

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE ON 11 February 2020

PART A: REPORT

SUBJECT: Review of the UK Parliamentary General Election held on 12 December 2019

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DATE: 22 January 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The report reviews the arrangements for the 'snap' UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) which took place on 12 December 2019. 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 the Acting Returning Office to implement any changes needed for future elections.

1. BACKGROUND

1.0 Following considerable political uncertainty about if and when a UK Parliamentary General Election might be held, the Notice of Election was finally posted on 7 November 2019. This followed fast-tracked legislation over a period of two days, with royal assent being given on 30 October 2019, this became law on 31 October 2019. That is 6 weeks prior to polling day for a process which we would normally start 5 or 6 months in advance of an election.

1.1 Legislation was required because the formal timetable was that the next UKPGE would be held in 2022.

1.2 Until this was determined there had been serious speculation about likely election dates being 29 November, or 5, 12 or 19 December. Any of these were feasible which limited the amount of practical preparation which could be undertaken by the Elections Team, as most practical arrangements, booking venues, printing, arranging staff etc required a date. This will be covered in more detail later in the Report.

- 1.3 There are significant reasons why a December election at short notice was a challenge for Council staff and the many other people and organisations involved in the administration and organisation of a national election, these will also be covered later in the report.
- 1.4 The (Acting) Returning Officer, the Chief Executive, expresses his thanks to all those staff, in particular the Elections Team, but many others across the Council who despite the notice given and the challenge of the December date, managed to deliver the UKPGE efficiently and with a minimum of issues, alongside 'normal' services. As always this was very much about teamwork and a shared desire to 'get it right.' He would also like to express his gratitude to all the organisations who made their venues available at such short notice and external staff who agreed to work.

2. ELECTION PLANNING

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 This not only involved local planning, but close working with our printers who produced and despatched most of our election material to very tight deadlines.
- 2.3 There were particular issues, both for those planning to vote in person and for absent and overseas voters for the UKPGE because of the short notice given. As in the European Parliamentary Election earlier in the year a number of people complained about the timescale and could not understand the administrative problems which this caused.
- 2.4 The Elections team contacted all polling stations in October to warn them that a General Election might be called with possible dates and asking for availability of venues. They also contacted staff who have previously worked to ascertain their availability. Although we were not able to make bookings at this time it did flag up our requirements and booking polling stations and staff was quick and easy at the point when the Election was actually called.
- 2.5 As always with a UKPGE the initial planning is complicated by the need to work with cross boundary issues for different parliamentary constituencies. Whilst the Chief Executive was the Acting Returning Officer for the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton Constituency, his counterparts at Horsham District Council and Adur and Worthing Councils were responsible for Elections to the Arundel and South Downs and Worthing West Constituencies, part of which both fall within this District.

- 2.6 Arun contacted the Elections Teams in the other councils well in advance of the date of the election being announced to start discussions on how we would work together. Although we were able to agree principles there were some complications. All the Councils use Xpress software to administer elections, but there were differences in level of knowledge, and we did not all use the same external printer, all of which became a challenge, for example when working with different number sequences for ballot papers for each constituency. This is however unavoidable as we all hold our own electoral data and only an individual council can, for example, answer elector queries for its own electors. This is complicated and detailed work for the Elections Team, working to produce accurate and complete registers across many polling Districts and who as always spent a lot of time ensuring that as many electors as possible were able to vote. On the whole these arrangements worked well on polling day, although more time to prepare and liaise between the authorities would undoubtedly have helped and avoided some issues, in particular arrangements for the transfer of data in a timely way.
- 2.7 A recurring problem is the Royal Mail 'walk sort' code which is shown on poll cards. As can be seen from the 'wrap reasons' given in Appendix 1, there was a significant peak in calls when poll cards first went out as electors did not know what it was. As this is a requirement we are looking at how to do this in the future – which may be as simple as calling it that on the poll card. The format is legally prescribed so we need to look in to this.

3. RAISING ELECTOR AWARENESS, COMMUNICATIONS AND ELECTION TURNOUT:

- 3.1 Supported by the Communications Team, including the Website and social media, and Arun Direct, ADC staff promoted key messages to the public, signposted them to more information and online processes and then managed the high volume of requests and queries across a number of communication channels, including requests for postal and proxy votes. All statutory notices were published on the Council's website and at the two receptions at the Arun Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall. As can be seen from the table below, voting levels across all three of the constituencies which fall within the Arun District show a similar pattern to previous years.

Turnout (%) for the three Parliamentary Constituencies which fall within Arun District is set out below:

Constituency	2019	2017	2015	2010
Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Electorate)	66.41 (77,446)	67.85 (75,827)	64.90 (72,985)	66.28 (70,816)
Arundel and South Downs	76.00	75.03	73.54	72.99
Worthing West	69.89	70.24	63.00	65.00

- 3.3 Day to day communications and standard enquiries have increasingly been handled by Arun Direct and via the website. Appendix 1 shows contacts from 29/10/19 to 13/12/19 via both of these channels. For comparison purposes elections calls would

normally average around 15 per day. The telephone figures do not include calls direct to the elections team either to landlines or mobiles. The transfer rate for telephone calls to the back office was 3.7%, demonstrating how effectively Customer Services and Elections have allocated queries between Arun Direct and the specialist back office team.

3.4 In addition to this we actively promoted key election dates and activities on social media. During the month leading up to the General Election, the Communications team posted 14 times to the three social media platforms for Arun District Council; Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These posts reached over 900 people each time, covering a wide demographic due to the different platforms they were posted on. They posted the 'Got 5' campaign from the Electoral Commission as well as their own generated content that was more personal to the District to create more engagement. They also shared content from other channels to spread the word further, e.g. posts from The Electoral Commission. In addition, the social media activity was supported by issuing three press releases which were then added to our website. '

3.4 The figures below show how people chose to contact us between 29 October and 13 December 2019. The comparison totally straightforward as circumstances in terms of timing during the year, notice given of the election and other elections held at the same time were different. The table below shows the contacts with Arun Direct and the number of visits to our voting and elections pages. Visits to reception areas are not split down to the same level of detail, but were 355 for the whole of November and December.

Appendix 1 also details the reasons (wrap codes) for people contacting us about the election.

2019		2017		2015	
Phone	Web	Phone	Web	Phone	Web
2,289	13,335	3,222	12,155	3,463	178

4. ELECTORAL REGISTRATION AND ABSENT VOTERS:

- 4.1 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 years. Despite this the Elections Team worked hard to process everything that came in and between 1 November and 26 November 3,994 new electors were registered.
- 4.2 We contacted overseas voters as soon as the election was called. For the most part we do have e-mail addresses but had to send letters where this was not the case. Given the timescale we strongly encouraged overseas electors to opt for a proxy vote if possible. Administering these took a disproportionate amount of time due to the complexity for some voters who have lived outside the UK for many years. However it was likely to be the only way to guarantee that ballot papers from overseas postal voters were received on time to be included in the poll.
- 4.3 We do have a considerable number of absent voters (people choosing to use a postal or proxy vote) and these are one of the most time-consuming elements in administering elections, as demonstrated by the contact reasons shown in Appendix 1.

The numbers are as follows for all the electors within the Arun District regardless of constituency:

- Total no. of postal ballot papers initially issued – 19,579 including 1350 new applications (19,677 in 2017)
- Postal proxy – 65 including 28 new applications
- Proxy applications – 732, including 97 new applications
- Emergency proxy applications – 32 (19 in 2017)

5. POLLING STATIONS:

- 5.1 As (Acting) 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 Council carried out a full review earlier in the year and although any changes to polling districts will only be implemented in time for the next election in May 2020, this was useful in the context of the UKPGE. Overall, the feedback from the Presiding Officers (POs) was good. Arun ran the polling stations on behalf of other two constituencies where these were for our electors. The numbers were 51 polling stations for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, 21 for Arundel and South Downs and 11 for Worthing West.
- 5.2 The December date for the election meant that the team had to particularly consider heating and external lighting. A number of polling stations which were known to have issues were given additional heating and POs were also given permission to keep external doors closed (following discussion with Election Control) if necessary, so long as signage was very clear. Staff were also briefed that they should dress warmly and take a blanket 'just in case'. A small number of

polling stations were also given additional external lighting. Most of the venues were satisfactory with these arrangements in place, although some were still cold.

- 5.3 Due to not all venues being available at short notice we had to change 4 polling stations (out of a total of 83). The (Acting) Returning Officer would like to express his thanks to all the venues who supported the election at such short notice.

6. POLLING DAY:

- 6.1 The Election Control cover was provided throughout the day for the Election using a back-office team (on a shift system) and Arun Direct, ensuring that sufficient advice and expertise was always available.
- 6.2 There were issues with the wet weather on the day of the election with a number of absorbent mats having to be purchased for some polling stations. There is an argument that these should have been purchased/hired in advance, but they were only needed at a small number of polling stations, not always those which we would have anticipated. There was a particular problem at Poling with the path to the polling station being flooded and the unfinished path next to the Wave in Littlehampton caused considerable difficulty as voters insisted on walking across a grassy area rather than following signs round it. The path will be finished before the election in May. Rain and wind were an issue on the day for POs who struggled to keep external signage in place. We are exploring options for future signage. As most electors know where their polling stations are this was not the issue it might have been. Provision had been made as part of a wider West Sussex initiative with Highways for gritting in case it was needed, but this was not the case.
- 6.3 There was a much greater focus on security, both at the count and for polling stations with detailed guidance being issued by the police. All staff were briefed on this fortunately, no incidents occurred. The police were very pro-active on the day, having visited all polling stations and had a presence at the count. Staff found this reassuring.

7. VERIFICATION AND COUNT:

- 7.1 The Count took place at the Arun Leisure Centre (ALC) where absorbent matting was in place for when ballot boxes were delivered (based on previous experience). POs were also helped by ALC to bring boxes and other equipment in.
- 7.2 As in recent elections the (Acting) Returning Officer made the decision that verification would start as soon as ballot boxes were delivered and as staff arrived at the count. Previously opened postal ballot papers were verified from 10pm onwards and were then mixed with other ballot papers as ballot boxes from polling stations were verified. Once all ballot boxes were verified tables started counting as soon as they were available to do so. This was strictly controlled by the election control team to avoid any confusion. The count finished at 4.30am, earlier than the anticipated time of 5.00am.

7.3 The verification and count stage for this election was straightforward and efficient. There were relatively few observers and we had little/no feedback from them.

8. CONCLUSION:

8.1 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
- Ensuring a transparent and fair process for anyone wishing to stand as a candidate
- Accurate verification and results
- Professional delivery and consistency

8.2 Our project management approach is robust, and we assessed the risks as much in advance as we could, given the very short notice. We had not planned for the Parliamentary 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 the Election. There was considerable impact on normal working in a number of areas and this should not be underestimated.

8.3 The impact on the Elections Team in particular has to be recognised. Members should note that the Elections Team (which is also the Electoral Registration Team) was in the middle of a very busy period of work anyway, with the annual canvass in its final stages with the aim of publishing the new Electoral Register on 1 December 2019. The Team had also undertaken the five-yearly review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations, a detailed review which took a number of months and reported to this Committee on 16 October 2019. In addition, the Arundel Neighbourhood Plan Referendum was held on 19 November 2019.

8.4 I would like to record my thanks to all involved for the commitment, hard work and support which has enabled me as Acting Returning Officer to deliver these elections.

9. 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"> Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee 		X
10. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail below)		
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. IMPLICATIONS:		
12. REASON FOR THE DECISION:		
To inform Members about the operation of the UK Parliamentary General Election in December 2019.		
13. BACKGROUND PAPERS:		
N/A		