

For General Release

REPORT TO:	GENERAL PURPOSES AND AUDIT COMMITTEE 28 January 2015
AGENDA ITEM NO:	14
SUBJECT:	ELECTION MATTERS: UPDATE FROM THE (ACTING) RETURNING OFFICER
LEAD OFFICER	Nathan Elvery, (Acting) Returning Officer (ARO)
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Simon Hall Cabinet Member for Finance and Treasury
WARDS	All
CORPORATE PRIORITY/POLICY CONTEXT The report details election related matters in the run up to the UK Parliamentary Election on Thursday 7 May 2015.	
FINANCIAL SUMMARY: This report is for noting and does not require any resources apart from those allocated in the budget for the funding of elections. Costs for the conduct of the election will be reclaimed from the Cabinet Office.	

RECOMMENDATIONS

REPORT FOR INFORMATION:

That Committee :

1. Note the implications of Individual Electoral Registration (IER)
2. Note the change of venue for the postal voter verification process
3. Note the proposals around Operation Black Vote
4. Note the Count venues for Croydon Central, Croydon North and Croydon South

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report is for the information of Members and provides an update on the progress being made in preparation for the UK Parliamentary Election on Thursday 7 May 2015, particularly in light of IER, which is expected to have a substantial impact on the election process.

3. DETAIL

Individual Electoral Registration (IER):

- 4.1 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, which received Royal Assent on 31 January 2013, brought in the biggest change to the electoral registration system in almost 100 years.
- 4.2 In summary the system of electoral registration has moved away from registering by the household based system, to one of IER, which now requires each elector to be individually registered and to provide personal identifiers, such as a date of birth and a National Insurance number. The elector identifiers are then checked against details on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) database before the applicant can be confirmed or otherwise as eligible to register as an elector.
- 4.3 The new system went live on 10 June 2014 and there followed a transitional electoral canvass to ensure all residents were notified and took the required actions to register under the new system.
- 4.4 The Cabinet Office recognized that the transition from household registration to IER was an extremely challenging task with a need to ensure that the electoral registers remained as complete and accurate as possible. The Cabinet Office anticipated that the majority (around 80%) of those already registered to vote would transfer automatically onto the new system. This was proven to be the case in Croydon.
- 4.5 However, the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) in Croydon was required to contact in excess of 33, 214 electors to issue Invitations To Register (ITR), as the data matching exercise did not result in data matching confirmations for those electors. In addition, the ERO was required to issue Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) to all properties where no electors were registered and to all properties with electors carried forward onto the 2014 register. To supplement this, the ERO sent relevant information to other properties where he had reason to believe that potential electors were resident. As a direct result of the work undertaken the electorate for Croydon has remained stable at around the 250,000 level.
- 4.6 A revised electoral register was published on 1 December 2014, which will form the basis of register to be used for election on 7 May 2015. Included on that register are electors who have not been matched or verified throughout the transitional canvass. This is to ensure the electors who have not been individually registered will be able to vote at the general election.
- 4.7 However, this carry forward of names to the 1 December 2014 register does not apply where an elector's details were also carried forward from the 2012 register and where they failed to return a HEF.
- 4.8 In the case of Absent Voters and any appointed Proxies who were not

confirmed under IER provisions, currently around 1,300 in number, they have all been contacted to explain that unless they register under IER, they will have their existing arrangements cancelled. In addition any new absent voting applications made by electors who have not been confirmed under IER will be rejected.

- 4.9 The IER process is now ongoing and the electoral services team are preparing for the expected late surge for registration as we approach the election. The statutory deadline for receipt of applications to register for the election is Monday 20 April 2015. This is only one day before the close of postal voter applications.
- 4.10 With regard to the election registration deadline, the ERO is taking steps to encourage as many potential electors as possible to register well before the deadline. One of the initiatives will be to send a household confirmation letter to all properties confirming current elector details and what action to take if anyone at the property is not currently registered. This will take place in February. In addition plans are in place to give extensive coverage to IER via the council's communication channels to encourage potential electors to register on-line.
- 4.11 As a further reminder to potential electors all poll cards for the election will be received by registered electors by no later than Friday 10 April. This will alert anyone not receiving a poll card to register well before the 20 April deadline. In addition, void properties, with no current electors will also have delivered a poll card, informing anyone resident at the property to take the necessary steps to register in time to vote at the election.
- 4.12 In relation to the election, the ARO will be holding a meeting in February with election agents and one of the topics to be covered will be IER and its impact on the election.

100% verification of personal identifiers on postal votes – venue, impact on Count.

- 4.13 For the purposes of the 2015 election, the ARO is under a duty to confirm the personal identifiers for 100% of all postal votes.
- 4.14 To ensure this process follows a transparent and logical workflow, the ARO has recommended that the Community Space in BWH is used for the opening of the postal votes. As this is a fundamental change to past arrangements the ARO will be sharing with stakeholders the layout plans and will be inviting Candidates and Agents to view the location and to oversee the first opening session.
- 4.15 This change of venue will mean that there will be no final opening of postal votes at the count locations. Instead plans are being worked up to ensure the timely and secure transportation of the final postal votes received late in the day from BWH to each respective count. As a result the ARO does not anticipate that this change of location will extend the time normally

taken to complete the postal vote process.

Operation Black Vote

- 4.16 In the run up to the election, Operation Black Vote is organising a campaign, supported by the Electoral Commission, to engage voters to register to vote. Operation Black Vote has a voter registration bus, which it proposes to have visit areas with high Black and Minority Ethnic populations to increase the number of BME people registered to vote and to encourage other under- represented groups to register.
- 4.17 Operation Black Vote will also be working with Bite the Ballot, the youth vote project; Operation Disability Vote and the British Chinese Project, which aims to increase the number of voters of Chinese origin.
- 4.18 The Council has been approached to host the Operation Black Vote registration bus for a day and the ARO is currently in conversation with the organisers.

Count Venues

- 4.19 The ARO has a duty to ensure that any counting of the votes is carried out in a timely and efficient manner and that the count produces an accurate result.
- 4.20 Recent election counts have taken place at Trinity School which although deemed a suitable venue, has also thrown up some logistical and other problems which has impinged on the timely delivery of the count.
- 4.21 The ARO has looked at the practical factors that impact on the organisation and timing of the verification and count, such as the size of the constituency, size and capacity of venue, transport links, cost and transparency for candidates and agents, and has concluded that it is practical for the Parliamentary Counts to be held at different venues.
- 4.22 The proposal is for the count for Croydon Central to be situated in the Arnhem Gallery in Fairfield Halls and for the Croydon North Count to take place on the main stage in Fairfield Halls. It is then proposed that the Croydon South Count will take place in the Braithwaite Hall.
- 4.23 In making this recommendation to change the count venue the ARO is of the view that the use of Fairfield Halls and the Braithwaite Hall will improve the count process, allowing the ARO to follow the key principles for an effective count, namely that all processes are transparent, the verification process produces an accurate result and that the count produces an accurate result.
- 4.24 Many other factors have also been taken into consideration and the change of venue will allow for improved count layouts, more staff to be appointed to count, vastly improved access for the Presiding Officers

delivering the ballot boxes and much improved reception, control and security arrangements around who will gain admittance to each count.

- 4.25 The change of venue will also allow for a much improved location for the declaration of the results, with all official declarations taking part in the main foyer of Fairfield Halls. (Each count will have its own informal verification of result before the announcement of the official result).
- 4.26 In addition the use of two separate count venues will aid in any required contingency planning in that if one venue becomes unavailable for any reason then a backup location is at once available.
- 4.27 All three counts will each be under the supervision of a duly appointed Deputy Acting Returning Officer (DARO).

5 FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 The proposals do not require any resources apart from those allocated in the budget for the funding of national elections, which will be reimbursed after submission and agreement of the election accounts to the Cabinet Office.

6. HUMAN RESOURCES EQUALITIES, ENVIRONMENT AND CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACTS

- 6.1 There are no direct implications in these areas arising from this report.

7. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS/PROPOSED DECISION

- 7.1 Although the ARO is statutorily autonomous from the Council in performing these functions, the ARO wishes to keep Members updated to ensure transparency and flow of information.

The ARO has the statutory responsibility for organising the election and the counting of the votes. In relation to the count venue the ARO has had regard to concerns raised about the Trinity School venue. In doing so the ARO has undertaken a detailed review of the benefits of using the Fairfield Halls and Braithwaite Hall. It is evident from that review the new venues will allow for a much improved count process allowing for the timely and accurate declaration of results and for each count to be delivered to statutory requirements.

8. OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 8.1 None. The report is for information only.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS - LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None