

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO AND DECISION OF ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE ON 16 July 2019

SUBJECT: Review of the Arun District and Town/Parish Elections held on 2 May 2019 and the European Parliamentary Election held on 23 May 2019

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DATE: June 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The report reviews the arrangements for the Arun District and Town/Parish Elections and the European Parliamentary Elections which took place on 2 May and 23 May 2019 respectively. The report provides key facts, figures, information and feedback and considers lessons learnt, as well as seeking support for future improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Report be noted.
2. Support to be given to the Returning Officer to implement suggested improvements to the Elections process.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- a) The planned local elections (Arun District Council and Town/Parish) were held on 2 May 2019. Prior to Polling Day and following months of uncertainty, an order came into force on 10 April 2019 confirming that as the UK would still be a member of the European Union on 23 May 2019, elections to the European Parliament would be held on that date. This was just 5 days before local authorities were required to publish the Notice of Election and meant that there would be just 14 working days between this and the local election count. Prior to the confirmation of 23 May election authorities had been instructed that the Government would not refund any expenses incurred in preparation for this date as it would not be taking place. This was obviously the 'official' line, but was not helpful. In fact Arun made the decision to contact all polling stations on 14 March to ask them to 'hold the date'. This had the added advantage of giving us information about where we would have to find alternatives if our normal venues were not available.
- b) Members may not be aware that the local elections are the most complicated elections to organise by some way as they are effectively a number of mini-elections. Whilst the infrastructure such as polling stations, staffing and public awareness covers each mini-election without additional work, the Elections Team had to manage much more complex

administration and an extended nomination period from 19 March to 3 April 2019 during which we received and processed 419 nominations from candidates and arranged for printing and delivery of poll cards, ballot papers and postal votes for each electoral ward. We offer informal checks of paperwork to candidates during the nomination period which is best practice. This is always helpful, but was of particular value this year given the introduction of the new Home Address Form. A very large number of these needed correcting, despite briefing sessions and additional instructions to agents and town and parish clerks. Difficulties with the form were reported to the Electoral Commission by many authorities. Overall numbers for elections at a local level are:

District Council Elections:

- 23 District wards
- 54 seats to be elected
- all contested

Appendix 1 shows nominations and numbers elected for District Council wards

Town and Parish Council Elections:

- 24 councils holding elections
- 46 wards, 15 contested
- 237 seats to be elected

Appendix 2 shows nominations and numbers elected for Town/Parish wards

c) Turnout

- Appendix 3 sets out the electorate, the overall turnout and the number of postal votes issued and verified for all elections. The turnout for the European Elections in 2014 was 37.8%, almost identical to the 37.5% in 2019. The turnout for the Local Elections in 2015 was 67.7% (but these were held at the same time as the General Election) and the West Sussex Elections in 2017 had a turnout of 33.8%.
- The number of proxy votes requested was 112 for the District and Town/Parish elections and 336 for the European Elections.
- The turnout by ward was very variable, examples being that for the District Council elections the highest turnout was 45.27% in Pagham and lowest 22.19% in Courtwick and Toddington. For the Town/Parish Elections the highest was Beach at 38.78% and the lowest Hatherleigh at 19.22 %.

d) There are significant reasons why the election period was a challenge for Elections staff; however there were also some reasons why running two elections close together proved to be helpful, such as only having to train brand new polling staff for the European Election as other staff had been trained prior to elections on 2 May. Because many of the organisational

issues were closely related this report will review the general issues which applied to both elections, whilst identifying specific issues which applied to each one.

- e) The review covers all stages from planning, which took into account lessons learned from 2015 and 2017, through to practical arrangements on polling day itself and the count, although the particular combination of elections and timing will always be unique.
- f) The Returning Officer (the Chief Executive) expresses his thanks to all those staff and in particular the Elections Team, who despite being tired and frustrated that the European Election had been called with so little notice, managed to deliver two major elections efficiently and with a minimum of issues. As always this was very much about teamwork and a shared desire to 'get it right.' In effect the Council managed two elections in a very short space of time superbly, largely due to the dedication of Arun District Council staff.

2.0 ELECTION PLANNING

a) Risk

- A key element of planning elections is managing risk. As in previous years, we followed a detailed project planning process to minimise risk and ensure that the deadlines in the statutory election timetable were met. A detailed risk register was completed, no significant additional risks were identified to us by the Police. The planning took account of previous lessons learnt from the 2017 elections. A key issue was whether or not the venue which has previously been identified as our contingency venue if we are unable to use the Arun Leisure Centre, was suitable, that is the Bersted Park Community Centre. In discussion with the manager for both venues it was agreed that whilst Bersted might be practical for a more straightforward election with smaller turnout, it would not work for complex local elections with a large number of attendees at the count. We will investigate options for the future with Freedom Leisure. There are limited venues around the Arun District which are large enough and secure enough to host an election count.

b) Staffing

- There had been a review of staffing within the elections team during the year which resulted in a slightly changed structure which I believe has supported a change in allocation of work, allowing experienced staff to focus more on their specialist areas. However the absence of a key member of staff for a number of months did place additional pressure on the team, despite cover being planned in advance, particularly for the European Election.
- Staffing was very challenging this year. We need up to 320 staff (85 Presiding Officers, 175 Poll Clerks and 60 Count Assistants to provide full cover). There was sufficient time to arrange this for the local elections as we started to contact staff a number of months in advance and we do have a regular cohort of staff who would have set the date aside in anticipation of working on 2 May. This was much more difficult for 23 May and we had staff dropping out (including Presiding Officers) and needing to be replaced right up to the day before the election.
- All polling and count staff attended training sessions and additional sessions were arranged for new Presiding Officers.

c) Briefings

- Agents and Candidates briefings were held prior to the nominations period for the local elections. (Nominations for the European Election were managed by the Regional Returning Officer in Southampton.) An additional briefing was held for agents only to give an informal opportunity to discuss any issues with the Returning Officer and to demonstrate the new counting method which was to be used for local elections.

d) Timetable

- A further detailed plan and timetable was produced for the European Election as soon as it was announced, which enabled the Team to manage two complicated processes in parallel. Normal processes for local elections eg. poll card delivery in person, were not possible for the European election due to timescales. Copies of timetables for the local elections are attached at Appendix 4 and the European election at Appendix 5.
- Timetables running into each other was more challenging than in 2017 as there was a much greater overlap between the two elections. A particular issue was that many voters were confused by the delivery of European poll cards before the local elections on 2 May, compounded by the fact that we had to move some polling stations for 23 May as they were not available at such short notice.
- There are a number of time consuming issues that need to be dealt with after any election, including pack up, staff payments, candidate expenses etc. which needed to be done whilst preparing for the next election.

e) Complaints

- We had minimal complaints that were dealt with quickly as soon as they arose. The majority of complaints were about issues over which we had no control

f) Royal Mail

- We had a number of problems with Royal Mail which did seem to be worse than in previous years:
- Some electors complained that they did not receive poll cards for the local elections, we will be keeping an eye on this in the future to make sure that it is not specific areas – whilst the majority of poll cards were delivered by our personal canvassers a number of them had to be sent by Royal Mail, eg more rural areas or blocks of flats that canvassers did not have access to.
- Poll cards were not all delivered on or around the agreed date. We understand that this is due to practical difficulties around how long it takes the postmen/women to actually deliver them due to weight and the fact that poll cards normally require a visit to every property, which would not be the case with normal mail
- The poll cards for the European elections were sent out very late by Royal Mail (due in part to the bank holiday on 6 May) and we believe in batches rather than all at the same time, which also caused confusion amongst voters.

- We still find that voters hav trouble completing their postal votes, in particular not returning everything they need to or by writing today's date instead of their date of birth. We will look at how we can manage this in the future although we already provide extensive instructions as well as instruction videos on our website.
- The European postal votes going overseas were not dealt with very quickly by Royal Mail and we had a number of complaints to say that the electors postal pack was only received 1 or 2 days before the election. Where we were informed of this we allowed the electors to cancel their postal vote and have a proxy vote; as the timing around this election meant that the overseas electors could have been disenfranchised.

g) Printing

- We had a number of issues with the printing for both elections. We believe that the majority of these were due to the short timeframes between each election. This would have had a major impact on all printers dealing with election materials around the country. But overall are happy with the quality and delivery of the printing that we received.
- We will be meeting with our printers to discuss these issues to see how they can be mitigated in the future, but also take into account that these were exceptional circumstances that we hope would not happen again.

h) Software

- The Xpress system worked well with elections staff more familiar with the software than in 2017. The new online Staffing module (MEA) was used for the first time for the local elections. It did not work well because of a combination of staff not completing information when asked repeatedly and the system not being user friendly and working how we would like it to, so a system that should have saved us time actually made more work. Due to the general frustration we did not use this for the European Election and will be having further discussions with Xpress, the software suppliers.

i) European Parliamentary Election and UC1s

- The planning for the European Parliamentary Election needed to take account of arrangements for European electors. European electors resident in the UK can register and go onto the Electoral Register as do other electors. Their voting status is however more complicated and they must complete a UC1 form telling us whether they want to vote here in a European Parliamentary Election, or in their country of origin. Normally we would send these forms out in January in a year when a European Election is to be held, followed by a reminder. This was a major issue nationally with UC1s only able to be printed and despatched after it was confirmed that the election would be held, with a return date of 7 May. We recognise that this was difficult for many people and we did not have time to send out reminders which we think would have helped. Comparative figures for 2014 are shown below.

	2019	2014
European Electors	5,681	3,889
UC1s returned	1,034 (18%)	981 (25%)

j) Website and Contact Centre

- The numbers of people accessing the elections pages on the website for the period 18 March to 31 May are as follows, compared to last year:

	2019	2018 (no elections)
Customers	37,708	8,144
Page hits	135,708	19,236

- That is a considerable increase on a year with no elections, and demonstrates the value for both ourselves and customers in using the website for elections information. Our preference will always be for customers to find the information they require online rather than making a telephone call. The most popular elections pages were:
 - ADC election results (62,812)
 - Town/Parish results (19,165)
 - Elections landing page (12,754)
- The fact that the landing page had a lot fewer views than the election results shows that people were going directly to the results rather than navigating, this could be by using a search or by having bookmarked these pages.
- For the period 18 March to 31 May 2019 there were 2,378 elections calls answered by Arun Direct, against 413 calls for the same dates in 2018, an increase of. The vast majority of calls concerned registrations before deadlines and issues with postal votes and polling stations on the day. My thanks to the Arun Direct Team who dealt with all the first line calls from the public throughout the period and also dealt with the majority of queries from Presiding Officers (normally around registration status) on both election days.

4.0 ELECTORAL REGISTRATION:

- a) There continues to be a lack of understanding of the registration process by Electors, despite the fact that the current Individual Electoral Registration process has been in place for some time. Despite this the Elections Team worked hard to process everything that came in and between 18 March and 23 May 4,367 new electors were registered. This was a remarkable feat by the Team, (including Arun Direct who agreed to help with this). Between 10 April (when it was confirmed that the European Election would take place) and 23 May only an additional 24 overseas voters were registered. We believe this is because electors have been registering throughout the year in anticipation of a General Election or Referendum.

5.0 POLLING STATIONS:

- a) As Returning Officer, the Chief Executive keeps the provision of appropriately located and accessible polling stations under continuous review, with formal reviews taking place every few years. The next full review of Polling Stations is about to start and any recommendations will be reported to this Sub-Committee in October 2019. Overall, the feedback from the Presiding Officers and Polling Inspectors was good. There were a few minor issues and despite being written to in advance of polling day a number of electors were very unhappy that we had changed their polling station.
- b) Where we were using the same polling stations for each election we were able to store the equipment (polling booths etc) at the polling stations, avoiding a second round of deliveries.

6.0 POLLING DAY:

- a) The Election control cover was provided throughout the day for both Elections using a back office team (on a shift system), Arun Direct and six Polling Inspectors each with designated areas, ensuring that sufficient advice and expertise was always available. This worked well.
- b) We had a number of minor issues with tellers at the local elections, but no more than we expected. The Presiding Officers were able to deal with them. In one instance we were not told about the incident at the time so when a complaint was made afterwards it was not possible to deal with it. This needs to be part of the briefing for agents and candidates, as well as polling stations staff for the next major election. There were no issues with Tellers at the European Election
- c) We did have issues with fly posting during the campaign period. To a large extent this seemed to be as a result of suggestions to Electors that they display elections leaflets as posters during the campaign period. The publicity material was not specific about the rules around this which resulted in our Greenspace Team having to remove a number of posters from mainly Highways locations. When it became obvious that this was happening we agreed with West Sussex County Council that we could remove such material without asking for their authority each time, so long as we ensured that the location was genuinely WSCC land.

7.0 VERIFICATION AND COUNT:

a) Venue and Parking arrangements

- The Arun Leisure Centre (ALC) was a good venue and catering arrangements worked well with ALC providing a dedicated member of staff for the staff rest area throughout the day for both counts, which worked well.
- We were concerned that parking would be an issue for both election counts. The count for the local elections was held on Friday 3 May. This was a normal day for ALC, and the School, which also had building work taking place. In addition to this a large number of observers were expected for the count. ALC agreed to nominate parking behind their building for count staff only and we were able to agree with the University that up to 50 nominated staff would be able to park at the new Technology Park just along the road from ALC.
- The issue for the European Count was different as the count was held on Sunday 26 May, on which date ALC was hosting a swimming gala which meant that they were very busy through until mid-late afternoon. We used the same strategy and there were no problems. ALC responded really well to both Elections, but particularly to the short notice they were given of the European Elections.

b) Local Elections

- Thorough briefing and training in advance helped to ensure a really good shared understanding of the process and the new count method for the local elections, 'Kangaroo boards' rather than 'grass skirts'. The feedback from most observers was that this was more transparent and that the whole process felt a lot calmer.
- The District Election Count finished at approximately 4pm, at which point counting tables moved on to counting Town/District wards as soon as they were free. The overall count finished at 9pm approximately.

c) European Election

- The verification and count stage for this was relatively straightforward, but did involve close contact with the Regional Returning Officer (RRO), Mark Heath throughout the process. The South East Region, consisting of 67 authorities was electing 10 MEPs. This was a complex process and depended on us following instructions very carefully on what to report when and how this would be verified. We reported our count results by e-mail to the RRO at 7.45pm. We were told that the staff could leave the count venue at 10.30pm once the RRO was satisfied that there was no reason for a recount at Arun. The final results for the South East were announced at 01.40am.

8.0 CONCLUSION:

- a) I am pleased with how our arrangements for these elections ran in practice and believe that we achieved a number of objectives:
- Avoiding challenge to the election
 - Compliance with legislation and Electoral Commission Guidance
 - Ensuring a transparent and fair process for electors, both in terms of registration and voting

- Maximised voter turnout so far as was possible given the timing
- Ensuring a transparent and fair process for anyone wishing to stand as a candidate
- Accurate verification and results
- Professional delivery and consistency

- b) Our project management approach is robust and we assessed the risks well ahead of the local elections. We had not planned for the European Election and it is due to a massive team effort from the whole of Arun's staff, who provided both front and back office support that we were able to successfully deliver both Elections.
- c) I would also like to thank our partners, in particular Freedom Leisure, the University and all those responsible for the venues which we use as polling stations for their co-operation and support.
- d) The impact on the Elections Team in particular has to be recognised and I continue to review the resources needed to deliver the annual canvass, major elections and by-elections and Neighbourhood Plan referenda, alongside other commitments such as the five-yearly review of polling stations.
- e) I would like to record my thanks to all involved for the commitment, hard work and support which has enabled me as Returning Officer to deliver these elections.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Report be noted.
2. Support to be given to the Returning Officer to implement suggested improvements to the Elections process.

10.0 CONSULTATION:

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider elections team across the Council 	X	
10.0 ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail below)	YES	NO
Financial		X
Legal		X
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		X
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		X
Sustainability		X
Asset Management/Property/Land		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		X

11.0 IMPLICATIONS:

12.0 REASON FOR THE DECISION:

To inform Members about the operation of the Arun District Council and Town/Parish Council Elections and the European Parliamentary Elections in May 2019.

13.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None