

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 OCTOBER 2015
MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION OF THE LOCAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS HELD IN MAY 2015
REPORT OF HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To scrutinise the organisation and management of the combined parliamentary and local elections held in May 2015 by Nottingham City Council.

2. Action required

The Committee is asked to

- 2.1 use the information received at the meeting to scrutinise how Nottingham City Council organised and managed the combined parliamentary and local elections in May 2015; and
- 2.2 identify any relevant recommendations for improvements and any potential areas for further scrutiny activity for inclusion in the work programme.

3. Background information

- 3.1 On 7 May 2015, elections were held for 650 members of the UK Parliament and for local councillors in all 36 metropolitan boroughs, 194 district authorities and 49 unitary authorities in England. In almost 280 local authority areas in England, the UK Parliamentary election was combined with other polls, including in the City of Nottingham. The elections were held amid the introduction of a new system of voter registration – Individual Electoral Registration (IER) - which brought a significantly increased level of complexity to the management of the election for electoral administrators nationwide. In their report into the challenge of 2015 elections, the Association of Electoral Administrators noted the following:
- 3.2 “Electoral administrators continue to deliver elections within an increasingly complex and challenging environment even when the odds are increasingly stacked against them. This was clearly the situation for the complex elections held on May 7 2015 following the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Preparations for the elections were behind as a result of the impact of the introduction and IER and

electoral administrators were exhausted before the election timetable even started.”¹

- 3.3 Overall, the Nottingham City Combined elections were delivered effectively. There have been no challenges to the result, there were no major issues at the count and polling was carried out without major incident. The ERO also met the performance standards set by the Electoral Commission for the conduct of the election (the Commission’s report on the election identified 29 councils where this was not the case).²
- 3.4 Post election, Democratic Services’ held conversations with key colleagues who took part in the administration of the elections and sent out questionnaires to polling and count staff, candidates and agents. The feedback received is referred to in this report and in the appendix to this report.

National Context

Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

- 3.5 IER was introduced on 10 June 2014, significantly changing electoral registration in England, Wales and Scotland. Instead of the ‘head of the household’ completing a registration form on behalf of all residents at an address, citizens are now required to register to vote individually and in order to do so, they must provide personal identifiers (National Insurance Number and date of birth). Additionally, IER introduced an online registration facility in an effort to improve access to the registration process (although paper applications to register can still be made).
- 3.6 The transition to IER began with a complex data matching exercise known as confirmation, which compared existing electors’ details with the details held on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) database. Electors whose details matched with DWP records were confirmed on the new register and were notified of their registration status. Citizens whose records did not match were sent Invitations to Register. For the purposes of the elections in May 2015, these ‘unconfirmed’ electors were allowed to stay on the register but were not allowed to have a postal vote (even if they had had one before). This created a register where electors could have a range of different statuses but still be eligible to vote thereby increasing the potential for confusion (amongst electors) and for errors in advice.

¹ Association of Electoral Administrators – Elections and Individual Electoral Registration – The challenge of 2015. <http://www.aea-elections.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/aea-report-elections-and-ier-challenge-of-2015.pdf>

² Electoral Commission’s report – Assessment of the performance of Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls, http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/190957/Assessment-of-the-performance-of-Returning-Officers-at-the-May-2015-polls.pdf

- 3.7 National and local campaigns to raise awareness of the new system of voter registration, together with burgeoning interest in the election, led to a late surge in registrations (with 10,000 new electors added to the City's register in the final 2 weeks before the election) and many electors registered to vote repeatedly. This had a huge impact on the Electoral Services team who, in addition to processing new registrations, processed 30,000 duplicate registrations in the run up to the election. The team also dealt with a significant increase in the number of postal vote applications.

Cross Boundaries

- 3.8 In light of the boundary review in 2016 the issue of cross boundaries could also pose a significant problem for the Council in the future. Local authorities who have parliamentary cross boundaries already have to give and take data from each other's Electoral Registers. They then print and despatch polling cards and postal packs and provide polling stations for people not normally on their register of electors for the purpose of running the parliamentary election. With unfamiliar data (different software systems) and partner organisations providing elements of the election on your behalf this increases the risks involved in this type of election.

Local Context

- 3.9 The Electoral Commission sets standards, monitors and reports on the performance of Returning officers (ROs) which is designed to support ROs in delivering consistent high-quality service for voters and those standing for election. In its assessment of the performance of returning officers (ROs) at the May 2015 polls, the Electoral Commission assessed 29 ROs as not meeting performance standards, encountering issues such as an early dispatch of poll cards, issues at the count, errors with nominations and ballot papers being issued to those not entitled to receive them.³ Nottingham was not mentioned as having encountered issues or as not having met the Electoral Commission's performance standards.

IT/ Software

- 3.10 During the IER confirmation process in 2014, Electoral Services experienced significant problems with their existing software, so much so as to seriously impair confidence in the team's capacity to both implement IER successfully and to run the combined elections appropriately in May 2015. An urgent decision was taken in August 2014 to replace the software in the clear knowledge that, whilst this would address the concerns about the functionality of the existing software,

³ Electoral Commission's report – Assessment of the performance of Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls,
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/190957/Assessment-of-the-performance-of-Returning-Officers-at-the-May-2015-polls.pdf

there were risks to a rapid instalment of a new system and that this would entail Electoral Services' staff managing a very complex election using an unfamiliar system. Whilst the replacement of the software proved justified in terms of IER functionality, as the deadline for registration in advance of the election approached and the volume of processing for IER increased, Electoral Services then encountered major problems with slow running of the system and a build-up of data queues.

- 3.11 This had a significant and prolonged effect on the team's daily operations, led to excessive overtime hours and challenge to progression against the election planning timetable. Ultimately, IT colleagues were able to diagnose where some of the problems with the new software installation lay and achieved improvement in its operational speed shortly before the election. Notwithstanding the context of IER complications and software installation issues, all milestones in the election timetable were met.

Staffing

- 3.12 The core Elections team for the 2015 election comprised two managers, four electoral services officers, two apprentices, one member of staff on secondment from another area and two temporary business support officers. One senior post remained vacant as the team had been unable to recruit to the position (this is indicative of a national recruitment and retention problem within Electoral Services' teams generally). Of the team of nine, only four staff had worked on previous elections. The lack of experience in the team, combined with the scale of the election and the impact of IER and IT issues, meant that senior managers were forced to focus on day to day electoral registration operations and processing rather than higher level planning. This ultimately delayed key internal preparations and communications in respect of the election, but caused no external detriment.
- 3.13 Colleagues in Constitutional Services provide additional telephone support to Electoral Services usually from the period when the notice of election is given though the extent of their support depends on the degree to which their day to day governance role is reduced during the pre-election period. There is no other dedicated call centre support available as is provided in some other authorities of the size of Nottingham nor is there HR or payroll support to deal with the appointment and payment of temporary staff for the election.

Management of the election

Complexities of a Combined Election

- 3.14 Combined elections are complex as they run on different timetables and legislation. This can be not only confusing for administrators, candidates and agents but also for electors, as different rules can apply. When local elections are combined with a parliamentary election there is also the

added pressure of the volume of work due to the increased public awareness. The Returning Officer does however have some discretion on local arrangements such as the timing for local nominations and the count. There are of course some benefits of combined elections: they are more cost effective, as we can share the costs with central government and they can help increase turnout.

Outcomes on Key elements of the 2015 Combined Elections

- 3.15 This section includes headline feedback on outcomes from key parts of the election process reflecting both the experience of candidates and agents and polling station and count staff and also the perceptions of the core team of Electoral Services and Democratic Services staff. Work is still in progress to review all the detailed election feedback to address:
- 1) how citizens, candidates and agents can be better supported in future;
 - 2) how polling station and count management procedures can be improved going forward; and
 - 3) how Electoral Services colleagues can be better supported to ensure that they have the capacity to plan and organise elections effectively.

Nominations

- 3.16 The nomination process in Nottingham this year included 19 parliamentary candidates and 200+ local candidates. The nomination period for parliamentary candidates was prescribed by the Cabinet Office as between 30 March and Thursday 9 April 2015, 4pm. There was some flexibility over the nomination period for the local election; however the deadline was also 4pm on Thursday 9 April. This was further shortened by the Easter Holiday period during the nomination period, from Friday 3 April to Monday 6 April 2015.
- 3.17 Nottingham City Council held briefings to which candidates and agents were invited and issued guidance. A facility of informal checking of nomination papers was also offered to support candidates and agents. The Electoral Commission advised that local authorities dealing with combined local and parliamentary elections should consider having a longer nomination period for the local election to minimise the impact on resources. The decision taken on the length of Nottingham's nomination period for the local elections was in line with various other core cities and local districts that also opted for the minimum nomination period.

Nominations – stakeholder / citizen feedback

- 3.18 Nottingham City Council sent questionnaires to candidates and agents, and of those who responded, 68% of candidates and agents agreed or strongly agreed that the information supplied was helpful, with none disagreeing. Several candidates/agents did comment that it would have been useful to have had the guidance available electronically, rather than only in hard copy, either via email or a link to a website.

- 3.19 Of the candidates and agents who responded, 68% either strongly agreed or agreed that they felt well supported during the nominations process, with only 4% disagreeing.

Polling Day

- 3.20 Nottingham City Council used 129 polling stations on 7 May 2015. There were reports of queues at polling stations and Inspecting Officers went to those venues to troubleshoot and assist wherever possible. There was only one polling station with a significant queue at 10pm and all of those queueing were able to vote.

Polling Day – stakeholder / citizen feedback

- 3.21 The majority of polling stations were deemed adequate for use with 83% of responding Poll Clerks and Presiding Officers agreeing or strongly agreeing that their polling station met the needs of voters and 70% of responding candidates and agents agreeing the polling stations were managed effectively.
- 3.22 53% of candidates and agents who responded to the survey agreed that polling station arrangements were appropriate and managed effectively, whereas 7% disagreed.

Polling and Count Staff Appointments

- 3.23 A significant number of temporary staff was required to resource the combined parliamentary and local election, with particular roles relating to polling day and the count. Staffing levels were increased for the election in 2015 in anticipation of a higher turnout and increased workload, partly due to the implementation of IER and the potential for confusion for voters resulting from having two ballot papers and boxes. 322 individuals were appointed to 628 posts with appointment letters being sent out on 19 March 2015. The appointment and training process was managed by Electoral Services whilst also managing the transition to IER and implementing new IT software. The recruitment involved an increase in the proportion of staff that had no previous experience of working on an election, especially at the count.
- 3.24 Polling stations were staffed in accordance with Electoral Commission guidance as to the numbers of staff to the size of the electorate. Some polling stations had to manage queues and became extremely busy. However, there were no reports of queues having been managed inefficiently or of any major issues with queuing at the close of polling. Many people dropped out of working on the election who then had to be replaced at short notice. This resulted in some polling stations and count teams having a larger number of new inexperienced staff than initially intended.

Polling and Count Staff Appointments – stakeholder / citizen feedback

- 3.25 67% of Presiding Officers who responded to the questionnaire felt that their poll clerks were effective in carrying out their duties. Comments were however made that on occasion poll clerks were slow.
- 3.26 53% of candidates and agents who responded to the survey agreed that polling station arrangements were appropriate and managed effectively, whereas 7% disagreed.

Postal votes

- 3.27 On election day the postal vote team started opening postal votes at 1pm, followed by another session at 7pm which included all the postal votes collected from polling stations throughout the day. At this election there was an unprecedented amount of postal votes handed in during the last few hours of polling, however this did not cause a delay.
- 3.28 Improvements to the postal vote checking-in system meant that postal packs were identified more easily and processed straight away. Due to the Nottingham Tennis Centre being a Council networked building the Council was able to scan and check 100% of the personal identifiers exactly as they would have if at the Council offices. This provided consistency in the process and allowed staff, candidates and agents to have confidence in the process in place on the night.
- 3.29 Experienced staff were used to open postal votes at these sessions and were assisted by Senior Officers of the Electoral Services Team to ensure that the postal votes did not delay the verification. This was an improvement on previous general elections since the relaxation of postal voting restrictions when late delivery of postal votes had caused overall delays to verification.

The Count

- 3.30 The Nottingham Tennis Centre is one of the largest venues we have and is close to the city centre on the west side of the city. It provides two large sports halls, along with many additional facilities, such as a public gallery overlooking the courts which is used as the media area, adequate space for three parliamentary constituency counts, plenty of space for candidates and agents to view all aspects of the verification and count, a café serving light refreshments with televisions for viewing results, and adequate parking for staff and observers.
- 3.31 The Parliamentary count (i.e. post verification) should have commenced by 2:00am. This was not achieved by Nottingham. In terms count

arrangements, in accordance with Electoral Commission best practice, the Council operated a mini count system on a ward by ward basis. The ballot boxes from each polling station in each ward were verified side by side for both elections, thus allowing the Council to identify immediately where papers had been deposited in the wrong box as previous experience had indicated that this was likely to be an issue that might impact deleteriously on the verification process. Each ward also had a postal ballot box for both elections which staff in that ward also verified. Once all boxes had been verified the final verification figures were fed back to the Deputy Acting Returning Officer who completed an overall verification sheet for the whole constituency. This figure was then released to candidates and agents and the UK Parliamentary count commenced.

3.32 The Acting Returning Officer decided, on the basis that polling day was expected to be busy and, accordingly, that staff would be fatigued, to inject additional and new staff to the verification process in an effort to ensure that this progressed well. All verification and count staff were trained in advance and had written instructions and many were in situ and already working on postal boxes before other boxes and staff arrived. This decision was also taken in the interests of succession planning, in order to develop a larger cadre of staff involved with elections. The benefits of this were seen more immediately with the local counts where 20 DROs were used, most having acted as ward count supervisors in the parliamentary verifications and counts.

3.33 However, in some instances, the impact of having 50% new staff members meant that the verification and count were affected as those staff were cautious and diligent but slower. Many of our boxes did not tally straight away with the ballot paper account and therefore had to be recounted which is not unusual. However, with a large turnout and a significant amount of papers in each box, which then had to be counted up to three times to clarify the figure, there was an impact on time. Accuracy, transparency and a clear audit trail ultimately took precedence over speed.

3.34 The local election count was held at 12:00pm on Friday 8 May and included a significant number of staff from the parliamentary verification and count from Thursday 7 May. Due to the overrunning of the Parliamentary Count, core team members were not ready for the start of the count at noon. Some core team colleagues had no or little break between the two counts and did not have enough time to complete their tasks before people started to arrive for the local count.

The Count – stakeholder / citizen feedback

3.35 The verification and count for the combined elections took place at the Tennis Centre in Nottingham. This is widely regarded as a good venue with 97% of count staff who responded to the questionnaire agreeing or strongly agreeing that the venue was effective. 57% of candidates and

agents felt that the verification and count arrangements were effective, with 7% disagreeing. There were a number of comments made by candidates and agents about the delay in announcing results and the perception that staff was being underused. Twenty-five percent of candidates and agents who responded to the survey commented on the fact that the verification and both counts took significantly longer than other comparable places. This needs to be seen within the context of the exceptional number of candidates and turnout, the use of additional inexperienced staff and the opportunity taken to “promote” a number of experienced staff to work as Deputy Returning Officers for the individual ward counts.

- 3.36 The majority of Deputy Returning Officers and Count Supervisors who responded to the questionnaire were satisfied with the calibre of their count assistants with 84% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their count assistants worked effectively. Those that disagreed expressed concern about the proportion of experienced staff to inexperienced staff and the impact this had on the speed at which the count was able to progress. Concerns were also expressed about the amount of hours staff were required to work and the impact this had on their ability to work quickly and accurately.

4. List of attached information

- 4.1 Appendix 1 – Questionnaires and responses

5. Background papers, other than published works or those disclosing exempt or confidential information

- 5.1 None.

6. Published documents referred to in compiling this report

- 6.1 The May 2015 UK Elections, Electoral Commission, July 2015.
- 6.2 The Electoral Commission, Assessment of progress with the transition to Individual Electoral Registration.
www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/190464/IE R-June_report.pdf, 10 July 2015.
- 6.3 Cabinet Office Statement - 16 July 2015.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/individual-electoral-registration-ending-the-transition>
- 6.4 The Electoral Commission – Standing at a UK Parliamentary general election in Great Britain.
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0007/79540/UKPGE-nominations-factsheet-FINAL.pdf

- 6.5 Electoral Commission's report – Assessment of the performance of Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/190957/Assessment-of-the-performance-of-Returning-Officers-at-the-May-2015-polls.pdf

7. **Wards affected**

- 7.1 Citywide.

8. **Contact information**

- 8.1 Rav Kalsi
Senior Governance Officer
rav.kalsi@nottinghamcity.gov.uk
0115 8763759