

Item

## REVIEW OF ELECTIONS on 6 May 2021



**To:**

Civic Affairs Committee 14/07/2021

**Report by:**

Returning Officer Andrew Grant

**Wards affected:**

All

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on elections held in Cambridge on 6 May 2021.
- 1.2 Elections were held for Cambridge City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, the Cambridgeshire Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Mayor.
- 1.3 Elections for the City Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner were postponed from May 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.4 Andrew Grant, who had been acting as the Interim Chief Executive since October 2020, continued in the Returning Officer role even though his tenure as Interim CEx had been completed.
- 1.5 This report will look at the four combined polls as one event.

### 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. Background**

- 3.1. All 42 seats on the City Council were up for election in 2021, following a ward boundary review undertaken in 2018. This would mean each elector having up to three votes. For the County Council, 12 seats were up for election in Cambridge.
- 3.2 The PCC and Mayoral polls were held using the supplementary vote system, while the City and County polls used first-past-the-post.
- 3.3 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 6 May.
- 3.4 An Election Steering Group is chaired by the Returning Officer and attended by the deputies. The Election Steering Group's remit is to review progress against the project plan and advise the Returning Officer on matters arising.
- 3.5 The Electoral Services team was supported by officers from across the authority who have specific roles within their service area, for example, Customer Services, 3CICT and the Facilities team.
- 3.6 A county-wide election planning group was also formed, comprising of the County Returning Officer (CRO), the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO), the Combined Authority Returning Officer (CARO) and the Electoral Services Managers from each of the six district authorities within Cambridgeshire. N.B. The PARO and CARO appointments are held by the same person.
- 3.7 Externally, communication is also maintained with the Police, Royal Mail, the software provider, the print company, and other relevant parties to ensure successful delivery of the poll.
- 3.8 Planning for the polls due on 6 May 2021, formally started in October 2020. As Cambridge was one of only three local authorities in the UK to be managing a combination of four city-wide polls on 6 May, discussions were also undertaken with those other two authorities in Bristol and Liverpool.

### **Candidates and Agents**

- 3.9 Candidates and agents were engaged early in the process, as it was necessary to ensure plans for access and scrutiny of the polls would be appropriate and in-line with current COVID-19 guidelines.
- 3.10 Meetings were held virtually on 10 February, 26 February, 17 March, and 29 April. A virtual briefing was also provided to city councillors on 1 April.
- 3.11 Feedback from election agents on communication was encouraging, with future pre-election meetings likely to be a mix of in-person and virtual, depending on the proximity of polling day.
- 3.12 Overall, agent's feedback was that the processes in place for the submission of nominations and the count were acceptable given the necessary covid-related considerations. Most responses agreed that they would like to see future counts take place at the sports centre.

### **Communications and Promotional Activity**

- 3.13 Promotional activity was limited this year, due to the inability to hold any face-to-face meetings or registration events. These included:
- Highlighting election deadlines and information on the Council's website & social media channels,
  - Including information about postal voting in a covid information letter that was sent to all Cambridge residents,
  - Including information on registration in a settlement scheme letter that went to EU residents in the city,
  - Sending e-mails to students via the communications officer at Anglia Ruskin University and accommodation officers at each University of Cambridge college,
  - Sending a notification card (pink poll card) to every residential address where no electors were registered,
  - Registered electors also received a booklet about the Mayoral election (as required in law). Information for the PCC election website and telephone number was included on poll cards,
  - Most communication related to the pandemic, e.g. encouraging electors to apply for a postal vote and reassuring in-person voters that polling stations would be a safe place to visit.

### **Correspondence**

3.14 Contact from customers was not as high as expected. 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>6 May 2021</b>	<b>12 Dec 2019 UKPE</b>	<b>2 May 2019 City</b>
E-mails elections@cambridge.gov.uk	2,226	6,623	2,395
Telephone contact to Customer Service Centre (457048)	878 (145 on polling day)	2,193	1,054 (109 on polling day)

3.15 The Council provided polling station data to Democracy Club, which is a non-partisan organisation that collects data from various local authorities to create an easy postcode look-up tool for electors to find information about elections taking place in their area, candidates and polling station locations.

### **Staffing and Training**

3.16 A survey of all previous election staff had been undertaken in December 2020, to try and ascertain the impact of the pandemic on staffing levels. Scenarios were presented to staff to try and gauge how many staff would work under different national restrictions, results were as follows:

<b>National measures</b>	<b>Would work</b>	<b>Might work</b>	<b>Would not work</b>
1. Low - No social distancing	84%	11%	5%
2. Medium – outside meet up only	58%	22%	19%
3. High – stay at home	51%	21%	28%

3.17 Ultimately, the polls fell during a period of medium national restrictions, meaning that many staff were unable or unwilling to work. The greatest difficulty was recruiting people to work in polling stations, and many experienced Presiding Officers did not work. Coupled with the fact that a review of polling districts had created a further ten polling stations there was a much larger number of vacancies than usual.

- 3.18 When it became clear that the four counts would be conducted over just two days, the County RO offered to fully staff their count on the Friday morning. This would allow the core election team a chance to have a break after working polling day and through Thursday night, as well as ensure enough people were able to be recruited for the other counts more easily.
- 3.19 Extra staff were finally recruited for polling stations through the Cabinet Office's offer to redeploy civil servants, as well as some last-minute staff gained via the County Council. Having so many inexperienced staff in polling stations (approx. 33%) meant that training and support took up a greater portion of the core team's time than usual.
- 3.20 Every person working at a polling station was required to undertake training. This was delivered via an online portal, with a further virtual briefing delivered to Presiding Officers, replacing the usual face-to-face sessions of previous years.
- 3.21 Virtual briefings were also delivered to staff supervising the opening of postal votes and those appointed as supervisors at the verification and counts.
- 3.22 A total of 313 people was employed into 492 roles across the five-week election period.

### **Voter Registration**

- 3.23 A total of 92,837 electors were eligible to vote in Cambridge on 6 May. The voting franchise was the same for all four polls.
- 3.24 For the May polls, a total of 3,349 electors were added to the register in advance of the poll.
- 3.25 Of the new applications that were made in this period:
- 351 were already registered at their address
  - 113 failed DWP checks and had to provide further identification
  - 1,171 requested to vote by post
  - 492 were EU citizens

### **Absent Voting**

- 3.26 The issue of postal vote packs was outsourced to an external print provider, who was unfortunately unable to issue four ballot papers in one pack and therefore two packs were issued to each postal voter: one with the city and county ballots and one with the PCC and mayoral ballots.
- 3.27 An issue with numbering on some of the County council ballots was discovered shortly after issue, meaning the numbers on the voter's statement did not match those on the ballot paper. After investigation it was determined that this was an error made during the issue process, and only 15 electors were affected. New packs were issued to those who had not yet returned their packs, and the RO agreed to accept those that had already been returned
- 3.28 A total of 16,119 (17.4%) electors registered for a postal vote at the May polls. This was an increase of 32.1% on the number of electors with a postal vote on 2 January 2021. The total number re-issued due to being reported as lost or not received was 18 (10 in 2019).
- 3.29 Ten postal vote opening sessions were conducted with the following return and rejection rates for each poll as follows:

Poll	Returned and included in the count	Rejected Date of birth and/or signature absent	Rejected Date and/or signature invalid	Rejected Security statement missing
City	12,127 (75.2%)	170	151	94
County	11,997 (74.4%)			
PCC	11,452 (71.0%)	152	126	97
Mayoral	11,759 (73.0%)			

- 3.30 The above figures will not balance, because some statements were returned with only one ballot paper enclosed, so only those statements that were incorrectly completed or missing altogether were rejected.
- 3.31 The average rejection rate across the four polls was 1.7%, compared to 2.1% at the May 2019 poll in Cambridge and lower than the last reported national average of 2.4%.

- 3.32 There were 120 electors who voted by proxy and 24 emergency proxies were issued on polling day.

### **Polling Stations**

- 3.33 There were 57 polling stations on 6 May. Difficulty obtaining some of the usual sites arose, as owners of the buildings did not want to allow their use during the pandemic. Where alternative sites could not be found, the station was moved to the next nearest polling site, meaning a lot of sites were double or triple stations that would not otherwise have been. This resulted in some places having a very limited number of voters allowed at any one time, to maintain adequate social distancing while inside.
- 3.34 Some queues were reported outside stations during the day, but this had been expected considering the need to maintain social distancing inside. A large queue developed at Romsey Mill at 9:30pm, when around 150 appeared to 'suddenly' turn up to vote. Everyone who was in the queue at 10 pm received their ballot papers and voted, but this delayed the return of the ballot box to the count venue, which did not arrive until 11:45 pm.
- 3.35 An external company was employed to provide covid-marshals to ensure social distancing and other measures were observed both inside and outside of the stations.
- 3.36 Four Polling Station Inspectors were responsible for overseeing station progress and visited each station at least twice during the day.

### **The Verification and Counts**

- 3.37 As three of the four polls this year were outside of the Returning Officer's complete control, the decision on when to hold the respective counts was also outside of the RO's remit. Despite making representation to the CRO and PARO/CARO, the argument put forward by Cambridge to hold the police and mayoral counts on the Monday following the polls was not upheld.
- 3.38 The decision was subsequently taken by the CRO and the PARO/CARO to hold the County Council count in the morning of Friday 7 May and the PCC and Mayoral counts on Saturday 8 May. This resulted in the need to undertake the verification (to check how many ballot papers have been issued) of all four polls overnight after the close of poll on Thursday 6 May.

- 3.39 This left little option but to hold the City Council count in the afternoon of Friday 7 May, so that Sunday could remain free as a contingency count day and the successfully elected City Councillors could be signed in to office on Monday 10 May, as is required in law.
- 3.40 The verification and counts were subsequently slowed by the need to maintain 2m social distancing between count staff, meaning the number of people was half of that normally employed. This was compounded by the increase in ballot papers across the four polls, with a total of 156,989 ballot papers verified in just nine and a half hours by 42 count staff.
- 3.41 The successful conclusion of four election counts between 9 am on Friday 7 May and 9 pm on Saturday 8 May (36 hours) cannot be underestimated. It was a mammoth effort by the RO and core election team who worked virtually non-stop in that period, and resulted in no disputed declarations, no formal recounts, or dissatisfied candidates/agents.
- 3.42 The RO acknowledges and is thankful for the support provided by the County RO, without whose assistance it would have been almost impossible to successfully navigate the extended count period. Furthermore, the resilience of the counting staff, and especially the count supervisors, to work such long hours and maintain COVID-19 measures is especially appreciated.
- 3.43 The count venue was relocated out of the Guildhall as it was deemed unsuitable to accommodate all the necessary COVID-19 measures. The Cambridge University Sports Centre has been the back-up venue for election counts for several years and is far more spacious to accommodate the social distancing measures and one-way systems that were required to maintain a covid-safe environment.
- 3.44 Feedback from election agents and staff was largely positive, with the only negative comments regarding the temperature, especially overnight on Thursday, which was exceedingly cold. The use of outside air-circulation was a covid-mitigation requested by Public Health and so this would not be an issue in future. Other comments regarded the lack of proper refreshments, which again was restricted due to covid-measures and so this will be addressed in future.
- 3.45 The sports centre has been acknowledged as a much more suitable venue to hold election counts. The venue management have provided very positive feedback and would be happy to accommodate the election counts again. Providing availability, the Returning Officer intends to return to that venue in future.

3.46 Turnout across the four polls was as follows:

- City – 42.7%
- County – 42.5%
- PCC – 41.9%
- Mayoral – 42.2%

This is compared to local turnouts of 36.6% in May 2019 and 37.8% in May 2018. Within Cambridgeshire, turnout ranged between 29% - 45%, with only South Cambridgeshire DC recording a higher turnout than Cambridge.

### **COVID-19**

3.47 The challenge of running the polls during an international pandemic, resulted in a much earlier cycle of planning than in a 'normal' year, and this was intensified by the postponement of the two polls due in 2020 now also taking place in 2021.

3.48 The County's public health team provided guidance and support regarding the measures that were required, however they did not properly engage with the districts until late in February, which resulted in some plans changing very late in the planning cycle.

3.49 Legislation was introduced that required face coverings to be worn inside polling stations and at other election events, such as postal vote opening and the counts. Other measures in place were:

- Screens in polling stations, between staff and electors,
- One-way systems in stations, where possible, and limiting the number of people in the station at any one time,
- Hand sanitisation points at polling stations, postal vote opening and the count venue,
- Encouraging electors to bring their own pen/pencil,
- Cleaning of polling booths, pencils and the ballot box between electors and providing masks for anyone arriving to vote without one,
- Keeping a fresh flow of air, via open doors/windows,
- Staff observing the 2m social distancing requirement,
- All staff who worked on the election were asked to undertake lateral flow tests so that any staff member who tested positive could isolate and would not therefore work. Only one person reported a positive test across the five-week election period,

- The number of observers allowed to scrutinise the postal vote openings and verification/counts was severely limited, which had been discussed and agreed in advance with the local political parties and independent candidates,
- All observers were also required to prove a negative lateral flow test before they would be admitted to any election event,
- Extra information was included on poll cards and via the Council's communication channels to encourage people to either apply for a postal vote or take precautions when visiting the polling station.

3.50 Following the conclusion of the polls, Public Health have reported that there was no significant spike in infections and that the elections appeared to have had no impact on the number of reported COVID-19 cases in Cambridge.

### **Complaints**

3.51 No formal complaints were received regarding the election process or delivery. There were some reports from electors regarding election material that they did not wish to receive, and they were directed to the relevant political party.

3.52 One resident reported that they believed their neighbour was involved in election fraud, which the Returning Officer understood to be a misunderstanding however they were advised to report the incident to the Police. No further action on this has been brought to the RO's attention.

### **Funding**

3.53 The cost of the polls will be split four ways, with the County Council, Police Authority and Combined Authority funding their portions of the cost.

3.54 The predicted cost of the four combined polls is estimated to be under £250k, compared to a single poll, which usually comes in around £110k.

3.55 Extra funding has been provided by the Cabinet Office to cover all covid-measures required for the polls. The provision of all screens and other personal protective equipment (PPE), covid marshals at polling

stations, postal vote openings and the counts has been funded from within this (and included in the above estimate).

#### **4. Implications**

**(a) Financial Implications**

**(b) Staffing Implications**

**(c) Equality and Poverty Implications**

**(d) Environmental Implications**

**(e) Procurement Implications**

**(f) Community Safety Implications**

None

#### **5. Background papers**

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

#### **6. Queries**

If you have a query on the report please contact Vicky Breeding, Electoral Services Manager, tel: 01223 457057, email: [vicky.breeding@cambridge.gov.uk](mailto:vicky.breeding@cambridge.gov.uk).