

Scrutiny Committee Report



Listening Learning Leading

Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

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To: Scrutiny Committee

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Conduct of the 2011 local elections: update on progress

Recommendation: to note the progress on the election action plan

Purpose of Report

1. To consider progress on the implementation of the scrutiny committee's recommendations on the review of the 2011 local elections.

Background

2. At its meeting on 17 April 2012 the committee considered an update report and requested a further update following the Police and Crime Commissioner elections held on 15 November 2012. Appended to this report is a table setting out the recommendations and the current position in addressing the recommendations.

Progress on implementation of recommendations

3. Since its meeting in April 2012 the elections team has successfully delivered a number of by elections and the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in November. These elections have allowed the team to further address the actions identified in the review and enhance their project management/risk management processes.
4. The **attached** schedule provides an update on the status of the committee's recommendations.
5. The schedule shows good progress against the recommendations. We did encounter problems at two recent by elections, details of which are set out below. These issues highlight that even with good planning and control measures in place problems can arise outside of the returning officer's direct control.
6. At the Chinnor by election in May 2012 we received information that a number of properties had not received poll cards despite assurances and checks with our

printer that showed the number of poll cards handed to the mail company matched the electorate figure data sent to them. As a precaution the returning officer authorised the re-issue of poll cards. Shortly after the election the returning officer received a letter from UKMail together with 1,722 undelivered poll cards which they had failed to deliver to Royal Mail for delivery to households. In light of this error the returning officer instructed the print company to transfer poll cards and postal votes for all future elections direct to Royal Mail to avoid the risks associated with third party involvement.

7. The Didcot All Saints by election in October 2012 presented the elections team with a number of complications arising from the fact that the electoral register compiled during the annual canvass could not be legally published until just over a week before the election therefore delaying the despatch of poll cards and preparation of postal vote packs. Because of this we sent a letter to every elector earlier in the month alerting them to the date of the by-election. However, this tight timetable impacted on the delivery of postal votes. Because of the lateness of the issue, for the reasons already stated, the returning officer instructed officers to hand deliver the packs to households rather than risk a further delay within the postal system.
8. Although issues did arise during the preparation for the PCC elections (shortage of staff, availability of polling stations, possible loss of electricity) robust project management and risk assessment allowed officers to address/mitigate against any issues. Both the project plan and risk register are available on request.

Financial Implications

9. None arising from this report.

Conclusion

18. At its meeting in April 2012 the committee considered an update report on the implementation of its recommendations, agreed at its meeting in July 2011, for suggested improvements for the future management of elections and requested a further update following the PCC elections. The committee is asked to note progress to date.

Background Papers: Report to committee meeting held on 17 April 2012.
Minutes of scrutiny committee meeting held on 21 July 2011 and 17 April 2012

Update on status of committee's recommendations

	Recommendation	Status comment
1		
i	exercise to identify and select a suitably experienced printing firm be undertaken	The company appointed by the returning officer (RO) has successfully delivered two annual canvass registrations, a number of by elections and the PCC elections. The RO and his staff have met several times with representatives of the company and have built up a good working relationship. The RO is in discussions with the company regarding future election work.
ii	a suitable local printer be identified to deal with small scale elections printing and to provide back up in the crucial period immediately prior to an election	As previously reported a local printer identified and agreed to provide back up for printing ballot papers.
iii	a communications strategy be developed for all elections using the councils' facilities and a wide range of media;	The elections team works closely with the communications team and specifically their identified 'communications buddy' during all elections. For the PCC elections a full communications strategy was put in place. This will be repeated for all major elections.
iv	during the nominations process <u>frequent</u> communication take place with agents	Agents are now regularly updated on developments (issue of poll cards/postal votes etc and advised of any problems).
v	the nomination process be reviewed to ensure a more efficient and effective use of resources and eliminate use of paper records	Due to the low number of candidates standing at recent by elections a meaningful analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the paper based and electronic processes has not been possible. Officers will raise the issue with colleagues at the forthcoming Association of Electoral Administrators Conference to assess best practice.
vi	clerks of parish and town councils should be advised that they are not required to handle completed nomination papers	Guidance note to parish clerks has been amended to reflect this and will form part of written instructions to parish clerks for future elections.
vii	analysis take place to identify those activities which must be carried out by the core team and those which are peripheral and could be carried out by other parts of the organisation but shaped by the elections team	At the recent PCC elections non core team officers were trained and administered the postal vote opening sessions. The training of presiding officers and poll clerks was delivered via an online session followed up with a short briefing session from the RO when staff collected their ballot boxes. This released elections staff from the resource intensive process of delivering numerous training sessions.

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		<p>A temporary agency worker was employed during the course of the PCC election to assist with general telephone queries and the administration of registration forms. Non core team officers from the department's business unit were on standby to assist with telephone queries (they were not required due to the low volume of calls received during the PCC elections).</p> <p>We are investigating the option of engaging a project manager from outside the core team on major elections.</p>
viii	during the election period the project plan and risk register be regularly updated to form part of short and focussed meetings of the core elections team chaired by the returning officer (or a deputy authorised to act on his behalf) to oversee progress	RO continues to hold monthly update meetings with core team. During the PCC election these were held weekly to monitor progress and to review and update the project plan and risk register.
ix	the two separate IT systems used by the elections team be integrated as soon as possible	Joint data base system in place and operating successfully.
x	data be supplied to the printer in a timely manner so that majority of postal vote packs are in future provided to Royal Mail on the day after the postal vote deadline;	Implemented. Data supplied early with a second issue for late registrations.
xi	the Online Business Account be used by both the printer and the elections staff in a timely manner to check the quantities of documents supplied to Royal Mail against the data file supplied to the printer;	<p>Officers receive data from the printers on the number of data files received, poll cards and postal vote packs produced and supplied to the postal service and from Royal Mail on the number of packs received from the printers and entering the mail system. As evidenced by the Chinnor by election (details in the body of this report) this system is not fool proof as it relies on other parties accurately recording information.</p> <p>For each election the election team ensures it has a named contact at Royal Mail to follow up on any issues that may arise.</p>
xii	an exercise be carried out to identify colleagues outside the core elections team who can support the process in a variety of roles such as overseeing postal votes, inspecting polling stations, count	As noted in vii non core team officers managed the postal vote opening/verification work for the PCC elections. This will be operated at all future major elections (the election team will administer those for by elections).

	Recommendation	Status comment
	supervision having received appropriate training;	<p>Non core elections officers continue to act as polling station supervisors and count supervisors.</p> <p>Appropriate briefing/training sessions are held and updated to reflect each type of election.</p>
xiii	all options for count venue(s) in 2015 be considered and each potential count venue be subject to a detailed written assessment and that a named person holds responsibility for the preparation of the selected venue(s);	For the PCC elections the counts for South and Vale were held at the Abingdon Leisure and Tennis Centre in Abingdon. This proved very successful. The County Council elections in May 2013 will provide officers with a further opportunity to assess the suitability of this venue for future counts. This information will be used to finalise arrangements for 2015.
xiv	a training course be developed for count supervisors encompassing all aspects of their role;	Comprehensive briefing sessions and a full mock count exercise were held for count supervisors employed for the PCC elections. These will be repeated for future elections.
xv	the 'combination method' is not a recognised means of counting 'split votes' and should not be used;	Officers will agree the count method before each election, train and instruct staff accordingly and explain the process to agents. At a recent by election in Vale the 'block vote' method of counting was used with no problems where four candidates stood for two seats.
xvi	the returning officer review the method used for counting 'split votes';	As above. Procedures to be revised in light of the above.
xvii	all staff employed by the returning officer be paid by BACS through the payments system; use of cheques becoming an exception;	Due to the timing of the PCC elections staff were not paid by BACS due to concerns that payments would not be received before Christmas as favoured by the Home Office. The elections team have made progress with this project and will implement the recommendation for the forthcoming County Council elections in May 2013 and then assess its success.
xviii	the allocation of polling stations be reviewed in the light of the electorate and turnout figures;	Polling district and places review completed and agreed by Council at its meeting in December 2011.
2	the returning officer shall provide a report to the scrutiny committee in six months and in November 2014 setting out progress on implementing these recommendations, and the scrutiny committee should regularly monitor progress on implementation;	The report to this committee in April 2012 fulfilled the first part of this recommendation. This report fulfils the request made at the April meeting for a further update.

	Recommendation	Status comment
3	To ask the Electoral Commission to examine and report on the council's elections systems fitness for purpose within the next 12 months.	As reported in April 2012 the Electoral Commission does not undertake such work although it does require the submission of data and information during an election and uses this to monitor performance. This replaces the previous annual self assessment regime. For the PCC elections the council was selected by the Electoral Commission as part of the 15 per cent sample whose performance standards they would like to look at in more detail. This involved the submission of supporting evidence. No issues were raised by the Electoral Commission.