

Arun District Council

REPORT TO:	Corporate Support Committee – 6 February 2025
SUBJECT:	Review of the Elections held on 2 May and 4 July 2024
LEAD OFFICERS:	Dawn Hudd, Returning Officer and Chief Executive Lauren Fairs-Browning, Electoral Services Manager
LEAD MEMBER:	Councillor Francis Oppler, Chair of Corporate Support
WARDS:	All
CORPORATE PRIORITY / POLICY CONTEXT / CORPORATE VISION: Access to the democratic process is key to the delivery of the Council's strategic aims and objectives, with the Police and Crime and UK Parliamentary election providing electors with the opportunity to exercise their fundamental democratic right to vote.	
DIRECTORATE POLICY CONTEXT: The Electoral Services team sits within the Law & Governance group within the Chief Executive's directorate. The delivery of successful local and national elections is a clear policy of the directorate given the fundamental need for those electors who are able to vote to do so.	
FINANCIAL SUMMARY: There are no financial implications associated with this report.	

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report presents the Returning Officer's review of the administration of the Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner and UK Parliamentary elections which took place on 2 May and 4 July 2024, respectively. The report provides key facts, figures, information and feedback, and considers lessons learned, as well as seeking support for future improvements.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Committee is requested to review the information presented and provide any comments and suggestions to the Returning Officer.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3.1 The report reviews the arrangements for the elections which took place on 2 May and 4 July 2024. It provides information, feedback and considers lessons learned.

4. DETAIL

Elections that took place

4.1 The Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) election took place on 2 May 2024 with Philippa Dart as Local Returning Officer (LRO) with Karl Roberts and Daniel Bainbridge as Deputy Local Returning Officers (DLROs). The UK Parliamentary election (UKPGE) took place on 4 July 2024. Philippa Dart acted as Acting Returning Officer (ARO) with Daniel Bainbridge as Deputy Acting Returning Officer (DARO) for the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton parliamentary constituency. Other officers were also appointed as Deputies with specific powers for adjudicating ballot papers at the count and refusing the issue of ballot papers at polling stations due to the introduction of Voter ID legislation.

4.2 The Returning Officer is fully accountable for all aspects of these elections and as with all Returning Officers is directly accountable to the Electoral Commission, rather than the local authority.

4.3 The administering authorities for each area were as follows:

Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner	Brighton and Hove City Council
Arundel and South Down constituency	Horsham District Council
Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency	Arun District Council
Chichester constituency	Chichester District Council
Worthing West constituency	Adur and Worthing Council

Election planning

4.4 At the time of planning the PCC election the Returning Officer and Electoral Services staff knew that there was a possibility that the UK Parliamentary election would be combined on the 2 May 2024.

4.5 Officers developed a plan on how they would deal with the additional workload and brought in additional staffing resource to manage the high level of expected applications for registration, postal and proxy votes

4.6 Officers had regular bulletins from the Police Area Returning Officer's office at Brighton and Hove City Council with directions and suggestions on how things should be dealt with.

4.7 Meetings were held with the neighbouring local authorities to plan who would complete which tasks where there were cross-boundary constituencies and develop robust memorandums of understanding between all concerned. With Bersted and Pagham wards now being within the Chichester constituency following the outcome of the national parliamentary boundaries review, this was the first year that Arun as a district had to liaise with three other local authorities regarding these arrangements.

Communications

4.8 Communication is critical in relation to any election, and it was particularly important leading up to May 2024 due to the possible combination of elections and complexities associated with cross-boundary elections.

4.9 The team developed a robust communications plan well ahead of the elections utilising the Household Notification Letter (HNL) delivered to each household in January/February 2024 and a dedicated webpage in January 2024, poll cards in March 2024, press releases and social media posts throughout both election periods, particularly ahead of deadline dates to try to avoid late applications. Officers also developed a leaflet providing information on the elections which was delivered with the HNLs and given to councillors for distribution and provided in the reception areas. This included information on the new postal vote return procedures.

4.8 Arun Direct has always provided excellent support to the Elections Team, without which it would not be possible to deliver either electoral registration or elections. This was again the case for the 2024 elections.

Poll cards

4.9 The team, drawing upon wider support from across the Council and externally, hand-delivered the majority of the poll cards for the PCC election as usual. Due to the tight timescales for the UKPGE the team was unable to hand-deliver and sent the poll cards via Royal Mail.

4.10 Officers again included a map of the location of the elector's polling station to assist them and a QR code to be scanned when requesting a ballot paper in order to speed up the process of locating the elector's details when arriving at the polling station.

4.11 The team also printed and posted the poll cards for the other constituencies to make it easier for the elector to contact the Council regarding queries with registration and applying for postal/proxy votes.

Nominations

4.12 The nominations for the PCC election were administered by the Police Area Returning Officer at Brighton and Hove Council. There was a total of 4 candidates.

4.13 The nominations for the UKPGE Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency were dealt with by Arun and there was a total of 6 candidates.

Electoral registration and absent voting arrangements

4.14 As a letter had been sent to all households, the team was able to encourage people to register significantly earlier than the deadline. This meant we were able to manage the increase in registrations across the election period and concentrate on processing the increase in postal vote applications. Officers received a significant increase in duplicate registration applications which is an ongoing issue.

The table below sets out a summary of applications received between 26 March and 26 June 2024.

Application summary	Registration	Postal voting	Proxy voting	Overseas electors	Voter Authority Certificates
Total		3739	602	274	152
Application method	Registration	Postal voting	Proxy voting	Overseas electors	Voter Authority Certificates
Total	10,875	3739	602	274	152
Paper	493	780	37	3	10
Online	10,100	2959	565	271	142
Phone	282	0	0	0	0

4.15 There was a marked increase in requests for proxy votes this year, with 602 in total between 26 March and 26 June. This was due to the late notice of the UKPGE and the fact that a lot of electors were due to be away on 4 July. This compared to the 66 applications, including 7 emergency proxies, that we received in 2023.

4.16 Due to the change in legislation for overseas voters having votes for life we receive a large increase in applications as shown on the table. Each application must be looked at and checked for eligibility from their previous UK registration/residency and can be very time consuming. All applicants were contacted where necessary and added to the register ahead of the election where possible. The team received a number of complaints where overseas voters did not receive their postal packs in time. This was due to the tight timescales and beyond the team's control.

4.17 Due to the issues around postal vote delivery by Royal Mail in 2023's local elections and other by-elections within the year the team decided to trial the hand-delivery of postal votes for the PCC election by the usual delivery team, as permitted by the legislation.

4.18 The team created reporting tools so that it knew when a postal pack had been delivered to a property in case of queries. The hand delivery went very well with very few complaints. This process was adopted again for the UKPGE Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency and will continue to be used for future elections. Hand delivery is both a reliable and cost-effective way of ensuring each elector is given the opportunity to vote. We received some complaints from electors not receiving their postal votes but the majority of these were from the other constituencies which were delivered by Royal Mail.

4.19 Due to the change in legislation regarding the return of postal votes delivered in person by the elector, the team increased its level of communications, including a radio advert, to inform electors that should they wish to return their postal votes at the Civic Centre or local polling station that they would need to complete a prescribed return form. The team found that a few electors still posted the returned packs through the Civic Centre post box despite having large signs displayed. There were very few rejected, but considering this it was decided that for the UKPGE the post boxes would be sealed to avoid postal votes being rejected for that reason.

Staff and training

4.20 For the PCC election, excluding the core elections team and the rest of the wider election control team, 431 different staff roles were filled, and for the UKPGE 505 staff roles were filled between 22 May (when the election was announced) up to appointing a last-minute Presiding Officer on 3 July.

May 2024	
Poll Clerks (PC)	209
Presiding Officers (PO)	82
Count Assistants (CA)	48

July 2024	
Poll Clerks (PC)	Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (BRL) - 157 Arundel and South Downs (ASD) - 37 Chichester (CHI) - 24 Worthing West (WW) - 38 Total of 256
Presiding Officers (PO)	Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (BRL) - 46 Arundel and South Downs (ASD) - 16 Chichester (CHI) - 7 Worthing West (WW) - 12 Total of 81
Count Assistants (CA)	74

4.21 For the UKPGE the team was required to fill many different staffing roles, from polling station staff to count assistants, postal vote openers to pack up staff. The short notice of this election combined with the increase in staff members required added to the complexities of this. For a scheduled election the team begins the process of recruiting staff 8 to 9 months prior to the date of the election, allowing time for the staff to respond to requests, complete in-person and online training, and provide the relevant documentation for payroll.

4.22 Staffing a UKPGE is also more of a complex process as polling stations are split into each of the parliamentary constituencies and whilst the team recruits for the same number of polling stations as other elections, staff working in the Arundel and South Downs (ASD), Chichester (Chi), and Worthing West (WW) constituencies work for the respective local authority which runs each constituency rather than for Arun District Council. This means that training requirements and appointment letters are different for each and produced additional work for the team sending out multiple instructions.

May 2024	
Poll Clerks (PC) letter	1
Presiding Officers (PO) letter	1
Count Assistants (CA) letter	1
Arun in-person training	4 sessions
Online iPads training	All staff
PO briefing	3 sessions

July 2024	
Poll Clerks (PC) letter	4 (1 for each constituency)
Presiding Officers (PO) letter	4 (1 for each constituency)
Count Assistants (CA) letter	1
Arun in-person training	1 session for new staff
WW online training	1 session
WW online PO briefing	1 session
CHI online training	1 session
CHI online PO briefing	1 session
ASD online training	1 session
ASD online PO briefing	1 session
Online iPads training	All staff
PO briefing Arun produced all ballot boxes so POs from the constituencies within Arun also needed to attend to collect their boxes from the Civic Centre	3 sessions

4.23 The team also received an unprecedented number of new staff applications; 15 on the day the election was called, up to a total of 205 – the last 3 of which were received on polling day. In comparison, prior to the UKPGE, this is how many applications the team received over the period of 13 months. Each application must be downloaded individually and manually added to our staff database, which now contains the details of 668 staff members.

4.24 Despite only sending appointment letters to all the staff who had previously indicated they would be willing to work in a polling station when a UKPGE was called, due to the short notice and the timing of the election in the summer holidays, the team had a high number of staff decline their appointments, or not respond to the team at all. The team had 410 responses to the survey sent out for staff to accept/decline their appointment. However, as previously mentioned the team hired 337 polling staff. Of the additional 73 staff who completed the survey, 63 declined the appointment in the first instance (18.69% of total staff required), and the remaining 10 (2.96%) dropped out of the role after accepting. This means that not only did the team have the challenge of finding 46 additional polling staff compared to May 2024 but also needed to replace 21.66% (73) of staff who were no longer available once the UKPGE was called.

4.25 In comparison, in May 2024 there were 316 responses to our staff survey, and ultimately hired 291 polling staff. 20 members of staff (6.87%) declined in the first instance, and 5 (1.72%) dropped out after accepting, making a total replacement rate of 8.59% (25). This illustrates the effect that the timing of the election had on both the recruitment and retention of polling staff.

4.26 When it comes to staffing the polling stations, the team follows the guidance of the Electoral Commission where possible. They advise the following:

Electorate (excluding postal voters)	Recommended number of polling station staff
1 - 1250	3 (1 Presiding Officer and 2 Poll Clerks)
1250 - 2250	4 (1 Presiding Officer and 3 Poll Clerks)

4.27 The exception to this is for the smallest and largest electorate polling stations. For example, the polling district AHOE which covers the Hoe Lane Ward of Yapton Parish has 83 electors and so only 2 members of staff are used. Whilst the polling station covering CPAG3 and CPAG4 polling districts in Paghham has 2,142 electors and so we hire additional staff to manage any potential queues. The team also considers the number of electors visiting each polling place – the building where polling stations are situated. In the example of the Yapton & Ford Village Hall, there are 3 polling stations with a total of 4,127 in-person voters and so additional staff are required to direct voters to the correct polling station within the building and to ensure that the ballot papers are not placed in the wrong ballot box.

4.28 However, the Electoral Commission ratios are based on using paper registers and corresponding number lists. They do not take into consideration the use of iPads in polling stations, which streamlines the voting process and ultimately reduces the number of staff required to issue ballot papers. Until the Electoral Commission recognise the use of iPads within their staffing ratios, the team is required to still follow them.

Postal Vote Opening

4.29 As the team expected a lower turnout for the PCC election, it was able to return to afternoon sessions for postal vote opening as the numbers were more manageable than with the 2023 local elections.

4.30 The team adopted the same approach for the UKPGE as it was only required to open the postal votes for the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and Worthing West constituencies. This worked well for both elections.

Polling stations

4.31 Changes were made to the location of certain polling stations due to venues no longer being available or being temporarily unavailable due to building works. 81 polling stations were operated across 69 venues.

4.32 As explained previously, the elector's polling station details were included in the HNLs sent in January 2024 as well as the revised poll cards, highlighting the need to check whether a change had been made to the normal venue. This was mirrored on the Council's website, in press releases and on social media activity around the elections. Very few issues were experienced with the venues on polling day and a small number of minor complaints where people had not fully read their poll cards. In the future the team will look at further ways to highlight any changes, including sending text messages and emails to electors where their details are held and there is an ability to use them.

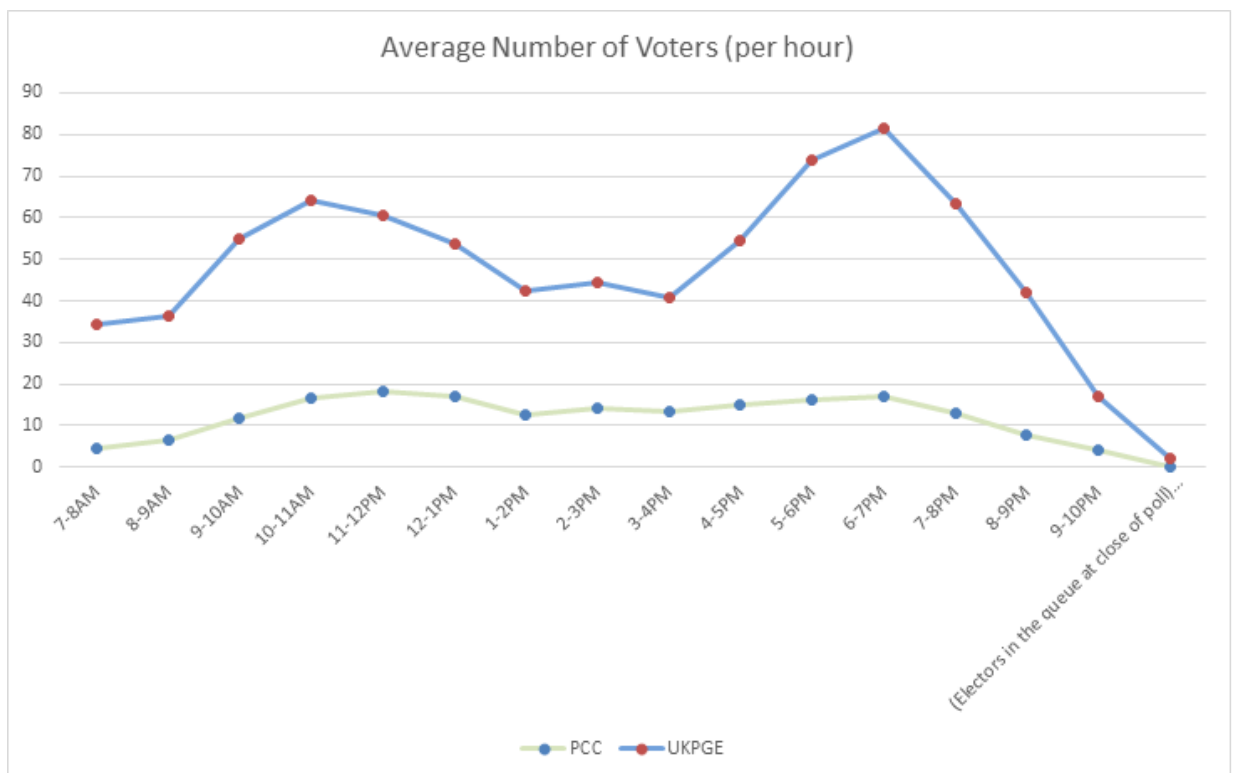
4.33 Arun District Council was required to carry out a polling district review between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025, and therefore any comments received were used in this review. That review is the subject of a separate report on this meeting's agenda. Officer will also ask for further feedback from all stakeholders as part of the consultation period for this exercise. The team constantly reviews polling station venues; therefore the team did not expect to encounter any issues with this work.

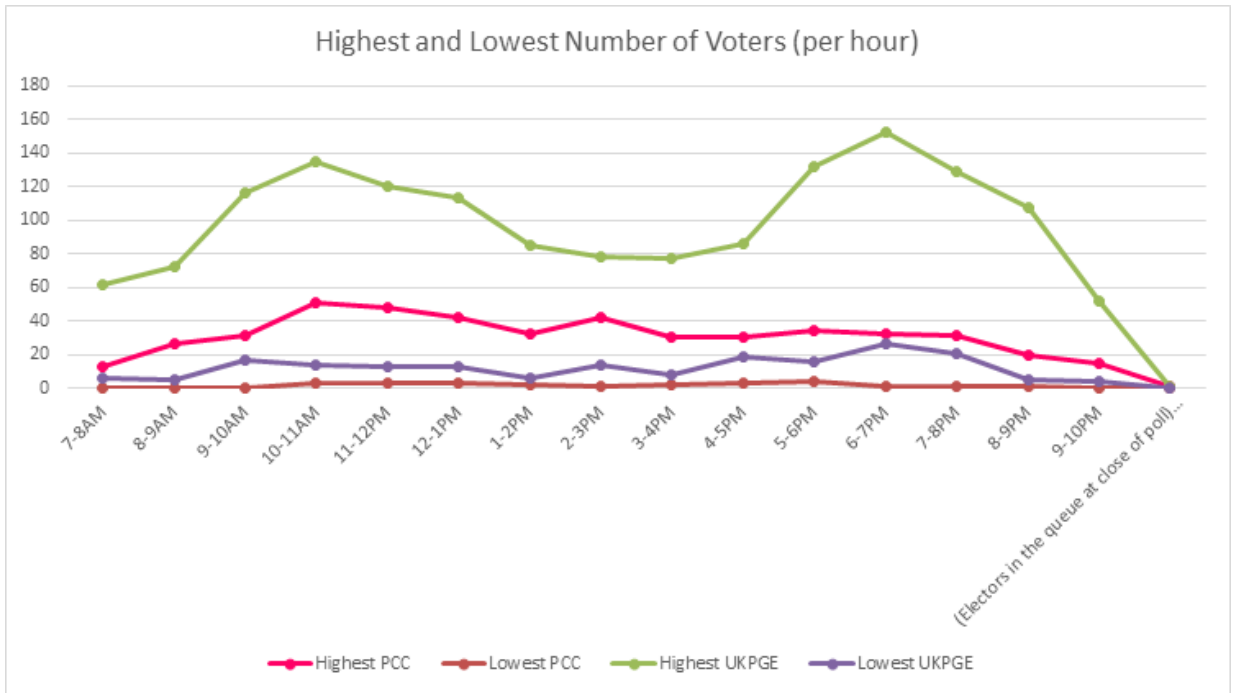
4.34 iPads were once again used in polling stations instead of the paper Electoral Registers, Corresponding Numbers List and Ballot Paper Account. The team was also able to use the tablets to gather the Voter ID statistics required by the Electoral Commission. Again the iPads worked very well and saved a lot of officer time as well as that of the polling station staff. Electors experienced a more efficient voting experience because of this. Using technology is considered the way forward for officers and for the electoral process and is updated with new functionality each year in line with legislation and user requests.

Polling day and iPad Turnout Figures

4.35 One of the main benefits of the iPads is the live updating the team receives throughout polling day so that the team can see how many electors have voted at each polling station. This helps in tracking stations that may need additional support during the day and when their busy periods are. The following data from both the PCC election and UKPGE is based on the 46 polling stations located within the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton Constituency, to ensure a fair comparison. It illustrates how big the gap was between the number of voters voting in each election and considers the difference in elector eligibility.

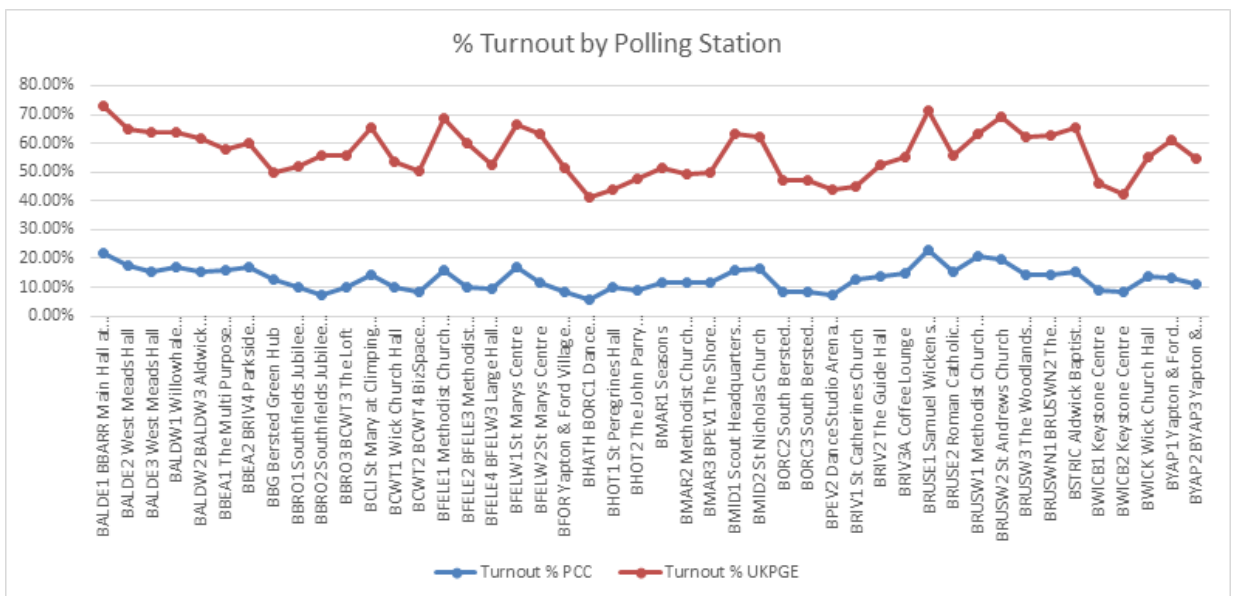
4.36 Through the iPad turnout figures members will see that the peak time for voting is between 10-11am and 6-7pm, and this is reflected in both the PCC and UKPGE figures. With this level of information know, presiding officers can advise staff to take breaks accordingly, as well as ensuring any part time PCs are hired over these times, rather than quiet parts of the day.





4.37 The team is also able to see and compare the polling stations with the highest and lowest turnouts per hour for both elections. This shows the variations across the district, particularly when looking at the 6-7pm peak and how stark the difference is between election types. For the PCC this hour slot saw 32 electors vote at the busiest station and 1 elector at the quietest, but for the UKPGE the difference was between 153 electors and 32 electors.

4.38 Comparisons can also be made between the percentage turnout for each polling station at both elections. Unsurprisingly the turnouts increased in all polling stations at the UKPGE. The smallest increase was at St Catherine's Church, the BRIV1 polling district, which increased from 12.82% at the PCC to 44.95% at the UKPGE, meaning an additional 310 electors voted. The biggest increase was at the Methodist Church in Felpham at the BFELE1 polling district, which increased from 16.12% to 68.8%, with an extra 684 electors voting.



4.39 It is also interesting to see that the polling station turnouts follow the same curve regardless of the type of election. Traditionally the PCC is the lowest turnout of the district-wide elections, whilst the UKPGE has the highest turnout. As the curve remains the same for both, this will hopefully help inform staffing numbers in future elections as well as predict turnout figures more accurately. This means ballot boxes can be allocated more accurately to count tables at an election count based on what the team predicts to be the number of ballot papers inside. Ensuring that each count table has roughly the same number of ballot papers on it means that count tables can run more efficiently and speed up the count process.

4.40 The vast majority of feedback received, with a few exceptions, stated that the iPads were more efficient and faster than traditional paper registers, Corresponding Number Lists and ballot paper accounts.

Verification and count

4.41 The verification and count for the PCC election was held on Sunday 5 May 2024. The verification commenced at 9am and the first count started at 1.00pm across Sussex.

4.42 The team trialled the use of the Arun Civic Centre as the count venue in order to assess it as a contingency venue. This was possible due to the expected lower turnout compared with the UKPGE. Although the space was a smaller than either the Arun Leisure Centre or Littlehampton Wave it worked well and was well thought out in advance with secure areas for the ballot boxes to be stored and distributed from.

4.43 The UKPGE verification and count took place directly after the close of poll on 4 July 2024. Again, a different venue was trialled at the Littlehampton Wave in order to test options for the future. Despite the majority of count staff being employed at polling stations for the day, the verification and count went well and the team and the Acting Returning Officer received positive feedback from those attending. The count was concluded within the expected timeframe. The venue was a success with the vast majority of feedback received confirming that they preferred it and so we will look to use this for future elections.

4.44 The team received feedback that the use of screens hinders the ability to see and hear what is going on, feeding back to staff and to ask questions. Screens were again used in order to manage interactions between observers and count staff. As with previous elections this was generally well received by both observers and staff, with a few exceptions. Observers have always been informed, in line with Electoral Commission guidance, that they should not talk to the staff and to direct their questions/comments to the table supervisors, or to the Returning Officer and their Deputy(ies) if necessary. The count staff have fed back that they appreciate the screens as there are fewer interruptions and they can focus on their task, enabling them to work.

Conclusion

4.45 The Returning Officer, Electoral Service Manager and the Elections Team are pleased with how the Council's arrangements for these elections ran in practice and the Elections Team worked extremely hard to make sure that all tasks were completed accurately and in the required timeframes, particularly considering the late notice of the UK Parliamentary election.

5. CONSULTATION

5.1 The feedback received from relevant consultations is set out within the Appendices to this report.

6. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

6.1 There are no alternative options to bringing this report to the Committee.

7. COMMENTS BY THE GROUP HEAD OF FINANCE/SECTION 151 OFFICER

7.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

9. COMMENTS OF THE GROUP HEAD OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE & MONITORING OFFICER

9.1 There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

10.1 The report sets out the staffing levels required to run elections and the challenges around recruitment.

11. HEALTH & SAFETY IMPACT

11.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

12. PROPERTY & ESTATES IMPACT

12.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

13. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) / SOCIAL VALUE

13.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

14. CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT/SOCIAL VALUE

14.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

15. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

15.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

16. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT

16.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

17. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION / DATA PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

17.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT: None