

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO CORPORATE SUPPORT COMMITTEE ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2021

SUBJECT: Review of the Elections held on 6 May 2021

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DATE: July 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The report reviews the arrangements for the Elections which took place on 6 May 2021. It provides information, feedback and considers lessons learned.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that the Members of the Corporate Support Committee:

- (i) Review the information presented and make any comments.

1. BACKGROUND:

Elections that took place

1.1 A number of elections took place on 6 May 2021 with a total of 21 individual polls:

- Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner
- West Sussex County Council
- District By-elections
- Bognor Regis Town Council By-election
- Littlehampton Town Council By-elections
- Walberton Neighbourhood Plan Referendum

1.2 The Police and Crime Commissioner election and a number of by-elections should have been held in 2020 but were postponed because of the pandemic. This is the most complex combination of elections ever managed by the District Council, not least because of the difference in responsibility/accountability for each election. This report will cover the differences, recognising the different jurisdictions and will look in detail at the overall arrangements which covered all elections, such as polling stations, the count and staffing. It should also be noted that although the detail will have been different, the overall processes, particularly those introduced

to deal with the pandemic were very similar across all authorities.

Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner

1.3 This election was led by the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) who was the Chief Executive of Brighton and Hove Council, Geoff Raw. Nigel Lynn was the Local Returning Officer (LRO) and Jackie Follis was the Deputy Local Returning Officer (DLRO). The PARO was responsible for all aspects of the election that could be carried out remotely, including information to candidates, nominations, consolidation of the count figures from each District/Borough etc. The LRO was responsible for all aspects of the practical delivery of the poll and the count at Arun, from as soon as the nominations were notified to us by the PARO. There were 5 candidates.

West Sussex County Council

1.4 There are 13 WSCC Electoral Divisions in the Arun District and the overall election was led by Tony Kershaw from West Sussex. Nigel Lynn and Jackie Follis were both Deputy County Returning Officers (DCRO) for this election. The DCRO at Arun was responsible for all aspects of the election, including the nominations process. Across the Arun electoral divisions there were 58 candidates.

District, Town/Parish By-elections and Neighbourhood Plan Referendum

1.5 Nigel Lynn is the Returning Officer (RO) for the Arun District and Jackie Follis is the Deputy Returning Officer (DRO), with other officers appointed as DROs for specific duties, eg overseeing postal vote opening sessions. The RO is fully accountable for all aspects of these elections and as with all ROs is directly accountable to the Electoral Commission, rather than the local authority. The local polls were:

- District Council By-elections – Brookfield Ward and Pevensey Ward
- Bognor Regis Town Council By-elections – Pevensey Ward
- Littlehampton Town Council By-elections – Beach Ward, River Ward and Wickbourne Ward
- Walberton Neighbourhood Plan Referendum (NPR)

1.6 There was a total of 23 candidates across these elections, with the NPR being a simple Yes/No response.

Election Planning

1.7 The pandemic has been the single most dominant factor throughout our preparations, starting with the delay to the polls in May 2020. The postponement was announced 6 weeks prior to the elections, meaning that a large proportion of the work had already taken place. From the start of lockdown in March 2020 it became obvious that Covid would present many challenges. What was clear is that we had to plan for the worst case scenario so a lot of the preparations took place during the Autumn/Winter prior to the elections when the restrictions were quite severe with considerable uncertainty around any vaccination programme that

might be in place at some future date. At every point we were having to carry out detailed risk assessments around the safety of staff, voters, candidates and postal vote and count observers, using sometimes conflicting advice from different agencies. We appreciate that candidates also had to deal with less than ideal circumstances for their campaigns.

1.8 The overall election timetable is attached as Appendix 1 for information

Staff and Training

1.9 We contacted known elections staff (480 on our database of staff who had worked for us in the previous 2 years) from late summer 2020 onwards to ask who would be willing to work under what level of restrictions. For many understandable reasons, not least uncertainties around vaccination, we had a mixed response, from 70% of those contacted: 150 said yes, 84 said no and 102 said maybe.

1.10 Knowing that we would get fallout even in a normal year we had to start recruiting and were able to recruit an additional 64 staff via our website, and 3 civil servants via a Cabinet Office scheme to support authorities with recruitment for the elections. From that point onwards the elections team was dealing with a constant stream of people changing their minds right up until a couple of days before the elections, with 43 staff in total 'dropping out', despite confirming that they were available. Staff availability was one of the reasons for reducing the number of polling stations.

1.11 We needed a total of 224 staff at polling stations and 35 count assistants on each count day, against a total of 320 required for the local elections in May 2019. Polling Inspectors and supervisory count staff who are not included in this total, were permanent Arun staff who fortunately did not have to be 'persuaded'. We were only able to accommodate 35 count assistants in a covid secure working environment, rather than the 60 used previously

1.12 Staff training sessions were delivered virtually, which went down well with the vast majority of people, reducing risk of transmission, time taken for staff to come into the civic centre and cost of mileage. Training involved a presentation recorded by us on all the normal processes and relevant electoral legislation and a separate session on the use of the tablets which we used in polling stations. We will deliver training this way in the future.

1.13 The core election team did what it could working from home in the run up to the election, but eventually moved into the Civic Centre at the start of April in order to deliver the election and manage postal vote opening. This was tightly managed with the team split into 2 groups to mitigate the risk of Covid transmission. It is not too dramatic to say that the whole team becoming sick would have been a disaster.

Poll Cards

1.14 Poll cards were hand delivered using the majority of our normal staff, with short term replacements where they were unable to carry out deliveries. We decided,

following a risk assessment, and providing them with suitable PPE this would be a safe activity for them to carry out.

- 1.15 For the first time poll cards had a map showing the location of the polling station and included a QR code to make voting in polling stations easier using tablets.

Nominations

- 1.16 Nominations for the PCC were dealt with by the PARO in Brighton, all other nominations, including WSCC were managed by the Arun elections team with information being passed back to the Returning Officer at WSCC as appropriate. As the Civic Centre was closed nominations were dealt with virtually except for the final submissions. Candidates and agents were asked to contact the team initially by e-mail, or by post (either Royal Mail or through the letterbox at the Civic Centre) for a check of the nomination forms. There were a significant number of errors on the forms as normal which confirmed the need for the checks, but all of the nominations were finally received and confirmed to be valid. The view of the Elections team is that the e-mail checks worked well generally as a clear e-mail to candidates and agents appeared to be helpful on both sides. We accept it won't work well for everybody but will review this again before the next elections. The Team dealt with 81 nominations in May this year - the next elections are District and Parish in 2023 and we are likely to have around 400 nominations.

Postal Vote Opening

- 1.17 This took place in the Civic Centre and photographs are attached at Appendix 2 showing the layout, including one of the observers areas with the screen that was used to show observers postal votes that were considered to be invalid because signatures or dates did not match the original postal vote application.
- 1.18 In order to create a safe environment for staff and observers, staff were asked to work individually in screened areas, particularly important as the postal vote opening sessions lasted a number of hours.
- 1.19 Normally staff would work at one or two tables in larger teams. The opening took longer than normal, and staff spent a lot more time 'waiting' than would be usual. This was because the supervisors were having to instruct up to 14 people individually as they got to the end of each stage for the bundle of envelopes that they were dealing with, rather than instructing people in larger groups. The reconciliation process was also complicated due to the number of different ballot papers which people could have returned, but some of which they chose not to use. One observer attended one session throughout the two-week postal vote opening period and was very complimentary about the arrangements.
- 1.20 Appendix 3 describes the process set out by the Electoral Commission so that members can understand its complexity and therefore the impact on the team.

Polling Stations

- 1.21 We were given health and safety instructions by the Electoral Commission, The Association of Electoral Administrators as well as directions by the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) at Brighton and Hove Council and Public Health at West Sussex, as well as general government guidance for Environmental Health services. Some of this advice was in conflict at times, but the final decisions were for the Returning Officers working through their deputies if necessary, in different authorities.
- 1.22 The Government also strongly advised that authorities should not use schools as polling stations this year, not a problem for us, but a significant problem for some areas.
- 1.23 In Arun we initially contacted our normal polling stations in late summer 2020 with a survey about basic facilities and to ask questions related to availability and a covid secure working environment. Based on this elections staff visited venues to carry out detailed risk assessments and it was determined that we would have to reduce the number of polling stations across the District in order to be able to manage venues safely and be able to staff them. Part of this was a decision by the Returning Officer to use 2 venues for each of the 13 County Divisions in Arun. In fact, following consultation we ended up with 28 different venues. We used venues that were larger, so not only could they provide a separate entrance and exit, a one way system etc, they were big enough to accommodate more than one of our existing polling stations. This also enabled us to use additional staff for queue management and cleaning throughout the day.
- 1.24 The Returning Officer at WSCC and the PARO were consulted on the proposal, followed by political agents. We had feedback which resulted in a number of changes to our original proposals.
- 1.25 We wrote to all households in the Arun District in January. Firstly, this was to provide them with information on who was currently registered at the property, and secondly to confirm with them the voting method they had in place and encourage them to consider alternative methods. We also included an election leaflet to provide information on how voting in person would look and feel different, including the polling station they will be voting at, as well as the procedure should they wish to apply for a temporary or permanent postal vote.
- 1.26 We have had a small number of letters of complaint from electors who were unhappy with the voting arrangements, however most of them accepted the reason for the change and asked for reassurance that the normal polling stations would be used again in the future, which we were happy to confirm.
- 1.27 We provided an individual Covid secure polling station layout for the Presiding Officers at each venue and screens and appropriate PPE for polling station staff, which also ensured a safe environment for voters and observers.

Use of Tablets

- 1.28 The main change at polling stations was the use of tablets to access an electronic register. We investigated the use of these carefully having had the system recommended by another authority. Members will have seen them in operation when they voted themselves
- 1.29 There was an error with the tablets at the start of the poll as some electors were issued with ballot papers they were not entitled to. This issue was caused by the data used from the Management System due to the increase in the number of polling stations at each venue. Unfortunately, the data did not differentiate the polling districts that should have had 2 ballots only and those also voting in the district/town by-election and the NPR. This only occurred at 6 of the 28 polling stations where there were more than 2 polls taking place.
- 1.30 It was confirmed that this has never happened before with the software company and was caused by the Covid arrangements in the reduction of polling venues. Now the error has been identified we are working with both the tablet software company and our election management software company to make sure this does not happen in the future.
- 1.31 Once the issue was identified, all affected Presiding Officers were contacted so they were aware. (although most of them had already identified a problem). They then made sure that only the correct ballot papers were issued to the relevant people.
- 1.32 They were also told to seal the affected ballot box, so we knew which one had the incorrect ballot papers in at the verification.
- 1.33 We used a list of the affected ballot paper numbers for each box and then pulled these out at verification stage, with only one person sorting these papers. They were then removed to be shown to the observers and secured away from the valid ballot papers. This process was conducted in an open and transparent way and was agreed in advance with the Electoral Commission.
- 1.34 Overall, the polling staff and Elections management were very happy with the use of the tablets as it made the process more efficient. We are now going to be part of the software company's working group making suggestions on improvements to the system going forward.

Polling day

- 1.35 We had feedback from both staff and voters that they felt safe in the polling stations.
- 1.36 We did have to manage queues in some areas due to limits on the number of people allowed in the polling station at one time. We had warned voters that this might be the case, but they were understandably unhappy with having to wait in socially distanced queues and we did not have the capacity to provide chairs which would have meant having to sanitise them after each use. We had

instructed Presiding Officers that they could allow more people into speed things up if necessary, by allowing 2 people to be at the issuing desk and 2 at the ballot box, which they did where necessary. Angmering Community Centre had the biggest problem with queues, not helped by poor weather. We were limited by having to use the smaller room there because the larger room was being used for testing/vaccinations. We had agreed with Public Health England that they would not be working on polling day, to limit queues, but it was still not ideal. We had not fully anticipated this.

1.37 We had a few problems with tellers in terms of having to remind them about social distancing, but these were limited.

Verification and Count.

1.38 Appendix 4 shows photographs of the count venue at Arun Leisure Centre, a wider picture taken during set up the night before and a picture showing one of the seven count tables. All staff felt safe and observers were able to see more of the actual count, as we used full length screens and only therefore needed single width tables, so observers were closer to counters and ballot papers.

1.39 We had to ensure safe working for the elections team who would be spending three days counting together and for any observers.

- Friday 7 May - Verification and WSCC count, counting finished at approximately 7.45pm
- Saturday 8 May - District and Parish counts and Walberton NPR, counting finished at approximately 12.35pm
- Monday 10 May – PCC count, counting finished at 3.43pm and we cleared the venue by 5pm

1.40 The rules around social distancing and the way we could work were very strict and the team spent a huge amount of time agreeing a layout which complied with Covid guidance.

1.41 We used a camera and screen to show doubtful votes to candidates/representatives. This worked well and reduced the number of observers clustered around count tables, which is normally very distracting for staff who are still counting. This is shown on the first page of Appendix 4.

1.42 Along with many other authorities we limited observers to candidates + one representative and also allowed agents to attend. In practice very few observers attended any of the counts, however we had to assume that many of the 170 entitled to attend the verification, would do so.

1.43 Despite the very low numbers of observers and amount of space they did not follow 2m social distancing or the one way system. When this became obvious the Returning Officer moved outside to make the declarations.

1.44 A marquee and toilets were provided behind the Arun Leisure Centre for observers due to the lack of space inside the Arun Leisure Centre, these were barely used, but we could not have predicted this.

1.45 No press attended any of the counts

Turnout

1.46 Appendix 5 summarises turnout and postal voting numbers for each election which took place on 6 May 2021.

1.47 Turnout for the PCC (Arun Counting Area) was considerably higher at 32.07% compared to the previous PCC election in 2016 at 19.92% when it was the only election taking place on that day. The overall turnout across the whole of Sussex was 35.77%. Further information on the PCC Elections can be found on the Brighton and Hove website.

<https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2021/results-sussex-police-crime-commissioner-election>

1.48 The overall turnout for the 13 WSCC Divisions within the Arun District was 32.27%, against 33.74% in 2017, with the turnout for individual divisions ranging from 21.13% to 41.32%. The turnout range for West Sussex was 21.13% to 48.30%. The overall turnout for West Sussex was 37% and further information can be found on the WSCC website.

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/about-the-council/how-the-council-works/elections/county-council-elections-6-may-2021/>

1.49 The results from the by-elections can also be found in Appendix 1. Full results for all Arun elections are on the website: [Elections | Arun District Council](#)

Postal and proxy voting

1.50 There were very few requests for proxy votes this year, with only 65 in total, including 7 emergency proxies, compared to 336 including 8 emergency proxies for the 2019 European elections. We do not know why this was, but it is possible that people found it more difficult to find a reliable proxy and either voted in person or requested a postal vote.

1.51 Due to the pandemic all voters were strongly encouraged by the Government downwards to request a postal vote due to the uncertainties around the elections. This was considered at all levels to be the safest and most convenient way to vote. In the run up to the elections 23,564 postal votes were issued, against 17,870 for the European Elections, that is a 25% increase. The postal vote turnout was 70% (16,428 verified votes) against 64% (11,399 verified votes) for the European elections.

1.52 It is reasonable to conclude that the encouragement to voters to request a postal vote worked. It should also be noted that given the socially distanced working arrangements and staff numbers, we would not have had the capacity to open more than 25,000 postal votes at the Civic Centre.

1.53 Royal Mail were under some pressure due to the much higher number of postal votes for all authorities. We were not able to secure our normal guaranteed delivery time for sorted postal votes to the Civic Centre, but we adjusted our processes to deal with this and Royal Mail improved their sorting after a couple of days so there were no major problems.

Electoral Registration

1.54 As we had sent a letter to all households in January 2021, we were 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 huge increase in postal vote applications. We did of course receive an increase in duplicate registration applications which is an ongoing problem, as well as duplicate postal vote applications caused by political parties sending out postal vote application forms without checking whether the elector had one in the first place.

Communications

1.55 Communications is always important with at an election, it was particularly important in May 2021 due to the complexity of the combination of elections and the additional measures to be observed because of Covid-19.

1.56 External communications included: an early letter to all households in January to explain how we would be working and to try to manage the expectations of voters; regular briefings and letters for candidates and election agents on how things would be different, press releases and answers to press enquiries and the Leader's VLOG. A number of changes were made to some of the practical arrangements following feedback from agents in particular.

1.57 Arun Direct has always provided excellent support to the Elections Team, without which it would not have been possible to deliver electoral registration or elections. This not only included their normal election tasks, which increased, but other activities which they were able to undertake to support elections in quieter periods. It is not possible to make a full comparison between elections contacts in 2020 and 2021 due to the lockdown and the different way of working particularly in 2020, but the table below gives an indication of the increased contacts which were mainly about absent voting, but also registration, both entirely expected.

	2020	2021
April	57	642
May	46	282

Improvements for future elections

- 1.58 There were a number of new ways of working which we had to use and will implement for future elections:
- 1.59 Staff training will be done remotely using video presentations with live Q&A sessions, saving cost and time for both the Council and casual elections staff. Not only does this also ensure absolute consistency for each session, but staff can watch the recorded session again later, which we understand a number of them appreciated.
- 1.60 We are reviewing the continued use of tablets in polling stations, working towards our next elections in 2023. In principle we would like to do this and are looking at financial implications v staff savings. We also recognise that with voter ID on the horizon we will almost certainly need similar system.
- 1.61 We will continue to use screens at the count. These enabled staff to feel safer, observers to get closer to the actual counting and seemed to reduce the overall noise level in the main count room. We are less sure about their continued use in polling stations because of some issues for people with hearing difficulties. We recognise that masks did not help with this either but would need to be very certain before using them again.
- 1.62 Although not mentioned previously in this report, communications of various kinds with hundreds of elections staff was done via google forms this year which worked very well and did help with administration.
- 1.63 We are likely to use a camera and screen at our next major elections to deal with doubtful votes

Conclusion

- 1.64 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 and dealing with any problems in a professional way following full agreement with the Electoral Commission.
 - Compliance with legislation and Electoral Commission Guidance and the many other requirements around running an election during the pandemic
 - 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 constraints around

<p>the pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring a transparent and fair process for anyone wishing to stand as a candidate • Accurate verification and results • Professional delivery and consistency <p>1.65 Our project management approach was robust, we assessed the risks well ahead of the elections and continued to adjust this as new advice was published. 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 all the Elections.</p> <p>1.66 I would also like to thank our partners, in particular Freedom Leisure and those responsible for the venues which we use as polling stations for their co-operation and support.</p> <p>1.67 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. In particular, I would like to recognise the efforts of the core Elections Team who delivered the most complex of elections under very difficult circumstances.</p>		
<p>2. PROPOSAL(S):</p> <p>The Corporate Support Committee is asked to review the information presented and make any comments.</p>		
<p>2. OPTIONS:</p> <p>Members may wish to make recommendations</p>		
<p>4. CONSULTATION:</p>		
Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		x
Relevant District Ward Councillors		x
Other groups/persons (please specify) The wider elections team and other services within the Council	x	
5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 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 – slow down progress on key sites		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		X
6. IMPLICATIONS:		
None		

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:
To make members aware of the arrangements for and outcomes of the elections held on 6 May 2021

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:
Appendix 1 - The overall election timetable
Appendix 2 – Photographs showing the postal voting layout, including one of the observer’s areas
Appendix 3 - The postal voting process set out by the Electoral Commission
Appendix 4 - Photographs of the count venue at Arun Leisure Centre
Appendix 5 – Summary of the turnout and postal voting numbers for each election