Counting Officer will also be responsible for the administration of the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum on the Isle of Dogs and the Borough Governance Referendum on the same date.

Recommendations:

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

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

1.1. This report is an information item

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

2.1 None.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

3.1 This report details the planning currently being undertaken by the Borough Returning Officer for the delivery of the Greater London Authority (GLA) polls now scheduled for Thursday 6 May 2021

3.2 The management hierarchy for these polls is as follows in order of seniority

- Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) for the GLA polls across London is Mary Harpley (Chief Officer of the GLA)
- The City and East Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) is Althea Loderick (CEO Newham Council) Newham are the lead authority for the constituency.
- The City and East Constituency is made up of the following 4 authorities
    - Newham (Constituency Lead authority)
    - Barking & Dagenham
    - City of London
    - Tower Hamlets
- Will Tuckley (CEO) will act as the Tower Hamlets Borough Returning Officer (BRO)
- Will Tuckley (CEO) will also act as Counting Officer for both the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum and the Borough Governance Referendum to be held on the same day

3.3 There are three different 'contests' that make up GLA elections, three different ballot papers for voters and three different counting methods. **(See Appendix A)**

These are for:

- the Mayor of London (Supplementary Vote System)

- the 14 Members of the London Assembly that represent London's 14 Constituencies (First past the post)

- the 11 London Wide Assembly Members that represent the whole of London (The modified d'Hondt formula – proportional representation)

3.4 The two referendums are based on specific questions relating to the polls themselves with these prescribed in the legislation and the counts are first past the post with no minimum turnout. It is proposed to update GPC on the detail of these polls on 23rd February 2021

3.5 Following the suspension of the polls and the Covid pandemic there has been a necessity to keep in touch with all the stakeholders both external and internally. This has in the main been project managed by the GLA who are closely liaising with all the London Authorities to ensure consistency of approach and to ensure, with the almost daily pandemic updates, that the risk assessments and project planning reflect not only the considerable work undertaken prior to the suspension but also to look ahead to the new year and to continually assess the implications of a continued high infection rate or if the

infections start to abate and polling undertaken in a manner in which everyone is historically acquainted.

These include

- CGI Smartmatic (GLA digital count)
- PSL printers (GLA printing of booklets)
- FDM printers (Poll cards/ballot papers & postal votes)
- Civica Xpress (Electoral Services Software)
- Royal Mail (Poll cards and postal votes)

3.6   To assist in the project planning and risk assessments there has been several meetings held and guidance continually updated and reviewed with the following organisations

- London Elections Management Group (GLA)
- The London Branch of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)
- City and East Constituency Electoral Service Managers (Newham lead)
- The GLA
- An election's working party (GLA)
- CROs, BROs and Election Managers Meetings (Led by the GLRO)
- Cabinet Office
- Electoral Commission

3.7   It is also proposed, after the publication of the electoral register on 1 December 2020, for the internal Tower Hamlets Project Group chaired by Will Tuckley to be convened.

The make-up of this project team will be as follows

- Legal
- IT
- Communications
- Facilities
- The Metropolitan Police (SET and Local representatives)
- The Electoral Commission
- Electoral Services
- Democratic Services

4. Covid

4.1   Following the suspension of the original polling date significant work has been undertaken to try and predict how restrictions to normal working practices will affect the way people will cast their votes, postal voting, polling day and the operation of the count venues.

The GLA have, with the help of the stakeholders detailed above, produced a set of risk assessments that not only cover the usual risks experienced at a normal poll but also those that must be considered as we approach the new year.

The documents are considerable and shared with all authorities across London for comment and improvement and cover concerns relating to

- Electoral registration
- Continued project management

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

4.2   The risk assessments are considerable and are being reviewed daily with all Returning Officers across London sharing what is perceived to be best practice for a Covid affected poll.

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

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

This could result in a significant spike of absent voters and this has been seen in the case studies in South Korea and the United States and we are reviewing our numbers on a monthly basis to try and predict when and if a spike should occur.

4.3   All postal voting across London has been mooted as an alternative but would involve a change to or additional primary legislation and has not been met with enthusiasm by Government as an alternative for those who would ordinarily attend a polling place.

It is proposed for a further update on all polls being held in May 2021 to be provided to committee on 23rd February 2021.

5.   <u>COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER</u>

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

5.2   A maximum recoverable amount (MRA) will be set by the GLA based on their calculation of the potential cost of the polls and historical amounts incurred and confirmation has been received that additional expenditure incurred due to Covid will be reimbursed.

5.3   A 75% advance of the MRA will be provided to the BRO to assist with expenses incurred in the lead up to the poll.

5.4   It is anticipated that the expenditure will be reimbursed to a break even sum for the BRO.

5.5   The anticipated costs for the Governance Referendum is detailed in separate reports and the Neighbourhood Planning Referendum is as yet unknown and will be updated on 23 February 2021.

6.   <u>LEGAL COMMENTS</u>

6.1   This report is for information only and there no legal implications arising from its contents, save to confirm that local polls and referenda due in May 2020 were postponed for one year. This is by virtue of The Local Government and Police and Crime Commissioner (Coronavirus) (Postponement of Elections and Referendums) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

7. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

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

8. BEST VALUE (BV) IMPLICATIONS

8.1   There are no implications arising from this report

9. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

9.1   There are no SAGE implications arising from this report.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

10.1   There are several risks that should be considered when combining polls

10.2   The GLA is a combined poll with 3 ballot papers having to be issued to the electorate with different ways to cast their vote and different counting methods to determine the result. With the Governance Referendum this will be another ballot paper which will, in addition to the Mayor of London paper refer to a Mayor albeit as a question and not part of a list of candidates, but this could be construed incorrectly by some as linked.

10.3   Some may find the receipt of 4 papers difficult to deal with in the polling booths and when receiving postal packs given that the voting methods are also different. This is further compounded by the Referendum on the Isle of Dogs which would mean 5 papers being received by the electorate in some areas that they would need to comprehend and cast their votes correctly as required.

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

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11. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no implications arising from this report.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report
- NONE.

Appendices

Appendix A: Voting methods

Appendix B: Corona Virus considerations example

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended) list of "Background Papers" used in the preparation of this report
- NONE.

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

GLA Counting Methods

1. Mayor of London – Supplementary vote system

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

2. Constituency London Assembly Member (City & East)

    •   The 14 Constituency London Assembly Members are elected using the 'first past the post system'.
    •   This means the candidate in each constituency with the most votes is elected as a Constituency London Assembly Member.
    •   The London Assembly constituency is not the same as the parliamentary constituency.
    •   There are 14 constituencies in London, each made up of two or more boroughs

3. London wide Assembly Member

    •   There are 11 London wide Assembly Members
    •   Elected using a form of 'proportional representation
    •   Cannot be allocated until all the constituency results have been announced because all the votes cast are subject to the formula.
    •   The 11 seats are allocated using the 'Modified d'Hondt Formula'.
    •   The votes cast in the London-wide Assembly Member contest takes account of the number of Constituency London Assembly Member seats that each political party has already won following each calculation.
    •   11 rounds of calculations take place to fill the 11 vacant Assembly Member seats, with the party or independent candidate with the highest number of votes at each round being allocated the seat.
    •   Seats won by parties are allocated to party candidates in the order they appeared on the relevant party's list of candidates.

COVID19 – Polling Places Risk Assessment 2021 (Example)

Guiding Principles to Keep in Mind

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

Elections individuals voting on a single day are higher risk for COVID-19 spread because there will be potential for larger crowds and longer wait times.

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

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

Recommendations for staff

Promoting behaviors that reduce the spread of Covid19

- Stay at home when sick or after recent close contact with a person with COVID-19
- Educate polling staff
- Polling staff who are sick, have tested positive for COVID-19, or have recently had contact with a person with COVID-19 should stay home.
- Ensure that poll locations are adequately staffed to cover any sick workers who need to stay home.

Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette

- Provide an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol for use at each step in the voting process where voters interact with polling staff, after using the polling booths, and as the final step in the voting process.
- Place alcohol-based hand sanitizer in visible, frequently used locations such as registration desks and exits.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizers may damage or mark paper ballots. Polling staff and voters should ensure their hands are completely dry before handling these items.
- Encourage polling staff to hand wash frequently e.g. before entering the polling location, before and after breaks or shifts, after touching or handling masks or PPE, after using the restroom, after touching shared surfaces or objects etc. with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Encourage workers and voters is sneezing to use a tissue or use the inside of their elbow. Used tissues should be thrown in the bin and hands washed immediately with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Masks

- Recommend and reinforce the use of masks among all workers. Masks are most essential in times when physical distancing is difficult.
- Encourage voters to use masks while in the polling location. Where voters' masks may need to be removed to support identification procedures, alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol should be provided at the station so voters can sanitize their hands after removing their masks.
- A plastic barrier between the voter and the poll worker can provide additional protection.
- Post signs providing instruction on the use of masks.
- Note: Masks should not be placed on:
  - Babies and children
  - Anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious
  - Anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance

- Masks are meant to protect other people in case the wearer is unknowingly infected but does not have symptoms. They are not meant to be a substitute for personal protective equipment such as surgical masks, respirators, or other medical personal protective equipment.
- Masks can make it more difficult for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to lip-read, hear, or understand what people are saying. Communication can be supported with written communication, posting information/instructions, and decreasing background noise. Lip reading can be supported with clear masks, face shields, or plexiglass barriers.
- Officials should consider having supplies, such as clear face coverings available, to ensure that voting is accessible to people with disabilities.

Adequate Supplies

- Ensure adequate supplies to support handwashing. Supplies include soap, hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol (placed at every station, if supplies allow), paper towels, tissues, disinfectant wipes, and no-touch bins.

Signs and Messages

- Post information in highly visible locations (e.g., at entrances, in rest rooms) that and describe how to stop the spread of germs such as hand washing posters and face mask information.
- Include messages about behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19 when communicating with voters such as on websites, video links, emails, and social media.
- Ensure that any signage and messages are accessible to voters with disabilities, for example by providing large print or braille versions or having audible messages with the same information.

Social Distancing

- Remind voters upon arrival to leave space between themselves and others. Encourage voters to stay at least a metre to 2 metres apart.
- Polling places may provide signage or other visual cues such as floor markings and/or decals, to help voters and workers remember this.
- Have plans to manage lines to ensure social distancing can be maintained.
- Clearly mark points of entry and exit to avoid bottlenecks and elector cross over.
- Discourage voters and workers from greeting others with physical contact e.g. handshakes.

Maintaining Healthy Environments

Disinfect surfaces

- Surfaces that are frequently touched by multiple people, for example door handles, registration tables, pens, booths should be disinfected frequently using sanitising products provided.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products e.g. concentration, application method and contact time, use of personal protective equipment, storage.
- If the surface is dirty, it should be cleaned before disinfecting.
- If public restrooms are available in the polling location, they should be cleaned and disinfected routinely.
- After the polling location closes, clean all facility areas and items, including all tables, chairs, door handles, and restrooms, used by polling staff or voters.

Clean and disinfect voting equipment

- Laptops, tablets, keyboards, and other reusable items should be disinfected routinely.
- Follow the manufacturers guidance for appropriate cleaning and disinfection procedures for voting equipment and polling booths.
- To prevent damage to equipment, post signs near to booths discouraging voters from disinfecting the equipment with their own wipes or touching the ballot papers with hands that are still wet with hand sanitizer.

- If no manufacturer guidance is available, consider the use of alcohol-based wipes or spray containing at least 70% alcohol to clean booths and boxes. Dry surfaces thoroughly to avoid pooling of liquids.
- After the polling location closes, all equipment and transport cases should be cleaned and disinfected following the manufacturer's instructions prior to returning it to it being picked up by the facilities team.

Shared objects

- Where possible, replace shared objects, like pens or ballot pencils with single-use objects.
- Shared objects, like pens or ballot pencils, should be disinfected between users.
- Minimize the handling of shared objects e.g. polling cards should be retained by the elector but if insistent to hand to staff then should be placed in a suitable container/rubbish bag.

Ventilation

- Ensure that there is suitable ventilation and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible, for example by opening windows and doors. It could be colder because of this particularly first thing in the morning and early evening but it is better to have ventilation than not.
- Do not open windows and doors if doing so poses a safety or health risk to polling staff, voters, or children accompanying voters (e.g., risk of falling or triggering asthma symptoms).

Crowd and line management

- Maintain or increase the total number of polling places available to the public on Election Day to improve the ability to social distance.
- Unless there is no other option, do not increase the number of potential registered voters assigned to each polling place.
- Minimize lines as much as possible, especially tightly spaced queues in small indoor spaces. Use floor markings or decals and signs to remind voters to maintain social distancing while in line.
- Limit the number of voters in the facility by moving lines outdoors if weather permits.

Modified layouts and procedures

- Increase distance between voting booths to ensure that voters remain ½ metres apart.
- Modify the polling location layout to ensure voters move in one direction while in voting locations and to avoid bottlenecks, such as single doors for entry and exit.
- Ensure the electors are aware on arrival of the changes to the polling procedures
- Ensure that any changes to operations do not limit accessibility to voters with disabilities.

Physical barriers and guides

- Physical barriers, such as sneeze screens, can be used to protect workers and voters when physical distance cannot be maintained, for example at desks or between voting stations.
- Consider placing markings or decal on the floor to remind voters to maintain at least 1-2 metres from other voters and workers.

Recommendations for Voters

Practice prevention and slow the spread of COVID-19

- Handwash/sanitise before entering and after leaving the polling location.
- While in the polling location, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol frequently, especially after touching surfaces frequently touched by multiple people, such as door handles or voting booths.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Throw used tissues into the bins provided or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol.
- Wear a face covering or mask.
- Children and anyone who has trouble breathing, is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance should not wear a mask.

- Maintain at least 1-2 meters of distance from others. It is important to continue social distancing even when you and others are wearing masks.

Avoid crowds

- Vote early. The polling places are open from 7am until 10pm
- Consider voting at off-peak times, such as mid-morning if more suitable for you.
- If there is a queue can you come back later?

Be prepared

- Check where your polling place is on your polling card or online at XXXX
- Check that there are different requirements in advance because they may have changed due to COVID-19.
- If you have any concerns, please contact the electoral services team
- Please contact the team or go online if you have any concerns for voters with disabilities casting their votes.
- Make sure you have your polling card with you to avoid delays at the polling location.
- Where possible, try and understand the ballot process to speed the process of casting your ballot at the polling location. There could be up to 5 ballot papers to complete.
- Bring your own black ink pen or pencil to the polling place.