

CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT OF: Returning Officer

TO: Civic Affairs Committee

14/9/2016

WARDS: All

REVIEW OF 5 MAY 2016 ELECTIONS AND 23 JUNE 2016 REFERENDUM

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the elections held on 5th May 2016 and the referendum held on 23rd June 2016.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Committee notes this report and provides feedback to the Returning Officer on issues it would like to be considered in the management of future polls.

3. GENERAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 On 5 May 2016, elections were held for Cambridge City Council and for Cambridgeshire Police and Crime Commissioner.
- 3.2 The management of the city council elections are the responsibility of the Returning Officer. The Chief Executive is appointed in a personal capacity to this role and accountable for their delivery.
- 3.3 The management of the Police and Crime Commissioner election falls within the remit of the Police Area Returning Officer, the Chief Executive of East Cambridgeshire District Council. Each of the six local authorities in the county remained responsible for the poll in their area, with delivery of the poll accountable to the Local Returning Officer, again the Chief Executive.
- 3.4 On 23 June 2016, a UK-wide referendum was held to decide whether the UK remain within or leave the European Union.

- 3.5 The management of the referendum was the responsibility of the Chief Counting Officer, who is the Chair of the Electoral Commission. Responsibility for the delivery of the referendum was then cascaded via the Regional Counting Officer (Chelmsford City Council's Chief Executive) to the Counting Officer in each local authority area.
- 3.6 All following references to the Returning Officer are to be taken as a reference to the Local Returning Officer and/or the Counting Officer.
- 3.7 At all polls, the Returning Officer appoints deputies with full powers to ensure that all legal aspects of the polls are covered and to allow them to act in the event the Returning Officer becomes unavailable. The Head of Legal Services, the Democratic Services Manager and the Electoral Services Manager were appointed as deputies for all three polls.
- 3.8 Each year the relevant elections are managed as discrete projects. The Election Steering Group is chaired by the Returning Officer and attended by all deputies and the Head of Corporate Strategy. The Election Steering Group's remit is to review progress against the project plan and advise the Returning Officer on matters arising.
- 3.9 A Project Team is chaired by the Electoral Services Manager and includes all staff within Electoral Services, as well as a range of officers from across the authority who have specific roles within their service area, for example; Customer Services, Northgate /ICT and the Facilities team.

4. ELECTIONS – 5 MAY 2016

Candidates and Agents

- 4.1 Local political parties and other interested parties were invited to pre-election briefings on 24 February and 22 March. Particular emphasis was placed on the procedure for submitting nomination papers, access to the election process and the Electoral Commission's code of conduct for campaigners.

Promotional Activity

- 4.2 A number of initiatives took place to promote the polls and raise awareness of the deadlines for registration and absent voting.
- 4.3 Awareness was generated by an ad-bike and ad-van touring the city in the final week before the registration deadline. Banners were also placed on front of the Guildhall. This was in addition to the usual council publications, website & social media channels. Further

information was circulated via University publications and direct e-mails to students.

- 4.4 A national voter registration drive took place between 1 & 5 February, primarily targeting the 18-24 age-group. The Electoral Services Support Officer worked with Cambridge University, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge Regional College, Hills Road Sixth Form College and Long Road Sixth Form College to engage and educate students. Some of this work was completed with the assistance of the electoral office at South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Correspondence

- 4.5 Contact from residents was relatively high leading into the May elections. The chart below compares contact levels for the five weeks leading up to, and including, polling day against previous polls.

Contact Method	5 May 2016 <i>City & PCC</i>	7 May 2015 <i>City & Parliamentary</i>	22 May 2014 <i>City & European</i>
E-mails	1,583	2,482	654
Telephone calls into CSC	955	3,592	1,216

Training

- 4.6 Every person working at a polling station was required to receive training – if they did not attend the training, they were not employed. Training was developed locally based on previous programmes and local experience as learning points. Four face-to-face training sessions were delivered and on-line training was made available to those staff who had attended face-to-face training within the previous 12 months.

Postal Voting

- 4.7 Postal vote packs were issued in-house. A total of 11,721 postal vote packs were issued, a decrease of almost 9% on 2015. The total number re-issued due to being reported as lost or not-received was 19, in contrast to 102 in 2015.
- 4.8 The vast majority of postal votes are issued as soon as possible after the deadline for applications, which was 19 April. The first postal

votes were issued on 20 April, with those postal votes made close to the deadline issued on 21 April.

- 4.9 Current legislation requires that electors added to the register at the final deadline and who have also made an application for a postal vote, must wait until they are included on the register before the postal vote can be issued. Therefore these elector's postal packs were issued on 27 April, the date of the final update to the register before 5 May.
- 4.10 Five postal vote opening sessions were conducted with 72.8% of postal votes returned for inclusion in the count (87.5% in 2015). Signature and date of birth checking was carried out on 100% of returned postal votes and 1.4% were rejected because either the date of birth and/or signature was absent. A further 1.0% were rejected due to either an invalid signature and/or date of birth (0.9% in 2015); so those whose personal identifiers on the postal vote statement did not match with the original postal vote application. A total of 2.4% of postal votes were rejected.

Polling Stations

- 4.11 Overall there were 48 polling stations, staffed by 48 Presiding Officers and 122 poll clerks. The polling stations used were the same as in 2015 with two exceptions; in Castle (CB) the Castle Street Methodist Church was secured due to the sale of the previous site and in Romsey (LC) the C3 Centre was finally utilised in place of the temporary portacabin.
- 4.12 Six polling station assistants were employed to support stations with identified issues. This was especially important at the Salvation Army Hall in Tenison Road (Petersfield JB), which experienced some difficulties due to a long-term road closure.
- 4.13 There were minor queues at some polling stations during the day. Stations with significant student numbers had particular challenges as students did not always know under which address they were registered and queues built up while staff tried to assist individuals with this. There were no queues at 10pm when stations closed.
- 4.14 Four polling station Inspectors were responsible for overseeing station progress and visited each station at least twice during the course of the day. This was in addition to the Returning Officer visiting all polling stations.

The Count

- 4.15 Due to the combination of City and PCC elections, arrangements for the count had to be managed in conjunction with the Police Area Returning Officer, who had directed that the count of ballot papers for the PCC election must be counted from noon on Friday 6 May. Therefore, after the close of poll both polls were verified, but only the ballot papers for the city elections were counted through the night.
- 4.16 Staffing for both Thursday night and Friday afternoon was six counters per ward, with both the large and small halls in use. The limitations of our accommodation means this is the maximum of counting staff we can accommodate, which in turn affects the speed of the count. This year, assistant supervisors were recruited to support count supervisors and the final ward result was declared at 3.26 am on Friday morning. This is earlier than previous years, although not unexpected due to the relatively low turnout of 40.1%.
- 4.17 The count of ballot papers for the PCC election commenced at noon on Friday 6 May, with the final totals for Cambridge submitted to the Police Authority Returning Officer just after 2:30 pm.
- 4.18 As in 2015, the reserve count venue was once again the University Sports Centre on the West Cambridge site. This is in line with our disaster recovery plan.

Complaints

- 4.19 Only one complaint has been recorded within regard to the May polls. This was in relation to an overseas elector whose entry on the register had not been renewed. Upon investigation it was concluded that this was due to human-error and the entry reinstated. However, this did not affect the poll as overseas electors do not have the right to vote in local elections.

5. REFERENDUM – 23 JUNE 2016

- 5.1 On 23 June 2016, a UK-wide referendum was held to decide whether the UK should remain within or leave the European Union.
- 5.2 Management arrangements for this poll were as outlined in 3.5 above.
- 5.3 The Chief Counting Officer issued ten directions, including:
- The date on which poll cards and postal votes were to be issued;
 - The ratio of polling station staff to electors; and
 - The timing of the count.

5.4 The following information is provided where it differs to the experience of the May 2016 polls reported above.

Referendum Agents

5.5 At a national referendum, campaign groups and their agents register with the Electoral Commission and a Local Agent is appointed to work in each authority area. Local information was provided to agents, however a briefing was not arranged as this was handled by the Electoral Commission.

Promotional Activity

5.6 Activity for the referendum mirrored that of the May polls with the exception that the ad-van and ad-bike were not utilised. The large amount of national media coverage in the lead up to the poll was the main factor in raising awareness.

Correspondence

5.7 Customer contact in the lead-up to 23 June was unusually high. The table below illustrates the differences between the May and June polls as total customer contact received in the five weeks prior to polling day:

Contact Method	23 June 2016 Referendum	5 May 2016 City & PCC
E-mails	3,789	1,583
Telephone calls into CSC	3,362	955

Training

5.8 Despite the short period between the May and June polls, polling staff were again required to undertake training. This was to ensure consistency between stations, to highlight the difference between a referendum and an election and ensure any minor issues from May were highlighted. Four training sessions were delivered as well as the on-line training module.

Postal Voting

5.9 A total of 14,850 postal vote packs were issued, again in-house. The total number re-issued due to being reported as lost or not received was 63, a predictable increase due to the high profile of the poll.

- 5.10 As per the Chief Counting Officer's directions, postal vote packs to overseas electors were issued on 23 May and postal packs to UK addresses were issued on 27 May. The early issue of postal vote packs was only possible due to the ballot paper contents being known so far in advance. At an ordinary election, candidate details are not known until much closer to polling day and therefore ballot papers cannot normally be printed and issued so early.
- 5.11 The number of postal vote opening sessions was increased to eight in order to cope with the expected higher-than-usual turnout, which was 89.7%. Postal votes rejected due to a date of birth and/or a signature not being provided was 0.9% and a further 0.7% were rejected because the identifiers provided did not match the original application; so 1.6% were rejected in total.

Voter Registration

- 5.12 During the lead into the referendum, voter registration in Cambridge increased significantly. In May, the three election specific updates to the register totalled 3,738 new electors. In June the same three register updates added 6,564 new electors to the register.
- 5.13 The 'register to vote' website crashed at 10:15 pm on the registration deadline day and the government decision to extend the deadline by 48 hours caused a great deal of extra work for the electoral team. This further affected the timing of when polling station registers could be printed, the subsequent issue of ballot boxes to presiding officers and altered when postal votes could be sent to new electors; who were then not included in the register until 20 June. The knock-on effect of this single decision was significant and caused additional pressure on an already stretched team.

Polling Stations

- 5.14 Due to the polling station to elector ratio designated by the Chief Counting Officer, two further stations were added making a total of 50 polling stations across the city on 23 June. These were manned by 50 Presiding Officers, 126 poll clerks and six polling station assistants. Again, four Inspecting Officers each oversaw a designated area.
- 5.15 One polling station location changed from May. Arbury Court Library was used as an alternative in Arbury (GA) due to Arbury Community Centre being unavailable on the date required. It is expected that polling will return to the community centre in May 2017.

- 5.16 Queues were again a factor of the day itself but as in May, there were no queues at the close of poll.

The Count

- 5.17 The timing of the count was directed by the Chief Counting Officer. As in May, the Large and Small halls at the Guildhall were utilised with a total of 84 count assistants, eight count supervisors and six assistant supervisors.
- 5.18 An online results system was in place to transmit local totals and receive authority to proceed from the regional hub at Chelmsford. We were also required to duplicate the information in an e-mail as a back-up reporting system.
- 5.19 A power outage at 9pm in the Guildhall resulted in complete loss of telephony and PC access, which was not restored until just after 11 pm. This resulted in a delay in communicating with the regional hub at Chelmsford as the contingency to use a 3G enabled smartphone was slower than expected. Further delays were experienced while waiting for Chelmsford to approve each reporting stage.
- 5.20 Turnout in Cambridge for the referendum was 72.3%, in line with the national turnout of 72.2% and a regional turnout of 75.7%. The Cambridge totals were signed off by the Regional Returning Officer at 4.03 am.

Complaints

- 5.21 No complaints have been recorded for the 23 June poll.

6. CONSULTATIONS

Local party agents and referendum agents have been asked for their feedback on the relevant poll. All councillors have been sent a copy of this report and any feedback will be reported.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 The May elections and the June referendum were generally well-run, but not without their challenges and some minor areas for improvement.
- 7.2 It is evident that the Guildhall is no longer suitable for staging the count. The floor space is inadequate with a limit on the number of staff and observers permitted, as well as the complete lack of observation for media in the small hall. Work will begin in September

on evaluating a change in location for May 2017 to the University Sports Centre.

- 7.3 Elections and electoral registration are increasingly complex and the finely balanced statutory timetable means that unexpected issues often have a knock-on effect on other electoral events.
- 7.4 Changes to legislation at the last minute created a huge risk to the delivery of the poll and feedback on the handling of the 48 hour registration deadline extension will be strongly represented to the Cabinet Office.
- 7.5 The relative success of both the May and June polls are due in no small part to the hard work of the electoral services team and their commitment to the role. Retention, training and motivation of staff are fundamental in ensuring the service continues to build on the stability it has enjoyed over the past two years.
- 7.6 In my view, the national system is becoming increasingly fragile and major reform is needed to reduce risks to the electoral process.

8. **IMPLICATIONS**

- (a) **Financial Implications** - There are no financial implications resulting from this report. The PCC and referendum are funded by central government, while the city council elections are covered from within existing budgets.
- (b) **Staffing Implications** – The fixed-term post (to October 2016) of Electoral Services Support Officer will be evaluated in light of the current and expected workload of the electoral services team.
- (c) **Equality and Poverty Implications** - An equality impact assessment is in place for electoral events and is reviewed annually in light of changes to polling station premises.
- (d) **Environmental Implications** – Nil.
- (e) **Procurement** – none required.
- (f) **Consultation and communication** – Feedback from key stakeholders has been sought and will be reported verbally to the Committee. Upon publication, the report will be highlighted to stakeholders.
- (g) **Community Safety** – not applicable.

BACKGROUND PAPERS: Elections equality impact assessment.

To inspect these documents contact Vicky Breading on extension 7057.

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