

Draft Minutes of the Elections and Registration Working Group

9 June 2010

The Electoral Commission, Trevelyan House, Great Peter
Street, SW1P 2HW

Present: George Cooper (London Borough of Haringey)
Robert Connolly (Birmingham City Council)
Lindsay Dixon (Sunderland City Council)
Bill Gillatt (Leeds City Council)
Debra Harrod (Poole Borough Council)
Keith Hathaway (GLRO)
Ailsa Irvine (Electoral Commission)
Laura Lock (South Cambridgeshire District Council)
Glynne Morgan (Pembrokeshire County Council)
Jennifer Martin Kohlmorgen (Electoral Commission)
John Owen (AEA)
Pat Parker (Electoral Commission)
Kath Richards (Southampton City Council)

In attendance: *Item 3* – Catherine Rose & Jenny Hainsworth (Electoral
Commission) and Paul Docker (Ministry of Justice)
Item 4 – Phil Thompson (Electoral Commission)

Apologies: Jill Lewis (Manchester City Council)
Alex Meek (Leeds City Council)
Alison Scott (Leicester City Council)
Alex Thomson (City of Edinburgh Council)

1 Welcome and apologies

1.1 Ailsa Irvine welcomed members to the meeting and introduced George Cooper who had been invited to join the group to represent the London Regional Returning Officer.

2 Minutes of the meeting of 9 March 2010

2.1 The minutes had been previously circulated for comment and published on the website in the absence of any feedback. As the minutes had been circulated in the midst of the election period, a further opportunity was

provided to the group to comment on the minutes, and the minutes were confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Post-election review

3.1 Following the publication of the interim report on queues at polling stations, the Commission will publish its full report on the administration of the election in mid-July. Catherine Rose provided an overview of the Commission's reporting process and shared some of the feedback already received from various sources, including a summary of issues discussed at the post-election seminars.

3.2 The Commission then invited the group to share their views on a range of specific headings. The group did not always express unanimous views, but the following represents a summary of the key points discussed:

3.3. UK Parliamentary timetable:

- The 17-day UK Parliamentary timetable did not work effectively alongside the local government timetable and adhering to statutory deadlines with combined elections was particularly difficult.
- A number of options around extending the UK Parliamentary election timetable were discussed to ease the pressures. For example, it was suggested that moving the nominations deadline would result in postal votes being sent out more quickly. Paul Docker emphasised that any suggested changes to the election timetable would have to represent a gain for the elector. There were also discussions around the postal vote application deadline and moving it from E-11 days to E-19 days, or even splitting the postal voting deadline, with E-19 being the deadline for new applications and leaving E-11 as the deadline for changes. Some group members saw advantages to revising the timetable as it would allow them to send out postal packs earlier. Others were concerned that these solutions alone would not lead to packs being posted significantly earlier than E-11.
- Relaxing restrictions on applications for an emergency proxy vote was discussed, but there were integrity concerns around this. There were also concerns that moving back the deadline for new postal vote applications could have a detrimental impact on the integrity of proxy voting.
- Postponing contested parish council elections beyond the current 3 weeks was also suggested as a way of relieving pressure.

3.4 The poll:

- The election type should appear at the top of the front of the ballot paper to avoid any possible confusion.

- Queues at polling stations – there was no consensus about how to prevent queues from building up at future elections, but discussions focussed on planning by Returning Officers and the Commission’s recommendations on amending the law.
- It was suggested that moving the deadline for returning postal votes to polling stations from 10pm to 5pm would assist with the processing of postal votes and would have an impact on the timing of counts.

3.5 Registration and postal voting:

- It was suggested that students registered in respect of more than one address should be required to state in which constituency they wish to vote at UK Parliamentary elections.
- Registration forms on *Aboutmyvote*: it was reported that some electors were confused by ambiguous wording on the site and thought that they had registered after typing in their details on the online form. The wording has now been amended to remove any ambiguity and to make clear that the form has to be printed, signed and returned to the ERO. It was agreed that it would be helpful to invite a member of the Commission’s Campaigns team to a future meeting of the group to discuss forms.

3.6 Cross boundary arrangements:

- Some electoral management systems were reported to have been incompatible and required data to be exchanged manually.

3.7 Candidates, agents and third parties:

- There were some complaints that Royal Mail had taken the bank holiday in the week of the election, which created a backlog of postal votes. In addition, it was suggested that Royal Mail needed to engage more actively with candidates about the freepost arrangements.
- Varying deadlines for appointing polling and counting agents, and in particular the lateness of the UK Parliamentary deadline at E-2, were difficult to manage in those areas with combined polls.
- The emerging practice of divulging information on Twitter and blogs needed further consideration.
- Administrators received increased levels of feedback about tellers at this election and there was a desire for the role of tellers to be clarified, potentially through legislation.

3.8 Integrity:

- There were some reports of postal vote applications delivered by party activists were handed in close to the deadline, despite the forms often indicating that the elector had completed the form several weeks prior to the deadline.
- Some local authorities had to reduce the number of checks of postal vote identifiers as a result of postal votes being returned later than expected and the pressures of the timetable.

3.9 Roles, responsibilities and support arrangements:

- It was mentioned that the ceremonial position of the Returning Officer seemed antiquated and was of no operational use.
- The role of the Returning Officer and the task of engaging them was considered to be an issue that should be addressed through training and/or performance standards.
- Those authorities who had used call centre arrangements to deal with enquiries from electors reported that they had worked well.

4. Guidance and support

4.1 Phil Thompson circulated the initial results of the evaluation of Commission products based on feedback forms returned by administrators and added that the feedback had been similar to the previous year with some materials being very well received – especially the Returning Officer guidance, the guidance for candidates and agents, and the polling station handbook, which 89-90% found useful or very useful. In respect of the products provided for the first time for these elections and which had been developed in consultation with the group, 58% of respondents rated the nomination forms useful or very useful and 68% considered the nominations checklist to be useful or very useful.

4.2 The pre-election seminars received a mixed response, but when seminar attendees were asked whether the seminar had met their expectations 92% said it had partly or fully met their expectations.

5. The future of the group, format and working arrangements

5.1 All those in attendance agreed that the group should continue. The relationship of the group to the ECG would need to be clarified once the ECG had next met. Clarification was sought from one member of the group about the group's role in developing Commission guidance and how this was described. It was agreed that the Commission would continue to say that guidance had been developed in consultation with representatives of the electoral community on the Elections and Registration Working Group.

5.2 It was agreed that closer links should be encouraged by each member with the local authorities in their respective regions and, as a way of encouraging more positive engagement, future agendas would include a

standing item headed 'Feedback from regions'. The group was keen to communicate the role of the group to their regions as it was reported the dissemination of the letter from the ECG on the role of both groups had not been widespread.

Post-election meeting note: the covering email has a link to the Working Group's terms of reference which Working Group members might find useful.

5.3 The group agreed that it wanted to engage with the print and software suppliers, but in the most efficient and timely way that would allow discussion on relevant issues at an appropriate stage in the planning process. It was agreed that software suppliers should be invited to attend working group meetings on a case-by-case basis for specific discussion around relevant issues. The group was less convinced of the need to invite print suppliers given their large number, but felt that alternative mechanisms for communicating with printers should be considered.

6. Date of next meeting

6.1 To be confirmed.