

Report to the Governance Select Committee

Date of meeting: 7 July 2015

Subject: Parliamentary and Local Elections 2015 – Lessons Learnt Report



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Recommendations:

- (1) To consider a review of the elections held on 7 May 2015; and**
- (2) To recommend to the Returning Officer any changes to procedure for future elections**

Introduction

Summary

1. This report discusses the planning processes and implementation of the elections held on 7 May 2015:
 - (a) The election of a Member of Parliament for the Epping Forest Constituency;
 - (b) 18 District Council wards (returning one councillor for each with one non contested);
 - (c) 10 Parish Council elections with 6 contested wards..
2. The report outlines that, in the opinion of the Returning Officer, processes were generally followed effectively. The report looks at one problem in Epping which is reported in more detail below. The Elections have been reviewed by the Elections Planning Group and issues identified have been included within this report.

Commentary

3. The date of the General Election had been known for five years due to the fixed term parliament act. It follows the first year when this Council has been required to implement Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and publish a register based upon a set of transitional arrangements. Combinations of local polls with national ones has the effect of increasing turnout requiring a different set of processes and arrangements to those normally employed.
4. Work was undertaken to encourage further registration for the general election by the deadline. The authority had chosen to pay for a second confirmation letter in January 2015 setting out those registered in each property. This was encouraged by the Cabinet Office but only part funded. The additional confirmation letter had the effect of prompting some 5,000 changes to the IER register published in 2014. In addition the Council joined with the national campaign for the registration deadline which publicised the opportunity of registering online.

Experience of this publicity was that people that were already registered, did so again causing officers in Elections to undertake unnecessary deletions of duplicate registration at a time when planning and implementation of the election was in full flow. The Electoral Commission will, in due course, publish their report on the conduct of the national elections.

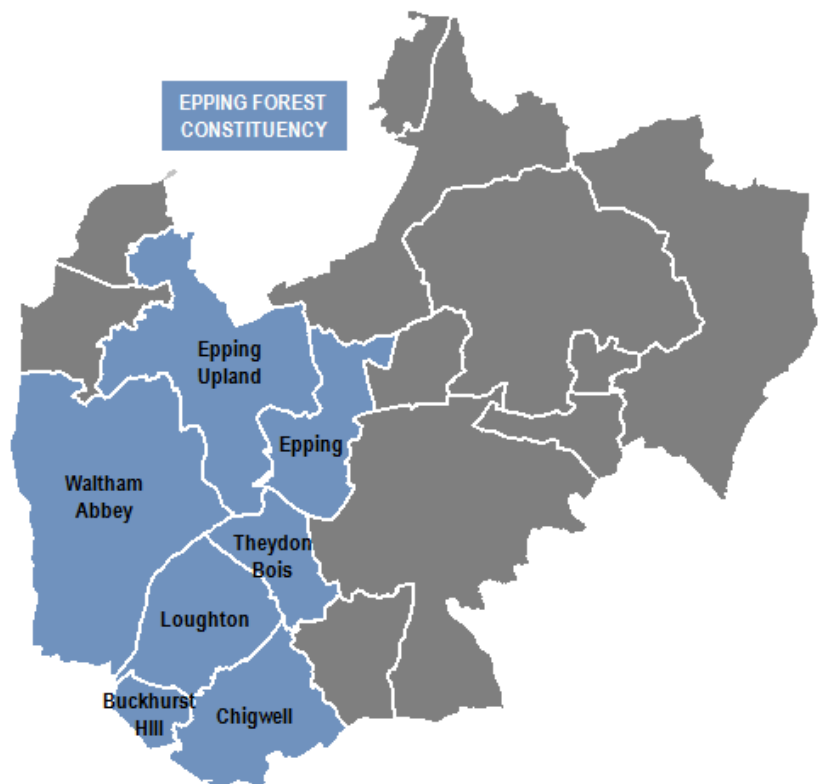
5. The Council also published online an interactive map so that electors could find their relevant polling station. Officers will look at how this can be publicised more effectively next year. Although there was no increase in the percentage turnout as compared to 2010, some 2,800 more people voted this year (49,348). It is likely that the scheduled 2020 general election will be based on fewer constituencies if a review by the government is completed in time.

Electoral Arrangements

6. The Returning Officer and a team of officers met regularly since December 2014 in order to plan effectively for the Election and to ensure that the processes were undertaken at the appropriate times.

A Project Plan and a Risk Register for the combined elections were prepared, reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

At each General Election the (Acting) Returning Officer (ARO) at Epping Forest is responsible for the conduct of the Parliamentary seat of Epping Forest. Elements of the local elections for the Epping Forest District were therefore undertaken by colleagues at Harlow and Brentwood the map shows the extent of the Constituency.



7. Wards to the north form part of the Harlow constituency and those to the east, Brentwood and Ongar.

Planning and Preparation Issues

Staffing

8. The levels of staffing for polling stations, verification and counts were adequate. Assumptions made about the level of staff required for the issue and opening of postal votes proved correct as these procedures were all completed in good time. Directors were helpful in making officers available for all of the processes. Staff attended effective training sessions for each stage of the process in accordance with the project plan.

Ballot Paper Printing

9. The proofs of all District Council and Parish Council ballot papers were scrutinised carefully and all ballot papers were printed in the correct format. All of the local election papers were printed by the Council's Reprographics Section which again provided an excellent service

bearing in mind the tight timescale for printing. This year the staff worked over one weekend immediately following close of nominations thus ensuring that all ballot papers were available for checking and postal despatch and the election itself. A manual check was made of each printed ballot paper prior to election day to ensure that books were printed correctly and that all papers included the official mark. No errors were detected and there were no reports from polling stations of printing errors on the papers which suggests that the checks made before polling day were accurate. Changes are to be made to the covers printed for the ballot papers in future, to make clear the election, ward and numbering.

10. Nationally there was an issue with a late change made to the logo of the Green Party. The Electoral Commission had agreed the change of logo and had not transmitted this information effectively to Returning Officers. The ARO took the decision not to reprint ballot papers and informed the agent of its view, given that there was no confusion created for voters. Elections staff will, for subsequent elections double check correct logos on the Electoral Commission website prior to printing.
11. Due to the number of ballot papers required for the Parliamentary election (75,000) it was necessary to engage an external printer. Only one printing error was discovered in this set and immediately reprinted by the supplier.
12. The split between internal printing for local elections and external for national ones worked well and it is recommended that this practice be followed for 2016 when 100,000 PCC ballots will be required.

Postal Votes

13. In the run up to the election both Harlow and Brentwood Council's informed us that they would not issue Postal Voting Packs for District and Parish elections falling in their Parliamentary areas. This meant that postal voters in those areas received postal packs from two different issuing authorities at different times. Experience has been that voters have been able to deal with having two sets of papers and Epping Forest did not receive parliamentary ballots for the other authorities. Epping Forest did get complaints that postal packs from Brentwood, that had been applied for after an early cut-off date for printing, had not arrived until shortly before the election. Additionally requests for 'late cut' information caused some administrative issues.
14. The issue of postal votes for Epping Forest went smoothly. Nearly 10,000 postal voting packs for sent out, the most ever. Previous problems regarding the scanning software and the scanners themselves were not repeated. There was no evidence of any postal vote fraud although 150 postal votes were rejected for various reasons. Postal votes are rejected because of mismatched signature or date of birth or both. This year anecdotal evidence was that in relation to those rejected quite a few were rejected for not putting their year of birth on the Postal Voting Statement.
15. Regulations made under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 now require the Electoral Registration Officer to inform electors, after a poll, that their postal vote identifiers have been rejected (unless fraud is suspected). This should help electors who submit their postal ballot packs in good faith to avoid their vote being rejected at future elections.

Election Day issues

16. All polling stations opened on time with no access issues. This year four polling stations were changed due to unavailability of previous locations:
 - (1) Lincoln Hall – moved to the Baptist Church opposite the previous polling station
 - (2) Faversham Hall, Chigwell Row – a new station at All Saints Church, Chigwell Row was used.

(3) King Harold School, Waltham Abbey – the station was moved to Ninefields Community Centre

(4) Gilwell Hill Community Centre, Sewardstone Road – moved to White House, Gilwell Park

No issues were raised in connection with these stations. For future years, officers are keeping under review the future use of Ninefield Community Centre which has been taken back into the control of Waltham Abbey Town Council.

17. In Epping, where there were both District and Town Council elections, it was discovered at poll opening that Town Council ballot papers had been issued to transposed stations in the Hemnall and St Johns wards. Immediate action was taken to suspend the issuing of these ballots and corrected papers were taken to the polling stations.
18. Those ballots issued incorrectly were subsequently rejected at the count and are shown as being rejected on the results sheets published. This situation was due to human error. In reviewing the election the following revised processes have been agreed:
 - (1) All ballot paper books to have labels on their front covers saying which ward and election they are for.
 - (2) All ballot papers issuing to be systematically double checked against issue lists for boxes generated by the computer system.
 - (3) All presiding officers to be required to double check their allocations against expected and reminded of the need to double check their ballot papers on collection.
19. This year the ARO had taken the decision to continue with local conventions relating to tellers and issued instructions via presiding officers to ensure consistent practice across the stations. In addition 'meet and greet' staff were also used at busier stations. These arrangements worked well with only minor issues. The ARO also took a view that a vehicle marked with a candidate's posters should not be parked within Polling Station curtilages.
20. As part of the national election the government opted to fund Post Office sorting centre sweeps on the evening of the poll. As in previous years when this has been adopted, only a handful of packs were delivered (6) through this process. 25 packs were delivered in the normal post on the Friday. At a cost of approximately £600 this does not, on the face of it, constitute a good use of public funds.
21. The polling day otherwise passed without incident and new procedures planned for queues at close of poll were not required to be invoked.

Verification and Counts

22. Verification and counting of parliamentary ballot papers took place at Debden Park High School. A larger hall was required for this election to enable a larger number of Count staff to be employed. Counting started as soon as the polling finished. Although it took some time to verify due to the need to sort and count District Council and the Parliamentary election papers the process went smoothly with only a minor delay in the final mix/add stage for which officers have identified the cause and amended the count plan for future elections that employ this end process. The final declaration of the Parliamentary seat was made at around 3.45 am.
23. The Council's Public Relations and Marketing Officer supported by the Website Officer ensured that appropriate publicity was made available at all stages with links to the Council's website. Social media was also used to spread the message. There was significant media interest and the Council provided effective media facilities at the Count.

24. The District Council and the Parish Council elections counts were undertaken from 1.00 pm on Friday 8 May 2015. These counts were a mix of traditional counts and those using block voting and grass skirt counting methods and were completed very quickly.
25. In view of the limited car parking available at the Theydon Bois Village Hall arrangements were made with the North Essex Parking Partnership to relax the enforcement of parking restrictions on single yellow lines in the vicinity of the Hall. All of those expected to attend were reminded of the need to display the notice provided on the dashboard of their vehicle.
26. Members had previously asked for refreshments to be made available at the Count. These were well received by those attending.
27. For future elections the Returning Officer has requested officers to look at replacing some manual processes by the Accountancy Officers and to seek to address how those attending the Count can be better informed at the verification stage, which box from which ward is being counted on which table. These will form part of the planning processes for next year.

Police Liaison

28. Discussions were held with Essex Police prior the election. The Polling Stations received visits during the day. There were no instances requiring immediate Police presence outside of the regular visits. There was also Police support provided at the Count Centres on both Thursday evening/Friday morning and at Theydon Bois on Friday afternoon. Police visits during polling day were well received by Polling Station staff. The Returning Officer would like to publicly thank Sergeant Ant Alcock from the Epping Forest and Brentwood Local Policing Hub and his officers working on both days for their help and assistance.

Complaints and Queries Received in the Elections Office

29. There were few telephone calls made to the Elections Office on 7 May:
 - (a) There were a few software issues which were sorted out with staff at the polling stations to enable electors who had registered to be able to vote on the day. These will be discussed with Xpress in due course.
 - (b) There was an issue with the Government website wording re postal votes for Overseas electors which had confusing wording so many didn't set up a postal vote because they had had one in the past (at some point, not necessarily as an overseas elector but if they had had a postal vote it said not to do anything more which wasn't really true!)
 - (c) The office received phone calls on election day where people had failed to update their registration in time.
 - (d) The office also received requests for emergency proxy votes many of which didn't fit the medical criteria (having a cold or feeling a bit sick isn't a good enough reason).

Post-Election Consultations/Comments

30. Every Agent has been written to asking for comments in relation to the running of the Election. By the date of writing this report only the following comment has been received:

Derek Jacobs, Agent:

The only thing I would say as agent, would be regarding the Budworth Hall Chipping Ongar polling station. This was difficult for tellers as the gap between departing voters and tellers made number collection difficult. Years ago voters went in by the main door and tellers were

allowed inside. Of course I realise that voters have every right not to give numbers and I have always impressed this on tellers. Also going back to the original system at that station may not be practicable under current usage of the building.

Response:

Budworth Hall is a station where there is no inside area for tellers to sit. Use of the main entrance would mean difficult access for those with a disability. There have otherwise been no comments in relation to the use of this station which has been used for many years and is known by the electorate.

31. The Candidates evening was held on 16 April and was better attended than last year. We feel that candidates from all parties should be encouraged to attend this session as it provides essential information about the running of the election. There has been anecdotal evidence that some agents have not passed on the candidates pack sent with every nomination form to their candidates/
32. Sufficient resources were allocated to the elections by both the Government and the Council. Our Government claim has already been submitted and invoices for the recharges to Councils have been sent. We are awaiting the conclusion of neighbouring authorities account before we finalise our District accounts.

Future Elections/Canvass

33. In May 2016 there will be the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Election, elections for a third of the District Council seats and parish council elections in approximately half of the parish/town councils. It will not now be the date of the EU Referendum (unless provisions being discussed change again). The timing of the PCC election count will be determined by the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) but it is thought that we will be given the discretion to hold it on the Friday 6 May 2016.
34. The Canvass for 2015 poses a significant challenge to deliver a level of accuracy and registration similar to this year. The Governments review of constituencies will be based on the published register figures for this year. Additionally we are aware that going forward we have a number of local planning referendums, an EU referendum and a combined election in 2016.

Lessons Learned

35. Save the error in the issuing of ballots to the Epping stations, there were no key issues arising at the May 2015 elections. Generally all practices were completed successfully. Members of the Committee are asked to provide feedback to the Returning Officer for future elections.