

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	General Purposes Committee	Date:	18 October 2016
Subject:	Elections and Referendum 2016		
Report Of:	Returning Officer		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	None		

NOT FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To report on the Police and Crime Commissioner and Local Elections process in May 2016 and the EU Referendum process in June 2016.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 General Purposes Committee is asked to **RESOLVE** that the review of the election and referendum processes be noted and any feedback from Members be recorded.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 It is good practice to review electoral procedures to inform and develop future election plans and practices. The Returning Officer is subject to external scrutiny to ensure that elections are effectively planned and managed through the Electoral Commission's performance standards reporting process, which involves regular requests for compliance with election checklists.
- 3.2 The Returning Officer was responsible for the organisation and running of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) election in Gloucester City and the City Council's first all-out elections since the introduction of new electoral boundaries on 5 May 2016. The Council's Returning Officer, Jon McGinty, was newly appointed for these elections. He also acted as Counting Officer for Gloucester City for the Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union on 23 June 2016.
- 3.3 As part of the election planning process the project team, consisting of the Returning Officer, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and the Senior Electoral Services Officer, held regular planning meetings, attended briefings with the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) and a regional briefing in respect of the

EU Referendum. The Senior Elections Officer also attended regular County Elections meetings.

- 3.4 The elections core team has conducted a 'lessons learned' exercise, informed by feedback from Election and Referendum Agents and staff working on both the elections and the referendum.
- 3.5 It is the Returning Officer's view that all polls ran smoothly and resulted in highly accurate results, with the overall margins between the number of ballot papers issued and verified being very low in both cases when compared with other Councils. He further considers that the requirement for day time counts in respect of the May polls and the use of a ballot box for each poll enhanced both the accuracy and the speed of the counts.
- 3.6 It should be noted that the proximity between the May elections and the June referendum was extraordinary and, coupled with the limited notice in respect of the referendum, created significant additional challenges in terms of managing two overlapping statutory timetables. The elections team planned for this and worked extra hours to ensure that all tasks were completed.
- 3.7 The processes for all polls ran largely without incident and each count ran smoothly and with minimal delays. Nevertheless, the Returning Officer and Electoral Services Team have been discussing ways in which the operation of the election preparation, polling day and the count could be marginally improved, and officers will look to implement these process improvements in future elections. Three specific issues arose during the May polls and are explained in more detail below.

Poll Cards

- 3.8 As polling day in May approached we became aware that there had been an issue with the delivery of poll cards in Abbeymead Ward as the number of reports of non-delivery from electors and some candidates was higher than we would normally expect.
- 3.9 At every election electors report that they have not received poll cards, often just before polling day, by which time there's no way of knowing whether they've disposed of it by accident. We hand deliver our poll cards because we consider that it gives us more control than using Royal Mail because once documents enter the Royal Mail system we have no knowledge of what happens and when they are delivered. By hand delivering we know that there are only two possible reasons for alleged non-delivery (once processing and printing errors are ruled out): a failure by the member of staff or the elector has mislaid or disposed of their poll card by accident. Hand delivery also provides a significant saving when compared with Royal Mail; in May 2016 hand delivery of poll cards cost £17,877.20, but would have cost £33,072.82 using Royal Mail, representing a saving of 46%.
- 3.10 This is the first time that we have experienced a failure with a member of our staff and to our knowledge at least 95% of poll cards for the May elections were successfully delivered. The person in question was not an internal member of Council staff, therefore we have taken the only action available to us and will not employ them for election delivery duties in the future.

Postal Votes

- 3.11 In May we became aware that some electors in the Longlevens Ward had been sent the incorrect ballot paper in their postal ballot pack. As soon as this came to light we undertook the appropriate checks and confirmed that 16 electors had been affected. We immediately cancelled the affected postal ballot packs and reissued them along with a letter to explain the situation and we also informed the Longlevens candidates. We removed any incorrect ballot papers already received from the process and were able to identify any further incorrect ballot papers received using the postal vote identifier checking software. On further inspection this appears to have been a printing error as the data provided to the printer was correct.
- 3.12 In May a member of the public alerted us to the fact that 13 postal vote ballot packs had been found in the street in Abbeydale Ward. Following investigation we discovered that one of our delivery staff had left them on the roof on their car and driven away. We immediately reissued the affected packs via post and they were delivered within the statutory timescale. As this was a genuine human error by a very reliable member of staff who is usually extremely competent, we do not intend to take any further action.

4.0 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 Failure to review the elections process would prevent the Council from improving its practices and from meeting the Electoral Commission's performance standards.

5.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 5.1 To report on the elections process and obtain feedback from the General Purposes Committee on the process, with the aim of identifying improvements.
- 5.2 The Electoral Commission also requires the Returning Officer to evaluate the elections process in order to meet its performance standards.

6.0 Future Work and Conclusions

- 6.1 It is good practice to review the elections process and to identify actions for improvement. The Election Team have not identified any areas that require major improvement, but will continue to review processes on an ongoing basis and already have a number of areas highlighted where new or revised processes or approaches may be explored including:
- Content and number of candidate briefings
 - Content of polling station staff training
 - Recruitment of staff and succession planning
 - Count layout and signage

7.0 Financial Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, however, it should be noted that, spending on an externally-funded poll exceeded the Maximum Recoverable Amount (MRA) for the first time in the life of the current team for the EU Referendum. For non-City Council elections the Council incurs no costs outside of the costs of employing the core team; in the case of national polls, the Cabinet Office provides the funding and issues each Returning Officer with an MRA based upon previous polls and registration numbers. As a result of the surge in late registration in the run up to the referendum, we exceeded our MRA by approximately £12,000 due to additional printing and postage costs; we believe this to be a widespread issue nationally. To secure the funding for the additional costs we must submit our full accounts, which are in the process of being audited by Internal Audit. If the Election Claims Unit does not accept the additional spend then the Council will have to fund the shortfall from existing budgets.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

8.0 Legal Implications

- 8.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report. The Returning Officer complies with all relevant legislation in respect of the organisation and running of elections.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

9.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

- 9.1 There are no key risks arising out of the recommendations in this report. The elections review process will help to reduce any risks associated with elections by identifying opportunities for improving practices.

10.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA):

- 10.1 There will be no negative impact on individuals or groups as a result of the recommendations in this report.

11.0 Other Corporate Implications

Community Safety

- 11.1 There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

Sustainability

- 11.2 There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

Staffing & Trade Union

- 11.3 The Returning Officer is responsible for the providing adequate resources for the staffing of elections.

Background Documents: None