

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

18 JULY 2019

**REPORT OF SENIOR
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

Leader – Councillor Bob Cook

ELECTORAL UPDATE

SUMMARY

To provide feedback from the Local Elections and European Parliamentary Election in May 2019 and an update on Electoral Registration. The lessons learned will be taken in account as part of planning for future electoral events.

REASONS FOR PRODUCING THIS REPORT

To provide feedback on the May 2019 polls.

DETAIL

ELECTIONS 2019

1. This report highlights what went well and lessons learned to enable the Returning Officer to plan for future polls.
2. Once again the elections team were placed under significant pressure between September 2018 and May 2019 delivering the local and Parish elections and then the European Parliamentary Election at short notice. Planning and preparation took place alongside the elections for the Stockton MYP, the Annual Canvass, postal vote refresh exercise and a Household Notification Exercise during February.
3. The statutory election period for the European Parliamentary election was underway before the polls for the Local Elections had been held. The risks associated with concurrent planning and administration of the polls under different legislation and guidance should not be underestimated. Alongside increased registration activity during the statutory period, the scale of the work is summarised below:

Local Elections

- 97 polling stations were booked
- Borough Elections – 155 Nominations (1550 assenters)
- Parish Elections - 124 nominations (248 assenters)
- 66 agents were appointed
- 447 staff were appointed to 1085 jobs
- 34,855 postal ballot packs were issued and 22,599 were receipted and opened and processed
- 1,834 postal votes were returned on polling day which included 227 in the final Royal Mail sweep which all had to be opened and processed for verification as soon as possible after 10pm
- Turnout 33%

European Parliamentary Election

- 97 polling stations were booked
 - 408 staff were appointed to 978 jobs
 - 35,015 postal ballot packs were issued and 20,941 were receipted and opened representing an unprecedented 86% turnout of postal voters
 - 1,609 postal votes were returned on polling day which included 180 in the final royal mail sweep which all had to be opened and processed for verification as soon as possible after 10pm
 - Turnout 32%
4. Despite some issues highlighted below, the 2019 polls at Stockton were delivered successfully. Clear leadership, effective team working and project management enabled a timely and planned approach to delivery including positive working relationships with partners and suppliers and thereby achieving successful election outcomes. Clear roles and good communications continue to contribute to this success and will stand us in good stead for future elections.
5. Regular meetings were held in the region and sub region particularly in the early planning stages. These meetings and good communication with the Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators continue to be invaluable in sharing ideas and best practice.

LOCAL ELECTIONS - ISSUES

Nominations Process

6. A key issue during local elections continues to be the scale of the nominations process. Multiple informal checks of the 279 nomination papers (including the checking of 1,798 assessor details) and assistance to candidate and agents throughout the tight nominations period remains a challenge. The Notice of Election was published early to provide additional time for informal checks, together with a comprehensive nominations pack and briefing sessions. Take-up of the support available was disappointing and we will review the way we provide information to candidates and agents to encourage them to access for support guidance available at future elections.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION - ISSUES

European Electors

7. The Government confirmed on 1 April that reasonable contingency planning costs associated with this election would be covered. As a matter of urgency Stockton produced UC1 forms on the 8 April and these were sent out to over 1,267 EU electors. Completion of these forms enable an EU elector to vote in the UK rather than in their own European country. Stockton received 321 by the deadline of 7 May; only 14 forms were received after this deadline.
8. As at previous snap polls ensuring overseas electors received postal votes in time required additional resource and planning. Delivery and return of overseas postal votes continues to be a focus in our election planning ensuring the continued practice of an earlier despatch of postal votes to overseas electors and the use of a dedicated air mail overseas postal voting licence (in line with Electoral Commission guidance). A number of problems were experienced locally and nationally with the postal service to Europe, in particular France, resulting in overseas electors not receiving their postal ballot pack in time to vote. In Stockton there was a 35% response rate from overseas postal voters; only 13 postal overseas ballots were received after 2 May.

9. Postal Ballot Papers for Stockton were produced and released into the postal system in line with the statutory election timetables. After the packs are released into the postal system, the delivery route and timescales are unfortunately out of our control. The delivery problems have been raised with the Electoral Commission, our contractors and national electoral bodies.
10. As a proactive step, at the time we acknowledge registration as an overseas elector, we attach an absent vote application form and ask the elector to consider a proxy vote taking into account the speed of the postal system in the country they are now living.

MATTERS RELATING TO BOTH COUNTS

Mini Count

11. As in recent elections, a mini count approach was adopted for both polls. This means that each individual table is its own count and ballot papers allocated at the start of the process remain with the table at all times. This approach has proven to be quicker and more accurate and if problems arise they are isolated to a particular table and are easier to resolve. A visual display of the results for the local elections at the rear of the count hall again proved very successful and allowed attendees and media representatives to view the overall results as the counts were progressing.

Training

12. For the 2019 polls, face to face training was once again provided for all polling station staff (as recommended by the Electoral Commission) and count staff in accordance with a detailed training plan. In addition to face to face training an online training package was used to train doubtful ballot paper adjudicators for the Local Elections. Inevitably, there will always be some issues on stations on the day but access to the Elections Team and support staff throughout the day supports resolution of problems as they arise.

Working with Council Services

13. Early planning meetings and close liaison with Council Services are essential to the smooth running of elections. Community Services and Security Services continue to provide essential support and contribute to the smooth running of arrangements leading up to, during and after polling day (e.g. opening stations, monitoring portacabins, securely transporting postal votes and election materials).
14. ICT is critical in enabling the delivery of the election and through good working relationships with IT staff we are able to overcome any problems that we might encounter. IT critical dates (e.g. statutory deadlines, data transfer dates) are provided at an early planning stage and attendance by IT support staff at the first postal vote opening sessions and verification and count provide essential support. IT support staff continue to provide us with excellent support, and play a key role in developing the visual display results system.

Integrity Issues

15. Liaison with the Police through our Single Point of Contact (SPOC) allows us to discuss security and integrity issues in a timely manner, facilitating a risk assessment to identify and address potential concerns about electoral malpractice, thereby complying with EC advice. Prior to every electoral event, our Integrity Plan is reviewed and shared with our SPOC.
16. Despite briefings from the Police and a joint letter from the Chief Constable and the Returning Officer encouraging candidates and agents to abide by the Code of Conduct, there were various allegations of electoral offences raised by candidates/ agents about the conduct of

other candidates during the local election campaigns; these were referred to the SPOC for investigation.

Polling Stations

17. There were no notable issues or complaints about polling stations during the 2019 polls. Several changes were made to stations following the Polling District Review in 2018. Whilst the use of mobile station is never ideal, the larger mobiles used in a number of locations proved to be a better option.

Staffing

18. The recruitment of staff continues to prove very difficult. Corporate commitment to releasing staff for election duties is essential for the delivery of future elections.

FUTURE ELECTIONS

19. The next scheduled elections are the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections and Tees Valley Mayoral Elections in May 2020. Stockton will again be the lead for these elections and preliminary planning work has commenced. It is currently proposed to hold the counts on Friday 8 May and Saturday 9 May however this may need to be reviewed following the decision to move the May Day Bank Holiday to the Friday to mark VE Day.

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

20. The impact of our democratic engagement work and pro-active data mining continues to have a positive impact on registration levels which are illustrated in the table below. Targeted approaches to attainers via schools has seen attainer registration increase from 25% to 41% in the last six months. Work will continue and will support registration through canvass reform.

	01/12/2018	139,819	92%	8,007	1,184	26%	333,464	190	216
Register Month /	Register Published	Electorate	% of adult Pop	Pending Electors	Attainers	% of Attainers	Postals	Proxy Voters	Over-seas
January	02/01/2018	140,444	92%	7,060	1,132	25%	33,541	188	215
February	01/02/2019	140,609	92%	5,683	1,200	26%	32,762	192	218
March	01/03/2019	141,338	92%	4,805	1,344	29%	33,714	189	217
April	01/04/2019	141,934	93%	4,243	1,660	36%	34,788	187	215
May	01/05/2019	142,662	93%	4,273	1,762	40%	35,170	201	225
June	03/06/2019	142,846	93%	4,295	1,810	41%	35,266	313	238

Canvass 2019

21. Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) will be sent to all properties as the first stage of the Annual Canvass on 1 August 2019

22. As usual residents are asked to confirm that their details have not changed either by returning the form in the pre-paid envelope provided or by using the online, telephone or text options. Where there are changes, residents can advise Electoral Services by using the on-line service, calling the Helpline or by returning the hard copy HEF.

23. The HEF form is not a registration form; anyone added to the form is directed to www.gov.uk/register-to-vote to register. If they do not, we will write to those individuals separately to invite them to register. Individuals can also register by calling the electoral

helpline on 01642 526196 but they will still need to provide national insurance number and date of birth in order to register.

24. The second stage of the canvass will commence with canvassers undertaking personal visits to all properties not returning a HEF. This will take place between 10 September 2019 and 25 October.
25. Final HEF reminders will be mailed on 5 November 2019 and the revised Register will be published on 1 December.

Canvass Reform

26. On 12 March 2019, the Cabinet Office published an interim statement of policy regarding reform of the canvass. Further details are set out in a separate report.

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