

Decision Maker: GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE

Date: 12 September 2017

Non-Urgent

Non-Executive

Non-Key

Title: FEEDBACK ON THE 2017 UK PARLIAMENTARY (GENERAL) ELECTION

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Chief Officer: Doug Patterson, Chief Executive/Acting Returning Officer

Ward: N/A

1. Reason for report

To advise Members on the key issues relating to the UK Parliamentary (General) Election held on 8 June 2017, and to give Members the opportunity to comment on the electoral arrangements.

2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

Members are asked to note the contents of the report and consider if there are any matters they would like the Returning Officer to take into account when making arrangements for future elections.

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children

1. Summary of Impact: Not Applicable
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Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Not Applicable
 2. BBB Priority: Excellent Council
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: Not Applicable:
 2. Ongoing costs: Not Applicable:
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Conducting Elections
 4. Total current budget for this head: Not Applicable
 5. Source of funding: The Cabinet Office funds UK Parliamentary (General) Elections
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Personnel

1. Number of staff (current and additional): 6 full time, 3 casual staff and approximately 1,250 temporary staff recruited by the Returning Officer for staffing polling stations, opening and verifying postal votes and counting the votes
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: Not Applicable
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory RequirementThe 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 UK Parliamentary Elections (section 28 of the 1983 Act). The Acting Returning Officer is personally liable for the conduct of these elections.
 2. Call-in: Not Applicable:
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Procurement

1. Summary of Procurement Implications: 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? Not Applicable
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

3. COMMENTARY

UK PARLIAMENTARY (GENERAL) ELECTION, 8 June 2017

Background

- 3.1 Under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, a General Election had not been due until 7 May 2020, but on 18 April 2017 the Prime Minister announced plans to seek a snap General Election on 8 June 2017 (giving just 34 working days to organise).
- 3.2 A motion was passed the next day in the House of Commons, and, with 522 votes 'for' and 13 'against', was ratified by the two-thirds majority required by the Fixed Term Parliaments Act.
- 3.3 On 25 April 2017 the election date was confirmed as 8 June 2017 by Royal Proclamation being issued by HM Queen, and Parliament was dissolved on 3 May 2017.
- 3.4 The election period was interrupted by two major terrorist attacks, the Manchester Arena bombing on 22 May 2017 and the London Bridge attack on 4 June 2017. There were calls for polling day to be postponed. National security became a prominent issue in the final weeks and this directly impacted on our polling and count security arrangements.

Roles and Responsibilities

- 3.5 At a General Election in England and Wales, the Returning Officer (the Mayor) is a largely ceremonial position - receiving the writ and declaring the results.
- 3.6 The administration of this election is the responsibility of the Acting Returning Officer (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.
- 3.7 The Acting Returning Officer is responsible for delivering the General Election in the three constituencies of Beckenham, Bromley and Chislehurst and Orpington in the London Borough of Bromley.
- 3.8 The three wards of Clock House, Crystal Palace and Penge and Cator form part of the Lewisham West and Penge constituency and are under the responsibility of the Acting Returning Officer of London Borough of Lewisham.
- 3.9 It was agreed that Lewisham would be responsible for administering the nomination process, publishing the statutory election notices, issuing, receipting and verifying the postal votes, and counting the votes; and the Acting Returning Officer would be responsible for issuing the poll cards, and setting up and staffing the polling stations in these three wards.
- 3.10 The writs requiring the General Election to be run in our 3 constituencies were received by the Mayor on Thursday 4 May 2017 and the notice of election was published in each constituency triggering the start of the statutory timetable and giving 25 working days to polling day.

Registering to Vote

- 3.11 Following the introduction of individual electoral registration in June 2014, all applicants must now have their identity verified before their details can appear on the electoral register. They do this by providing their personal identifiers namely their date of birth and their national insurance number. These are checked against DWP records, making the register more secure and more resistant to electoral fraud.

- 3.12 The deadline for registering to vote at this election was Monday 22 May 2017 (12 working days before the election).
- 3.13 Whilst online registration makes it easier and quicker for local residents to engage in the democratic process, it does lead to the potential for high number of applications for registration close to the deadline for the election and for duplicate applications i.e. where an application can be matched to an individual already on the register at the same address. Only individuals not already on the register, needed to register. There was no need to register separately for the General election. National publicity does not always make this clear.
- 3.14 Details of the registration applications received in Bromley are as follows:
- Total number of registration applications received from the day the election was announced (Tuesday 18 April 2017) until the deadline of Monday 22 May 2017 was **22,007** (21,211 online)
 - Total number of registration applications received in the last two days (up until the deadline) was **6,018** (5,819 online)
 - Total number of duplicate applications received was **7,918**

Poll Cards

- 3.15 Poll cards were sent out on Friday 5 May 2017 (the day after the publication of the notice of election) by Royal Mail to some 227,000 registered electors (including polling station voters, postal voters, proxies and postal proxies) giving voters sufficient time to update their registration information or to apply for an absent vote before the relevant deadlines.
- 3.16 A further 12,500 poll cards were issued up to a week or so before polling day, to those residents who registered close to the relevant deadlines.
- 3.17 Notification was received from 16 households (41 electors) that they had received duplicate poll cards (confined to a small area in Beckenham); and a small number of complaints were received from residents who had not received their poll cards.
- 3.18 Details were checked with our supplier but we were assured that all poll cards had been correctly printed and despatched to Royal Mail.

Appointment of Staff

- 3.19 The Acting Returning Officer made some 1,250 appointments to support this election. Whilst many individuals fulfilled different roles, over 800 individuals were appointed with only 155 of these individuals being Bromley Council employees.
- 3.20 The majority of staff who work at polling stations (6am to 10pm) are not Bromley Council employees.
- 3.21 Bromley Council employees are now required to:
- obtain their line manager's consent to undertake this appointment, and
 - take a day's leave or TOIL equivalent (recently introduced)
- 3.22 This has impacted on the recruitment and retention of experienced (Bromley Council) staff and will result in the Acting Returning Officer being increasingly reliant on non-Council staff at future elections.

Absent Voting

- 3.23 **Issue of Postal Votes:** The total number of postal votes issued at the General Election in the borough was 40,553.
- 3.24 The issuing of postal vote packs went smoothly with the first mail out (the bulk of the postal votes – some 36,000 packs) being sent out from the printers by first class post on Tuesday 23 May 2017. This included all those electors with permanent postal votes and those who had applied up until 8 May 2017.
- 3.25 Residents who applied after this date and up to the deadline of Tuesday 23 May 2017 (some 4,000 voters) received their postal vote packs a few days later.
- 3.26 A small number of complaints were received from residents about the non-receipt of their postal vote packs but in most cases replacement postal votes were issued to these people (up to 5pm on polling day).
- 3.27 **Receipt and verification of Postal Votes:** Bromley always has a high take up/return of postal votes and this General Election was no different with some 34,941 (86.16%) packs being returned by 10pm on Thursday 8 June 2017.
- 3.28 The personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) on every returned postal vote statement in each pack were checked and verified against those held on file from the original applications – this is a huge logistical operation requiring suitable accommodation (the Great Hall) for some two weeks before polling day, and is totally dependent on IT systems and staff.
- 3.29 Over 34,000 personal identifiers were checked with 460 postal votes being rejected in accordance with the Electoral Commission Guidance which has been developed by forensic experts from the Forensic Science Service.
- 3.30 The core electoral team (electoral staff and team leaders) undertake the manual checking of those signatures and dates of birth that the IT system requires to be checked visually (most signatures are compared and accepted automatically by the system). These staff have undertaken training to help them make a decision whether to accept or reject a signature.
- 3.31 The Commission's advice is that staff should only reject postal voting statements when they cannot satisfy themselves that the statement has been duly completed with a genuine signature, and that a signature shows 'major and significant differences' before deciding they are not so satisfied.
- 3.32 Once the personal identifiers were verified, the postal ballot papers were placed in ballot boxes, sealed and stored securely before being transported to the count venue on the evening of polling day.
- 3.33 **Proxy Voting:** A total number of 1,808 proxies were appointed at this election with 49 emergency proxies being appointed on polling day.
- 3.34 Absent Voting statistics for each constituency are broken down as follows:

Constituency	Postal Votes Issued	Postal Votes Returned	Turnout (%)	Postal Votes Rejected	Rejected (%)	Proxies
Beckenham	12578	10940	86.98	136	1.24	567
Bromley & Chislehurst	11366	9689	85.25	154	1.59	503
Orpington	12085	10547	87.27	141	1.37	517
Lewisham (3 wards)	4524	3765	83.22	29	0.77	221
TOTAL	40553	34941	86.16	460	1.32	1808

Polling Stations

3.35 The following changes were made to the polling stations used in 2016:

- **New Venue - South Rooms, Holy Trinity Church Rooms** in place of La Fontaine Academy in Bromley Common and Keston ward (following parking and access issues at the Academy)
- **New Venue - Darrick Wood Community Centre** in place of Darrick Wood Infant School in Farnborough and Crofton ward (following various issues at the School and with the Head Teacher)
- **Crofton Infant School** in place of Crofton Junior School in Petts Wood and Knoll ward (at Head Teacher's request)
- **Edgebury Primary School** in place of Mobile Unit opposite Edgebury Primary School in Chislehurst ward (following completion of major building works at the School)
- **Mobile Unit at Bullers Wood School** in place of Bullers Wood School in Bickley ward (at Head Teacher's request due to public examinations taking place)

3.36 In all the above instances a 'note' was put on the poll cards to draw the change to the attention of the voters prior to polling day. In addition to this, notices were displayed at several of the 'old' polling stations (including Darrick Wood Infant School) to remind voters of the change.

3.37 In regard to the two new venues used, initial feedback from polling staff and electors indicates that:

- South Rooms, Holy Trinity Church Rooms – more accessible than La Fontaine Academy with suitable accommodation, ample space to accommodate 2 polling stations and good facilities. *The Acting Returning Officer proposes to use this venue at all future elections*
- Darrick Wood Community Centre – the main room was too small to accommodate 3 polling stations, voters complained that the Centre was not as accessible as Darrick Wood Infant School and the pathway from the car park to the main centre is unsatisfactory (one voter fell and sustained a serious head injury which required hospital treatment). *The Acting Returning Officer proposes to go back to Darrick Wood Infant School at future elections (see below)*

- 3.38 Earlier this year the Head Teacher at Darrick Wood Infant School expressed her concerns about the use of the school as a polling station. Following suggestions, a number of alternative locations were investigated including Darrick Wood Senior School (not available), St Michaels and All Angels Church (not available) and Darrick Wood Community Centre (available).
- 3.39 A site visit of the Community Centre was undertaken (at the beginning of April before the General Election had been announced) to assess its suitability. There were some concerns about the size of the main room but given the issues at Darrick Wood Infant School in 2016, the decision was made to go ahead and use the Community Centre when the General Election was called.
- 3.40 However, to maximise the space available, voters from the 3 polling stations placed their ballot papers in one (the same) ballot box which was placed in a central position in the room used for polling.
- 3.41 Although there were issues on polling day with the space at the Community Centre, the use of one ballot box proved very successful with added benefits at the count including the prevention of ballot papers being put in the 'wrong' ballot box and the subsequent issues with reconciling ballot paper accounts at the count.
- 3.42 The Acting Returning Officer proposes to extend the use of one ballot box across multiple stations at the next election.

Polling Day

- 3.43 Polling day ran smoothly in most polling stations without any major issues being reported to the Acting Returning Officer, although staff reported throughout the day that polling stations were busy and turnout was expected to be high.
- 3.44 Polling finished at 10pm and there were no reported queues at any polling stations in Bromley at close of poll.
- 3.45 Presiding Officers working at polling stations in the constituencies of Beckenham, Bromley & Chislehurst and Orpington returned their sealed ballot boxes and other election materials to the count venue at Kent County Cricket Ground in Beckenham, whilst the Presiding Officers working in the 3 wards of Lewisham West & Penge constituency returned their ballot boxes to the Army Cadet Training Centre in Blackheath.

The Count

- 3.46 **Timing:** The law requires the Acting Returning Officer to take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes (Stage 2) at a General Election as soon as practicable and within 4 hours of the close of poll i.e. an overnight count.
- 3.47 **Venue:** Following the successful use at the 2016 EU Referendum of the Kent County Cricket Ground as a count venue (in preference to a marquee on the Civic Centre site), contact was made with the Kent County Cricket Ground immediately after the announcement of the General Election, and a booking was secured.
- 3.48 **Security:** In light of the recent terrorist attacks security was increased both inside and outside the venue. In order to prevent any unauthorised access, security officers were placed at i) the entrance/roadway to the grounds and ii) all entrances to the main building where the count process was taking place. Access was only allowed to the parking area if individuals had

evidence of a right to be present at the Count. Bag searches were undertaken. All staff, candidates and agents were required to register at the main building by producing their appointment letters, and were given wrist bands. Senior staff, candidates and election agents (not counting agents) were also given coloured lanyards to identify their roles more easily.

- 3.49 **Lessons learnt from 2016:** Parking restrictions were imposed in the roadway outside (Worsley Bridge Road) and parking facilities were made available on site to everyone attending the count. This made the venue more accessible (especially for Presiding Officers returning the ballot boxes), and alleviated complaints from local residents.
- 3.50 Also, in response to some concerns that were raised last year, a review had been undertaken of practices at the count and the following potential improvements were identified:
- Reviewing the layout of the count to ensure that all processes are carried out in clear view of those entitled to attend – Supervisors tables were brought forward so that they were more visible to the Candidates and Agents
 - Providing more information about the count – An Information Pack was produced and distributed/made available to all Candidates and Agents
 - Making available on the night (upon request), copies of the Verification Statements to Candidates and Agents at the end of Stage 1
 - Identifying the Acting Returning Officer's Senior Count Team by wearing bright coloured lanyards
- 3.51 **The Count Processes:** In accordance with guidance issued by the Electoral Commission, arrangements for each constituency have to be structured in such a way as to break down the verification (Stage 1) and counting of votes (Stage 2) into a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the constituency, with the totals of these 'areas' being aggregated into a single total for the constituency.
- 3.52 The Acting Returning Officer decided to undertake the verification and count processes in each constituency at ward level (although postal votes could not be identified/sorted down to ward level as they came from anywhere in the constituency, but were 'mixed in' the ward counts) with the results from each ward aggregated to achieve an overall result for the constituency.
- 3.53 The count started in each constituency at 10pm with the postal vote ballot boxes which were already at the venue. The ballot boxes from the polling stations began to arrive shortly after 10.15pm and were all received within about one hour.
- 3.54 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 sorted into votes for each candidate and counted (known as Stage 2), the count total can be compared to the verification total to identify any discrepancies.
- 3.55 **The Results:** The count process was quite straightforward with verification (Stage 1) being concluded and the sorting/counting of votes (Stage 2) being started for all 3 constituencies before 2am on the Friday morning.
- 3.56 The counts proved largely uneventful with the result of the Orpington constituency being declared by the Mayor at about 3am, followed by Bromley and Chislehurst at 3.30am and Beckenham at 4.00am (see Appendix for breakdown of results at ward level in each constituency).

Other Issues:

- 3.57 **Electoral Fraud:** Following the General Election there was some media speculation that individuals (especially students) may have voted twice at these elections.
- 3.58 The Acting Returning Officer has very limited powers to investigate such allegations and is not permitted to access much election material after the election unless it is under a court order or a police investigation. Any such allegations must be reported to and investigated by the local police.
- 3.59 However, the Acting Returning Officer takes any allegation of electoral fraud very seriously and asked his staff to monitor social media for any concerns in regard to double voting, discuss the issue with the Electoral Commission and contact our local election Single Point of Contact (police officer) to check the situation.
- 3.60 The Acting Returning Officer is pleased to advise Members that there is no intelligence of any specific allegations being made in Bromley about double voting or any other electoral fraud.
- 3.61 **Customer Contact Centre:** More than 5,000 front line phone calls to the electoral helpline were dealt with by the Customer Contact Centre (Liberata) during the election period, and with extended opening hours on polling day, this service was very helpful. The Acting Returning Officer proposes to offer the same service at the 2018 Local Council Elections.

4. IMPACT ON VULNERABLE ADULTS AND CHILDREN

There are no implications arising from this report for vulnerable adults and children.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Not Applicable

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The funding for the UK Parliamentary (General) Election is met by an allowance from the Cabinet Office in respect of each constituency. Expenditure will be contained within these allowances.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Some Council employees are recruited by the Returning Officer to help with various duties regarding the conduct of this election. However, a majority of staff are recruited from other sources.
- 7.2 Section 35(6) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 provides that the Council shall place the services of its officers at the disposal of the Returning Officer

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 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 UK Parliamentary Elections (section 28 of the 1983 Act). The Acting Returning Officer is personally liable for the conduct of these elections.
- 8.2 The rules and regulations for the conduct of the UK Parliamentary (General) Election are primarily contained in the Representation of The People Act 1983, 1985 and 2000, the

Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001, the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011.

9. PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

Not Applicable

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