

The administration of the June 2017 UK general election

Report on the 8 June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election

December 2017

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Tel: 020 7271 0500

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The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

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Summary: administration of the June 2017 UK general election

A total of 46,835,433 people were registered to vote at the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election, the largest ever electorate for a UK-wide poll. Turnout was 69% – the highest turnout for a UK general election since May 1997.

Nearly four in five (79%) people surveyed after the election reported they were either very or fairly confident the elections were well-run, and 89% of candidates were very or fairly satisfied with the administration of the election.

The June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election was unexpectedly announced less than three weeks before polling day for the scheduled May 2017 local government elections. This presented significant challenges for Returning Officers (ROs) and their staff who were responsible for running the poll. They deserve great credit and thanks for ensuring that the May and June elections were well-run.

But this positive overall picture should not mask wider risks to the administration of well-run elections, which are becoming increasingly apparent. ROs and electoral administrators face reduced resources and a growing number of skilled professionals are leaving local authority elections teams. They are also increasingly reliant on a relatively small pool of specialist software and print management suppliers.

Problems in some places meaning that some voters received inadequate service, and significant issues in Plymouth and Newcastle-under-Lyme, illustrate that more action must be taken now to deal with the increasing challenges that ROs are facing in delivering well-run elections.

We will continue to work with the UK's governments, Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers to collect and review evidence about the challenges to well-run elections and to identify changes which could help reduce these risks.

We also want to see progress by the UK's governments towards implementing recommendations that we and others have made, including:

- Implementing the UK Law Commissions' proposals to simplify electoral law and Sir Eric Pickles' recommendations on electoral fraud.
- Improving the rules for nominating candidates, appointing emergency proxies and making it easier for overseas voters to cast a vote.
- Making electoral registration more joined-up with other public services to make it simpler for the public and more efficient for EROs, and reducing the risk of people voting in more than one constituency.

1 The administration of the June 2017 UK general election

1.1 The June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election presented significant challenges for Returning Officers (ROs)¹ and their staff who were responsible for running the poll.

1.2 The election was unexpectedly announced less than three weeks before polling day for the scheduled May 2017 local government elections which were taking place across Scotland and Wales and in parts of England.² An unscheduled Northern Ireland Assembly election had already been held in March 2017. In the three weeks before polling day on 8 June, terrorist attacks in Manchester and London also led to heightened security across the UK, particularly in high-profile public places.

1.3 Evidence summarised in this chapter, and set out in more detail in our research on voters' and candidates' views, shows that the May and June 2017 elections were well-run. ROs and their staff deserve great credit and thanks for their hard work to deliver these elections. But this positive overall picture should not mask wider risks to the administration of well-run elections, which are becoming increasingly apparent.

1.4 The May and June elections in 2017 saw a small number of areas where problems meant that some voters did not receive the service they should be able to expect. There were also more significant issues with the administration of the UK general election in Plymouth and Newcastle-under-Lyme. These are indicators that more action must be taken now to understand and address the increasing challenges that ROs are facing in delivering well-run elections.

Delivering well-run elections: an increasing challenge

In our July report on electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election we highlighted that Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were required to process significant numbers of electoral registration applications during April and May 2017. These were unexpected and unplanned in terms of both their volume and timing, and a significant proportion were duplicate applications from people who were already correctly registered. EROs across the UK had to draw on their local authority budgets to deal with the impact of an unplanned national electoral event.

¹ Other than where we refer specifically to an individual (Acting) Returning Officer, we use Returning Officer or RO in this report to refer to the (A)ROs who were legally responsible for running the elections.

² The next scheduled UK Parliamentary general election had been due to take place in May 2020, but Parliament voted to hold an election on Thursday 8 June 2017 instead.

Returning Officers and electoral administrators are also faced with reduced resources and a growing number of skilled professionals leaving local authority elections teams. The AEA has recently highlighted the significant number of people leaving the electoral administration profession, with 12% of its members leaving over the last three years. They are also increasingly reliant on a relatively small pool of specialist software and print management suppliers.

We will continue to work with the UK's governments and the Electoral Coordination and Advisory Board (which includes senior Electoral Registration and Returning Officers and is also attended by representatives from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of Electoral Administrators) to collect and review evidence about the challenges to well-run elections and to identify changes which could help reduce these risks.

We also want to see progress by the UK's governments towards implementing the important recommendations made by the UK's Law Commissions in 2016 to reform and simplify our complex and fragmented framework of electoral law. The Law Commissions' proposals would bring significant benefits to those who administer elections, as well as those who campaign or stand as candidates, and would support more efficient election administration in future.

Turnout and participation

1.5 A total of 46,835,433 people were registered to vote at the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election, the largest ever electorate for a UK-wide poll. This included:

- 285,000 British citizens who were registered as overseas electors; and
- 284,000 electors who appointed proxies to cast a vote on their behalf.

1.6 A total of 3,308 candidates were nominated to stand for election at the June 2017 general election, representing on average between five and six candidates per constituency.

1.7 A total of 32,294,928 ballot papers were included in the counts for the June 2017 general election, representing a turnout of 69%. This was the highest turnout for a UK general election since May 1997.

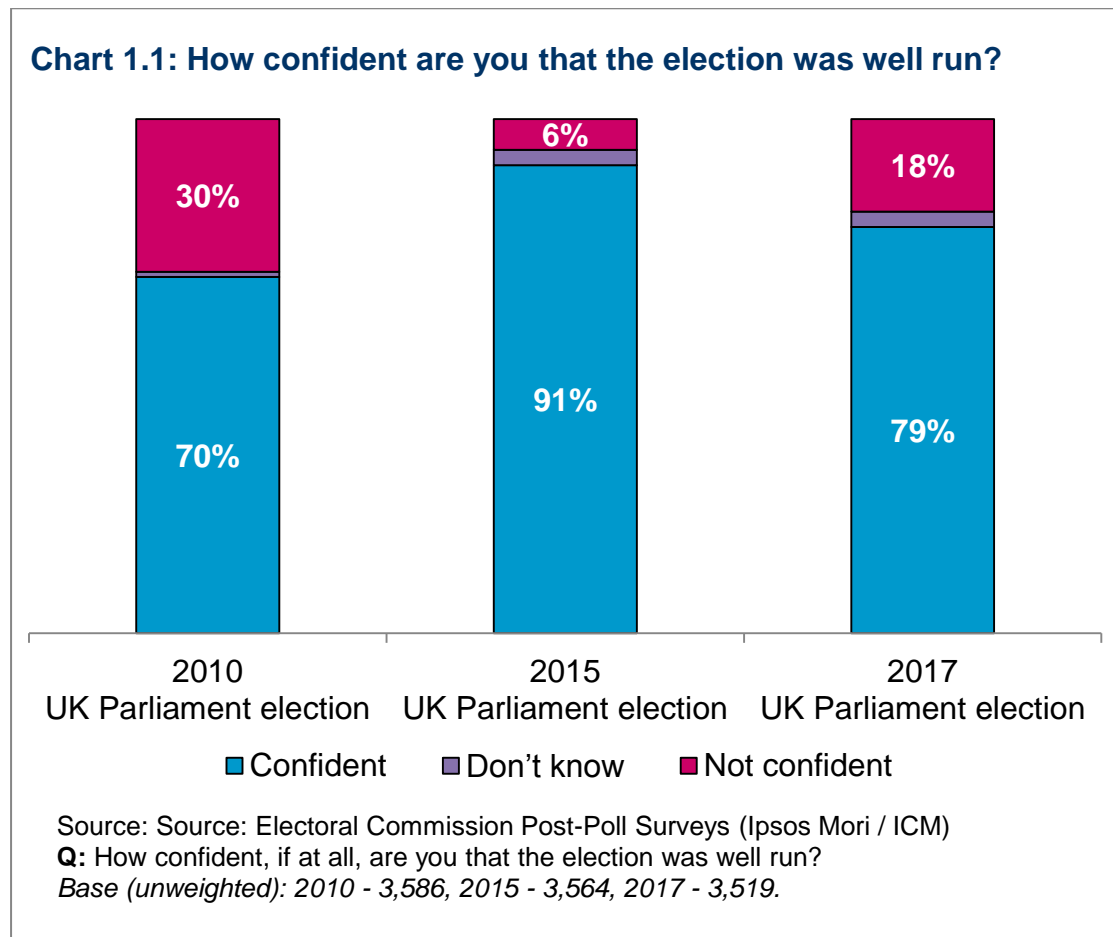
1.8 Some 8,412,060 electors (just under 18% of the total electorate) were issued with a postal vote, and 7,155,315 were returned by voters to ROs before the close of poll. Approximately 2.4% of all returned postal votes were not included in the count because the voter's personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) could not be matched against those previously provided and held on record by the Electoral Registration Officer, or because the voter failed to include either the ballot paper or the signed postal voting statement (or both) in their returned postal vote envelopes. ROs must check the

personal identifiers on every returned postal ballot pack before the ballot paper can be included in the count.

1.9 A total of 74,289 ballot papers (less than a quarter of 1 per cent of the total votes cast by voters) were rejected and not counted either because they were blank, it was unclear which candidate the vote was for, or the Returning Officer's official mark was missing.

Voters' and candidates' views

1.10 Our research with the public after the June 2017 general election found that nearly four in five people (79%) reported they were either very or fairly confident the elections were well-run. This was lower than the proportion of people who reported that they were confident that the May 2015 general election was well-run (91%) but in line with other more recent electoral events. In 2017, voters were significantly more likely to say that they were confident the elections were well-run than non-voters (81% compared with 64%).



1.11 Lack of information (24%) and distrust towards politicians/the political system (19%) were the categories of most frequently mentioned reasons why people were not confident that the June 2017 UK general election was well-run.

1.12 Our research also found that:

- 98% of voters thought that the ballot paper was easy to complete
- 84% of polling station voters were satisfied with the process of voting
- 80% of postal voters were satisfied with the process of voting

1.13 Our research with candidates after the June 2017 general election also found that nearly nine in ten (89%) said they were satisfied with the administration of the election in their constituency.

Our reports on the 2017 UK general election

1.14 This report concludes our specific programme of reporting on the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election. We have also published specific reports on the registration of voters, accessibility and political finance regulation at the general election.³

1.15 In addition, we have published findings from our research with electors and candidates on their views about the 2017 general election.⁴

1.16 We will also publish by March 2018 an analysis of data recorded by police forces about cases of alleged electoral fraud which have been reported during 2017.

³ Electoral Commission: [*Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election*](#) (July 2017); [*Elections for everyone – Experiences of people with disabilities at the 8 June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election*](#) (November 2017); [*Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election*](#) (November 2017)

⁴ Electoral Commission: [*Voting in 2017 – Understanding public attitudes towards elections and voting*](#) (October 2017); [*Standing for office in 2017 – Analysis of feedback from candidates standing for election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish council and UK Parliament*](#) (November 2017)

2 Electoral administration and management issues

2.1 Following the announcement in April 2017 that a UK Parliamentary general election would be held on 8 June, ROs and electoral administrators had to review and update their plans to be able to deliver both sets of polls. We published our core guidance to support ROs, candidates and campaigners within three days of the Prime Minister's announcement, and our full set of guidance and resources was available within two weeks.

2.2 In their own report on the 2017 elections the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) – the professional body representing local officials who run elections – recognised the importance of timely, comprehensive guidance, and highlighted that electoral administrators welcomed the availability of guidance and resources at short notice.⁵

2.3 Evidence from our assessment of performance against our performance standards and of issues that were raised during the June 2017 UK general election shows that overall the elections were well-run.⁶ There were no legal challenges to the results of elections in 2017, and electors and candidates expressed high levels of confidence in the administration of the elections.

2.4 There were, however, a small number of areas where local issues and errors in electoral administration and management meant that some electors did not receive the service they should be able to expect. These are highlighted later in this chapter and included:

- errors in the production and issue of poll cards;
- errors in the production and issue of postal ballot packs; and
- errors in the administration of polling station procedures.

2.5 There were also more significant issues with the administration of the June 2017 parliamentary elections in Plymouth and Newcastle-under-Lyme. This report summarises these and considers the latest position relating to the independent reviews which were commissioned by the local authorities in those areas to identify the nature and causes of those problems.

2.6 It is important to be open about problems and mistakes so that ROs and others can learn for future elections. We will continue to review how we

⁵ Association of Electoral Administrators *It's time for urgent and positive Government action The AEA's review of the 2017 local government elections and the UK Parliamentary general election* (September 2017)

⁶ For more information about performance standards for ROs see our website at <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/performance-standards-data/performance-in-running-elections-and-referendums>

support and challenge Returning Officers to ensure they can deliver well run elections, learning lessons from the 2017 elections.

2.7 We also set out in this chapter recommendations for legislative changes to help address these issues for future elections.

Returning Officer performance at the 2017 general election: Plymouth constituencies

2.8 In Plymouth there were four separate errors during the administration of the June 2017 UK general election across a range of activities in the three constituencies of Plymouth Moor View, Plymouth Sutton and Devonport and South West Devon:

- The RO issued both ordinary and postal poll cards to approximately 35,000 postal voters.
- The RO did not send a data file of 1,926 postal voters to the printers, which meant that the voters did not receive postal ballot packs when they should have.
- The ERO for Plymouth did not notify 331 electors that they had been removed from the electoral register as a result of review procedures that had been instigated before the election was announced.
- The RO did not include 6,587 votes counted from polling stations in the Efford and Lipson ward for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport constituency in the public notice of the total number of votes for each candidate when the result was declared.

2.9 These errors are likely to have had a significant impact on voters, some of whom may not have been able to ensure they were properly registered and/or have been able to vote in the elections. The errors also affected the confidence of voters, candidates and campaigners in the conduct of the election. The scale of the problems led the RO to commission an independent review immediately following the election. The review was conducted by Dr Dave Smith, and the Electoral Commission assisted in framing the terms of reference for the investigation.

2.10 Dr Smith reported his findings in September 2017.⁷ His report examined each of the issues in detail and made a number of recommendations to ensure these errors do not recur. His recommendations included: the need to have sufficient appropriately skilled and experienced staff in post at an operational level; the need for properly documented operating procedures, systems and process to ensure continuity; robust quality assurance and checking procedures; and the establishment of an improvement plan to ensure that the full recommendations were implemented.

⁷ Dr David Smith [*Plymouth City Council – Review of Registration and Elections*](#) (September 2017)

2.11 We have concluded that the RO for Plymouth did not meet elements of the performance standards at the UK general election because they did not:

- Develop and implement robust project management processes.
- Ensure robust processes were in place for ensuring that there were no errors on voter materials.
- Ensure postal ballot packs were received by voters as soon as possible so that voters had the maximum amount of time to act on the information.
- Ensure count processes were designed and managed to secure an accurate result, with a clear audit trail.

2.12 The RO for Plymouth has not accepted the fee which they were entitled to claim from the UK Government for their services in administering the June 2017 election.

2.13 The RO is clear about the need to improve the delivery of future elections in Plymouth, and work is underway to address the independent review recommendations. We note the significant challenges the RO has faced in recruiting the necessary staff for key roles to support the administration of elections and registration, which contributed to the problems at the June 2017 election. We will continue to work closely with Plymouth to ensure the required improvements are made.

Returning Officer performance at the 2017 general election: Newcastle-under-Lyme constituency

2.14 There were several errors during the administration of the June 2017 UK general election across a range of activities in the Newcastle-under-Lyme constituency, including:

- The RO failed to ensure the dispatch of over 500 postal votes to electors who had successfully applied for them.
- The ERO did not have sufficient processes in place to ensure that all documents relating to absent voting and registration applications were received and acted upon.
- The ERO did not determine and process 439 valid applications for registration by the statutory deadline.
- The ERO processed 509 applications for registration by the statutory deadline, but added them to the incorrect register, causing them to be unable to vote.

2.15 As in Plymouth, these issues had an impact on voters' ability to participate in the election and also affected confidence in the conduct of the poll in that area.

2.16 The RO and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council commissioned an independent review following the election, which was carried out by Andrew Scallan CBE on behalf of the Association of Electoral Administrators.

2.17 The findings of Mr Scallan’s review were published on 27 November 2017. His report detailed evidence about the errors and problems which occurred in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and made several recommendations, including: taking steps to address the inexperience of elections office staff; carrying out an independent review to ensure all elections office practices are legally compliant; providing training on election software and law to elections office staff and the Head of Audit and Elections; and reviewing elections office resource requirements to ensure it is able to deal with peaks in activity ahead of future elections.

2.18 We will now conclude our formal process of assessing the performance of the RO for Newcastle-under-Lyme and confirm our final assessment before the end of the year. We look forward to working with the local authority to ensure the required improvements are made so that confidence in the administration of future elections in Newcastle-under-Lyme can be restored.

Before polling day

Candidates’ commonly used names

2.19 Candidates must provide their full name on their nomination form, and this is normally the information which will be printed on the ballot paper. They can, however, also choose to specify that they are commonly known by another name and have this printed on the ballot paper instead:

- Candidates can request to use a commonly used **forename, surname or both**. For example, they may be known by their abbreviated name ‘Andy’, rather than their full first name ‘Andrew’.
- Candidates may also use **initials** as part of their commonly used name.

2.20 Electoral law makes it clear that a commonly used name is one which is different from **any other** forename or surname. That means a candidate cannot exclude any middle names from the ballot paper by specifying their first name as a commonly used name. Similarly, they cannot exclude their first name from the ballot paper by specifying a middle name as a commonly used name.

2.21 Candidates and political parties raised concerns with ROs and directly with us that this meant candidates were not able to have the name they were actually commonly known by on the ballot paper. We also highlighted this issue after the May 2015 UK general election.

2.22 We continue to recommend that candidates should be able to stand for election using any name that they commonly use (provided it is not confusing or offensive), to help voters recognise them on the ballot paper.

Recommendation 1: Clarify the law relating to candidates' commonly used names

For all elections where it is not already the case, the UK's governments should ensure that the law does not require that a candidate's commonly used name must be different from any other forename or surname that they have. The law should retain existing safeguards that Returning Officers may reject a commonly used name on the grounds that it is likely to mislead or confuse electors, or it is obscene or offensive.

Performance assessments: production of poll cards

2.23 Our performance standards framework is designed to support ROs in delivering a consistent high-quality service for voters and those standing for election. It makes clear that we expect ROs to ensure that voters receive the information they need, in an accessible format and within time for them to cast their vote. This includes ensuring that poll cards are received by voters as soon as possible so that voters have the maximum amount of time to act on the information contained on them.

2.24 There were several issues with poll cards at the UK general election, which are summarised below.

South Thanet constituency

2.25 The ARO for the South Thanet constituency issued poll cards to approximately 11,500 voters which contained the incorrect constituency name. The ARO subsequently issued replacement poll cards with the correct constituency name to all affected electors.

2.26 We concluded that the ARO for South Thanet did not meet elements of [RO performance standard 1](#) because they had not put in place robust processes for ensuring that there were no errors on voter materials. Some electors in South Thanet may have believed that their constituency had changed causing confusion.

Hitchin and Harpenden constituency

2.27 The ARO for the Hitchin and Harpenden constituency (who was the RO for St Albans City & District Council) appointed the local RO for North Hertfordshire District Council as their deputy, and delegated to them the issuing of poll cards to electors in that part of the constituency.

2.28 Electoral law requires ROs to issue poll cards to eligible electors as soon as practicable after the publication of the notice of election. The last date for publication of the notice of election for the June 2017 general election was 8 May, more than four weeks before polling day. The RO failed to issue the poll cards for the North Hertfordshire area of the constituency in a timely manner, resulting in the delayed despatch of poll cards for approximately 40,000 electors.

2.29 We concluded that the ARO did not meet elements of [RO performance standard 1](#) because they had not put in place robust processes for ensuring that poll cards were issued as soon as possible so that electors had the maximum amount of time to act on the information. Some electors in the Hitchin and Harpenden constituency may not have received the information they needed in the poll card in time to act on it, for example to change their registration details or apply for an absent vote.

2.30 We will continue to work with the South Thanet, St Albans and North Hertfordshire ROs to drive improvements and to help them put arrangements in place to ensure the provision of a consistently high quality standard of service for voters and those standing for election.

Absent voting

Postal voting

2.31 Postal voting continues to be a popular voting choice with electors. More than 8,412,000 electors (just under 18% of the total electorate) chose to receive a postal vote at the 2017 UK general election. The practical administration of postal voting processes – printing, assembling and delivering postal ballot packs to electors and then processing returned postal votes – can be complex and require a significant input of staff and supplier resource to ensure they run effectively. The close timing of the elections in May and June 2017 led to increased pressures for ROs, electoral administrators and their suppliers.

2.32 There are significant benefits if ROs print and send out postal ballot packs as early as possible in the election timetable, as voters have more time to receive and return their completed postal votes, particularly those who require their postal ballot packs to be sent overseas. Our guidance continues to make clear that Returning Officers should send out postal ballot packs as early as practicable in all cases, and in particular, that they should prioritise the issue of postal ballot packs to overseas addresses, including to members of the British Armed Forces posted overseas.

2.33 ROs have highlighted that they faced a number of practical difficulties in ensuring that postal ballot packs were issued as quickly as possible after the close of nominations on 11 May. In particular, the market for specialist print and production suppliers who can deliver absent vote and ballot paper requirements for Returning Officers in the UK is not large, and they were under unexpected additional pressure to deliver because the June general election was held with relatively short notice and took place only a month after the scheduled May elections.

2.34 We have previously highlighted that the capacity of print suppliers to fulfil demand is a significant risk to the ability of individual ROs to produce and despatch postal votes in good time. This risk was exposed again by the particular circumstances of the May and June 2017 elections.

2.35 We will continue to work with the UK's governments and the Electoral Coordination and Advisory Board to explore ways to improve this area of election delivery and to minimise these risks.

Postal ballot pack printing and despatch

2.36 We expect ROs to ensure that voters receive the information they need, in an accessible format and within time for them to cast their vote. ROs must ensure that robust processes are in place for ensuring that there are no errors on voter materials, and that postal ballot packs are received by voters as soon as possible so that voters have the maximum amount of time to act on the information.

2.37 There were several specific instances of postal ballot pack printing and dispatch errors at the May 2017 elections, which are summarised below:

- The Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) for the borough of Colchester issued ballot papers to 400 postal voters with incorrect ballot paper numbers.
- The DRO for the district of Uttlesford issued ballot papers to approximately 700 postal voters with incorrect ballot paper numbers which did not match the number on the postal vote statement.
- The DRO for the district of Mid Sussex issued postal voting statements to 14,060 postal voters in the district which were missing the directive text and arrow indicating where the voter should provide their signature.
- The RO for Northumberland incorrectly issued two County Council ballot papers to 478 postal voters, and also failed to issue parish council election ballot papers to those voters.

2.38 In all cases, steps were taken to minimise any adverse impact on electors or those standing for election, including the issuing of replacement ballot packs to affected electors once the issue had been identified. This does not, however, negate the fact that they did not, in our view, have in place robust processes for ensuring that there were no errors on voter materials. Some electors in these areas may not have been able to cast a valid vote as a result.

2.39 In each case, the RO reviewed the issues and identified changes to their processes to address the causes of these errors, and as a result there were no similar problems at the June 2017 general election in any of these areas.

Proxy voting

Proxy vote applications in Northern Ireland

2.40 Some political parties and candidates in Northern Ireland highlighted concerns in the weeks before polling day about the number of electors who had appointed a proxy to vote on their behalf. A total of 11,707 electors appointed a proxy (representing 0.94% of the total Northern Ireland electorate, compared to 0.61% of the total electorate across the UK who

appointed proxies). This was an increase from recent elections in Northern Ireland:

- **5,432** proxies were appointed in Northern Ireland for the May 2015 UK Parliamentary general election
- **6,644** proxies were appointed for the May 2016 Assembly elections
- **9,920** proxies were appointed for the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections

2.41 We received no specific complaints or evidence about fraudulent proxy appointment applications, but we recognise that there were some concerns expressed about whether electors could have been misled or coerced into completing an application. The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) undertook an internal review of proxy vote applications after the 2017 general election and is satisfied that her office carried out its duty under law and had applied the correct procedures to scrutinise applications before granting them.

2.42 The CEO referred seven cases to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for investigation where there were concerns that an application to appoint a proxy had not been properly completed, for example where it appeared to have been signed by someone other than the elector. These cases remain under investigation, and we aim to report by March 2018 on data about the outcome of cases across the UK from all elections in 2017.

2.43 In his 2016 report on electoral fraud, Sir Eric Pickles made several recommendations aimed at strengthening the integrity of proxy voting, including clarifying offences around compelling or preventing someone applying for a proxy vote.⁸ We continue to support the majority of Sir Eric's recommendations, and we want to see further progress by the UK's governments towards implementing them.

Recommendation 2: Implement the relevant recommendations from Sir Eric Pickles' review of electoral fraud

The UK's governments should introduce legislation required to implement the relevant recommendations from Sir Eric Pickles' review of electoral fraud.

The UK Government has already responded and has accepted the majority of Sir Eric's recommendations, and it should set out its plans for implementing them.

Emergency proxy vote applications

2.44 Electors, candidates and elected representatives raised concerns with us that, under the rules currently set out in electoral law, some people were not qualified to appoint an emergency proxy and were not able to vote at the

⁸ Sir Eric Pickles [*Securing the ballot – Report of Sir Eric Pickles' review into electoral fraud*](#) (August 2016)

2017 general election as a result. These included examples where electors had to deal with serious family medical emergencies on polling day, and also where an elector's deployment as a member of the armed forces was extended with little notice.

2.45 Electors have raised these concerns with us, and with MPs and other elected representatives, at several recent elections. We continue to recommend that the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy should be extended. People should also be eligible to appoint an emergency proxy if they have:

- unforeseen caring responsibilities; or
- have experienced the death of a close relative.

Recommendation 3: Extend the qualifying circumstances for electors to appoint an emergency proxy

The UK's governments should amend electoral law to extend the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy, so that those who have unforeseen caring responsibilities or who have experienced the death of a close relative would also be eligible.

Overseas voters

2.46 Data from ROs shows that more than 280,000 British citizens were registered as overseas electors at the 2017 general election, a significant increase compared with 2010 and the 2015 election:

- December 2010: **33,000** British citizens registered as overseas electors
- May 2015: **106,000** British citizens registered as overseas electors
- June 2017: **285,000** British citizens registered as overseas electors

2.47 Significant numbers of British citizens applied to register as overseas electors ahead of the June 2016 EU referendum: after the referendum we reported that around 135,400 additional overseas electors were added to the electoral registers between 17 March and 9 June 2016. Electoral law requires a new application to register as an overseas elector every 12 months, and this meant that many people who applied to register in May and early June 2016 needed to apply again in order to be able to vote at the June 2017 general election.

2.48 Overseas electors again contacted us during and after the election to express concern that they had been unable to return their postal votes in time before polling day. There was a period of four calendar weeks between the close of nominations (when the details of the candidates to be printed on the ballot papers are confirmed) and polling day. In some cases this was not enough time to ensure that postal ballot packs could be printed by the RO, sent to and received by the elector, completed and returned to the RO before 10pm on 8 June.

2.49 We highlighted similar problems after the 2015 general election and the 2016 EU referendum. We recommended that ROs should ensure postal ballot packs for future elections are issued to overseas electors as early as possible and should include the correct return postage, so that they can be delivered and returned by voters as quickly as possible before polling day. We were pleased that the UK Government ensured that ROs for the June 2017 general election could use the International Business Response Service for overseas postal ballot packs, despite the relatively short time between the announcement of the election and the dispatch of postal ballot packs to overseas electors.

2.50 Ahead of the 2017 general election we also advised overseas electors to consider appointing a proxy living in the UK to cast a vote on their behalf rather than voting by post. However, we recognise that many British citizens living overseas, especially those who have been away for a considerable period of time, may not be able to identify an eligible person living in the UK who they can appoint as their proxy.

2.51 The 2017 Conservative party election manifesto reiterated a commitment to extend the franchise for British citizens living abroad to vote in UK parliamentary elections. This would enable British citizens who have lived outside the UK for more than 15 years to continue to vote in UK elections. If electoral law is changed before the next scheduled UK general election in 2022, it is likely that more British citizens overseas will be reliant on current postal voting and proxy voting procedures.

Recommendation 4: Improve access to the voting process for overseas electors

We will work with the UK Government and Returning Officers to develop workable and effective proposals to make it easier for overseas electors to cast their votes in time to be counted at elections, which could be included in future legislation to extend the franchise for British citizens overseas.

Polling day and the count

Transparency and security at polling stations and count venues

2.52 We maintain the UK's registers of accredited observers,⁹ and between the Prime Minister's announcement on 18 April and polling day a total of 442 accredited observers were added to the register.

⁹ For more information about the registers, see our website at <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/observing-elections-and-referendums>

2.53 Electoral observation by non-partisan citizen representatives is an essential element underpinning confidence in the electoral and democratic process. One of the Commission's roles is to authorise people and organisations to observe UK elections and relevant referendums. Organisations and individuals applying to be accredited as an electoral observer are required to abide by the Commission's Code of Practice for electoral observers and must sign a declaration confirming they have read and understood the code.¹⁰

2.54 Once accredited, an electoral observer is entitled to attend the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers, at polling stations and at the count. Accredited observers are not required to inform Returning Officers about their plans before attending polling stations and count centres, although we have encouraged observers to do so. They must not obstruct election processes, however, and must maintain strict political impartiality at all times.

2.55 Some ROs highlighted concerns with us about the activities of accredited observers. In particular this included concern that Presiding Officers were not always notified in advance that observers would be attending specific polling stations or count centres. These concerns were particularly pronounced in the light of the terrorist attacks which took place in Manchester and London in the weeks before polling day.

2.56 The Commission's observer scheme has been running for almost ten years and we now intend to conduct a full review of how the scheme operates across the UK. We will seek the views of Returning Officers, observers and other stakeholders with a view to putting in place any changes to the process before the scheduled 2019 elections.

Performance assessments: Polling day

2.57 Our performance standards framework makes clear that we expect ROs to put in place appropriate measures to ensure that voters have confidence that their vote will be counted in the way they intended.

Warley, West Bromwich East and West Bromwich West constituencies

2.58 In two polling stations in the Warley constituency, Presiding Officers mistakenly issued a total of seven voters with tendered ballot papers instead of normal ballot papers, and the voters put their completed papers in the polling station ballot box. Tendered ballot papers should only be issued in a limited number of prescribed circumstances, and should be placed in a special official envelope; never in the ballot box.

2.59 The Electoral Services Manager for Sandwell Council gave instructions to polling station staff that the sealed polling station ballot boxes should be opened; the tendered ballot papers should be removed from the ballot boxes;

¹⁰ Electoral Commission [Code of practice for electoral observers – Electoral observation at United Kingdom elections](#) (February 2012)

new normal ballot papers should be marked by the staff in accordance with votes marked on the tendered ballot papers and placed in the ballot boxes; and the ballot boxes should be re-sealed.

2.60 The (Acting) Returning Officer (ARO) was not informed about the instructions given to polling station staff until several days after the election. The approach that was taken represented a significant and serious breach of prescribed polling processes.

2.61 A further error on polling day occurred when staff from Sandwell Council's electoral services team failed to check and empty the postal ballot box situated in the Council office reception area. The ballot box was subsequently found to have contained 23 postal ballot packs. These had not been opened and verified and the ballot papers were not counted.

2.62 We concluded that the ARO for the Warley, West Bromwich East and West Bromwich West constituencies did not meet elements of [RO performance standard 1](#) because they had not put in place robust procedures to maintain the secure storage of ballot papers and postal ballot packs at all times. Both errors meant that some electors may not have been confident that their vote would be counted as they intended. The error in the polling stations in the Warley constituency, and the subsequent actions taken by the Presiding Officers under the instruction of the Electoral Services Manager, undermined the secrecy and integrity of the ballot in that polling station.

Double voting

2.63 Our previous report on electoral registration at the June 2017 general election highlighted concerns that some people may have voted twice at the general election, based on claims made by voters on social media. Although it is possible, in certain circumstances, for someone to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place, it is a criminal offence for an elector to cast more than one vote on their own behalf in a UK Parliamentary general election.

2.64 We have not investigated specific instances of alleged double voting – where potential criminal offences are involved it is for police forces and prosecutors to assess the evidence to determine whether legal action should be taken. We provided advice to UK police forces about how to investigate allegations that an individual may have voted twice, including obtaining from the relevant ROs the marked copy of the register.

2.65 The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) has collated information from police forces across the UK about the current status of their investigations into allegations of double voting. At the time of publishing this report, we are aware that a total of 17 individual allegations of double voting had been identified from claims made directly to the police or indirectly via elected representatives, the press or social media. These allegations remain under investigation, and we aim to report by March 2018 on data about the outcome of cases across the UK from all elections in 2017.

2.66 The evidence available to date from police investigations does not appear to indicate that double voting took place at the June 2017 general election on any significant scale. It is nevertheless troubling that there is currently no mechanism to collectively interrogate registers maintained by different Electoral Registration Officers in order to identify duplicate entries across Great Britain, and that some voters appear to have admitted exploiting that weakness.

2.67 We highlighted the opportunity to address this vulnerability when the UK Government was developing its plans to implement individual electoral registration in Great Britain in 2011,¹¹ and we also recommended further work in our July report on electoral registration at the 2017 general election. The UK's Law Commissions recommended in 2016 that electors applying to be registered in respect of a second home should be asked to designate which home they wish to be registered at to vote at national elections.¹²

Recommendation 5: Explore mechanisms to reduce the risk of people voting in more than one constituency

We want to work with the UK Government to explore possible mechanisms to reduce the risk of people voting in more than one constituency at a UK general election. This could build on work to help identify and reduce the number of duplicate electoral registration applications.

The Government should also consider other options for reducing this risk, such as requiring people who are lawfully registered to vote in local government elections for more than one local authority area to choose which of those addresses they will vote at for UK Parliamentary general elections.

Counting votes

2.68 Electoral law requires that ROs must begin counting the votes for a UK Parliamentary election within four hours of the close of poll (i.e. by 2am on the day after polling day). ROs can only begin counting the votes once the number of ballot papers in each ballot box has been verified against the accounts kept by Presiding Officers.

2.69 For constituencies where counting did not begin by this time, the RO is required by law to submit a statement to us setting out the steps taken to ensure that counting could begin before 2am, and explaining why it was not possible to do so.

¹¹ Electoral Commission [*The Electoral Commission's response to the Government's White Paper and draft legislation on Individual Electoral Registration \(Cm 8108\)*](#) (October 2011)

¹² Law Commission, Scottish Law Commission and Northern Ireland Law Commission [*Electoral Law – A Joint Interim Report*](#) (February 2016)

2.70 The ARO for three constituencies in Cornwall (North Cornwall, South East Cornwall, St Austell and Newquay) submitted statements explaining that the count venue used at previous elections was not available, given the short notice of the election being called, and the smaller venue could accommodate fewer count staff. The same ARO also submitted a statement explaining that the count venue for the Truro and Falmouth constituency was outside the constituency, and that counting could not begin until postal ballot packs had been delivered to the count centre from the ARO's main office.

2.71 The ARO for two constituencies in Northumberland (Berwick upon Tweed and Hexham) submitted statements explaining that the large and remote geography of both constituencies meant that it took time to transport materials safely to the central count venue for the county.

2.72 There were a number of close results at the June 2017 general election, and in many case ROs agreed to requests from candidates or election agents to recount votes. Eleven successfully elected candidates won by fewer than 100 votes in this election, compared with three candidates in 2015 and six in 2010.

2.73 Where ROs agree to requests from candidates or agents, recounts should be undertaken with maximum openness and transparency so that all observers can have confidence in both the process itself and the provisional result which it provides. Returning Officers can refuse to recount votes if they consider the request is unreasonable, but they may instead offer candidates and agents the opportunity to inspect the bundles of ballot papers as a means of reassuring them that the result is accurate.

2.74 The closest result at the June 2017 general election was in the constituency of North East Fife, which was decided by two votes after three formal recounts. The longest count was for the constituency of Kensington, which was decided by 20 votes after three formal recounts which continued throughout the night of polling day and during the following day. The result was declared at 9pm on Friday 9 June.