

## CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

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REPORT OF: Returning Officer

TO: Civic Affairs Committee

13/9/2017

WARDS: All

### **REVIEW OF ELECTIONS HELD ON 4 MAY & 8 JUNE 2017**

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#### **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Cambridgeshire County Council and Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority elections held on 4 May 2017 and the UK Parliamentary general election held on 8 June 2017.

#### **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 4 May 2017, elections were held for Cambridgeshire County Council and the elected Mayor for the newly-formed Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. A by-election was also held in the Arbury city council ward.
- 3.2 The Returning Officer for elections to the county council is the Director of Corporate and Customer Services at Cambridgeshire County Council. However, the responsibility to manage and deliver the poll lies with an appointed Deputy Returning Officer in each of the five local authority areas within the county council area. The Chief Executive is appointed as such in Cambridge.

- 3.3 The management of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority election falls within the remit of the Combined Authority Returning Officer: the Chief Executive of East Cambridgeshire District Council. Each of the six local authorities in the combined authority area remain independently responsible for conduct of the poll, with delivery of the poll the responsibility of the local Returning Officer, again the Chief Executive in Cambridge.
- 3.4 On 18 April 2017, the Prime Minister announced that a UK-wide Parliamentary election (general election) would take place on 8 June 2017.
- 3.5 At a general election, the appointed Returning Officer for the Cambridge Borough Constituency (all wards except Queen Edith's) is the Mayor. This is an historic appointment and wholly ceremonial with only two legal functions; to receive the Writ and to declare the result. The responsibility for the management and delivery of the election belongs to the Acting Returning Officer and again this is the Chief Executive in Cambridge.
- 3.6 All following references to the Returning Officer are to be taken as a reference to the Acting Returning Officer or Deputy Returning Officer: meaning the Chief Executive duly appointed in the role.
- 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 Corporate Strategy, the Democratic Services Manager and the Electoral Services Manager were appointed as deputies for all polls.
- 3.8 Each year the relevant polls are managed as discrete projects. The Election Steering Group is chaired by the Returning Officer and attended by all deputies. 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, 3CICT and the Facilities team. The project team reports to the steering group.
- 3.10 Externally, communication is also maintained with the Police, Royal Mail and other relevant parties in order to ensure successful delivery of the poll.

#### 4. COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTIONS, COMBINED AUTHORITY ELECTION & CITY COUNCIL BY-ELECTION – 4 MAY 2017

##### **Candidates and Agents**

- 4.1 Local political parties and other interested parties were contacted in early February with information about the nomination and election process. Given the poor turnout at candidate and agent briefings in previous years, a full meeting was not arranged but one-to-one meetings offered with individuals. The offer was not taken up by any agent, but regular telephone and e-mail contact was maintained.

##### **Promotional Activity**

- 4.2 Promotional activity was focussed on council publications, website & social media channels. Further information was circulated via University publications and direct e-mails to students.
- 4.3 Additional promotional activity was limited as the post of Electoral Services Support Officer, whose role is to coordinate voter engagement and outreach activity, was vacant during the election period.

##### **Correspondence**

- 4.4 Contact from residents was greater leading into the May 2017 elections compared to similar polls held in May 2016. This can be accounted for because of the Parliamentary election being called two weeks before the poll. The chart below compares contact levels for the five weeks leading up to, and including, polling day against previous polls.

<b>Contact Method</b>	<b><i>4 May 2017 County &amp; Combined Authority</i></b>	<b><i>5 May 2016 City &amp; PCC</i></b>	<b><i>7 May 2015 City &amp; Parliamentary</i></b>
E-mails	1,730	1,583	2,482
Telephone calls into CSC	1,173	955	3,592

##### **Training**

- 4.5 As is the practice, 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. Six face-to-face training sessions were delivered (two more than in 2016) and on-line training was made available only to those staff who had attended face-to-face training within the previous 12 months.

### **Voter Registration**

- 4.6 For the May polls, a total of 1,770 electors were added to the register in advance of the poll.
- 4.7 A total of 87,020 electors were eligible to vote in the Cambridge city area on 4 May.

### **Absent Voting**

- 4.8 Postal vote packs were issued in-house. A total of 12,237 (14.1%) electors registered for a postal vote, an increase of 4.4% on the May 2016 elections. The total number re-issued due to being reported as lost or not-received was 33, in contrast to 19 at the May 2016 polls.
- 4.9 The vast majority of postal votes are issued as soon as possible after the deadline for applications, which was 18 April. The first postal votes were issued on 20 April, with those postal votes made close to the deadline issued on 21 April.
- 4.10 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 26 April, the date of the final update to the register before 4 May.
- 4.11 Five postal vote opening sessions were conducted with 8,591 (70.2%) postal votes returned for inclusion in the count (72.8% in May 2016). Signature and date of birth checking was carried out on all returned postal votes, and the following numbers were rejected:
  - 106 (1.2%) were rejected because either the date of birth and/or signature was absent from the security statement.
  - 54 (0.6%) were rejected due to either an invalid signature and/or date of birth (1.0% in 2016); these personal identifiers on the security statement did not match the original postal vote application.
  - 13 (0.2%) were rejected due to either the ballot paper or security statement not being returned in the envelope.

A total of 173 (2.0%) postal votes were rejected, compared to 2.4% at the May 2016 polls.

- 4.12 There were 174 electors who voted by proxy and three emergency proxies were issued.

### **Polling Stations**

- 4.13 There were 49 polling stations, staffed by 49 Presiding Officers and 104 poll clerks. Two new polling station sites were required following a change to the County Council division boundaries, which resulted in an increase in polling districts from 35 to 45. Most electors were accommodated at existing polling station locations.
- 4.14 The new polling stations were located at the New Chesterton Institute (NCI Club) on Holland Street and at the Churchill College campus in Storey's Way. There were no significant problems at either station but signage was an issue at Churchill College due to the number of different pedestrian routes to the location.
- 4.15 The changes to the County division boundaries meant that around 9% of the electorate were allocated to different polling stations from previous years. Despite issuing information to householders on the change of station location, there was still some confusion; with electors attending their old station 'out of habit'.
- 4.16 There were no reported queues at polling stations during the day. Although stations with significant student numbers continue to have particular challenges because students do not always know under which address they are registered. There were no queues at 10pm when stations closed.
- 4.17 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.
- 4.18 Four polling stations were running a triple poll, due to the city council by-election in Arbury ward. Extra poll clerks were appointed to these stations and no issues were reported.

### **The Count**

- 4.19 Due to the combination of County and Combined Authority elections, arrangements for the count had to be managed in conjunction with the respective Returning Officers, who had directed that the verification of both polls take place after the close of poll on

Thursday, with the County count being held from 9 am on Friday 5 May and the Combined Authority count taking place from noon that day.

- 4.21 Staffing for both Thursday night and Friday was six counters per division, with both the large and small halls in use. The limitations of our accommodation means this is the maximum number of counting staff we can accommodate, which in turn affects the speed of the count. This year, the final county division result was declared at 11:52 am. Turnout at the County council election in Cambridge was 42.2%.
- 4.22 The count of ballot papers for the Combined Authority election commenced at noon on Friday 5 May, with the stage one totals for Cambridge submitted to the Combined Authority Returning Officer at 3:16 pm, and stage two totals submitted at 5:14 pm. Turnout for the Combined Authority election in Cambridge was 42.2%.
- 4.23 As in previous years, the reserve count venue was the University Sports Centre on the West Cambridge site. This is in line with our disaster recovery plan.

### **Complaints**

- 4.24 Six complaints were received from electors, upset that their polling station location had changed from previous polls. The changes were necessitated by the review of county council division boundaries, which took them out-of-line with the city council ward boundaries.
- 4.25 It was then not possible, in the short time-frame given, to identify and secure polling stations for the new polling districts; meaning electors were allocated to the nearest polling station in the correct county division that had the capacity to take the required number of electors. In some cases this was not, physically, the nearest polling station and some electors were justifiably unhappy.
- 4.26 There will be a review of polling stations before the next scheduled elections in May 2018, informed by our experience in May 2017, where newly identified buildings or reallocation of electors will hopefully be less of an issue for those electors affected.

## **5. UK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION – 8 JUNE 2017**

- 5.1 The Prime Minister announced on 18 April that a snap general election would be held on Thursday 8 June 2017. This allowed just over seven weeks (39 working days) to organise and deliver a major poll that would ordinarily take months to plan.

- 5.2 Given that the announcement was made just over two weeks before the scheduled county council elections and the first election for a combined authority mayor, it cannot be underestimated the challenge that this created for the electoral services team. In common with many election teams across the country, one core team member cancelled their holiday to ensure the successful delivery of the poll.
- 5.3 An agency worker was already in place to cover a staff vacancy, but with the announcement of the general election, extra temporary support was drafted in from the Democratic Services team to assist with the vast increase in workload that had suddenly been created.
- 5.4 At a Parliamentary election, the Queen Edith's ward falls within the South Cambridgeshire constituency and so management of those polling stations is the responsibility of the Returning Officer for the South Cambridgeshire constituency. Communication with the election team at South Cambridgeshire district council was maintained for the duration of the election period and the arrangements worked well with our partner.
- 5.5 The Management arrangements for this poll were as outlined in 3.5 and 3.6 above.

### **Election Agents**

- 5.6 Due to the short timescales, no formal briefing was arranged and it was difficult to establish who the agents would be, given that in some cases, party candidates had not yet been selected.

### **Promotional Activity**

- 5.7 Again, there was no time to organise local publicity for the poll, however the Electoral Commission managed a national publicity campaign and there was also a large amount of publicity generated through national and local news and media outlets.

### **Correspondence**

- 5.8 Customer contact in the lead-up to 8 June was high. The table below illustrates the contact for national polls since 2015 as total customer contact received in the five weeks prior to polling day:

<b>Contact Method</b>	<b><i>8 June 2017 UKPE</i></b>	<b><i>23 June 2016 Referendum</i></b>	<b><i>7 May 2015 City &amp; Parliamentary</i></b>
E-mails	3,469	3,789	2,482

Telephone calls into CSC	3,381	3,362	3,592
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- 5.9 Note that the above figures do not include the two weeks between the announcement of the general election and the official start of the election period. It is not possible to separate out contact for the county & combined authority from the parliamentary. These are included as part of the statistics shown in paragraph 4.5 and would account for the inflated figures in that table.

### **Training**

- 5.10 Again, the lack of time to prepare for the poll meant that the usual practice of providing training for all polling staff was not possible. Any staff member who had worked on the May polls was not required to attend training, instead only those who had not worked in May or were being promoted to Presiding Officer were required to attend face-to-face training.

### **Voter Registration**

- 5.11 A total of 9,040 people registered to vote in advance of the general election. This is a significant number of registrations, in comparison to the June 2016 referendum when 6,564 new electors were added.
- 5.12 Between the announcement of the general election on 18 April and the deadline to register to vote, 10,440 applications to register were received. 1,400 (15%) of the applications made were either already registered to vote or a duplication of a recently made application.
- 5.13 99.3% of applications were made online via the government website. This is significantly higher than the national average which is around 77%.
- 5.14 A total of 78,544 electors were eligible to vote in the Cambridge constituency on 8 June. This is a lower figure than in the local election as not everyone who can vote in a local election can vote in a Parliamentary election.

### **Absent Voting**

- 5.15 A total of 13,217 electors (16.8%) registered to vote by post. The total number re-issued due to being reported as lost or not received was 39.
- 5.16 Postal vote packs to overseas electors were issued on 19 May and postal packs to UK addresses were issued on 20 May and 25 May.

This was the very earliest dates that they could be issued: essentially as soon as the candidates were confirmed and the ballot papers could be printed or as soon as the elector was registered to vote.

5.17 Eight postal vote opening sessions were conducted with 11,432 (86.5%) postal votes returned (89.7% in June 2016). Signature and date of birth checking was carried out on all returned postal votes, and the following numbers were rejected:

- 115 (1.0%) were rejected because either the date of birth and/or signature was absent from the security statement.
- 44 (0.4%) were rejected due to either an invalid signature and/or date of birth (0.7% in June 2016); these personal identifiers on the security statement did not match the original postal vote application.
- 18 (0.2%) were rejected due to either the ballot paper or security statement not being returned in the envelope.

A total of 177 (1.5%) of returned postal votes were rejected, compared to 1.6% at the June 2016 poll.

5.18 1,095 electors (1.4%) registered to vote by proxy, ten times the number that voted that way in the May polls. 26 emergency proxies were issued, a significant increase from the May polls.

### **Polling Stations**

5.19 There were 47 polling stations in the constituency on 8 June. These were staffed by 47 Presiding Officers and 102 poll clerks, with 11 polling station assistants assigned at all double stations. Again, four Inspecting Officers each oversaw a designated area.

5.20 Two polling stations were different from May because it was not possible to secure the premises at such short notice. In Newnham, a temporary unit was located on the Cambridge University rugby ground, instead of the usual site at Trinity Old Field Pavilion. The rugby ground had been used as a polling location in the past and no issues were reported there on polling day.

5.21 A temporary unit was also located at the North Cambridge Academy in King's Hedges division, due to the Arbury Community Centre being unavailable. The unit delivered was not as specified and was not adequate in size. During the day several complaints were received around accessibility, secrecy and general unsuitability. The location of the unit on the site was also raised, however it had been agreed in advance with the Academy so as to prevent disruption to students who were in the middle of exams and minimise any safeguarding

issues. Following the poll, the issue of the unit size was taken up with the company involved and an apology and a reduction in the cost was negotiated.

- 5.22 Queuing at some polling stations was again a factor on the day itself, and this was monitored by the election office with Presiding Officers, and there were no queues reported at the close of poll.

### **The Count**

- 5.23 The timing of the count is provided for in legislation; which requires the count to be held after the close of poll. Counting into favour is required to be started by 2am on the Friday after the poll.
- 5.24 Both the Large and Small halls at the Guildhall were utilised with a total of 78 count assistants, seven count supervisors and six assistant supervisors.
- 5.25 Turnout in Cambridge for the parliamentary election was 71.4%, higher than the national turnout of 68.7%. The declaration of the result for the Cambridge constituency was made by the Returning Officer at 2.55 am.

### **Security**

- 5.26 Security for the general election was increased at the request of the Home Office and Police following recent terror incidents in other parts of the country. Security advice was provided to candidates, extra briefings were given to polling staff and communication with owners/managers of all buildings with a polling station was steady.
- 5.27 In addition to the usual Police attendance at polling stations on polling day, extra officers were assigned to the area, with further units available in the county if required. Police presence at the count is usually very discrete, but was increased and visible for the June poll.
- 5.28 In terms of expected incidents the poll was very quiet, with no reports made to the Police.

### **Complaints**

- 5.29 Other than those mentioned in 5.21 above, no other complaints have been recorded following the 8 June poll.

## **6. CONSULTATIONS**

Election agents were asked for their feedback on the relevant poll, but none was received. All councillors have been sent a copy of this report and any feedback will be reported.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 The May and June elections were generally well-run, but not without their challenges and as always some minor areas for improvement.
- 7.2 The unscheduled general election called for 8 June resulted in an enormous amount of unplanned work and extended the length of time that the election team worked excessive hours. Despite the established project plan and well-rehearsed processes, snap elections are stressful and complex due to the extremely condensed timescales involved. Good planning and team work were major factors in ensuring that the poll went smoothly and problems that were encountered in other parts of the country did not occur.
- 7.3 The intended move to a count location outside of the City centre was not implemented for the 2017 polls due to staff resourcing, however the intention is now to look at the possibility of moving the count for the May 2018 city council elections to the University Sports Centre.

## 8. IMPLICATIONS

- (a) **Financial Implications** - There are no financial implications resulting from this report. The county council and combined authority polls are funded by those authorities. The parliamentary election is funded by central government.
- (b) **Staffing Implications** – No direct implications. The Electoral Services Support Officer is currently in recruitment for a fixed term to cover the current post holder's secondment and will further support the election team through the city council elections in May 2018.
- (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 Breeding on extension 7057.

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