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**Decision Maker:** GENERAL PURPOSES & LICENSING COMMITTEE

**Date:** 14 July 2015

**Decision Type:** Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

**Title:** FEEDBACK ON 2015 UK PARLIAMENTARY (GENERAL) ELECTION

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**Chief Officer:** Doug Patterson, Chief Executive and Returning Officer

**Ward:** List wards here

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1. Reason for report

To advise Members on the key issues relating to the UK Parliamentary (General) Election held on Thursday 7 May 2015 and to give Members the opportunity to give comments on the electoral arrangements.

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2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

Members note the contents of the report and consider if there is any feedback they want to give the Returning Officer for him to take into account when making arrangements for future elections.

### Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: N/A.
  2. BBB Priority: Excellent Council.
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### Financial

1. Cost of proposal: N/A
  2. Ongoing costs: N/A.
  3. Budget head/performance centre: Conducting Elections
  4. Total current budget for this head: £N/A
  5. Source of funding: The Cabinet Office funds UK Parliamentary (General) Elections
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### Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): 7 full time staff, 5 casual staff and approximately 1,250 temporary staff (recruited by the Returning Officer) for staffing Polling Stations, opening and checking Postal Votes and staffing the Count
  2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: N/A
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### Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory requirement. The Council is required to designate one of its officers as Electoral Registration Officer under Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. The Electoral Registration Officer also acts as Acting Returning Officer for Parliamentary Elections (Section 28 of the 1983 Act). The Acting Returning Officer is personally liable for the conduct of these Elections,
  2. Call-in: Call-in is not applicable.
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### Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected): c238,000 registered electors, candidates, agents and staff
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### Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? No.
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: N/A

### **3. COMMENTARY**

#### **Introduction**

- 3.1 Following the introduction of the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011, the UK Parliamentary (General) Election date was fixed for Thursday 7 May 2015.
- 3.2 The administration of this election was the responsibility of the Acting Returning Officer (currently the Chief Executive). His duties as an Acting Returning Officer are separate from his duties as a local government officer. He is not responsible to the Council but is directly accountable to the courts as an independent statutory office holder.
- 3.3 The Acting Returning Officer was responsible for running the General election in the three constituencies of Beckenham, Bromley and Chislehurst and Orpington in the London Borough of Bromley.
- 3.4 However, the three wards of Clock House, Crystal Palace and Penge and Cator wards form part of the Lewisham West and Penge constituency and were under the responsibility of the London Borough of Lewisham. It was agreed that Lewisham were responsible for the nomination process, printing of the ballot papers and counting the votes; and the Acting Returning Officer was responsible for the issue of the poll cards, the issue, receipt and verifying of the postal votes and the setting up and staffing of the polling stations in these three wards.
- 3.5 The writs requiring the General election to be run were received at the end of March 2015 and the Notices of Election were published in each constituency triggering the start of the statutory timetable (now extended to twenty five working days).

#### **Registering to Vote**

- 3.6 This election was the first major electoral event since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration in June 2014. Whilst no elector was removed from the register before the election because of this change, there were some electors (approximately 650) who lost their entitlement to vote by post or proxy because they had failed to register individually.
- 3.7 Individual Electoral Registration – and online registration in particular – brings greater opportunities to engage local residents in the democratic process and to boost the levels of registration among under- registered groups.
- 3.8 The Electoral Commission undertook an extensive public awareness campaign around registering to vote. Unfortunately however this caused some confusion with many local residents applying to register to vote even though they were already registered, whilst some local residents looking to register for the first time failed to complete the process and had no entitlement at all. These were problems common to all returning officers across the UK.
- 3.9 The cut-off date for registering to vote at this election was Monday 20 April 2015 (12 working days before the election) and then there was a further week to verify that the person was entitled to be on the register. These dates are governed by legislation and in common with the majority of the election timetable, the Acting Returning Officer had no discretion to extend the dates and deadlines.
- 3.10 At previous elections held in Bromley, it was usual to receive a couple of thousand registration applications in the lead up to the registration deadline. This year, over 18,500 applications were received in the period 11 March 2015 and the deadline of 20 April 2015. In many cases people used the online registration and if their national insurance number matched Department for

Work and Pension (DWP) records, registration was automatic. However, a significant number filled in paper forms that the election team had to process manually. Furthermore, many of the applications (especially those applying on line) were found to be duplicates i.e. the elector was already registered. This had a huge impact on the election team but all applications were processed by the deadline.

## **Nominations and Candidates**

3.11 Nominations were accepted by the Acting Returning Officer (for the constituencies of Beckenham, Bromley and Chislehurst and Orpington) from the 1 April 2015 to 4pm on 9 April 2015.

3.12 In total fifteen valid nominations were accepted. Each constituency had a candidate from the:

- Conservative Party
- Green Party
- Labour Party
- Liberal Democrats
- UK Independence Party (UKIP)

3.13 No nomination papers were rejected by the Acting Returning Officer at this election.

## **Ballot Papers**

3.14 Following the close of nominations, data was sent to the printers and the ballot papers were printed (starting with the postal ballot papers).

3.15 This year there were a number of instances across England and Wales where there were mistakes/printing errors on the ballot papers.

3.16 There was also considerable confusion across England and Wales concerning the late change to and approval by the Electoral Commission to the new emblems for the Liberal Democrats and Green Party (used on the ballot papers).

3.17 It is therefore pleasing to be able to report that the ballot papers for the three constituencies in Bromley were correctly printed and there were no issues in this regard. The print company appointed by the Acting Returning Officer did a very good job overall, met all the deadlines, and delivered all ballot papers for polling day in good time, which enabled the preparation of ballot boxes to go smoothly.

## **Postal Voting**

3.18 The total number of postal votes continues to rise in Bromley with just under 35,000 postal ballots being issued at this election.

3.19 The deadline for new postal applications was 5pm on Tuesday 21 April 2015 (11 working days before the elections) with some 4,903 applications being received between 11 March 2015 and 21 April 2015. Generally the elections team coped well with the volume of requests, turning around paper applications in good time.

3.20 Most residents applying for postal votes close to the deadline (and who indicated that they were going away before the election) were advised that they may not receive them until the end of April beginning of May. The elections team explained the risks of not receiving/returning a postal vote in time and that it may be more effective for them to appoint a proxy. However, it is for the voter to decide how he wants to vote.

- 3.21 The issuing of the postal votes went smoothly with the first mail out (the bulk of the postal votes - some 31,300 packs) being sent out from the printers by first class post on Wednesday 22 April 2015. This included all those electors with permanent postal votes and those who applied up to the beginning of April 2015.
- 3.22 However, residents who applied in the last couple of weeks up to the deadline, did not receive their postal votes until closer to polling day, in the second mail out at the end of April 2015. This is because although the election team sent the data to the printers the day after the deadline, it took around 3 or 4 working days to print, issue and check these postal votes before they could be sent out on 28/29 April 2015.
- 3.23 Most residents received their postal votes the day after they were posted. There were, however, eighty three (83) reported cases of non-arrival in Bromley (mainly concentrated in two areas) and in these instances replacement postal votes were issued to the electors.
- 3.24 This issue was taken up at the time with the Royal Mail and an investigation requested.
- 3.25 The table below shows the (high) take up and return of postal votes:

<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Issued</b>	<b>Received</b>	<b>%</b>
Beckenham	10,787	9,621	89.19%
Bromley & Chislehurst	9,804	8,572	87.43%
Orpington	10,310	9,168	88.92%
Lewisham (3 wards)	3,739	3,279	87.70%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>34,640</b>	<b>30,640</b>	<b>88.45%</b>

- 3.26 There is now a requirement to check the personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) on every returned postal vote against those held on file from the original applications. This is a huge logistical process (with the Acting Returning Officer acquiring suitable accommodation for over two weeks and appointing some eighty (80) staff for each opening sessions) and is totally dependent on IT.
- 3.27 Four scheduled postal vote opening sessions took place in the Great Hall at the Civic Centre before polling day, with a further two scheduled sessions on polling day, one at 1.30pm and the other at 8.30pm. Over 2,500 postal votes were received back on polling day.
- 3.28 Some 30,500 personal identifiers were checked during these sessions with about 400 postal votes being rejected because the personal identifiers could not be verified (the Acting Returning Officer has now contacted the electors of these rejected votes so as to ensure that their details are updated in time for the next election) .
- 3.29 Once the personal identifiers were verified, the postal ballot papers were placed in ballot boxes, sealed and taken to the counting of the votes.

## **Proxy Voting**

- 3.30 The total number of proxy votes substantially increased at these elections with over 900 being registered on polling day.
- 3.31 The deadline for new proxy applications was 5pm on Tuesday 28 April 2015 (6 working days before the elections). Some 844 applications were received between 11 March 2015 and 28 April 2015.
- 3.32 Following recent legislative changes there is now provision for an elector to apply for an emergency proxy vote on the grounds that they have a medical emergency or if they are called away unexpectedly for work reasons after 5pm on Tuesday 28 April and up until 5pm on the day of poll. Calls relating to emergency proxies were high with 67 emergency proxies being registered in Bromley at this election with many applying on polling day.

## **Polling Places/Stations**

- 3.33 A Review of Polling Districts and Places was undertaken last year and following consultation, the Returning Officer's final recommendations were agreed by this Committee on 13 November 2014.
- 3.34 Subsequent changes were made to the polling places/stations used at these elections:
- Southborough Lane Baptist Church was used in place of Southborough Primary School in the Bromley Common & Keston Ward (Polling District BC4)
  - Orpington Sea Cadets was used in place of the Portakabin at Our Lady of the Crays Church in the Cray Valley East ward (Polling District CE6)
  - There were also a number of changes to the room/hall used within the polling place (especially with schools where we had worked with Head teachers so that they could keep the school open on polling day.).
- 3.35 In these instances a 'note' was put on the poll card to draw the change to the attention of the voter prior to polling day.
- 3.36 There were a couple of issues that arose on polling day around the suitability/accessibility of one or two of the polling places/stations (see below). The elections team is in the process of reviewing the suitability of all Polling Places/Stations used in the Borough and will ensure that any issues are addressed before the next scheduled (GLA) election in 2016

## **Polling Day**

- 3.37 Polling day itself generally ran remarkably smoothly. All equipment was delivered to the polling places the day before polling day, and all polling stations were fully staffed and opened on time to receive voters for the 7.00am start.
- 3.38 There were a few issues during polling with the impact of the new (Individual Electoral) registration system, the messaging on the Government's website and the emergency proxy process, but generally polling went smoothly in most polling stations. However, due to the unprecedented number of phone calls made to the electoral helpline, neither the Customer Contact Centre nor the Lync phone system (in the Electoral Office) could deal with the number of calls received and unfortunately some callers were unable to get through. These arrangements will be reviewed before the next election in May 2016.

- 3.39 There were also a few isolated issues around the suitability and accessibility of the polling stations at the following polling places : - La Fontaine Academy, Red Hill Primary School, Darrick Wood Infant School , Edgebury Primary School and Melvin Hall . The Acting Returning Officer and his staff dealt with these issues so far as they were able on the day as soon as they were brought to his attention.
- 3.40 A review of all polling places/stations is now being undertaken and these specific issues will be addressed so far as practicable before the next election in May 2016.
- 3.41 Polling finished at 10.00pm and there were no reported queues at any of the 185 polling stations in Bromley.

## **Tellers**

- 3.42 Following last year's elections, and as agreed with this Committee, the Acting Returning Officer ensured that all Polling Staff were briefed about the role of tellers. They were also given posters (explaining the role of tellers, as endorsed by the Electoral Commission). These posters were either handed to the tellers or displayed close by to where they were positioned.
- 3.43 Overall, everything passed off very smoothly on polling day. There was one specific issue raised by a resident on the morning of poll about the behaviour of a teller at a polling station in the Orpington constituency, but no other issues were raised by tellers, local political parties, polling staff or residents with the Acting Returning Officer or the Electoral Office during polling day.
- 3.44 However there were a couple of issues concerning tellers reported after the election, namely: (1) the number of tellers present and their conduct (obstructing the entrance) at a polling station in the Orpington constituency and (2) a hundred or so poll cards being found (with a tellers pad) in the ladies toilets at a polling station in the Bromley and Chislehurst constituency. The elections team have looked into both issues and appropriate action taken.
- 3.45 It was also reported by one of the local political parties after the election, that that one of the Acting Returning Officer's Polling Staff was not co-operating with the tellers but this was resolved on the day.
- 3.46 The Acting Returning Officer will continue to ensure that specific training is given on the tellers' role at the next elections in 2016.

## **The Counting of the Votes**

- 3.47 The Acting Returning Officer has overall personal responsibility to conduct a well-run count process so as to ensure an accurate result in which voters, candidates and political parties have confidence.
- 3.48 The law requires that the Acting Returning Officer must take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes (Stage 2 – see below) in a General election as soon as practicable and within four hours of the close of poll.
- 3.49 The count process took place in a large marquee at the back of the Old Palace at the Civic Centre, with an annexe being used to provide a rest area for candidates, agents and guests (with a television & light refreshments), and for the declarations. Following a few issues last year (providing valuable lessons around the quality of the flooring and the dismantling of the marquee) a different contractor was appointed this time. Feedback received about the arrangements has been overwhelmingly positive this year.

- 3.50 The marquee was spacious with plenty of circulation space for each of the three (separate) constituency counts (at ward level), the transportation of ballot boxes worked well and all the proceedings were open and accessible to all entitled to attend.
- 3.51 The Great Hall was used for the opening of the postal votes received at the polling stations and during the day, and the Council Chamber and the Committee rooms were used in support of the elections
- 3.52 Shortly after close of poll at 10pm, Presiding Officers returned their sealed ballot boxes and election materials from their polling stations back to the Civic Centre (the sealed ballot boxes and some election materials for the three wards in the Lewisham West and Penge constituency were collected by Lewisham and taken away to be included in the counting of votes in London Borough of Lewisham under the responsibility of their Acting Returning Officer).
- 3.53 Under the election rules the total number of ballot papers in each ballot box is verified with the number on the ballot paper account submitted by the Presiding Officer at each polling station (or by the Supervisor in charge of the postal vote session) (known as Stage 1). This stage is critical in ensuring the accuracy of the result as it means that when the votes are counted (known as Stage 2) the count total can be compared to the verification total to identify any discrepancies. In most cases any discrepancies are of little importance because of the size of majorities, but where there are only a few votes between candidates any discrepancy takes on a much greater significance.
- 3.54 The count process for these elections was quite straightforward with verification (Stage1) being concluded and the counting of votes (Stage2) being started for all three constituencies before 2am on the Friday morning. The counts proved largely uneventful with the result of the Beckenham constituency being declared first, followed by Bromley & Chislehurst and then Orpington.
- 3.55 As indicated above, the count process for these elections was undertaken within each constituency at ward level, with the results from each ward being aggregated to achieve an overall result for that constituency. The appendix attached shows the results at ward level for each constituency. (Please note that the ward figures are slightly distorted as the postal votes could only be identified at constituency level, and so verified postal ballot boxes were 'allocated' to a ward – and did not specifically relate to that ward).
- 3.56 The Acting Returning Officer considers that the count process was extremely successful. There was minimal time when staff were sitting around doing nothing, the verification of the postal votes was concluded early with the Last Postal Vote Ballot Boxes being brought in before midnight, staff were well trained, and the counts were well organised and completed relatively quickly.

### **Appointment, Training and Payment of Staff**

- 3.57 The Acting Returning Office made some 1,250 appointments to support these elections. Whilst many individuals fulfilled different roles, over 800 individuals were appointed.
- 3.58 The table below shows the breakdown of the staff resource:

RESOURCE	(%)
<b><u>Employment:</u></b>	
Internal (Council employee)	27%
External	73%
<b><u>Gender:</u></b>	
Male	33%
Female	67%



<b>Age:</b>	
Teens	2%
Twenties	8%
Thirties	7%
Forties	15%
Fifties	29%
Sixties	28%
Seventies and above	11%

3.59 The Acting Returning Officer strongly believes that the training of election staff was an important function for the successful delivery of these elections:

- All polling staff attended a 2 hour training session at the Civic Centre prior to polling day
- Count staff at all levels were provided with detailed instructions on the process, with Senior Count Staff attending a training session shortly before polling day.
- All staff helping at the opening of postal votes received a training session at the beginning of the first opening session
- Specific training was provided for the polling station inspectors, Customer Contact Centre staff and support staff

3.60 Last year, following the change in the (tax) law, requiring the Acting Returning Officer to operate standard Pay As You Earn and report it to Her Majesty's Revenue Customs in real time, we entered into a three year contract with an external payroll company that specialises in election payments. Because of some concerns that were expressed last year, a significant amount of time had been invested in making sure that all staff were fully aware of the payment process this year, and that staff data was entered into the election management system accurately.

3.61 This process has worked extremely well this year. All staff were paid within a few weeks and the volume of complaints about errors (particularly relating to taxation) were minimal and certainly much lower than experienced in the past.

3.62 The majority of staff who work at polling stations are not council employees. Whilst the consent of their manager is required there isn't a consistent approach across the council on whether staff are required to take a day's leave to work as polling station staff.

3.63 The payment for work at polling stations was originally intended as a payment for the hours between opening and close of poll which were outside of the normal working day when the majority of such staff were local government employees. Given the change in balance of staff and given that non-council employees who are in employment will invariably take a day off work or similar then it may be a fairer approach to require all Council employees to do the same.

## **Post Count Issues**

3.64 Although for the politicians, the announcement of the results pretty much ends the electoral process, for the elections team there is still much to do. Deposits have to be returned (either to the candidate or the Cabinet Office), election materials sorted, cleared up and stored away (as provided in the election rules), staff, polling stations and suppliers have to be paid, returns completed for the Electoral Commission and Government departments, and accounts prepared.

## **Conclusion**

- 3.65 Overall considering the high level of interest in this General election, the higher turnouts (especially with the postal votes) and the challenges that all elections teams faced (especially around Individual Electoral Registration), everything passed off very smoothly.
- 3.66 There were a couple of issues that arose and were dealt with at the time but as always, some learning points have been identified and these will be taken forward in time for the GLA elections in May 2016

#### 4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report

#### 5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The budget for the General election was £517,895 funded from a grant from the Cabinet Office. Expenditure will be contained within budget.

#### 6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council is required to designate one of its officers as Electoral Registration Officer under Section 8 of the 1983 Act. The Electoral Registration Officer also acts as Acting Returning Officer for Parliamentary Elections (Section 28 of the 1983 Act). The Acting Returning Officer was personally liable for the conduct of these Elections.

#### 7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

Some Council employees are recruited by the Acting Returning Officer to help with various duties concerning the conduct of these elections. However, a large number of staff are recruited from other sources.

The Acting Returning Officer has a statutory right under section 25 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to require the Council to provide as many staff as is required for election purposes.

<b>Non-Applicable Sections:</b>	[List non-applicable sections here]
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	[Title of document and date]