

# **Report to the Constitution and Members Services Standing Scrutiny Panel**



**Date of meeting:** 16 July 2012

**Portfolio Holder:** Leader (Returning Officer's Report)

**Subject:** Local Elections – 3 May 2012

**Officer Contact for further  
Information:** Ian Willett (01992 564243)  
Graham Lunnun (01992 564244)  
Simon Hill (01992 564249)  
Wendy MacLeod (01992 564023)

**Democratic Services Officer:** Mark Jenkins (01992 564607)

---

## **Recommendation:**

To consider this review of the Local Elections held on 3 May 2012.

## **District and Parish/Town Council Elections**

1. The following District Council Wards were contested on 3 May 2012:

Buckhurst Hill East  
Buckhurst Hill West  
Chigwell Row  
Chigwell Village  
Epping Hemnall  
Epping Lindsey and Thornwood Common (2 seats)  
Grange Hill  
Hastingwood, Matching and Sheering Village (following boundary changes)  
High Ongar, Willingale and The Rodings  
Loughton Alderton  
Loughton Broadway  
Loughton Fairmead  
Loughton Forest  
Loughton Roding  
Loughton St John's  
Loughton St Mary's  
Moreton and Fyfield  
Passingford  
Theydon Bois  
Waltham Abbey Honey Lane  
Waltham Abbey North East  
Waltham Abbey South West

2. There were nine Parish/Town Council Ward contested elections:

Buckhurst Hill East (Buckhurst Hill Parish Council)  
Buckhurst Hill West (Buckhurst Hill Parish Council)  
Loughton Alderton (Loughton Town Council)  
Loughton Broadway (Loughton Town Council)  
Loughton Fairmead (Loughton Town Council)  
Loughton Forest (Loughton Town Council)  
Loughton Roding (Loughton Town Council)

Loughton St Mary's (Loughton Town Council)  
Loughton St John's (Loughton Town Council)

## Results

3. In each of the District Wards contested except for Epping Lindsey and Thornwood Common, one councillor was due to be elected. In Epping Lindsey and Thornwood Common two councillors were due to be elected, one to fill the scheduled vacancy and another to fill a casual vacancy resulting from a resignation. An election was not scheduled for the Hastingwood, Matching and Sheering Village ward but was necessary following a boundary change. Turnout in the District Wards varied between 39.06% in the Theydon Bois Ward and 18.64% in the Waltham Abbey South West Ward.
4. In the Buckhurst Hill East Parish Ward, electors were able to vote for up to 5 candidates from a list of 14. The turn out was 32.43%. In the Buckhurst Hill West Parish Ward electors were able to vote for up to 6 candidates from a list of 9. The turn out was 30.76%. In relation to the Loughton Alderton Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 5. The turnout was 26.26%. In the Loughton Broadway Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 6. The turnout was 25.18%. In the Loughton Fairmead Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 5. The turnout was 24.14%. In relation to the Loughton Forest Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 7. The turnout was 38.43%. In the Loughton Roding Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 4 candidates from a list of 5. The turnout was 33%. In relation to the Loughton ST Mary's Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 6. The turnout was 33.16%. In the Loughton St John's Town Ward electors were able to vote for up to 3 candidates from a list of 4. The turnout was 32.39%.

## Arrangements

5. A Project Plan and a Risk Register for the elections were prepared in December 2011 and updated on a regular basis. Returns were submitted to the Electoral Commission at regular intervals regarding compliance with their guidance and actions in the Project Plan.

## Polling Stations

6. 57 established Polling Stations were provided in 48 different buildings on 3 May 2012. In addition in Stapleford Tawney it was necessary to use St Mary's Church as the normal venue was unavailable. This required the appointment of 50 Presiding Officers and around 110 Poll Clerks. Sufficient staff were appointed including standby staff some of whom had to be called upon at short notice.
7. On election day representations were made about the condition of the entry path to the Allnutts Institute Polling Station. The entry path had dropped at the point where it joins the public footway making it difficult to negotiate by electors unsure on their feet and particularly the elderly. Consideration has been given as to how this problem can be overcome for the future. Tellers at the polling station suggested that a better location would be the Scout Hall in Flux's Lane. However, officers have concerns about using that building from a road safety point of view. The building is accessed from the junction of Bower Hill/Flux's Lane/ Brook Road which is not ideal for the large number of vehicle movements which would be generated by a polling station. However, the location has the benefit of a car park and its use would overcome the chronic parking problems in Allnutts Road. An alternative would be the renovation/repair of the entry path and discussions are taking place with those

responsible for the Institute.

8. Some representations were made about restricted access to Murray Hall in Borders Lane, Loughton. It is understood that one of the main entrance doors was open and the other which needs to be opened to accommodate wheelchairs could have been opened by pressing the entrance button. Discussions are taking place with Loughton Town Council regarding the possible re-positioning of the sign drawing attention to the entrance button.
9. The Presiding Officer on duty at St Edmunds Church Hall, Matching Green raised the viability of the venue as a polling station in that it accommodated two polling districts but the total number of electors voting was 12 in one polling district and 15 in the other, ie 27 during 15 hours. The Presiding Officer also stated that all the electors arrived by car. The number of electors due to vote at St Edmunds Church Hall is now considerably less than before because the electors affected by the boundary change now vote at the Matching Village Hall. In the light of these comments the parish Clerk/Council and the local District and county members were consulted about the possibility of the polling districts concerned voting at Matching Village Hall, Matching Tye at future elections. The responses received support this suggestion which will be implemented for the Police and Crime Commissioner election in November 2012.

### **Postal Votes**

10. The total number of postal vote packets issued was 6462. Only two packs failed to reach the electors in the post and had to be re-issued. This was a big improvement on previous years. 71.23% were returned which equates well with previous elections. Arrangements were not made for a final sweep of Royal Mail Sorting Offices on polling day in order to locate and obtain postal votes still in the postal system. 30 postal votes were handed in at polling stations. In the Council's post on the days immediately following polling day a total of 10 postal vote packages were received, some of those may have been in the Royal Mail system on polling day. A few were returned as undelivered because electors had moved or died and the elections Office had not been notified.
11. The issue and opening sessions for postal votes went smoothly. The software and scanners used for checking personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) again worked well. There was no evidence of any postal vote fraud although 145 postal votes were rejected for various reasons – no ballot paper, no postal voting statement, mismatched signature or date of birth or both.

### **Ballot Papers**

12. The proofs of all District Council and Parish/Town Council ballot papers were scrutinised carefully and all ballot papers were printed in the correct format. In addition 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. All of the papers were printed by the Council's Reprographics Section and the only error found prior to 3 May was the lack of the official mark on 11 papers. These papers were re-printed with the mark. As in previous years this was an excellent service bearing in mind the tight timescale for printing.
13. There were no reports from Polling Stations of printing errors on the papers which suggests that the checks made before polling day were accurate.

### **Spoilt Papers**

14. The number of ballot papers rejected in respect of the District Council Elections varied between 15 in both the Grange Hill and Loughton Fairmead Wards and none in the

Theydon Bois Ward. The majority of papers were rejected for being unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty.

15. The number of ballot papers rejected in the Town/Parish Council elections varied between 25 in the Buckhurst Hill East Ward and 3 in the Loughton Alderton Ward. Again the majority of papers were rejected for being unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty. Very few were rejected for voting for more candidates than the voter was entitled to.

### **Verification and Counts**

16. Verification and counting of ballot papers took place at Theydon Bois Village Hall on 4 May. Both processes went smoothly including the use of "grass skirts" where appropriate and were completed by mid-afternoon.
17. Verification sheets were not posted so that agents and others could look at them. One agent complained about this omission and he was shown the sheets. This omission will be corrected at future elections.
18. A section of the car park at the Theydon Bois Village Hall was coned off on 4 May for use by the Montessori nursery being held in a room at the rear of the Village Hall. During a subsequent discussion with the Bookings Clerk for the Hall, officers were advised that the nursery had complained that some of the reserved spaces had been used by persons attending the count. It appears that the cones were moved and then replaced after cars were parked in the reserved area. All those attending counts at the Hall in the future will be reminded of the need not to park in the area coned off.

### **Police Liaison**

19. Discussions were held with the Police prior the election and the Police prepared a Policing Plan. The Police support was good this year with all Polling Stations receiving visits. There were no instances requiring immediate Police presence outside of the regular visits. There was also Police support provided at the Count Centre. Police Officers escorted the delivery of ballot boxes from the Civic Offices to the Count Centre on 4 May. From a Policing prospective the elections gave little cause for concern. Police visits during polling day were well received by Polling Station staff.

### **Complaints and Queries Received in the Elections Office**

20. There were few telephone calls made to the Elections Office on 3 May by electors. The majority were from electors in wards in which there was no election being held. Some calls were made by Presiding Officers seeking clarification of procedures. One Presiding Officer was held up in traffic on the A12 and did not arrive at his polling station until after 7.00am. Fortunately his station was a double one and the other Presiding Officer in the building was able to cover with the assistance of a standby Presiding Officer who was sent from the Civic Offices. In fact no electors had attended by the time the Presiding officer arrived.

## Feedback from Election Agents and Candidates

21. Election Agents were invited to express views on the running of the Elections and the Counts.
22. Two agents drew attention to a lack of candidate lists inside polling stations. Members may recall that one of the directions issued by the Electoral Commission in 2011 was that the Notice of Poll which includes candidates' details was not to be displayed in polling stations. They specified that the only notices to be displayed were an A3 one in the polling booths advising how many crosses to put on each ballot paper and an A2 notice telling electors how to vote. Whilst it has been common practice in previous years to display the Notice of Poll in polling stations it is not a notice specified in the legislation for display inside polling stations. The law assumes that electors know who they are voting for before attending the polling station and that with logos on the ballot papers there is no need for additional information on a notice.
23. A comment was made that agents had not been made aware of the order of proceedings at the count. In April 2012, an information sheet was sent to all agents advising that verification would commence at 10.00am on 4 May and once completed would be followed by the District Election counts and then the Parish/Town Council election counts. At that time it was not possible to be more specific. On the day notes handed out on arrival gave similar information. Verification was completed by 11.30am at which time staff were given a 30 minute break as there would not have been a convenient opportunity for a break later on.
24. One agent advised that he did not receive a poll card and that he had heard reports that electors in several roads close to his address in the Loughton St John's Ward did not receive poll cards. This comment was also made by another agent who received representations from electors whilst canvassing and telling. A check was made with the canvasser who delivered poll cards in the area and he confirmed that poll cards were delivered to all the addresses over the Easter weekend and he experienced no difficulties at any property. It is not felt that this matter can be pursued further.
25. Another agent pointed out that electors in a new residential home at Loughton Hall had been wrongly allocated to the Loughton St John's Ward as the home is in the Loughton St Mary's Ward. This was an error which has been corrected for the future.
26. An agent complained that a candidate had been disadvantaged because of a lack of a description against his name on the ballot paper. This appeared to result from a misunderstanding as the candidate had chosen the description "Independent" which had appeared on all the relevant notices and ballot papers. There are two types of description allowed by law for a District Council election, namely, that of a registered political party or the word "Independent". If neither option is used on the nomination form the section for a description has to be left blank. The law for Parish/Town Council elections is different- candidates in those elections have the extra option of a description of up to six words. The agent suggested that the difference is illogical but that is the law. It is understood that the agent will consider registering his group as a political party.
27. One agent pointed out that it was not possible to accommodate tellers under cover at all polling stations. He also advised that there were several instances of "over-manning" of teller positions with party supporters at several polling stations. In some polling stations it is possible to accommodate tellers inside the building, eg in a lobby to the main room where voting takes place. However, some stations only comprise the main room and at such locations tellers have to stand outside. The point about the restriction on the number of tellers will be emphasised to agents in future although no complaints were made to Presiding Officers on the day of the elections.

28. An agent stated that some of those present at the count were concerned at the discourtesy shown to the Returning Officer by the level of "chatter" from the floor when he was announcing results. All of those present at the count are asked to restrict the level of background noise and similar requests will be made in future.
29. One agent whilst appreciating that the design of the expenses forms is outside of the control of the Returning Officer suggested that the forms are confusing. This comment was passed to Shaw and Sons who produce the forms and they have acknowledged that the forms can benefit from updating which they will be undertaking shortly.
30. All of the issues raised will be taken into account in relation to the planning and running of future elections.

### **Review of Procedures**

31. A thorough evaluation has been undertaken of all of the processes outlined in the Project Plan taking account of feedback from agents etc.
32. A Project Team comprising the Returning Officer and the three Deputy Returning Officers met regularly between December 2011 and May 2012 to ensure that the processes were undertaken at the appropriate times.
33. Sufficient resources were allocated to the election. In setting the budget for 2012/13 account was taken of the need to cover the cost of an additional election (the Hastingwood, Matching and Sheering Village District ward not scheduled for 2012 but required following a boundary change).
34. The level of staffing for polling stations, verification and the count were adequate. Assumptions made about the level of staff required for the issue and opening of postal votes proved correct as these proceedings were all completed in good time. IT network connections in Committee Room 1 worked without interruption including use at the close of poll on 3 May for scanning postal votes handed in at polling stations. Directors were helpful in making officers available for all of the processes.
35. Poll cards and ballot papers were printed internally by the reprographics section within the specified timescales. Being in-house it was easy for officers to liaise with the printers and achieve speedy turnaround times for approving drafts etc.
36. Training was provided for Presiding Officers and Senior Count staff.
37. Using, with only one exception, established polling stations ensured that the buildings were suitable. As mentioned earlier an issue arose on polling day about the condition of the ramp leading to the Allnutts Institute Polling Station and this will be addressed before the Police and Crime Commissioner election in November 2012. The previously unused St Mary's Church at Stapleford Tawney was inspected before it was booked and proved to meet the standard required.
38. Theydon Bois Village Hall again proved to be a good venue for the verification and count on 4 May. The Hall was laid out on the afternoon of 3 May so that a prompt start could be made on 4 May. There is inadequate parking on site to accommodate all those attending but by liaising with the Director of the Environment and Street Scene and the Parking Office and issuing notices for display on car dashboards it was possible for parking to take place on nearby streets where parking restrictions apply. Members will be aware that there is not a suitable alternative venue readily available in the District. As outlined above an issue arose in relation to the reservation of some parking spaces for the nursery held at the Village Hall and this

will be addressed in relation to future counts.

39. Electors were allocated to polling stations having regard to electoral Commission guidance. Generally turnout was quite low and there were no instances of queuing for ballot papers.
40. Despite a restructuring of the Police resulting in less resources being available for the election an adequate level of support was provided. A meeting was held with the SPOC and agreement reached on a Policing Plan which was subsequently delivered.
41. Arrangements for the security of ballot boxes at the close of poll, storage overnight and delivery to the count centre on the following day worked according to plan.
42. Once the ballot papers had been printed a system was put in place to ensure that they were securely stored and free from interference at all times. Staff checking books of ballot papers ensured that the papers were not left unsupervised at any time.
43. The Council's Public Relations and Marketing Officer supported by the Website Officer attended meetings as required and ensured that appropriate publicity was made available at all stages.
44. Stationery and equipment levels were checked at an early stage and adequate supplies obtained. On polling day there were no calls to the Elections Office for additional items of equipment.
45. Nomination forms were informally checked when received and this enabled agents to correct some errors before the close of nominations. Agents were provided with detailed guidance about the various processes.
46. All of the statutory timescales were met.
47. Throughout the election period the elections office was staffed for the handling of queries from electors, agents and candidates.

### **Lessons Learned**

48. Broadly speaking there were no key issues arising at the May 2012 elections. Generally all practices were completed successfully and this is reflected in the comments made by appropriate stakeholders.
49. Issues regarding the condition of established polling stations emphasises the need to check the condition/suitability of buildings between elections. This can be achieved by seeking assurances from those responsible for the buildings when bookings are made. The need for possible repair works to buildings is a matter for discussion with those responsible for the buildings. At present there is no budget provision enabling the Council to contribute to any such works but this may need to be reviewed if there is no other suitable building in the locality.
50. The small number of electors voting at St Edmunds Church Hall suggests that this is no longer a viable polling station bearing in mind that all the electors attending that polling station did so by car and would be able to travel a little further to the Matching Village Hall. The reason the number of electors is now so small at St Edmunds Church Hall is that the electors involved in the boundary change moved from voting there to the Matching Village Hall and those left at St Edmunds is considerably less than before.

51. There are some concerns about the number of postal votes rejected because of a mismatch between signatures on the application form and the postal vote statement. It is felt that many of these result from electors changing their signatures over time. It is hoped that the number will reduce with the introduction of applications being sent out seeking an updated signature.
52. The majority of calls to the Elections Office on polling day were from electors in wards where elections were not being held. In future increased publicity will be given to identify those areas where elections are not taking place.
53. Some fairly minor issues in relation to the count centre at Theydon Bois Village Hall will be addressed at future elections. Arrangements will be made to display the verification statements.
54. All of the issues raised will be taken into account in relation to the planning of the Police and Crime Commissioner election being held in November 2012. However holding an election at that time of year will pose additional issues which will be reflected in the Project Plan and Risk Register for that election.

#### **Members' Views**

55. Members are invited to express views on the running of the Elections held on 3 May 2011 which will also be taken into account for future elections.