Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

South Oxfordshire
District Council

Listening Learning Leading

Report of the Returning Officer

Author: Margaret Reed

Telephone: 01235 422550

Textphone: 18001 01235 422550

E-mail: margaret.reed@southandvale.gov.uk

To: COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND ELECTORAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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Report of the Returning Officer on the delivery of the May 2019 district and parish elections

Recommendations:

That the committee:

(a) notes the report

(b) endorses the action points in paragraph 31 of this report

Purpose of Report

1. This is the report of the Returning Officer on the delivery of the May 2019 South Oxfordshire District Council elections and the parish council elections for the South Oxfordshire area.

Background

2. The council is responsible for electoral registration i.e. ensuring that people are on the electoral register and entitled to vote. The council is required to appoint an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO), currently the head of legal and democratic, who is responsible for delivering this function.

3. The council appoints a Returning Officer (RO) who is responsible for the delivery of district and parish council elections together with other polls that may take place from time to time e.g. neighbourhood plan referendums, by-elections and parish

polls. This is also currently the head of legal and democratic. The council's RO automatically becomes the Acting Returning Officer for Parliamentary elections, Local Returning Officer for European and Police and Crime Commissioner elections and Counting Officer/Local Counting Officer for referendums.

4. Once appointed, the RO is answerable to the courts rather than the council, which is an important distinction from the ERO role. However, given that most members of the public do not understand this distinction and hold the council to account for the conduct of elections, it is important that the RO keeps the council well informed about how elections have gone and retains the confidence of councillors and the committee. That is the reason for this report.

Key issues

5. The district and parish council elections are the most complex that we deliver because of the number of individual elections involved. In May 2019 elections took place for all 36 council seats in 21 wards. All South district wards were contested. These were combined with 85 parish council/parish ward elections, of which 14 were contested and 71 were uncontested. Some of these elections were run on revised boundaries or with revised arrangements following community governance reviews.

6. This report reflects on the key areas of the delivery of the elections. My overall assessment is that the elections went well.

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

7. The electoral register was refreshed by the district-wide canvass during autumn 2018 with a new register being published on 1 December 2018. Monthly updates were issued between January and May 2019 to reflect changes notified to the council. In January 2019 we also sent a letter to all households asking them to check the information that we held and this provided an additional opportunity for electors to provide updates.

8. A small number of issues arose on polling day in relation to the accuracy of the electoral register. Where appropriate, these were corrected as clerical errors and the elector was able to vote. To our knowledge, only a very small number of electors were unable to vote as a result of electoral register errors.

9. Some political parties experienced problems with obtaining electoral register updates in the run up to the election. At times there were problems uploading information to political party portals so that updates had to be sent by email. There was also some lack of clarity in points of contact between officers and political parties and the ability to check what information had been successfully received. This is the subject of an action point for future elections.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND PROJECT SUPPORT

10. Project management and project support was provided by the programmes and assurance team and this worked well. The elections team is grateful for this support and also for the contribution made to the project by IT, the communications team, the accountants and the property and facilities teams, particularly officers responsible for the management of the count venue.

NOMINATIONS

11. The nomination period ran from 26 March until 3 April, a total of seven working days. All nominations were taken in person at Milton Park and for South Oxfordshire a total of 103 district council nominations and 572 parish council nominations were received. Positive feedback was received from agents about the nominations process.

12. Although there were some particularly busy times during the nomination period with agents and candidates having to wait longer than they would have wished to, it is unlikely that receiving nominations over a greater number of working days would have alleviated this. Rather it would have tied up scarce resources for a longer period whilst achieving the same outcome. We did not offer an appointments system as doing so was challenging to manage in 2015. We will nevertheless revisit the pros and cons for each approach between now and May 2023.

13. The main challenge for all involved in the nominations process was the new nomination form which was published nationally close to the elections and was unfamiliar to many candidates and agents leading to many errors that needed to be corrected requiring more than one visit to the office.

14. A number of parishes were unfamiliar with or did not understand the nominations process despite the fact that guidance was issued to all parish clerks in advance and some only submitted nominations after recirculation of guidance on the process and individual contact.

POSTAL VOTES

15. Postal vote despatch was timely and accurate and there were no notable problems. Despatch took place in Swindon rather than any further afield which proved helpful in enabling council staff to oversee the process on several occasions.

POLLING DAY

16. Polling day itself ran smoothly. All polling stations opened on time and with no serious concerns. Polling station inspectors were on hand to help resolve the usual operational issues. There were no unacceptable queues at polling stations.

17. Most polling stations are suitable for our needs and few issues arose in relation to their suitability. We seek to avoid the use of schools but at times that cannot be avoided. The polling districts and polling places review report also on this agenda highlights the polling stations that present challenges. Particular care is needed where elections for different district wards and different parish wards take place in the same room. In such cases a clear boundary between stations must be provided and care taken to ensure the correct signage.

18. As always, recruiting experienced presiding officers for polling stations proved difficult with the need to replace staff who had to pull out at short notice. Nevertheless all stations were staffed on the day in accordance with the Electoral Commission guidance and we are grateful to all internal and external polling

station staff. The elections team is working with the HR team to explore additional ways of recruiting polling station and count staff.

19. The elections office coped well with the volume of enquiries received on polling day from presiding officers, agents and voters. Candidate and polling station information was made available on the website and this was accessed 4121 times between 5 April and 2 May. Polling station information was also made available through the Democracy Club ("yourvotematters") and this was searched 2953 times.

THE COUNTS

20. All district and parish council counts took place in the sports hall at the White Horse leisure and tennis centre in Abingdon. A count venue manager worked with relevant officers and contractors to deal with the logistics relating to the venue and the equipment needed to undertake the counts.

21. The ballot box drop off at the leisure centre worked very smoothly but this system does require some presiding officers to travel considerable distances to the leisure centre and then home after a very long day. For future elections we are therefore exploring the possibility of some more local drop off points.

22. The district council counts took place overnight after the close of poll. In advance the RO had predicted that the verification (checking the number of votes in each ballot box against the presiding officer's ballot paper account) would be completed by 2am and that the district council counts would be completed by 8am. Each of these stages ran over by about half an hour respectively. This was caused in part by IT and printing issues which slowed down the completion of the last postal vote opening session and slowed down the production and throughput of results. Staff were also using the software count module for the first time and were less familiar with it than they will be with more experience. Steps will be taken to overcome these issues at future elections. Nonetheless the RO is very confident in the accuracy of the results which is a higher priority than speed.

23. Parish council counts took place on the Friday starting at noon. All these counts took place in Abingdon as the RO did not favour devolved counts at other locations which would have introduced unacceptable risks.

24. There are pros and cons of carrying out an overnight count rather than say a Friday daytime count for the district council elections and a Saturday count for the parish council elections. The options will be re-examined for the 2023 elections.

25. For multi-member district wards and for parish/parish and town wards, we trialled the use of "kangaroo boards"- boards with plastic pouches and summary sheets which enabled multiple votes on ballot papers to be counted. This worked well and proved to be more efficient than using "grass skirts" - sheets on which ballot papers are stuck and then counted – and more transparent than using tally sheets marked by count assistants which are harder for candidates and agents to observe.

26. At all counts we tend to receive criticism that there are times when count staff were sitting doing nothing. Whilst there are always opportunities to improve processes and efficiency, these comments often flow from a lack of understanding of the count process. Particularly in wards where more than one councillor is being

elected there is a significant amount of checking that has to take place before the RO can announce a result. It is undesirable for the team that have undertaken that count to start a new one in case an issue arises that requires a recount. In this respect we operate no differently than other ROs throughout the country. We are grateful to all staff who took part in the counts.

POST COUNT ISSUES

27. Although for candidates and agents the announcement of the results pretty much ends the electoral process, for the elections team there is still much to do. Staff have to be paid, polling stations have to be paid for and parish councils have to be invoiced for their share of election costs – whether contested or uncontested. There are also returns required by the Electoral Commission. The internal audit team is currently undertaking an audit of the elections. The costs of the elections are covered in the financial implications section below.

Financial Implications

28. The 2018/19 budget included £50,000 for costs expected to be incurred before 31 March 2019 (of which £32,000 was carried forward into 2019/20 because of the timing of the despatch of poll cards) and the 2019/20 budget included £115,000 for costs expected to be incurred after 1 April 2019, making a total budget of £165,000. These budgets are net of recharges to parish councils.

29. The accounts are still being finalised but the approximate costs of running the district and parish council elections is £248,000 less income of £54,000 meaning that the district council elections cost around £194,000 to run, resulting in an overspend of around £29,000 which has been reported in budget monitoring. The reasons for this were additional consultancy costs to cover a key vacant post that had been advertised three times (July 2018, September 2018 and November 2018) before the elections but not filled, additional printing and postage costs and some costs attributable to the count. There were also other minor overspends.

Conclusion

30. Overall the elections ran smoothly, with generally positive feedback from candidates and agents, staff involved and the media. As always, some learning points have arisen and key action points are covered in this report. In addition to these, the elections team has a more detailed action plan in response to feedback from the team itself, from the project team and from polling station and count staff. Some of these have already been actioned.

31. Key action points going forward are:

- for future elections publish a list of dates for the publication of electoral register updates, share this with candidates, agents and political parties and clarify processes and named contact points for the transmission of electoral register data

- decide whether to run an appointments system for nominations in 2023

- explore additional ways of recruiting polling station and count staff

- improve boundaries and signage where it is not possible to avoid running different elections in the same room

- explore the possibility of providing more local ballot box drop off points

- consider whether to have an overnight count or daytime counts in 2023

- explore ways of avoiding bottle necks that slow down the production, checking and announcement of results at the counts

Background Papers

None