

LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON

RETURNING OFFICER'S REVIEW OF THE GENERAL ELECTION 4 JULY 2024

1 SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1** This report from the Returning Officer is a review of the administration of the UK Parliamentary General Election in Croydon on 4 July 2024, in particular looking at how the recommendations made in the independent Review of the May 2022 elections were implemented.
- 1.2** The report also incorporates some of the changes introduced at the Mayor of London and Greater London Assembly elections that took place on 2 May 2024, and lessons learnt at that election
- 1.3** Both the GLA elections and General Election were well run, and there was no challenge to the results or the conduct of the Returning Officer or her team. There was positive feedback from candidates and agents, in particular regarding the General Election count. However, the Returning Officer is committed to continual review and improvements to the way in which elections are delivered in Croydon, and this report seeks to identify lessons learnt, and what improvements can be made in the future.
- 1.4** A summary of the lessons learnt and actions to be taken can be found in paragraphs 21.1 – 21.24.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1** Scheduled polls were held on Thursday 2 May 2024 for the Mayor of London and Greater London Assembly.
- 2.2** Croydon was the lead authority for the Croydon and Sutton GLA constituency, meaning that Katherine Kerswell was appointed as the Constituency Returning Officer for Croydon and Sutton and responsible for the constituency count.
- 2.3** Officers from Croydon and Sutton councils worked together on the delivery of the GLA elections, including the count. The Returning Officer would like to put on record her thanks to The London Borough of Sutton for their assistance at the election and the implementation of recommendations made in the independent review of the 2022 Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections.
- 2.4** The Croydon and Sutton constituency verified and counted the votes at ExCel London on Friday 3 and Saturday 4 May 2024.
- 2.5** Ward by-elections were also held in Woodside and Park Hill and Whitgift wards on Thursday 2 May 2024 to fill vacancies that had occurred.

- 2.6** On Wednesday 23 May 2024, the Prime Minister announced that the General Election would take place on Thursday 4 July 2024.
- 2.7** New parliamentary constituencies came into effect at these elections. There would now be 3 full parliamentary constituencies – Croydon East, Croydon South and Croydon West. The (Acting) Returning Officer for these constituencies was Katherine Kerswell.
- 2.8** Four wards formed part of the new Streatham and Croydon North constituency with wards from Lambeth: Crystal Palace and Upper Norwood, Norbury and Pollards Hill, Norbury Park and Thornton Heath. Due to there being more electors in the Lambeth wards, the lead authority was Lambeth and the Lambeth Returning Officer was appointed as (Acting) Returning Officer.
- 2.9** Croydon East, Croydon South and Croydon West constituencies were counted at Bernard Weatherill House. Streatham and Croydon North constituency was counted at Lambeth Civic Centre. The counts took place over-night on Thursday 4 - Friday 5 July 2024.

3 THE REVIEW

- 3.1** The review covers all areas of the election. As far as possible, these are addressed chronologically.. Progress against all recommendations made in the 2022 Review have been reported on.
- 3.2** The following areas of the election have been included in the review:
- Structured and Effective Project Planning
 - Organisational Structure, capacity and qualifications of the Core Elections Team
 - Location of Electoral Services on 11th Floor of Bernard Weatherill House
 - Nomination processes and provision of information to candidates and agents ahead of the Election including briefings
 - Training of Staff
 - Polling stations arrangements, polling station staff and issues on polling day
 - Absent voting
 - Customer contact
 - Decision on a Count Venue at least 6 months before a scheduled poll
 - Planning for the Count
 - Attendance at the Count and appointment of count agents
 - Systematic Approach to Managing Access to the Count including reception arrangements
 - Staffing at the Count
 - An Effective Escalation Procedure
 - Length of Time taken to Undertake the Count and Count processes
 - Facilities at the count
 - Business continuity

3.3 As part of this review, feedback on the election was sought from:

- Returning Officer Group
- Electoral services team
- Think Events London and Acting Head of Facilities Management
- Contact Centre Managers
- Croydon Digital Service
- Candidates and Agents
- Count supervisors and senior supervisors
- Polling station Presiding Officers
- Financial Data Management plc (print suppliers who printed and dispatched our postal votes and poll cards and printed our ballot papers)

4 STRUCTURED AND EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

4.1 The 2022 Review highlighted weaknesses in the project management approach in 2022 and recommended that changes were introduced in order to address these.

4.2 In March 2023, two management groups were established to plan and deliver the GLA and General elections. The Returning Officer Group (ROG) was the internal governance body established to provide strategic direction, decision making and oversight of the election projects. The Elections Operations Group (EOG) was the officer group responsible for the delivery of the project. All meetings of ROG and EOG followed structured agendas, were minuted and action plans maintained and monitored.

4.3 The GLA election project was divided into 21 work streams, each with a lead officer who was part of EOG. The Verto project management system was used to manage these work streams and provide reports and feedback to ROG.

4.4 When the GLA election was reviewed, it was agreed by ROG that this management structure needed to be refined for the General Election, where time was restricted. ROG worked well, giving the Returning Officer a clear oversight of the election. A clear decision-making structure had been introduced, with decisions recorded and responsibility for actions was clear.

4.5 However ROG felt that EOG had not be effective at the GLA elections. The lead officers for the majority of the work-streams were either the Head of Electoral Services or the Senior Electoral Services Officer. The Head of Electoral Services was still liaising and providing instruction to the other work-stream leads outside the EOG meetings. The EOG meetings were time consuming, adding limited value to the management of the election.

4.6 ROG also felt that the Verto system was unsuitable as a project management tool for the election project in which a large number of tasks are required to be delivered in a short period. A considerable amount of Officer-time was required to keep the project plan updated in Verto and produce reports on progress, in particular for the Head of Electoral Services. This directly impacted the time key Officers had to work on the delivery of the project. The reports that were produced were also too detailed and did not assist ROG with effective oversight of the election project. These issues would

have been exacerbated at the General Election where there was no lead-in time to allow for the extensive preparation needed to set the election project up correctly in Verto and where the period for delivery is so condensed. Officers needed to maximise the time available to deliver the election.

- 4.7** Therefore, the General Election was project managed by the Head of Electoral Services, with support from a Strategic Support Officer. The project plan and risk registers reverted to Excel spreadsheets which were maintained by the Head of Electoral Services, who then reported back to the ROG. There were still individual work streams with lead officers, but they reported back to the Head of Electoral Services in the first instance, or where necessary, directly to ROG. The Interim Deputy Chief Executive provided additional oversight of the project plan.
- 4.8** ROG met weekly from the announcement of the General election with, other ad-hoc meetings arranged on specific aspects of the election, such as the count, as and when needed. All meetings of ROG followed a structured agenda, were minuted and an action plan was maintained.
- 4.9** Structured and effective project management was therefore in place for the General election and the model will form the basis for the project management of the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections in 2026.

5 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE, CAPACITY AND QUALIFICATIONS OF THE CORE ELECTIONS TEAM

- 5.1** The 2022 Review recommended that the structure of the core elections team was reviewed, and that staff were properly qualified so that the team had the capacity to effectively deliver elections in the future, particularly in light of the new requirements of the Elections Act 2022.
- 5.2** Following the 2022 elections, responsibility for the Coroner Service was taken away from the Head of Electoral Services, and in the autumn of 2023, responsibility for the Civic Mayor's office and civic events was also taken away from the role – meaning that the Head of Service was fully focused on Electoral Services.
- 5.3** A new Senior Electoral Services Officer post was created adding an additional officer to the team.
- 5.4** The vacant Electoral Services Manager post was advertised twice, but recruitment was unsuccessful. The decision was made to pause to look again at the structure of the team, and the Head of Electoral Services for the London Borough of Sutton was seconded two days a week who also helped review the structure of the team. The recommendation was to increase the size of the team with a further officer. This was scheduled to take place after the GLA elections. The GLA elections were delivered in close partnership with colleagues from the London Borough of Sutton, who shared the workload of key aspects of the election project, in particular the logistics of the count. Within the team, officers acted up to cover vacant positions and experienced temporary staff supplemented the team. A council officer from Human Resources also worked with Electoral Services for one day a week to assist with the recruitment of election staff.
- 5.5** The recruitment to the core team that had been paused for the GLA elections was

further delayed by the early announcement of the General election. It will recommence in the autumn 2024 and the intention is that all posts will be filled by 1 April 2025.

- 5.6 During the General Election, the core team was supplemented by 3 temporary staff, two graduates and a seconded council officer and HR officer.
- 5.7 Since the 2022 Review, one member of the team has successfully completed the Association of Electoral Administrators qualification. Two other officers are currently doing the qualification and the final officer in the permanent team has done the comprehensive AEA foundation course – with a view to doing the qualification. The core team have also all undertaken substantial training on the requirements of the Elections Act 2022.

6 LOCATION OF ELECTORAL SERVICES ON THE 11TH FLOOR OF BERNARD WEATHERILL HOUSE

- 6.1 In February 2024 the Electoral Services team relocated to the 11th floor of Bernard Weatherill House. This provided a significant number of advantages to the smooth running of both the GLA and general elections.
- 6.2 Most parts of the election administration took place in one location – in addition to the core team, postal vote openings, election staff training, preparation of polling station paperwork, checking and storage of ballot papers and collection of Presiding Officer equipment took place there. This made management oversight easier and meant the core team were not working off-site as often as they had in previous years.
- 6.3 Rooms used in the Town Hall complex and Bernard Weatherill House that would normally have been used for equipment preparation, postal vote opening sessions and training were available to other parts of the council and/or commercial hire.
- 6.4 Electoral Services were located close by the Returning Officer, allowing her to have quicker access to key electoral staff as required.
- 6.5 There was enough space for all temporary staff who worked on the election to sit with the core team, rather than having people spread out over a number of rooms. This helped with supervision, training and messaging.
- 6.6 The location of Electoral Services significantly helped the planning for the count at Bernard Weatherill House as the Head of Electoral Services and other key staff were already on-site.
- 6.7 The availability of the 11th floor or similar space in 2026 is not guaranteed. Early planning on the location of the core Electoral Services team and various other parts of the election process will be necessary to ensure sufficient space is available.

7 CANDIDATE NOMINATIONS AND PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO CANDIDATES AND AGENTS AHEAD OF THE ELECTION INCLUDING BRIEFINGS

- 7.1 The period for the submission of candidate nominations for the General Election ran from Monday 3 June until Friday 7 June.

- 7.2** The first of two candidate and agents meetings took place on Friday 31 May. Guidance and nomination forms were circulated to known candidates and agents on Sunday 2 June.
- 7.3** Candidates and agents were offered informal checks of nomination papers to help ensure they were correct when officially submitted. All nomination papers officially submitted were accepted.
- 7.4** There was some misunderstanding from candidates and agents regarding responsibility for nominations for the Streatham and Croydon North constituency. However, all enquires were quickly passed to the Electoral Services Manager at Lambeth Council which was the lead authority for the cross-boundary constituency. Assistance was also provided to prospective candidates and agents in the cross-boundary constituency relating electors, absent votes and polling arrangements.
- 7.5** Feedback from candidates and agents on nominations was positive. 80% of those who provided feedback said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the information provided to them.

8 TRAINING OF STAFF

- 8.1** Although the 2022 Review highlighted the importance of training for count staff, there has always been comprehensive training of both polling station and count staff. This was also the case at the 2024 elections.
- 8.2** At the GLA elections, it was decided that all polling station staff would have in-person training. For many years only Presiding Officers had done in-person training with Poll Clerks doing on-line training, but it was felt that in-person training of all staff was the best way to prepare for the smooth introduction of Voter ID.
- 8.3** Training over 450 poll clerks is a big undertaking, requiring around 20 additional training sessions, which take a considerable amount of time and effort for the core electoral services team to set up and deliver. For the General Election, there was not enough time to plan and deliver in-person training for poll clerks, therefore their training reverted to online training, provided by the Association of Electoral Administrators. It still covered all aspects of the poll clerk work including Voter ID, which is now 'business as usual'. At future elections, training for poll clerks will be online.
- 8.4** All Presiding Officers were trained in person for the General Election. Feedback from Presiding Officers regarding training and guidance they received was positive. 70% of those who responded said they were very satisfied with the training they received, and 23% were satisfied. 96% said that the training and written guidance prepared them well for their duties on polling day. 4% said they felt partially prepared.
- 8.5** At the GLA election, thorough and detailed training of count team supervisors and other senior count staff, including practical exercises, was delivered by the Heads of Electoral Services for Croydon and Sutton. Supervisory staff also received written instructions. This was well received, and count staff were well prepared for their duties. The model of training and guidance was replicated at the General Election.
- 8.6** Feedback from supervisors regarding the training and guidance they received at the General Election was positive. 90% of those who responded said that they were very

satisfied or satisfied with the training they received. 90% of supervisors agreed the written guidance they received was useful and 10% said it was partially useful. 86% of supervisors said the training and guidance helped them feel prepared for the count and 14% said it helped them feel partially prepared for the count.

- 8.7** Ideally, written instructions to count supervisors would have been ready to distribute at their training sessions, however the short notice for running the General Election meant that there was not the time to get them ready for the training. Instead they were discussed at the training and circulated afterwards on 2 July. With a greater lead-in to the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections, the aim will be to get instructions prepared earlier so that they can be circulated at the training.
- 8.8** Suggestions from the count supervisors on improvements to training included providing a video of the training to supervisors, having separate sessions for inexperienced supervisors, and producing a quick-guide for count assistants.
- 8.9** The General Election, as a first-past-the-post election electing one candidate, has a relatively straightforward counting process. It will be more complicated in 2026 with the combination of Mayoral and Council counts. Two and three member wards will also require the use of 'grass skirts' or a similar counting method for recording split votes and unused votes. How best to prepare count assistants for the complicated elements of the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council election counts will be considered including written guidance and/or training.
- 8.10** Training on the count management software was delivered by the Head of Electoral Services. In 2022, it had been delivered by the supplier of the software. However, the training was too generalised and not focused on the specific Croydon processes. In-house training enabled focus on specific roles of the staff using the system incorporating this into the wider count process. This will be developed further in advance of the elections in 2026.

9 POLLING STATION ARRANGEMENTS, POLLING STATION STAFF AND ISSUES ON POLLING DAY

- 9.1** The feedback from the Presiding Officers was positive regarding the pre-poll arrangements for the General Election. In particular, the option for Presiding Officers to collect their equipment from Bernard Weatherill House, as well as the normal collection point at Woodside Baptist Church Hall, was welcomed. It was more convenient for many of the Presiding Officers who work for the council. It also meant that the collection at Woodside Baptist Church Hall was easier to manage with the reduced number of Presiding Officers collecting from there. Depending on where Electoral Services are located and the space available to them, this should be repeated at future elections. Feedback from Presiding Officers was that some parking dispensation for Presiding Officers at Bernard Weatherill House would help, and Electoral Services will investigate this, although this may prove difficult to achieve on a working day.
- 9.2** Presiding Officers who responded felt they were supported by Electoral Services on polling day. 68% felt very well supported. 32% felt well supported. With the addition of

temporary staff to the core team, there were 8 staff in the Electoral Services office taking calls, primarily from Presiding Officers and Polling Station Inspectors. This helped the team respond quickly to issues at the polling stations. Similar additional staffing to supplement the core team is vital for the team at future elections.

- 9.3** Polling Station Inspectors also supported polling station staff on the ground, making a minimum of 3 visits to each station during the course of polling day. This year, separate communication groups were set up by each Polling Station Inspector and the Presiding Officers in the polling stations in their area so they could contact each other throughout polling day. Similar groups between Electoral Services and the Polling Station Inspectors were also set up. These helped the communication on the day and should be standard practice at future elections.
- 9.4** At the General Election, there were only a small number of changes to the polling stations used at the GLA elections in May. This consistency was good for electors.
- 9.5** One polling station, Goldcrest Community Centre in New Addington, became unavailable because it was not possible to evict squatters and be certain that the building was in a suitable condition in time to be used as a polling station. There were a number of possible alternative solutions. Locating the polling stations at Tudor Academy became the clear preference, but it was necessary to undertake a site visit to confirm its suitability. This took place on 20 June. The decision had been to wait until the new arrangements had been finalised before confirming what they would be to agents and candidates. They were notified of the decision on Friday 21 June, and letters and emails were sent to electors the after the weekend. On polling day there was signage displayed outside Goldcrest Community Centre, redirecting electors to the new polling station, which was located 2 minutes away.
- 9.6** There was some feedback that information regarding the changes to the polling station could have been handled better, and that on the day staff should have been positioned outside Goldcrest Community Centre to redirect electors, in addition to signage displayed.
- 9.7** As had been the case at the GLA elections in May, with a small number of exceptions, all polling stations had 3 poll clerks. This was to help with the implementation of Voter ID.
- 9.8** There were no significant issues relating to Voter ID. Across the borough, 246 voters went to polling stations without valid ID and were unable to vote. Of these, 167 later returned and were able to vote. 79 voters did not return and did not vote.
- 9.9** On the whole, polling on the day went smoothly. All Presiding Officers completed a log-book of issues and these have been reviewed. Any venue specific issues have been logged and will be considered as part of the review of polling districts and polling places.

10 ABSENT VOTING

- 10.1** The GLA elections were the first elections after the new rules on absent voting were introduced. Since November 2023, electors have been able to apply for postal and proxy votes.

10.2 Numbers of new absent vote were significantly higher at the General Election. 5,177 successful postal vote applications and 1,171 successful proxy vote applications were made in the final three weeks before the application deadlines. 3,204 postal vote and 453 proxy vote applications were made in the same period before the GLA elections. As the majority of the postal votes applied for prior to the GLA elections were permanent arrangements also covering the general election, it can be assumed that this spike could have been even higher had the two elections not taken place within such a short period and this needs to be taken into consideration for future planning for parliamentary elections.

10.3 The total numbers of postal votes dispatched and returned were as follows:

Constituency	Number of registered postal voters (Postal votes dispatched)	Postal votes returned	% of postal votes returned
Croydon East	14,245	11,012	77%
Croydon South	16,591	13,454	81%
Croydon West	11,542	8,213	71%
Streatham and Croydon North*	5,858	4,296	73%
TOTAL	48,256	36,975	76.6%

(*Croydon wards only)

10.4 Postal votes were dispatched in 3 main runs. This is standard practice for Croydon and many local authorities (some do two). The number of postal votes means that production has to be outsourced to specialist print contractors and a schedule for production and dispatch is agreed in advance of the election. This schedule has to be manageable and achievable for both the print contractors, who need to produce the postal votes, and the local authority that has to process the applications and proof check the postal votes at a number of stages.

10.5 The following schedule was agreed in advance with Croydon's print contractors. Unfortunately, despite the Council meeting its schedule for production and transfer of data and proof-checking, there was a delay in the production process at the contractors, which caused the second and third runs of postal votes to be dispatched later than scheduled.

Run	Data provided	Scheduled dispatch	Actual dispatch
Run 1	28 May	17 June	17 June
Run 2	10 June	20 June	25 June
Run 3	20 June	25 June	27 June

10.6 Similar delays were experienced by other local authorities. The print contractors have apologised for the delay, which they blamed on the quantities of postal votes and poll cards they had to produce and added complexity in the production process caused by the number of cross borough boundary constituencies. They are conducting a full review of their processes to ensure that similar delays do not occur in the future. This

will include detailed discussions with all customers, including Croydon.

- 10.7** Following production, postal votes were collected by Royal Mail and delivered 1st class to electors. However, it appeared from the reports that we were receiving from electors, candidates and agents that, in many cases, postal votes were taking at least two or three days to be delivered.
- 10.8** There were also problems with the speed at which Royal Mail returned completed postal votes. In the first week after the main dispatch of postal votes, the numbers returned by Royal Mail were lower than at the same time during the GLA election. This was a serious concern at the beginning of the election week, when only a couple of hundred postal votes were returned on Monday 1 July. The issue was escalated to Royal Mail's postal voting team on a number of occasions. They advised that they had investigated but there was no back-log of postal votes in the system. The following day, close to 7,000 postal votes were received from Royal Mail.
- 10.9** It appears that despite the delays, Royal Mail did deliver all completed postal votes in time for them to be opened and checked and included in the count. Over 950 postal votes were received at the close of poll from the 'sweep' of the local sorting office, and there were very few delivered late after polling day. The percentage return of postal votes was down in comparison to the 2019 General Election, however there was a similar drop in the overall turnout at this election.
- 10.10** The combination of delays in production and delivery left many electors concerned that they would not receive their postal vote on time. The core electoral services team had to spend a considerable amount of time responding to enquiries and reissuing postal votes in-house that could then be collected from Bernard Weatherill House or reposted. This impacted on other election work in the final week of the election, increasing the workload and the pressure on the core team.
- 10.11** The timetable for postal vote applications is another pressure on the postal voting system. The deadline for applications is 11 working days before poll. Since the introduction of postal voting on demand in 2000, the number of postal votes has increased in Croydon from hundreds to around 50,000. Similar increases have been experienced by every local authority across the UK. Where so many applications for postal votes are received in the weeks up to the deadline, it places a considerable strain in the system.
- 10.12** The postal voting timetable, pressure on the capacity of a small number of print suppliers and reliance on a postal delivery service that is unreliable is of great concern nationally in the electoral community. The difficulties in Croydon were mirrored nationally. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, The Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators have all highlighted these concerns post-election and will work together to make recommendations to the Government on how the postal voting system can be improved.
- 10.13** There is also some misunderstanding regarding the time it takes for postal votes to be produced and dispatched. There is a widespread expectation that if a person applies for a postal vote, it will be sent to them within a matter of days, which is rarely possible. Ideally, information regarding the expected dispatch date of postal votes would be given to electors at the point of their application to manage expectations. However, the

vast majority of postal votes are applied via the national online portal. All local authorities have their own schedule of dispatch, so it is difficult for definitive dates to be given. However, in the future, the dispatch schedule will be included on the Council website. We will also investigate ways in which we might be able to confirm directly to electors when their postal vote is scheduled/has been dispatched.

- 10.14** The challenges in getting postal votes to electors and back in time to be counted are even greater for overseas electors. Overseas electors can only vote in national elections. This means that there is always a huge spike in overseas elector registrations when a General Election is called. This year, for the first time, overseas electors could register to vote and apply for a postal or proxy vote online. However, registration and absent vote arrangements are two separate applications. This appeared to cause some confusion, and some overseas electors were registering to vote, but not arranging their postal votes until a few weeks later – if at all. The timetable for applying for postal votes simply does not give enough time for postal votes to be sent and returned from overseas when applications are made close to the deadline. This is another matter for national review.

11 CUSTOMER CONTACT AND COMMUNICATIONS

- 11.1** Some key changes were made to the way in which the contact centre dealt with the increase in call numbers at both the GLA and General elections. In the past, temporary staff were brought in to take election calls. This year election calls were taken by experienced contact centre staff. This improved the quality of the call handling and information provided to the public. It also came at a lower cost to the Council.
- 11.2** A Teams group was established with contact centre and electoral services staff – this allowed answers to queries from the contact centre to be quickly shared amongst all staff taking electoral calls =, enabling more consistency and accuracy in messaging.
- 11.3** Electoral calls were also prioritised and went to the front of the queue of calls to the contact centre, reducing wait times and number of calls dropped.
- 11.4** At the General Election, there was an improvement in the number and percentage of calls handled by the contact centre compared to the GLA elections, despite the significant increase in the numbers received. In the four weeks up to the GLA elections, 1,876 calls were received and 1,826 of those were handled (97%). This included 633 calls received on polling day (609 handled). At the General Election, 3,297 calls were received in the same period and 3,279 of those were handled (99%). This included 887 calls received on polling day (881 handled).
- 11.5** At both the GLA and general elections, the public helpline number opening hours were meant to be extended to 7am-10pm. However, failure by the telephony contractor, Wavenet, meant that the change was not activated at 7am at either election. On both occasions, it required urgent escalation for the phone lines to be activated and public phone lines were down for an hour. This was particularly frustrating at the General Election because the matter was escalated by the Chief Executive after the GLA elections and assurances were given that there would be no repeat at the General Election. Prior to any future elections, a process must be agreed with the contractor so that this cannot be repeated, and it is expected that the contractor will check and confirm the lines are open at 7am.

- 11.6** Call records enabled the contact centre staff to call back all those who tried to call the helpline while the phone lines were down, and respond to their enquiries.
- 11.7** In addition to the statutory poll cards to electors, electoral services made use of the contact emails they hold for electors to provide them with information regarding the election. Due to human error, the deadline for proxy votes in one of these emails was incorrect. A follow-up email was sent to electors on the next working day correcting the error.
- 11.8** At the close of nominations, a Statement of Persons Nominated was produced with a hard copy displayed in the Town Hall reception and copies circulated to candidates and agents. Unfortunately, there was a delay in the publication of the notice on the Council website. The importance of publishing this notice by 5pm on 7 July was not clearly understood by the Council webteam. Rather than publishing the notice immediately, they transcribed the candidate information to display on the website in an accessible format. This went live after 5pm and there were also a small number of mistakes in the information displayed. While it is good practice to display information in an accessible format, this should have been in addition to the statutory notice being published, rather than in its place. The Returning Officer met with the webteam the next day and in the future, the statutory notices will be displayed immediately on the website.
- 11.9** To prevent further errors, processes for the dispatch of emails and publication of changes to the website were changed to mirror the multi-person proof-checking process in place for statutory written communications to electors, including poll cards. This will continue at future elections.

12 DECISION ON A COUNT VENUE

- 12.1** In the review of the 2022 elections, it was recommended that future decisions on the count venue location should be made more quickly to enable the maximum amount of time for planning for the Count – ideally 6 months prior to the count.
- 12.2** A detailed review and report into potential count locations was commissioned by the Returning Officer following the elections in 2022. This recommended that Fairfield Halls be the preferred count location for future elections.
- 12.3** However, at the General Election it was not possible to decide on the venue of the count until the date of the General Election was announced (on the 21 May) because availability cannot be guaranteed. However, a decision on the count location was prioritised as soon as the date was known.
- 12.4** Fairfield Halls, the preferred location for the count, was unavailable on 4 July. Trinity School, which has been used as a count venue on many occasions, was available and put on standby. Meanwhile because floors of Bernard Weatherill House were vacant, the possibility of using this space was immediately investigated and an initial evaluation of its suitability was favourable. Plans on how the venue could be used were developed so that the Returning Officer could make an informed decision.
- 12.5** The final decision on the count venue was made on 4 June following a walk-through of the venue by ROG. As this was an entirely new venue for counting, it was right that careful consideration was given to its use before the decision was made. The decision

was still made in good time, particularly as a significant part of the planning was completed as part of the assessment of the suitability of the building.

13 PLANNING FOR THE COUNT

- 13.1** There was a collective approach to planning for the General Election count. The Head of Electoral Services worked with the Principal Facilities Manager and Think Events London (an events management company) on the planning of the count.
- 13.2** Think Events London had worked with Croydon Council on the GLA election on the planning for the use of Fairfield Halls for the count. Although the count was moved to Excel London, they gained valuable experience and understanding of what was required at the count, and they had also helped plan and manage the return of ballot boxes by Presiding Officers at the close of poll.
- 13.3** Think Events London produced the initial plan for the use of Bernard Weatherill House when the suitability of the venue was assessed. This formed the basis of a detailed plan for the count that was developed over the following weeks by the Head of Electoral Services.
- 13.4** Think Events London took on responsibility of the detailed planning of the outside aspects of the project, and the Principal Facilities Manager worked closely with the Head of Electoral Services to develop the plans for use of Bernard Weatherill House itself. The Head of Electoral Services was responsible for the count process.
- 13.5** Each week, the updated count plan went to the Returning Officer Group for comments and input. The collaborative planning process and development of the plan with ROG meant that all aspects of the plan were open to challenge, and improvement as a result. Having people responsible for the logistical aspects of the count meant that the Head of Electoral Services was able to focus on the count process.
- 13.6** The plan that was developed will now be a blueprint for the planning of future counts, which will be adapted to take account of the venue and election specific issues.

14 ATTENDANCE AT THE COUNT INCLUDING APPOINTMENT OF COUNTING AGENTS

- 14.1** The 2022 Review had a number of recommendations around the arrangements for attendance at the count to ensure that it was managed in accordance with the statutory rules, including ensuring that candidates and agents were aware of the statutory deadlines.
- 14.2** A second briefing for candidates and agents for the General Election took place on 14 June, and this focussed on arrangements for polling day and the count including the arrangements for the appointment of counting agents and guests. Written instructions and an appointment form was then emailed to agents on 17 June, with a final reminder email sent on 26 June, ahead of the statutory deadline for appointments on 27 June.
- 14.3** All agents submitted their appointments by the deadline and only a small number of amendments were made at the Acting Returning Officer's discretion after that deadline. On the night of the count, only one group of individuals turned up who had not been

appointed. They had been told they could attend by a guest of one of the candidates-not by the candidate or their election agent. They were not admitted.

- 14.4** The 2022 Review recommended that confirmation of appointments be posted the day after the deadline. However, ROG made the decision to email appointments rather than post them, in order to aid the easy use of QR codes for access to the count (see paragraph 17.2). Therefore, such an early dispatch was unnecessary. The emails had been scheduled to be dispatched on Monday 1 July and this date had been communicated to the candidates and agents at their briefing sessions and in written guidance. It took a little longer than anticipated to prepare the appointment emails and they were emailed to attendees on Tuesday 2 July. As a result, there were some queries from agents and candidates when the appointments were not received on time.
- 14.5** In 2026, it is expected that there will be around 300 candidates, each entitled to bring a guest. Some candidates and guests will also be appointed as counting agents for other contests. It is important that the appointment emails are accurate and not rushed, but that the timetable communicated to candidates and agents is met. Dispatch date is recommended to be the Tuesday before poll so that it is achievable and expectations are managed.
- 14.6** All attendees were also sent a detailed guide to the count. This provided information regarding access, timings, layout of the count, facilities at Bernard Weatherill House and the count process. This was well received with 80% of candidates and agents who responded saying they were very satisfied with the provision of information, including the guide to the count and the appointments.

15 A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO MANAGING ACCESS TO THE COUNT INCLUDING RECEPTION ARRANGEMENTS

- 15.1** In 2022, there were difficulties in accessing the count. Staff were unable to access the building quickly enough. They had not gained access by the time that the agents and candidates arrived, resulting in long queues to get in, and a delay to the start of the verification. The 2022 Review recommended that there be a review of how access to the count was managed and that the attendees were filtered at reception, prioritising candidates and election agents and speeding up access for all attendees.
- 15.2** At the GLA election count at Excel, the following new processes were introduced:
- Attendees received an electronic appointment including personal QR codes
 - QR codes were scanned which recorded the individual's attendance – they were also scanned out when leaving
 - Photo ID was required for all non-staff (staff had already undertaken right to work checks)
 - Wristbands were allocated to each attendee
 - Name badges only given to supervisory staff, candidates and election agents

These processes worked well. Despite over 500 staff needing to access the count hall at the beginning of each day, there were no significant delays in attendees accessing the count.

- 15.3** The decision was taken to use a similar process at the General Election. Separate

entrances for staff through Access Croydon and other attendees through the Corporate Reception were also used to further speed up access. There were also separate reception desks for candidates and their election agents and the media to prioritise their access.

- 15.4** The reception desks for non-staff were located out-side the reception entrance on Fell Road. This would have been challenging had there been inclement weather and would not have been suitable at an election at most other times of the year. However, the successful use of the scanning solution means that should Bernard Weatherill House be used again in the future, a single entrance could be considered through Access Croydon so that the reception desks for all attendees is inside.
- 15.5** The approach adopted to managing the access to the count will serve as a blue-print for future counts – to be adapted as necessary to take account of the venue and any other election specific issues.

16 STAFFING AT THE COUNT

- 16.1** The 2022 Review made a number of recommendations regarding staffing at the count. This included ensuring undertaking right to work checks prior to polling day. At the GLA elections, checks of all count staff were done by Sutton electoral services using specialist software. This meant that staff could submit their documents online rather than bring in documents for an in-person check.
- 16.2** Staff who undertook right to work checks for the GLA elections were not required to do so again at the General Election. Staff who did not work on the GLA had to attend the electoral services office for their right to work check.
- 16.3** In-person right to work checks of all count and polling staff (in total over 800 people) in advance of the 2026 elections, would be extremely difficult to achieve. Therefore, the ability to undertake online checks must be in place before 2026.
- 16.4** Priority of appointments to work on the General Election count was given to those who worked on the GLA count. This ensured that there were very few staff without experience. There is inevitably some turn-over of staff, however, the close proximity of the two elections meant that there were only a couple of changes to the count supervisors used at the General Election. If available, these supervisors will be prioritised to be part of the count team in 2026.

17 AN EFFECTIVE ESCALATION PROCEDURE

- 17.1** The 2022 Review recommended that a clearer and more effective escalation procedure was in place to deal issues at the count.
- 17.2** Whilst the management structure of the count was similar to previous elections, efforts were made to ensure that it was clear to staff and candidates and agents who was responsible for each part of the process and to whom any issues should be reported.
- 17.3** Each of the constituencies had a Deputy Returning Officer supported by two Senior Supervisors. Count team supervisors escalated any issues to the Deputy Returning Officer for their constituency.

- 17.4** All count supervisors said that they felt that the process in place for escalating issues was clear. Of those that needed to escalate issues, 73% were very satisfied and 27% satisfied with how these were dealt with.
- 17.5** The count guide circulated to all candidates and agents prior to the count included photos of the Acting Returning Officer and the Deputy Returning Officers to help make it clearer who they were, should issues need to be escalated to them.
- 17.6** The Principal Facilities Manager was responsible for dealing with any venue issues. These were not escalated to the Head of Electoral Services/Deputy Returning Officer so that they could focus on the count process.

18 LENGTH OF TIME TAKEN TO UNDERTAKE THE COUNT AND COUNT PROCESSES

- 18.1** All count processes were reviewed in advance of the GLA elections. Working with colleagues from our GLA constituency partners at London Borough of Sutton, the processes for the GLA election were developed. Whilst accuracy was the primary consideration, ensuring efficiency was also important to improve the speed of the count.
- 18.2** A test count was conducted in November 2023 to get accurate data on the speed individual counters could verify and count ballot papers. This, along with previous election turn-out data, numbers of count staff and logistical considerations such as recounts and breaks were used to forecast the count times. These were generally accurate at the GLA elections, however delays occurred collating and verifying count figures for a large 2-borough, 3 contest election, which meant that declarations were a little later than anticipated.
- 18.3** A similar model for forecasting count times was used at the general election and was accurate. However, the model will have to change in 2026. In particular the counting of multi-member wards will present a number of different challenges including longer ballot papers, votes split between candidates from different parties, under-voting and the use of 'grass-skirts'. In order to accurately forecast count times, further count tests should take place to measure the impact of these factors on overall count speed and the forecast model changed to take account of this.
- 18.4** The use of Bernard Weatherill House as a count venue meant that the set-up of the count could be done over a number of days. There was no last-minute rush to complete the set-up and this meant that the verification and count could commence on time. Availability of future count venues for such a long period prior to the count is unlikely, however set-up time should be maximised to give as much time as possible.
- 18.5** The postal vote opening team that was located on the 11th floor of Bernard Weatherill House were well resourced and ready to open postal votes that had been returned from polling stations and from the 'sweep' by Royal Mail. An additional opening session had taken place in the early evening to open postal votes that had been collected from polling stations and this worked well to reduce the number of postal votes returned at the close of poll. Contingencies were built into count planning to ensure that if the postal vote checking took longer than expected, there would be no delay to the count process. However, all postal votes were opened and brought into the count before the finish of the verification stage.

- 18.6** Think Events London managed the return of ballot boxes by presiding officers. This was conducted efficiently, and boxes were brought quickly from the delivery points to the count floor.
- 18.7** The checking of ballot paper accounts and the unused ballot papers took place in Access Croydon. It was well resourced, and the accountants were able to clear up any queries with ballot papers accounts at that stage checking against the unused papers. The paperwork used for the checking process was reviewed and improved following the GLA elections and worked far better. This prevented the need for ballot boxes to be verified on numerous occasions, and was vital in ensuring the verification ran to schedule.
- 18.8** There were some issues with the completion of ballot paper accounts by a small number of Presiding Officers. This is despite the simplification of the paperwork and covering it in detail at the training and in written guidance. Although issues were dealt with when they were returned, it is vital that the accuracy of ballot paper accounts improves in the future. Best practice from other councils on how they ensure accuracy from their presiding Officers will be sought and introduced.
- 18.9** One of the changes to the processes introduced at the GLA and general elections was seeking efficiencies in the way in which count teams worked. Count Team Supervisors were empowered to use their staff to make the process run quickly. For example, some count assistants sorted ballot papers while others counted votes, rather than a very structured approach where all ballot papers are sorted first and votes are counted after. In 2026, the use of 'grass-skirts' to record split and under voting in multi member wards will add additional complexity to the process. A multi-tasking approach to the count process to incorporate this and to use staff efficiently will be vital to ensuring the speed of the count is maintained.
- 18.10** The feedback from election agents on the count process was positive. It was suggested that a more private area should be used for sharing of provisional results with candidates and election agents. This has been accepted by the (Acting) Returning Officer

19 FACILITIES AT THE COUNT

- 19.1** The use of the Bernard Weatherill House meant that there were good facilities for staff and other attendees, including a pay café for candidates, agents and guests on the 8th floor. This was open throughout the count. Refreshments were also provided for staff on the 7th floor. This meant that the café was not too busy.
- 19.2** At previous election counts, there has been pressure on the toilet facilities, both in terms of the number and the quality of them. Bernard Weatherill House had adequate facilities over a number of floors, and a team of cleaners kept them clean and stocked throughout the count.
- 19.3** Break-out space for the representatives of the political parties and individual candidates was provided. This received positive feedback from agent and candidates, as it gave them space away from the count floor and made movement around the count areas for all attendees easier. Although it may not be possible at all potential count venues, we should seek to provide similar provision at future elections.

20 BUSINESS CONTINUITY ARRANGEMENTS

- 20.1** Significant preparation went into business continuity arrangements at the count, including on-site support from the power supplier and lift operators, so that any issues could be dealt with as quickly as possible minimising any potential disruption.
- 20.2** Plans for the evacuation of Bernard Weatherill House were incorporated into the planning for the count. These included the practical securing of the count space and ballot papers, and the transparent re-opening of the building and re-start of the count, so that the integrity of the count would be maintained in the event of evacuation.
- 20.3** Further work on all aspects of election business continuity is required and the Electoral Services team will work with Corporate Resilience to further imbed business continuity into the planning for the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections in 2026.

21 SUMMARY OF ACTIONS AND LEARNING POINTS FROM THE ELECTION REVIEW

- 21.1** The model for project management that was in place for the General election will form the basis for the project management of the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections in 2026. (paragraph 4.9)
- 21.2** Recruitment to the core Electoral Services team that was paused for the elections will recommence in the autumn 2024 and the intention is to fill all posts by 1 April 2025. (5.5)
- 21.3** Early planning for locating the core Electoral Services team and various other parts of the election process will be necessary to ensure sufficient space is available. (6.7)
- 21.4** Count supervisor instructions need to be ready in time for their training sessions. (8.7)
- 21.5** How best to prepare count assistants for the complicated Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections will be considered including written guidance and/or training. (8.9)
- 21.6** In house training on the election count software will be further developed in advance of the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections. (8.10)
- 21.7** Electoral Services will investigate whether it will be possible to arrange parking dispensations for staff collecting equipment from Bernard Weatherill House. (9.1)
- 21.8** The additional capacity supporting the core team in the office on polling day that was in place at the General Election needs to be replicated in order to respond quickly to enquiries, particularly those enquiries from polling station staff. (9.2)

- 21.9** Communication groups between Polling Station Inspectors and their Presiding Officers will be standard practice at future elections to aid communication. (9.3)
- 21.10** The combined increase in postal votes for the GLA and General Elections needs to be taken into consideration when planning for spikes in applications for future General Elections. (10.2)
- 21.11** Officers will work with colleagues in the Association of Electoral Administrators, The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and The Electoral Commission to make recommendations on how the postal voting system can be improved. (10.12)
- 21.12** At future elections, the postal vote dispatch schedule will be included on the Council's website (10.13)
- 21.13** Ways in which we may be able to confirm directly to electors when their postal vote is scheduled to be / has been dispatched will be investigated (10.13)
- 21.14** Prior to any future elections, a process must be agreed with the phone line contractor so that there can be no repeat to of the helpline not going live at 7am. (11.5)
- 21.15** Multi-person proof-checking of bulk emails and website changes to be strictly adhered to at future elections. (11.9)
- 21.16** The plan for the count developed for the general election will serve as a blueprint for the planning of future counts, to be adapted as necessary. (13.6)
- 21.17** The dispatch date of count appointments (for polling agents and guests) at the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections needs to be achievable and expectations of candidates and agents are managed. (14.5)
- 21.18** The approach adopted at the General Election for managing access to the count will serve as a blueprint for future counts, to be adapted as necessary. (15.5)
- 21.19** The ability to undertake online right to work checks for election staff must be in place before the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections. (16.3)
- 21.20** Count tests should take place prior to the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections to take account multi-member wards and use of 'grass skirts' in order to aid planning including forecasting count times. (18.3)
- 21.21** Best practice from other councils will be sought on how they ensure Presiding Officers complete ballot paper accounts accurately. (18.8)

- 21.22** At future elections, the location for sharing provisional results will be more private. (18.10)
- 21.23** Seek to provide break-out space for count attendees at future election counts. (19.3)
- 21.24** Electoral Services will work with the Corporate Resilience team to further develop and imbed business continuity arrangement into the planning for the Mayor of Croydon and Croydon Council elections in 2026. (20.3)

Katherine Kerswell (Acting) Returning Officer
Croydon East, Croydon South and Croydon West parliamentary constituencies

18 October 2024