

Report to Stronger Council Select Committee

Date of meeting: 14 September 2021



Portfolio: Leader of Council
Subject: Review of Elections 2021
Responsible Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the management and delivery of the Elections held on 6 May 2021 be reviewed;**
- (2) That any proposals of the Returning Officer for changes to the arrangements for the management and delivery of Elections in future years be considered;**
- (3) That appropriate recommendations be made to the Returning Officer for further changes to the future management and delivery of Elections; and**
- (4) That the impending review of the size of the Council and ward boundaries by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England be noted.**

Report:

Introduction

1. This report reviews the planning processes and implementation of the following elections held on 6 May 2021:
 - (a) Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner for Essex;
 - (b) County Council;
 - (c) District Council;
 - (d) Parish & Town Councils.
2. In the opinion of the Returning Officer, the planning, management and delivery of all relevant processes for these elections was effective, especially given the circumstances under which these elections were held. The management and delivery of these elections have been reviewed by the Elections Planning Group – chaired by the Returning Officer – and any issues arising have been included within this report. Candidates and Agents involved in these elections have also been consulted and their responses are summarised within the report.
3. The Council has also recently received notification that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England intends to undertake a full review of the Council's size in terms of the number of Councillors and ward boundaries, which will culminate in all-out District

Council elections in May 2024. The Council is overdue a review as the last such exercise took place in 1998, and a briefing for Members will be held in the Autumn to provide further information.

Covid-19 Pandemic

4. Due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020, the elections due for the Essex Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner, 21 wards of the District Council and 14 of the District's Town and Parish Councils were postponed from their original date of May 2020. In time, the Government decided to hold these elections in May 2021, and they were combined with the elections already scheduled for this date for Essex County Council.

5. The United Kingdom was still under restrictions due to the pandemic, when these elections were held. This necessitated certain changes to the arrangements for operating Polling Stations, with 'one-way' systems being used for larger stations or a 'one-in-one-out' system for the smaller stations. Any pencils used by voters to mark ballot papers had to be sanitised after use and supplies of face masks and hand sanitiser had to be provided for each Polling Station. Screens were also procured to protect Polling Station staff.

6. The operation of the Count also had to be re-thought, as there was a requirement to ensure that the Count Staff were socially distanced from each other whilst counting. In addition, with four elections being held simultaneously, the Count could not be completed in one session. Therefore, the Council could not use its normal venue of Debden Park High School, and the use of an aircraft hangar at North Weald Airfield from Weald Aviation was secured.

District and Parish Elections

7. The Elections Planning Group met regularly from the autumn of 2020 to plan for the elections and to ensure that relevant processes were undertaken at the appropriate times. A project plan and risk register was prepared, reviewed and updated on a regular basis, which included the need to plan for and assess any risks relating to the Covid-19 Pandemic. However, all processes remained on track throughout the election period.

8. There were 21 seats on the Council up for election in May 2021, most of which were originally due for election in May 2020 but there were a small number of additional elections arising from Councillor resignations during the twelve-month waiting period. In addition, 14 of the District's Town and Parish Councils were also due for election in this year.

9. At Epping Forest, Elections are the successful collaboration of a number of teams that cross support each other during the peak in workload in the run up to elections. Aside from the Democratic Services Team, these ranged from the Corporate Communications Team right across the Council to Facilities Management, as well as all of the members of staff who make themselves available for duty in Polling Stations and at the Count Centre. This actually is not usual practice across the country – the Association of Electoral Administrators has raised concerns about this in previous Annual Reports – and is a credit to the Council and the many staff involved as well as the Managers who release their staff for elections duties.

Publicity

10. A national campaign was once again undertaken by the Electoral Commission to promote opportunities for online inclusion in the Electoral Register. To support and encourage registration and voting, the Corporate Communications Team undertook a sustained publicity campaign throughout the period of registration deadlines and during the run-up to the election.

11. In addition, BBC London attended one of the daytime Count Sessions to film a segment for their evening news bulletins, which was very well received. This included shots of the aircraft inside the Hangar at North Weald Airfield, where the Count was being held.

Pre-Election Period

12. The nomination process for the elections worked well and officers were once again able to undertake the informal checking of nomination forms before the deadline for the receipt of nominations, even if the system was slightly different this year due to the pandemic.

13. As in previous years, a briefing session was held for local election candidates and agents (including town and parish councils), following the deadline for the receipt of nominations. This Briefing was held on the evening of 12 April 2021 and informed those standing for election on the arrangements to be employed by the Returning Officer for the management of the election and count processes. However, this year the Briefing was held virtually on Zoom. The Briefing is still considered to be a useful exercise in preparation for the local elections each year, and the holding of the briefing on Zoom was well received.

14. Due to the Council no longer having its own Reprographics Section, all of the poll cards and ballot papers for the elections were printed by an external company – Sciprint Limited – who provided an excellent service given the tight timescales for the printing of the ballot papers.

15. The proofs for the ballot papers for each election were checked by the Team Manager for Democratic & Electoral Services, and a number of errors were found, but there simply was not the time to hand check all of the printed ballot paper books once they had been received. However, all of the books were supplied with ward names and ballot numbers printed on the cover of each book so that Presiding Officers could easily verify ward details when issuing ballot papers. Although usually each book of ballot papers is 'flicked through' to ensure it is correct, no errors in the issue of ballot papers were reported in any the polling stations.

16. In the run up to the election, the Returning Officer again received valuable assistance from Essex Police. One of the Council-funded Police Officers – Sgt Neil Ross – regularly attended meetings of the Elections Planning Group to discuss the policing of the elections and the security measures to be put in place for polling stations and the count centre, which ensured the integrity of the election process. There was a very visible presence by Essex Police throughout the period of the election and the Returning Officer has recorded their appreciation to Chief Inspector Basford and his officers for their support in maintaining the security of the election process and at the count, although no situations requiring the presence of uniformed officer presence occurred this year.

Postal Voting

17. Postal voting continues to be popular amongst registered electors across the District and a total of **12,174** postal vote packs for the local elections were issued on 21 April 2021. A low number of ballots were rejected by the Returning Officer at the scanning stage of the postal vote opening process and no evidence of fraudulent activity was identified. The returns for postal votes for each of the elections were as follows:

(a)	Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner	8,796	(72.3%)
(b)	Essex County Council	8,662	(71.2%)
(c)	District Council Wards	6,764	
(d)	Town / Parish Wards	3,721	

18. As not all of the District and Town/Parish wards were up for election, it would be misleading to give a percentage return rate of postal votes for these elections based on the 12,174 postal vote packs issued.

19. Although 100% of identifiers were checked as part of the scanning process, some technology issues arose during the postal vote opening sessions regarding the operation of

the scanning equipment. There were occasions when only one scanner was available, due to network issues in the Civic Offices.

Staffing

20. The Returning Officer encouraged all Council staff to consider participating in the election and Service Managers and Directors were very helpful in making officers available for these elections. Staff appointments for the elections were again facilitated through the use of an electronic system which enabled employment offers to be issued and accepted online. This approach worked well and the majority of the staff appointments were completed in March 2021.

21. Assumptions made about the level of staff required for the issue and opening of postal votes were proved correct, as these processes were completed efficiently and effectively by a large team of experienced staff. An appropriate level of staffing for polling stations and the count process was achieved and officers of the Democratic Services Section and other service areas provided essential support to the Electoral Services Section, by assisting with enquiries concerning registration and voting.

Polling Stations

22. The initial need to move the Polling Station at Murray Hall due to it being a vaccination centre was resolved. Following a meeting with the NHS Staff, and in particular Jenny Knight, the NHS confirmed that there would be no reduction in vaccinations because of the requirement for this venue as a Polling Station.

23. In the Spring, the Government had requested Returning Officers to avoid the use of schools as Polling Stations if possible. As a result of this, the following changes were made:

(a) the Polling Station at Whitebridge Junior School was moved to St Michaels and All Angels Church Hall; and

(b) the Polling Station at The Nursery Unit, Thomas Willingale Primary School was moved to the nearby Barrington Hall Community Centre.

(c) the Polling Station at Shelley County Primary School was moved to Ongar Youth Centre

24. Leverton Primary School was still used as the location was separate from the main school and fenced off. There was no viable alternative to using either Epping Upland Primary School so that location was retained.

25. On the day of the election, all polling stations opened on time and operated throughout voting hours (7.00am-10.00pm) without any significant difficulties being required to be resolved by the Returning Officer. The procedure developed for the handling of queues at the close of poll were not required to be invoked and turnout was at the level expected for local elections.

26. There was one issue reported for the Polling Station in Lindsey Street. Initially, the back door was not unlocked and voters waiting to vote had to stand outside as the staff were (rightly) only allowing a certain number of people in the station at any one time. Following a visit by the Returning Officer and one of the Deputy Returning Officers in the morning, a telephone call was put through to the owners of the Hall, and the back door was opened. This allowed a one-way system to be utilised for the rest of the day, which enabled more voters to wait inside rather than outside.

Verification and Count

27. Due to the requirement to retain social distancing, for both attendees and staff, as well

as the need for the Counts to continue over a number of days for all of the different elections, Debden Park High School could not be used as a count venue. Officers were able to secure the use of Hangar 6 at North Weald Airfield, which was being leased by Weald Aviation. The majority of the aircraft within the Hanger was cleared by the day of the Elections, which enabled staff to complete the setting up process during the day of the Elections, rather than in the evening.

28. The venue also necessitated additional arrangements to be made by Officers, which included the provision of:

- outside lighting for the verification on Thursday night,
- Portaloos for all three days,
- refreshments from the nearby Wings Café (also run by Weald Aviation),
- signage along the route from the Gatehouse to the Hangar for staff and attendees to follow,
- additional trade waste bins to be stationed at the Hangar for the whole weekend,
- security guards to patrol the perimeter of the hanger during the periods when counting was not taking place so that all of the ballot papers could remain in situ until the Count was completed, and
- additional heaters for the Hangar for the Thursday night.

29. In addition, staff on the Airfield provided valuable assistance to ensure that no attendees got lost on the way from the Gatehouse to the Hangar, and two members of staff worked overtime on the Thursday night to patrol the Airfield. Some of the casual staff employed at the Airfield for events also made themselves available to assist with the parking of cars outside the Hangar throughout the three days of the Count. The Returning Officer was grateful for the assistance of all who contributed during the three days of the Count.

30. With four separate elections occurring at once, some of the arrangements for the verification and counting of the ballot papers were prescribed by the Returning Officers for the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner and County Council elections. Consequently, only the full verification of all ballot papers was completed on election night.

31. The verification process itself was more complicated than in previous years, due to the number of different elections taking place simultaneously and did not get completed until 4.00am. There were a number of factors that contributed to this, the size of the venue, the amount of ballot papers involved, the size of some of the ballot papers, the distance of the count centre from the Polling Stations and the numerous times certain ballots papers had to be counted.

32. Staff returned at 9.00am on the Friday morning to begin the counts for the County Council election. This was completed at approximately 11.00am and, after a short break, the election counts for the District Council and Town/Parish Council wards were begun.

33. Staff again returned at 9.00am on the Saturday morning to begin the count for the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner for Essex. This is a transferable vote election, with the count in two stages. After the first stage, the two candidates with the highest number of votes go forward to the second stage whereby the second 'preference' votes of the candidates who have been knocked out at the first stage also get counted if they are for either of the two second stage candidates. However, if one candidate gains more than 50% of the vote at the first stage then they are declared the winner and there is no need for a second stage. In the event, this is what actually happened, and staff were permitted to leave at approximately 12.30pm.

Post-Election Consultation

34, The Returning Officer has written to all candidates and agents for the local elections, to seek comments or observations with regard to the management and delivery of the elections for consideration by the Select Committee. Members were also invited to comment on the

management and delivery of the elections, through the Council Bulletin. Two responses have been received and they are outlined in the following paragraphs.

35. One of the participants stated that *“The admin office team were very helpful on providing guidance on the forms and identifying key dates. The paperwork issued by the team was in the correct order along with guidance, my only view on this can this be digital as an online version (just an idea linking in with sustainability and friendliness for the environment by eliminating paper use)? When I hand delivered my election papers to the admin team, I thought the staff were friendly and very approachable considering the constraints around covid.”*

36. The response of the Elections Team was as follows: *“We need to make sure that all candidates get the same paperwork and if things were available online, they might ignore bits of the pack. Many people don’t have printers so there would be difficulties in them printing off the paperwork ready for completion and signature so to treat everyone the same, we produce the paper packs. It also means that, hopefully, candidates will complete our forms rather than obtaining other styles.”*

37. The comments of another participant were as follows:

“(1) Pre May 6th

As a town council election candidate here in Loughton I found all the procedures running up to Election Day to be excellent, the paperwork, candidate briefing and dealing with any enquiries was excellent.

(2) Polling Day Itself

All my comments (apart from one) refer to my experience in the Loughton Roding Ward and it’s two polling stations (23 – The Oakwood Hill Community Centre and 24 – St Michael’s Church Hall).

- As the key holder for polling station 23 - I saw the staff in at 6.20 am and again at 10.15 pm for closing the hall . Everything appeared to run smoothly and I have received no feedback from the very small part of the Roding ward electorate that actually use this polling station (it is largely used by the electorate of one polling district of the Loughton Alderton ward).*
- Polling Station 24 was my main experience of polling day, as tellers were not encouraged, I remained at this polling station for all of the 15 hours of voting.*
- Due to government guidelines about keeping school’s open the normal polling station for AZ (White Bridge School) was not available and this meant a further possible 1,100 electors were allocated to this polling station St Michael’s Church Hall.*
- This resulted in an electorate of 3,200 being allocated for this single polling station on May 6th (St Michael’s usually has a potential electorate of 2,100).*
- For this very reason I was expecting enhanced staff and on the day actually found less staff than normal.*
- As a result in my opinion there were unacceptable queues for voting for 7 of the 15 hours the polling station was open.*
- Between approximately 9.20am – 11.20am the wait was 20 minutes, between about 2.15pm – 4.15pm 20-minute queues formed and between 5.30pm and 8.30 pm the queue was about 35 minutes in length.*

- *I feel that this was unacceptable, and I would estimate from what I saw on the day and the very negative feedback I have received since somewhere between 70 to 80 electors were deterred from voting.*
- *I feel that with some prior planning this situation could have been avoided as an adjacent hall remain unused all day.*
- *There was no staffing to inform the queue what was going on or to prioritise the needs of the more elderly etc who clearly would not have been able to wait (I took on this unofficial role a number of times , bringing those who were unable to wait in line to the front , fortunately the other queuing residents were very understanding).*
- *The polling staff did the best they could in difficult circumstances and did respond by bringing down an extra voting booth, which helped a little, without the situation would have been much worse.*
- *Asking around since May 6th this issue of long waits throughout the day does not appear to have been experienced elsewhere and certainly not for very nearly 47% of the hours of polling.*

(3) *The Count*

- *This was conducted with the customary efficiency.*
- *I feel more communication could have been given as regards what was actually happening on the tables during the count.*
- *I was closely observing a multi member count and to be honest I didn't have a clue about how they were being counted and /or sorted and which stage of the process had been reached.*
- *Information either on the day or before hand would have been very useful."*

38. The Elections Team responded to this as follows: *"Looking back at the paperwork which accompanied the count entry tickets, there was an information sheet produced for each "session" which gave details of exactly what was going to happen during each session. This included detailed information about how the Parish/Town Council counts would be conducted using the counting boards because of the multiple vacancy element to deal with. The use of counting boards isn't new - the only difference this year was that each member of the count team had to have a board to themselves because, due to COVID, they couldn't work as a pair which is the norm."*

Future Elections and Lessons Learnt

39. The Elections Planning Group have already begun to review the Elections that took place in May 2021, and any lessons learnt from the management and delivery of these elections will be used for the planning of the elections scheduled in May 2022. This will begin shortly. Some of the issues already identified by the Group are detailed in the following paragraphs.

40. In respect of the impact of Covid-19 on Polling Stations, the equipment and arrangements made for the Covid restrictions appeared to work well and were adapted over the day, if Polling Stations began to experience long queues. It was acknowledged that one candidate had contacted the offices a number of times throughout the election day but all attempts to improve the queue at this Polling Station had been made by the Presiding Officer, Returning Officer and Station Visitors taking additional equipment.

41. It was noticeable that although the verification process had been more complicated and taken longer, the actual counting of the ballots was smooth and completed in good time. There were a couple of issues with typographical errors appearing on the verification sheets that were displayed at the venue, and this will be reviewed for future election counts to improve the transition of the verification data to the Corporate Communications Team. One

option would be to increase the number of laptops available at the 'top table' for future election counts.

42. By law, the number of votes on each table were required to be checked 3 times before they could be accepted by the Senior Officers on the 'top table' if they did not match the total on the corresponding Ballot Paper Account. It was noted that voters could and do walk out of polling stations with ballot papers, but the Presiding Officers and polling staff ensured that this happened as infrequently as possible.

43. The venue had been used due to the Covid requirements and had proved useful because of its size. The setup of the venue could begin earlier in the day, cars could drive into the venue to deliver equipment and everything could be securely left for the following days' counts. It was acknowledged that the temperature within the Hangar was cold, particularly during the verification process on the Thursday night, and this may also have been a factor in the verification taking longer than usual. It might be possible to hold future election counts at either the Civic Offices or another Council asset such as the Depot at Oakwood Hill. However, this would depend on the number and type of elections being held that year.

44. It was noted that the deadlines set for the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner, and the Essex County Council elections, greatly impacted on the management of the count, due to most of the same staff returning to count the following day at 9.00am after a 4.00am finish for the verification. Again, this was out of the Council's control and therefore had been dealt with to the best of the staff's abilities.

45. The Corporate Communications Team had received positive feedback from the media outlets that had attended the various count sessions.

46. In respect of the Location of the equipment used in the Elections, access to the equipment will need to improve so that Presiding Officers can collect and return their equipment to a safe and dry area. It was acknowledged that the Elections Team might not remain in Homefield in the long-term, and other options are being considered including using an area of the underground car park at the Civic Offices or other property assets owned by the Council.

47. The Select Committee is requested to review the management and delivery of the elections held on 6 May 2021 and consider any proposals of the Returning Officer for changes to arrangements for the management and delivery of local elections in future years, and to make appropriate recommendations to the Returning Officer for any further changes to be made to the management of future local elections.