

Delivering the 5 May elections and referendum

Now that the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act has been granted Royal Assent, I thought it might be helpful if I updated you on where we are with the delivery of all the polls scheduled for 5 May. We put into place our internal planning and management processes once it was clear that the Government was planning to legislate for a referendum last summer so we can now press ahead with putting our plans into action to deliver the referendum, and support the delivery of the scheduled elections, on 5 May.

The Act not only paves the way for the referendum to be held on 5 May but sets out how it will be combined with the elections that were already scheduled for that day, including elections to the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and to the Scottish Parliament, and local election in parts of England and across Northern Ireland. The Act also gives me, as Chief Counting Officer for the referendum, a power of direction over those who will be delivering the referendum on the ground.

So, in order to enable Counting Officers to begin planning for the delivery of the referendum and scheduled elections I shared with Counting Officers in November intentions in a number of areas, including for example:

- There will be a maximum number of 2,500 electors per polling station, and I will prescribe ratios of minimum numbers of Poll Clerks per number of electors;
- I will require Counting Officers to check personal identifiers on 100% of returned postal ballot packs.
- I have set out modifications to the wording and format of the statutory voter-facing forms, for example poll cards and postal voting statements, in order to make them easier for voters to understand and use (this also includes those forms for elections where the poll is combined with the poll for the referendum)
- I also announced, in December, that the count for the referendum should begin at 4pm on the afternoon of Friday 6 May. This will allow time for those areas with elections to count those ballot papers first.

Planning

Last summer the Electoral Commission set up an Elections and Referendums Steering Group which has been meeting on a monthly basis since September 2010 to ensure a consistent approach to the development and delivery of the polls on 5 May.

Membership of the Group includes each Regional Counting Officer for the referendum in Great Britain, or someone nominated by them, and the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, as well as representatives from the Cabinet Office, the Association of Electoral Administrators and UK Government territorial departments. .

The group has provided advice on the implications of a range of strategic issues including the timing of the count and declaration of the referendum result, and the levels of funding required to deliver the referendum successfully. The group also monitors practical issues arising from the planning and preparation for the polls, for example; ensuring that there are sufficient staff and space in polling stations and that the requirements for printing ballot papers and notices are followed by those delivering the polls.

Our offices in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and across England have been working with Regional Counting Officers to ensure that our instructions and guidance are understood and are being applied by Counting Officers and electoral administrators, as well as providing another opportunity for electoral administrators to feed back any concerns or comments they might have about the planning process.

We will continue to work with the hundreds of local Counting Officers across the UK, making sure that they have the plans in place to ensure voters have the best possible experience at the elections and referendum on 5 May.

Instructions and Guidance

We have now issued instructions on running the referendum to Counting Officers and have also published guidance for those administering elections scheduled for the same day. These are contained in 5 modules, which are available on the Commission's website. They cover the following areas:

- Planning and organisation (module 1)
- Administering the polls (module 2)
- Absent voting (module 3)
- Verification and count (module 4)
- After the declaration of results (module 5)

On Friday 28 January we also published the templates, style sheets and text to be used in the production of poll cards, postal voting statements (Great Britain) and declarations of identity (Northern Ireland) for use at the UK-wide referendum and the combined polls. A template for the ballot paper was published on 4 February, and this will be followed on 25 February by the modified statutory notices for display in polling stations and polling booths.

Public Awareness

It is important for voters to receive impartial information regarding the choice being put to them in the referendum, which is why we will now press ahead with plans to send an information booklet to all 27.8 million households in the UK.

The booklet explains what elections are taking place, what a referendum is, tells voters the referendum question and gives an independent explanation of the 'first past the post' and 'alternative vote' systems, as well as explaining how to vote in all the polls on 5 May. It will also be supported by a multi-media advertising campaign. We will produce separate booklets for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to make sure that voters have information relevant to the specific combination of polls in those areas.

The Electoral Commission has published on its website information on the referendum, along with a paper that sets out the process that the Commission has used to ensure that the content has been tested with members of the public, academics and plain English experts. The content of our public awareness booklets will draw on this information.

Referendum Campaign

The regulated period for the referendum began on Royal Assent. So, from now until polling day campaigners will only be allowed to spend up to certain limits. These limits are set out in the Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) and anyone intending to spend more than £10,000 on campaigning in the referendum between now and polling day must register with the Electoral Commission. Further information on how to apply, and details of those who have registered, can be found on the Commission's website.

We published our initial guidance for campaigners in November 2010 and have issued updates for campaigners throughout the Bill's passage through Parliament. Now the rules are clear we will publish our final guidance imminently. The Commission can also now start to register campaigners for the referendum, and to receive applications to become the official lead campaigners for a 'yes' and 'no' vote. The Commission must appoint lead campaigners on both sides, or not at all, and will make a decision on appointment of lead campaigners by 29 March.

- In deciding which campaigning organisations to designate we will give particular consideration to evidence of:
 - The extent to which the applicant is an 'umbrella organisation' coordinating the activities of a number of member organisations
 - The level of support for each applicant
 - The level of grassroots campaigning associated with the applicant
 - The applicant's capacity to deliver their campaign, and
 - The range of interests represented by the applicant

- We will also look at, but give less weight to, factors such as:
 - How long the applicant's organisation has been in existence
 - Its fundraising capacity, and its organisational structure
 - Its capacity to ensure the proper use of public grant money

The lead campaigners will have access to a public grant of £380,000 each, spending limits of up to £5million each as well as a free mail shot to voters and referendum broadcasts.

Yours sincerely,



Jenny Watson

Chair, Electoral Commission and Chief Counting Officer