

OSC Report – Electoral Services during 2016

OVERVIEW

This has been an extremely challenging year for Hackney Electoral Registration and Elections teams. In a normal year, we would expect to run no more than one borough wide election (usually in May). By-elections are relatively rare.

By contrast, within a period of 6 months this year there have been 3 borough wide election events and 4 single ward councillor by-elections, making 7 in total. One of these was the EU Referendum which, in addition to the pressure on the elections team, placed significant pressure on the electoral registration team with enormous volumes of applications to register. There were 41,385 applications between 1 April and 9 June 2016, of which 11,401 were duplicate applications which require significant additional work and over 2,000 were applications from overseas voters which are extremely time consuming to process. Volumes of absent vote applications were also large with over 4,400 applications for postal and proxy votes, plus significant numbers of changes and duplicates, between April and June 2016 (the great majority coming in the late May / Early June period). Postal and proxy votes require 2 or more stages of manual intervention in processing each application and proxy votes in particular are very time consuming. The canvass also has to be run and this has overlapped with elections this year, which increases the challenge. The team should be congratulated for their hard work and dedication.

It is also important to recognise that the team running electoral services is entirely new, from senior management downwards. The responsible Director changed in August 2015 and the staff in the team changed shortly after that. At the same time the electoral services IT system was changed as it was identified by the Returning Officer and an independent review that a combination of a poorly performing systems and underperforming team were causing performance issues. Whilst all of this was necessary to ensure there was not a repeat of the issues which occurred in 2015, it added to the complexity of running elections and electoral registration in 2016.

In terms of the system change, the old system was unreliable, with electors “stuck” in queues making registration difficult, and performance issues meant that at election time, the opening of returned postal votes was often delayed by several days because the system would not operate. These issues have been resolved with the implementation of a new system.

The elections team was also changed to improve performance. All but one of the team left the Council and a new structure was put into place, increasing staffing levels to ensure that we met the challenges of registration and elections. At the time this was a difficult decision which led to an unsettled period. However the timing of the change meant that a new team was substantially in place for the 2016 elections.

Taking the 7 elections as a whole, whilst naturally there are things that can be improved, the performance of the electoral services team overall has been excellent. That is not to say everything ran smoothly, and there was an issue with postal vote despatch for one election in particular which is covered in more detail below. In order to cope with demand staffing within the team has been increased, some on a permanent basis and some on a temporary basis. The additional temporary staff have now left. Members should also note that the number of additional staff required to run an election is very significant. For a borough-wide election approximately 900 staff are required, all of whom have to be individually appointed to their posts for each election, which is a huge task in itself. Roles include postal vote opening staff, staff to prepare and despatch polling station equipment, poll clerks, presiding officers, close of poll staff, count assistants and count supervisors amongst others.

It should be noted by the committee that with the statutory changes to the way electoral registration operates and the move to individual electoral registration, that the workload of the electoral services team has increased significantly. This has required additional staffing resources and also requires far more in terms of processing, printing and postage. The additional costs of this are estimated at £400k

per annum and this is currently being funded by annual reserve requests. This additional work is not expected to decrease.

The projected active electoral register now stands at circa 167,500 (the last published register stands at 180,150 however there are circa 12,600 electors who we believe are no longer resident as a result of canvass returns and are likely to be deleted in the coming months). The next publication of the register will be 1 February 2017 following the completion of the annual canvass. An electoral register which is as up to date as possible is important in order to accurately report turnout figures at elections.

The team and new the electoral system is now bedded in and has had significant experience throughout this year which will pay dividends in the preparations for 2018 and beyond.

REVIEW OF SPECIFIC ELECTIONS

5 May – GLA Election and 2 By-Elections

This election ran smoothly from the perspective of the Elector, although there were internal improvements to be made in the way that both registration and elections are run, as is always the case. There were the usual issues on the day with access to polling stations and with lifts, however nothing that could not be managed by the team. The count was held at Alexandra Palace alongside the GLA count and the by-elections turnouts were:

Hackney Downs 58%

Stoke Newington 63%

23 June – EU Referendum

This was the major elections event of the year and a huge test for the service. Preparations for this overlapped with the running of the 5 May election which made things complicated. Huge volumes of applications to register and an issue with the government website leading to a 2 day extension to the registration deadline complicated the running of the poll and shortened the time the team had to complete necessary processes. Team members working late into the night until 2am and on all weekends was common on the final days of registration and postal and proxy vote applications. There were also a high number of emergency proxy vote applications running up to and on the day of the vote itself which added to the pressure and workload on an already busy day. Flooding caused issues for Hackney in terms of staff not being able to get to their station, but our contingency plans meant all stations were open in time with all necessary equipment. Lessons learnt from 5 May were implemented in terms of the management and administration of the day itself. The count was well run, the mini count process worked well and the declaration was made at approximately 3.30am. Turnout in Hackney was 62%.

21 July – Hackney Central By-Election

This election passed without issues and was a well-run and managed event. Turnout was 18.6%

15 September – Mayoral By-Election

The main preparations for this election were done in good time, incorporating learning from previous elections. There was however a problem with the issue of postal votes when a spelling mistake was spotted on a ballot paper at a very late stage which required the postal packs to be deconstructed, the incorrect paper removed, the ballot papers reprinted and reinserted, and the packs to be reconstructed which led to a 5 day delay in despatch. This was human error and has

been dealt with using the appropriate HR process. The effect of this was that postal ballots were delivered later than planned and the statistics show a higher than usual level of postal ballots being returned after polling day which could therefore not be counted. There were also a small number of reports of postal ballot papers arriving on election day, which should not have happened even with the late despatch and we have raised our concerns with Royal Mail on this issue. It should be noted that it is not mathematically possible for the late postal ballots to have affected the election result, even if all had arrived on time and were counted.

There were also reports of election communications arriving on or after election day. Upon investigation, many of these were not actually Mayoral Booklets but Household Enquiry Forms related to the annual canvass (which was happening at the same time as the election due to unavoidable timing issues). However there were a small number of examples provided of electors whose Mayoral Booklets arrived on or after election day and again we have raised our concerns with Royal Mail. In the future we have decided to upgrade the last batch of Mayoral Booklets to first class to try to mitigate this problem (the last batch of booklets is sent to those electors who register close to the registration deadline).

The day and count themselves presented few issues, testament to the detailed preparation done by the team. The count was well run and the declaration made at about 12.15pm on the Friday following the election. Turnout was 18.6%.

3 November – Hoxton West By-Election

This election passed without issues and was a well-run and managed event. Turnout was 15.7%.