

The
Electoral
Commission

Election 2005: data and information
from (A)ROs

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Introduction

About this paper

1.1 This paper provides an overview of the main findings from a survey of (Acting) Returning Officers (referred to hereafter as (A)ROs) conducted at the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election. The survey was undertaken to obtain the views of (A)ROs on the administration and conduct of the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election (hereafter, the general election). The information we have collected will be used to inform the future work of the Commission. It complements a number of papers and reports published by the Commission in 2005:

- *Securing the vote* (published May 2005)
- *Election 2005: turnout* (September 2005)
- *Election 2005: engaging the public* (December 2005)
- *Election 2005: Northern Ireland* (December 2005)

1.2 The survey involved identifying a representative sub-sample of 235 Parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain and sending hard copy questionnaires to (A)ROs within these during April 2005. A separate survey was administered by the Commission's office in Belfast and was sent to one third of the constituencies in Northern Ireland. The overall response rate was approximately 53% across the UK (further technical details can be found in this paper's appendix).

1.3 In this paper we have provided an overview of information relating to several important administrative issues such as election staffing, publicising the election, the accessibility of voting and problems faced by administrators. In addition, we have highlighted common themes raised by many (A)ROs. Following this introduction, we go on to look at the following topics, drawing on responses to both closed 'tick box' questions and open-ended questions allowing respondents to provide further explanation and detail:

- nominations
- candidates and agents
- the administration of postal voting and arrangements with Royal Mail
- electoral registration
- local council elections
- publicising the election
- accessibility of the election
- evaluation of election process and voter feedback
- general voting procedures
- the count
- electoral fraud
- general comments from electoral administrators, and
- general contact with the Commission

1.4 The analysis in this paper is based on the responses of (A)ROs across Britain excluding Northern Ireland, unless indicated otherwise. Where percentages do not add up to 100%, this may be due to rounding.

Acknowledgements

1.5 This report has been compiled by the Commission’s Research Team, led by Catherine Johnson, Research Officer. The Commission would like to thank all of the (Acting) Returning Officers who responded to the survey – the evidence they have provided will be of considerable use to the Commission and others.

Nominations

1.6 Almost all of the (A)ROs responding to the survey (98%) reported that, in their opinion, the procedures for nominations worked efficiently and effectively. As Table 1 shows, this view was commonly held across the UK.

Table 1: UK breakdown of (A)ROs' views of procedures for nomination

| | England Yes % | Scotland Yes % | Wales Yes % | NI Yes % |
|---|------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| In your opinion, did the procedures for nominations worked efficiently and effectively? | 98 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, 91 English constituencies and 6 Northern Ireland (NI) constituencies (this represents one-third of all NI constituencies).

1.7 Many (A)ROs in England said that agents were invited to bring in their nomination papers for an informal pre-check for any errors or omissions before the actual submission on the statutory deadline. One commented that candidates and agents do not seem to always fully appreciate the formal and legal nature of the nomination process, and so submit papers that are not well-prepared.

1.8 The issue of the short period of time between the end of the nomination process and polling day was also raised. One (A)RO commented that the end of the nominations process was too close to the poll to effectively deal with postal vote issuing and the return and re-issue processes (issues addressed by the Commission in *Securing the vote*).

1.9 In Great Britain, some (A)ROs commented that they implemented an appointment system which they offered to each candidate to allow a degree of privacy and time to give guidance as necessary. In addition, several (A)ROs issued checklists with the nomination pack for use by candidates and election agents.

Candidates and agents

1.10 In Great Britain, three quarters of (A)ROs (77%) said they had held briefing meetings for party agents (see Table 2). However, one in five (20%) said they encountered 'particular issues' in their dealings with candidates and agents during the election period. In Northern Ireland, six out of six constituencies said that they did not hold briefing meeting(s) for party agents over and above those arranged jointly by The Electoral Commission, the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) and Royal Mail.

Table 2: Candidates and agents during the election period

| Did you do any of the following... | Yes % | No % |
|---|----------------|-------------|
| encounter any particular issues in your dealings with candidates and agents during the election period? | 20 | 80 |
| hold briefing meetings for party agents? | 77 | 23 |
| if yes above, how many? | Average of one | |
| produce any literature for party agents and or candidates? | 74 | 26 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.11 According to (A)ROs in England, some of the particular issues in dealings with candidates and agents were: unmet (high) expectations of facilities at the count (own rooms and TVs to watch the results) 'at (A)ROs' expense', and a lack of awareness about the need to have registered as a political party to use a description/logo. Indeed, one (A)RO commented that often a general lack of knowledge about the procedures involved was an issue. Some (A)ROs from English constituencies commented that candidates and agents had general misgivings about the security and handling of postal votes. In addition, some agents were unclear of the requirement to provide a letter from the Nominating Officer of their party if they wished to use a description.

1.12 Furthermore, the issue was raised that candidates or agents from minor parties can be unsure of their rights and responsibilities, which puts them at a considerable disadvantage compared to others with larger party structures and more expertise. One (A)RO suggested there should be a Commission helpline in such cases.

1.13 Many (A)ROs said that they worked closely with the main agents in advance of the election, with meetings before the election to advise them and to arrange a date for bringing in the papers. For example, circular letters were often issued on procedural issues for postal votes, the election and the count.

1.14 According to our survey, three-quarters of (A)ROs (74%) said that they produced some literature for party agents and/or candidates during the election period. In England, many (A)ROs sent out guidance notes for candidates and agents regarding expenses, polling agents, tellers, arrangements for postal ballot opening, codes of conduct at polling stations and details of procedures at the count. These usually included Electoral Commission material. Other guidance included local authority policy on fly-posting, guidance on the use of county council premises for meetings and information about dealing with postal votes and security issues.

Table 3: Candidates and agents during the election period, UK breakdown

| Did you do any of the following...% | England Yes | Scotland Yes | Wales Yes | NI Yes |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| encounter any particular issues in your dealings with candidates and agents during the election period | 23 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| hold briefing meetings for party agents? | 74 | 95 | 67 | n/a |
| Produce any literature for party agents and or candidates? | 67 | 95 | 100 | n/a |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies (75% of original sample), 91 English constituencies, and 6 NI constituencies (one third of all)

1.15 In response to the open-ended questions, several (A)ROs commented that they reproduced the Commission's guidance for candidates and agents at Parliamentary elections and issued the Commission's code of conduct regarding postal votes. In addition, some issued Shaw's candidacy guide to agents and candidates, along with nomination packs. One (A)RO commented that his authority produced a briefing for candidates and agents setting out how and why all aspects of the election are conducted as well as what he was expecting in return from candidates and their party workers. Our survey results suggest that, in most cases, guidance was localised.

1.16 In Wales, election material was also produced for party candidates and agents. The material produced included: guidance notes for tellers, location maps of count centres and addresses of polling stations. In Scotland guidance was distributed on electoral arrangements. Many nomination packs contained election timetables, guidance and forms. One (A)RO suggested that many candidates and agents were unsure of the processes and procedures and had to be 'led' through them at briefing sessions.

1.17 Most (A)ROs said that they endeavoured to keep political organisers well informed with regular circulation of relevant information. One said that their authority have now instituted quarterly meetings to open up dialogue and better understanding between themselves and the candidates and agents. In

addition, PowerPoint presentations were given by some (A)ROs to candidates and agents after the close of nominations.

The administration of postal voting

1.18 The Commission's report *Election 2005: turnout* contains a large amount of data relating to postal voting derived from a data collection exercise involving every (A)RO across the UK. Our survey of a sub-sample of (A)ROs collected some additional data and found that on average, across the UK, each (A)RO issued 10 replacement postal ballots to electors who had lost their form and approximately four replacement postal ballots to those who had spoiled it. In Northern Ireland, each DRO rejected an average of 78 postal ballot papers per constituency. Of the six constituencies surveyed, a total of 471 postal ballot papers were rejected.

Table 4: Undelivered ballot packs and Dols received separately from ballot papers, across Britain, 124 constituencies

| | Mean per constituency |
|---|-----------------------|
| What was the total number of ballot packs returned undelivered? | 87 |
| What was the total number of valid Dols received separately from ballot papers? | 73 |

Dols = Declaration of Identities

Base: 124 constituencies across Britain

1.19 The most common theme emerging from (A)RO's responses in England was that the increasing volume of requests for postal votes, along with the tight timescale for the election period, had caused some administrative difficulties, particularly in ensuring postal votes got to all electors in sufficient time. Local authorities dealt with this in different ways. Some dealt with the production and issuing of postal votes in-house, while others used external contractors to cope with the volume of postal votes. In general, survey responses indicate that printing of postal vote stationery was outsourced. Our survey suggests there was a similar approach in the production and issuing in-house of postal votes in Scotland and Wales, with some using external contractors to print ballot papers.

1.20 One (A)RO said that the use of contractors had become essential to meeting deadlines and the experience led some (A)ROs to consider using external contactors in future. Many said that often the number of staff available was not sufficient. It was argued that more time should be allowed to produce the ballot papers and to give electors more time to receive and complete them.

1.21 For the 124 English, Scottish and Welsh constituencies which responded to the survey, a total of **42,149 postal votes were handed in at polling stations**. Based on the responses we got, an average (mean) of 363 voters per constituency in Britain handed in their postal votes at the polling station. Several (A)ROs said that a high number of voters were handing in their postal votes at polling stations. One said that this was slowing down the verification process. Moreover, many commented that the pressure of completing full opening and verification of such votes at the count introduced delays. Furthermore, one (A)RO in England asserted that there was not enough funding at the local level for the extra temporary staff that is needed to deal with large volumes of postal votes. Another suggested that perhaps the larger number of postal votes returned directly to polling stations on polling day was a consequence of adverse publicity surrounding postal voting and Royal Mail.

Arrangements with Royal Mail

1.22 As a consequence of the large volume of postal vote requests, (A)ROs said they needed to liaise closely with Royal Mail to arrange collection and ensure the prompt delivery of postal votes. Almost all in Britain (99%), said that they made some arrangements at constituency level with Royal Mail to ensure the prompt delivery and return of postal ballots (see Table 5). The vast majority (87%) reported that, on the whole, the arrangements they had made were satisfactory.

Table 5: (A)RO arrangements with Royal Mail, Britain

| Were any arrangements made at constituency level with Royal Mail to ensure prompt delivery and return of postal ballots? | Yes % | No % |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Delivery arrangements | 94 | 6 |
| Batching postal votes | 34 | 66 |
| Final sweep of boxes and sorting offices | 98 | 2 |
| Were any arrangements made? | 99 | 1 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.23 Although many (A)ROs in England said they had a good working relationship with Royal Mail, some reported problems. Some said that 'inefficiencies' on part of some Royal Mail staff caused delays in the process, which then impacted on the 'already extremely tight timetable'. There were some complaints about the non-delivery or late delivery of poll cards. In addition, some said though that although initial arrangements were made, these weren't necessarily carried through. Almost all (A)ROs across Britain, (98%), said that they had arranged for a final sweep of boxes and sorting offices and 94% made some delivery arrangements. Only one-third (34%) said that they batched the postal votes.

1.24 In Scotland, most Returning Officers met with their Royal Mail representative in advance of the general election earlier in the year. One commented that Royal Mail always begin with good intentions and wanting to agree to a timetable, but sometimes they can fail to live up to those intentions. In order to facilitate the distribution process in Wales, (A)ROs met with their Royal Mail representative at an early stage to agree mailing arrangements and then maintained regular contact throughout the election period. Table 6 below suggests a very similar trend across the whole of Britain. In England, Scotland and Wales almost all made delivery arrangements and arranged for a final sweep of postal boxes and sorting offices.

1.25 In Northern Ireland, four out of six (A)ROs said they made some form of local arrangements with Royal Mail to ensure prompt delivery of postal ballot papers and return of postal votes. Five out of six constituencies responded that local arrangements proved satisfactory. A third of constituencies said that absent voting arrangements did give rise to some other problems. One DRO remarked that the quantity of absent votes caused problems as they had to ensure there was sufficient staffing and that they all fully understood their role.

Table 6: Arrangements made with Royal Mail across Britain

| Were any arrangements made at constituency level with Royal Mail to ensure prompt delivery and return of postal ballots? | England | Scotland | Wales |
|--|---------|----------|-------|
| | Yes % | Yes % | Yes % |
| Delivery arrangements | 92 | 100 | 100 |
| Batching postal votes | 35 | 32 | 33 |
| Final sweep of postal boxes and sorting offices | 98 | 100 | 100 |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, 91 English constituencies

Electoral registration

1.26 Approaching six in ten, 56%, of the sample of (A)ROs in England and Wales said that the rolling register did not present any administrative difficulties, with 44% saying it did.¹ In Northern Ireland, only one in six ROs said that they thought that the rolling register presented any administrative problems at constituency level.

1.27 An average of **184 requests** were received by each (A)ROs in England and Wales for **alterations to the register** between 11 March and the announcement of the election (on Tuesday 5 April).² In addition, an average

¹ This question was not asked in Scotland.

² This question was not asked in Scotland.

of 197 requests were received between the announcement of the election and polling day on 5 May. On average, 30 requests were received on polling day itself.

1.28 Several (A)ROs commented that the volume of applications increased in the run up to the election, creating pressure to cope with administering the rolling register in addition to administering the elections. One commented that this resulted in a huge backlog of claims to be included in the register for May and June. These then had to be processed after the election, with cost implications because there was a need to employ temporary staff and 'non-election' staff.

1.29 Many (A)ROs reported that a large number of electors telephoned their offices and call lines not realising they were not registered to vote until the election was called and after it was too late to register. Other (A)ROs said that the general election is often the only election that people are interested in voting in, and too many could not register as the deadline had already passed when the election was called. In *Securing the vote*, the Commission recommended that the deadline for registering to vote should always be after the date that the election is called and it also recommended that there should be a longer period of time between the last date for applications to be on the register and polling day, to allow for administering the issuing and return of postal votes.

1.30 One (A)RO reported that some electors had moved and not registered at their new address, but they had been deleted from their old address during the previous years canvass. Another also emphasised the importance of an accurate register as it is the 'first defence against fraud!' One Welsh (A)RO recommended that additional funding should be available so that they can write to the public for confirmation that they still want to vote by post and that this could also lessen the possibility of fraud.

Local council elections

1.31 More than one-third of (A)ROs (36%) said that they had county council elections taking place at the same time as the general election in their constituency or constituencies. Six in ten (59%) said they had no other election apart from the general election. Only 5% said that they had held a by-election(s) at the same time as the general election in their constituency.

1.32 Some (A)ROs said that this caused considerable additional workloads, particularly for small electoral services teams. This meant that temporary clerks had to be funded for the duration of the election period. It also meant that the administration of the election(s) was a more complex process due to larger volumes of work.

1.33 Another (A)RO agreed that there is an impact, but it was more the effect that the late calling of the general election had on the administration of their county council elections. This is because preparation for the county council

election was already well underway by the time the election was called. This caused problems due to the 'late information' sent by the Commission, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA), which then had to be acted upon.

Publicising the election

1.34 The Commission's 2002 report *Making an impact: The local promotion of electoral issues* explored the promotional activity undertaken by local authorities around electoral issues. Our survey of a sub-sample of (A)ROs following the 2005 general election, found a majority in Britain (65%) reporting they undertook some local publicity or provided information in relation to the election during the campaign period and the immediate run-up to it. A third (35%) said that they did not. In Northern Ireland, none of the six Deputy Returning Officers (DROs) we surveyed undertook any local publicity (over and above what was done centrally by the EONI) in relation to postal voting or to the election more generally.

1.35 As Table 7 shows, EROs in Scotland were most likely to undertake local publicity or to provide information in relation to the election, with over three quarters of EROs there (79%) saying that they did so. (A)ROs in Wales were the least likely to do so (44%). Almost two thirds of (A)ROs (64%) in England said that they undertook some local publicity in relation to the general election.

Table 7: Publicising the election

| During the general election campaign period or immediate run-up, did you... | England | Scotland | Wales |
|--|---------|----------|-------|
| | Yes % | Yes % | Yes % |
| Undertake any local publicity or provide information in relation to the election? | 64 | 79 | 44 |
| Undertake any local publicity of information relating specifically to postal voting? | 68 | n/a* | 67 |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, and 91 English constituencies

Note: * This question was asked in a separate survey to EROs in Scotland.

1.36 Around two thirds of (A)RO respondents in both England and Wales (68%) said that they undertook some local publicity of information relating specifically to **postal voting**, either during, or in the immediate run-up to, the general election campaign, with 32% saying they did not. Only approximately five in nine EROs in Scotland said they undertook local publicity in relation to postal voting, in the lead-up to the general election campaign period

1.37 Several (A)ROs commented that the main problem with publicising the election was that they could only say that 5 May was a possible date for the general election. In addition to announcements and press releases on the council websites and pre-election mailings, a range of other techniques were used by (A)ROs. Some of the detailed responses that we received to the questions are included in the list below.

England

- Most (A)ROs undertook some publicity in the local newspapers and on the local radio stations, by placing adverts, as well as conducting interviews
- Other methods included Council newsletters, and leaflets and posters, including the Electoral Commission 'about my vote' posters. Some (A)ROs provided weekly updates in the local newspaper
- Many used the Electoral Commission's publicity materials
- Press releases advising electors of closing dates – when delivery of ballot packs could be expected and when/where completed packs could be returned
- Some (A)ROs placed notices in local papers on postal vote application deadlines and press releases were issued giving the cut off date for the rolling register
- Several said they provided information on polling arrangements on poll cards
- Information made available on Council's website through press releases and pre-election mailing
- Some (A)ROs published Q&As in their local paper and on the council website

Wales

- Articles in the community newsletter or council newspaper and use of council websites
- One local authority talked to deaf and blind associations and other hard-to-reach groups to publicise the election. They devised an easy to understand guide for deaf voters on the general election
- Again, some (A)ROs commented that not knowing the election day itself made it very difficult to publicise
- One (A)RO said there was too short a formal election period and no specific Local Authority funding available

Scotland

- One local authority held a 'No Vote No voice' campaign – a local campaign encouraging registration voting through road shows, press coverage and leaflets etc. Other measures included banners erected on the high street, urging people to vote
- Returning officers interviewed on local radio, and press releases in local newspapers of writs being published
- Press releases regarding new constituency boundaries and other polling arrangements information on the council websites, which sometimes included information from the Commission's campaign

- Some (A)ROs publicised the last dates for receiving a replacement postal ballot paper for lost or spoiled ones

Election staffing and recruitment

1.38 The results from the survey indicate that across Britain, on average, 72 staff were employed per constituency as presiding officers or senior presiding officers at the 2005 general election. On average, 92 poll clerks were employed per constituency. In addition, an average of four staff were employed as polling station inspectors, 35 employed to issue postal votes and 33 employed to handle the receipt and opening of postal votes. The findings also show that, on average, 11 staff were employed as supervisors/ supervisory staff per constituency, with 62 staff employed as counting assistants, 37 as verification staff and four as reception staff. In addition, three staff were employed as security staff and five as additional postal vote staff.

1.39 Responses were almost evenly split as to whether any difficulties were experienced in recruiting sufficient numbers of suitably qualified staff. Across the UK, 52% of (A)ROs said they did experience problems and 48% said they did not. Five out of six DROs in Northern Ireland said they did not have any difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers of suitably qualified staff.

1.40 Pay appears to be one of the main reasons why it is difficult to recruit staff (particularly given the long hours many election staff are required to work). In England, there were significant difficulties in getting sufficiently experienced presiding officers to administer the election. Several commented that poll clerks should be paid same as presiding officers, as they usually do as much work on the day: 'having fees in line would probably encourage more people to become involved/interested in election work'. One (A)RO mentioned that some council departments required staff to take a day's leave in order to assist with administering the election process.

1.41 Throughout Great Britain, some (A)ROs experienced difficulties recruiting sufficiently experienced staff. Some (A)ROs reported that in addition to other council employees, they used students and retired people. Many already had established databases (containing a mix of council staff and non-employees) for selecting and recruiting election staff. In addition, staff were often recruited by word of mouth through existing or previous applicants.

1.42 One (A)RO in Wales reported that there were recruitment difficulties as most people do not want to work at night with an indefinite finish time. Staffing levels often rested heavily on existing staff and their relatives. Numerous (A)ROs across Britain commented that the pay for election staff was too low and the hours too anti-social to attract many new recruits.

1.43 In Britain, several (A)ROs said that with the increase in the number of postal votes it was very difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of postal vote staff with experience, as only Council staff were typically used for such activities. Some (A)ROs also argued that there were insufficient funds to pay

for all staff required at the count and to ensure its efficient and effective operation.

1.44 In England it seems that presiding officers were the most difficult to recruit of all election staff. Many (A)ROs said they had great difficulty in getting presiding officers and especially sufficiently experienced staff. One said they had to go through past appointments and persuade people to apply. Another commented that those constituencies that bordered London had problems recruiting as they were competing with higher rates of pay in London, due to London weighting.

1.45 Again, (A)ROs were divided about whether they regarded current fee levels for election staff as appropriate. Across the UK, 54% said fee levels were appropriate, although 46% disagreed. Views were split 50:50 among the sample of DROs in Northern Ireland about whether current fee levels for election staff were appropriate.

The Commission's code of conduct

1.46 The Commission produced a code of conduct for the handling of postal vote applications and postal ballot papers and eight in 10 (A)ROs across Britain (79%) said that they provided copies of the Commission's code to candidates, campaigners and canvassers. Almost three in five (59%) said that they used it as a reference document themselves, and 42% said that they referred candidates to it, as Table 8 below shows.

Table 8: Commission's code of conduct

| Did you use the Commission's code of conduct? | Yes % | No % |
|--|--------------|-------------|
| Referred candidates to it | 42 | 58 |
| Provided copies to candidates etc | 79 | 21 |
| Used it as a reference document yourself | 59 | 41 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain

Training and support from the Commission

1.47 The Commission provided a wide selection of training materials to assist (A)ROs in training their staff in the lead up to the general election. As Table 9 shows, almost all (A)ROs (93%) trained polling station staff using formal training sessions, which was by far the most popular method of training. This was followed by instruction sheets used by 41%, briefings used by over a third (37%) and role play interactive sessions used by one in five (20%).

Table 9: Methods used by (A)ROs to train polling station staff

| Which of these methods, if any, did you use to train polling station staff...? | Yes % | No % |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Formal training sessions | 93 | 7 |
| Instruction sheets | 41 | 59 |
| Role play-interactive sessions | 20 | 80 |
| Briefings | 37 | 63 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

Table 10: Methods used by (A)ROs to train postal vote process staff

| Which of these methods, if any, did you use to train postal vote process staff...? | Yes % | No % |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Formal training sessions | 9 | 91 |
| Instruction sheets | 64 | 36 |
| Role play-interactive sessions | 5 | 95 |
| Briefings | 73 | 27 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.48 In contrast, the most common training method for staff involved in the processing of postal votes were briefing sessions (used by 73%) and the least popular methods were role play (5%) and formal training sessions (9%). Almost two thirds of (A)ROs (64%) used instruction sheets. As can be seen in Table 11 below, relatively similar methods were used to train count staff: 74% used briefings, 68% instruction sheets and only 6% used formal training sessions.

Table 11: Methods used by (A)ROs to train count staff

| Which of these methods, if any, did you use to train count staff...? | Yes % | No % |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Formal training sessions | 6 | 94 |
| Instruction sheets | 68 | 32 |
| Role play-interactive sessions | 4 | 96 |
| Briefings | 74 | 26 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.49 On the whole, (A)ROs were very positive about The Electoral Commission's training products. As shown in Table 12 overleaf, the vast majority (83%) indicated that they thought the *Managing a UK parliamentary election guidance manual* was good, 12% said it was acceptable, only 1% rated it as poor and 4% did not use it. Almost three-quarters (74%) thought

that the *Quick guide to doubtful ballot papers* was good, 10% acceptable, only 3% poor and 13% did not use it at all.

1.50 Two in five (39%) said they did not use the election planner, 36% said it was good, 24% said it was acceptable, and only 2% said it was poor. The majority of respondents (54%) said that the *Quick guide to issuing of postal votes* was good, and almost half (49%) similarly rated the *Quick guide to the receipt and opening of postal votes*. The handbook and *Quick guide for polling station staff* was very widely used, with 92% and 86% of respondents respectively saying that they used the guides and that they were good. The e-learning pages for polling staff were the least used resource.

Table 12: (A)ROs' views of Electoral Commission training products

| Please indicate your views on each product: | Good | Acceptable | Poor | Did not use |
|--|-------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Election planner | 36 | 24 | 2 | 39 |
| Quick guide to issuing postal votes | 54 | 20 | 0 | 26 |
| Managing a UK Parliamentary election guidance manual | 83 | 12 | 1 | 4 |
| Quick guide to doubtful ballot papers | 74 | 10 | 3 | 13 |
| Receipt and opening of postal votes | 49 | 22 | 0 | 29 |
| Handbook for polling station staff | 92 | 6 | 0 | 2 |
| Quick guide for polling station staff | 86 | 7 | 0 | 8 |
| Lesson plans/trainers guide | 51 | 19 | 0 | 30 |
| E-learning pages for polling staff | 13 | 13 | 1 | 74 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.52 As shown in Table 13 below, almost nine in ten (A)ROs (89%) did not use the 'PowerPoint briefing – issuing postal votes', with only 4% saying they used it and that it was good. Neither did the vast majority, 92%, use the briefing on 'Receipt and opening of postal votes' at all. Six per cent said it was acceptable and 2% said that it was good.

Table 13: (A)ROs' views of PowerPoint briefing training products

| Please indicate your views on each product: | Good | Acceptable | Poor | Did not use |
|--|-------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Issuing postal votes | 4 | 7 | 0 | 89 |
| Receipt and opening of postal votes | 2 | 6 | 0 | 92 |
| Counting votes | 3 | 6 | 0 | 91 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

1.53 Some (A)ROs reported that staff who had attended training sessions using the Commission's materials had thought them to be worthwhile and useful. However, several (A)ROs commented that for the training material to be more useful, it needed to be provided earlier. Others commented that while the training programme was very thorough, perhaps more examples of what could go wrong and how to overcome any such problems would be useful (e.g. alleged fraud at polling stations). One (A)RO said that they did not have sufficient resources to do justice to training.

1.54 In Scotland some (A)ROs commented that a Scottish version of the training material would be helpful. Several (A)ROs in Britain said that a general DVD/video, along the same lines as the one produced for the European Parliamentary elections in 2004, would be useful for new polling staff. One strongly urged the Commission to consider further productions of election training materials as DVDs and videos – indeed, one (A)RO said that they had showed the previous video on European Parliamentary elections to staff for training purposes, despite its containing some irrelevant information.

Accessibility of the election

1.55 Based on (A)ROs' responses across the UK, on average, 89% of polling stations per constituency were considered accessible for people with physical disabilities and accessible for all, shown in Table 14. An average of 9% of polling stations per constituency had some accessibility restrictions and an average of 2% had poor accessibility for those with physical disabilities.

Table 14: Accessibility of polling places in the UK

| How accessible were your polling places/stations for disabled people? | UK | England | Scotland | Wales | NI |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Yes % | Yes % | Yes % | Yes % | Yes % |
| Accessible for all | 89 | 86 | 97 | 80 | 93 |
| Some restrictions | 9 | 11 | 2 | 16 | 6 |
| Poor accessibility | 2 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 |

Base: 26 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, 89 English constituencies, and 6 NI constituencies

1.56 Three-quarters (73%) of (A)ROs across Britain told us that voters did not make any comments about the display of the large printed ballot paper, with just under a quarter (23%) making largely positive comments about the display. Again, the majority (80%) of (A)ROs said that blind or partially sighted voters made no comments about the voting device with 18% making largely positive comments and 2% largely negative comments.

1.57 At the same time, findings from Scope's 2005 *Polls Apart* survey of disability access at polling stations suggests that there were more extensive access problems during the general election than has been suggested by the survey of (A)ROs. Scope's survey identified 68% of all polling stations as having one or more serious access barriers. Only 60% had level access into the station, and around one in three did not provide a tactile voting device to help visually impaired voters to vote independently, in secret/private.

1.58 In Scotland, England and Wales arrangements were made by (A)ROs to improve accessibility for those with disabilities on polling day. Arrangements included information on access available to staff and public and offers assistance on production of guidance for people with learning difficulties. One (A)RO remarked that electors with concerns over accessibility rang the elections office to make arrangements directly for their visit on polling day.

1.59 In Scotland, one Returning Officer said their polling accessibility scheme was the subject of consultation with the local disability liaison group, whose members were invited to comment on the polling places that were intended to be used. Some (A)ROs in England sent out email or SMS alerts to all who signed up to information service via their website. One (A)RO in Scotland said that it was not always possible to provide accessible polling places or to use temporary ramps due to the largely rural nature of the constituency and the remoteness of some locations. Polling places were kept under regular review to ensure accessible venues and where venues were not accessible, temporary ramps were provided.

1.59 Many (A)ROs in Britain said that they gave staff training on disability awareness, and reviewed polling stations for Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance. Wherever possible, and where resources allowed, all

efforts were made to make polling stations as accessible as possible and ramps were often provided.

1.60 One (A)RO in Wales said that a number of polling stations were changed prior to the election after a two-year survey on access problems had been carried out. They had had an additional allocated budget for DDA work for polling stations, though the budget was not sufficient to carry out the necessary work to make them fully accessible.

1.61 Some local authorities in Wales reported that staff were briefed on potential accessibility issues. There were issues where old buildings had to be used as polling stations and there were sites where only portakabins could be used. Some included an accessibility rating of the polling stations on poll cards to explain any difficulties.

1.62 Some (A)ROs said that it was sometimes not possible to find a building within a polling district that had disabled access. In addition, the suggestion was made that disabled voters should be allowed to vote at any polling place within their electoral area. Voters in Scotland commented that in all polling places there should be automatic doors for wheelchair users.

Evaluation of election process and voter feedback

1.63 In Britain six in 10 (A)ROs, 58%, said that they did not ask their presiding officers for a formal evaluation or review of the election process while 42% did ask for this. A similar proportion, 59%, reported that they did not ask their presiding officers to put mechanisms in place to record voters' views of the election process while 41% said they did.

1.64 As shown in Table 16, in Northern Ireland many DROs did ask their presiding officers to record certain information and formal feedback on the election process. This included DROs recording major accidents or incidents (83%), voters with particular needs: using large print ballot papers (33%), poll clerk performance (67%), and risk assessments (50%).

1.65 Two-thirds of DROs said that they did receive general complaints by voters about the presence of agents or party workers. In addition, half of the public made general complaints about finding polling stations, access to polling stations and people being turned away because ID was not acceptable.

Table 15: Evaluation of election process, Britain

| | England Yes % | Scotland Yes % | Wales Yes % |
|--|------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Q Did you ask your presiding officers for a formal evaluation or review of the election process? | 40 | 47 | 56 |
| Q. Did you ask your presiding officers to put mechanisms in place to record voters' views of the election process? | 37 | 53 | 56 |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, 91 English constituencies

Table 16: Provision of formal feedback on the election process, Northern Ireland

| Which of the following did you ask presiding officers to record...? | Yes % |
|---|-------|
| Polling station layout | 33 |
| Risk assessment | 50 |
| Major accidents or incidents | 83 |
| Times of voting (e.g. numbers per hour) | 50 |
| Poll clerk performance | 67 |
| Voters with particular needs: in wheelchairs | 50 |
| Voters with particular needs: using large print ballot papers | 33 |
| Voters with particular needs: blind voters assisted by companion/presiding officer | 83 |
| Voters with particular needs: illiterate voters/learning disability assisted by presiding officer | 33 |
| Voters with particular needs: those needing help to understand voting procedures | 33 |

| Which of the following do you ask them to record? | Yes % |
|--|-------|
| General complaints about: | |
| Finding the polling station | 50 |
| Access to the polling station | 50 |
| Presence of agents or party workers | 67 |
| Poll cards | 17 |
| Not being on the register | 33 |
| People being turned away because ID was not acceptable | 50 |
| Specific complaints from voters – amendments to the register | 20 |

Base: six NI constituencies

Voting activity and the count

1.66 As shown in Table 17, the highest concentration of voting activity in polling stations in Britain was between 5pm and 8pm. An average of one third (32%) of voting took place during this period, 10% before 9am, 16% from 9am-noon and 11% from 12noon to 2pm. Sixteen per cent of voting took place from 2pm to 5pm and 13% took place after 8pm.

1.67 In Northern Ireland, it seems that the highest concentration of voting activity in polling stations was between 5pm and 10pm which accounted for 51%, half of all voting activity. DROs reported that 29% of voting took place before noon and 25% took place from noon-5pm.

Table 17: When people voted on polling day, Britain

| | England | Scotland | Wales | Great Britain |
|-----------------|---------|----------|-------|---------------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Before 9am | 10 | 11 | 10 | 10 |
| From 9am – noon | 16 | 16 | 17 | 16 |
| From noon – 2pm | 10 | 11 | 12 | 11 |
| From 2pm – 5pm | 16 | 16 | 15 | 16 |
| From 5pm – 8pm | 32 | 34 | 28 | 32 |
| After 8pm | 13 | 11 | 17 | 13 |

Base: 26 Scottish, 9 Welsh and 89 English constituencies

1.68 Most (A)ROs across the UK, 95%, reported that a recount for their constituencies was not required. Among the general comments made by (A)ROs with regard to the count, they reported positive comments from candidates and agents about the ‘professionalism’ of election staff.

1.69 Across Great Britain, and particularly in England and Wales, many (A)ROs said they had a particular problem in relation to the count in their constituency due to the receipt of a large volume of postal vote envelopes handed in at polling stations, rather than through the post. Another issue, at least in England, was the resource implications of the large volume of postal votes. In Scotland, the fact that postal votes were sometimes delivered late also delayed the administration of the count.

Electoral fraud

1.70 Almost one in five (A)ROs (18%) said that they had received a report or allegation of electoral fraud in their constituency – it is worth noting that we collected the incidence of *reports* or *allegations* and some of these may not have been substantiated. A slightly higher number, one in four (25%) said they had received a report or allegation of fraud specifically related to postal voting.

1.71 In Scotland, over one third of 18 (A)ROs (37%) said they had received a report or allegation of fraud related to postal voting, compared to 21% receiving a report or allegation of electoral fraud more generally. Among the nine constituencies in Wales, this difference is also evident and there were no reports of electoral fraud. (A)ROs in four Welsh constituencies said that they had received a report(s) or allegation(s) specifically related to postal voting fraud.

Table 18: Allegations or reports of electoral fraud & postal voting fraud

| Report/s or allegations of fraud | Yes % | No % |
|--|--------------|-------------|
| Were any reports or allegations of electoral fraud in your constituency made to you? (Britain) | 18 | 82 |
| Specifically were any reports or allegations of fraud relating to postal voting made to you? (England and Wales only) | 25 | 75 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

Table 19: Breakdown of allegations or reports of electoral fraud & postal voting fraud, Britain

| | England Yes % | Scotland Yes % | Wales* Yes % |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Were any reports or allegations of electoral fraud in your constituency made to you? | 19 | 21 | 0 |
| Specifically were any reports or allegations of fraud relating to postal voting made to you? | 21 | 37 | 44 |

Base: 19 Scottish constituencies, 9 Welsh constituencies, 91 English constituencies

Note: *small base

1.72 In Northern Ireland, only one out of six DROs said that they had received a report or **allegation of electoral fraud** in their constituency. However, two out of six DROs said that they had received specific reports of fraud relating to postal voting in their constituency. One commented that the fraud was detected because they had noticed similar handwriting on postal vote application forms.

1.73 Some English (A)ROs suggested that media coverage of alleged fraud in the postal voting system had made some electors more likely to make unsubstantiated allegations and that such coverage may have changed the voting method some decided to use. Another said that a teller had written to say that many people came to vote at that polling station only to be told that

they were postal voters, even though they said that they had not requested a postal vote. Similarly in Scotland, some Returning Officers received complaints from members of the public that had been unaware they had signed forms requesting a postal vote.

General comments

1.74 (A)ROs were also asked to provide additional comments and views about the administration of the election. A common response was that there was an overall problem with the volume of postal votes received at polling stations. Many (A)ROs reported that the announcement of the election after the closing date for registration did upset some possible electors.

1.75 Some argued that there should be restrictions on the involvement of party organisations in handling postal vote applications. In addition, some believed that regulations on postal voting should be tightened up and perhaps watermark ballot papers used. Other recommendations included that the registration cut-off date was moved closer to polling day.

1.76 In England, a frequent response was that longer and more standardised timetables would be better able to cope with the volume of postal votes. One (A)RO argued that the time available was too tight to administer the election properly when combined with local government elections. In addition, many said there was a problem with the general public's lack of awareness of registration requirements.

1.77 A couple of (A)ROs suggested that postal voting should again, as prior to 2001, only be available to people who are unable to attend the polling station or for those that will be on holiday. Several respondents in England said that the handing in of postal votes at polling stations should not be allowed. In Wales, one (A)RO suggested that ID should be used instead of registration. Other comments focused on the very long hours staff were expected to work.

Contact with the Commission

1.78 The majority of (A)ROs across the UK (62%) contacted the Commission during the course of the election. In Britain, the most common reasons for the contact were to obtain advice about electoral legislation (37%) and to obtain materials (32%). More than one in six, 15%, contacted the Commission for advice about a problem and 14% did so to make us aware of a situation or issue.

1.79 The vast majority of (A)ROs (84%) said that the quality of response that they received from the Commission staff during the course of the election period was good, 15% said it was acceptable and only 1% said it was poor. In addition, 79% said that the response from staff was quick and 21% said that it was acceptable.

Table 20: Reason for contact with the Commission, Britain

| What was the main reason for your contact? | % |
|---|----------|
| For advice about a problem | 15 |
| Advice about electoral legislation | 37 |
| To obtain materials | 32 |
| Make EC aware of situation or issue | 14 |
| Other | 1 |

Base: 119 constituencies in Britain, May 2005

Table 21: Reason for contact with the Commission – England, Scotland and Wales

| What was the main reason for your contact? | England Yes % | Scotland Yes % | Wales Yes % |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| For advice about a problem | 15 | 17 | 17 |
| Advice about electoral legislation | 42 | 17 | 33 |
| To obtain materials | 28 | 42 | 50 |
| Make EC aware of situation or issue | 13 | 25 | 0 |
| Other | 2 | 0 | 0 |

Base: 12 Scottish constituencies, 6 Welsh constituencies, 91 English constituencies

1.80 Table 21 shows that many (A)ROs in Scotland and Wales contacted the EC to obtain materials: 42% and 50% respectively. This compares to only 28% in English constituencies – the most common reason for English (A)ROs contacting the Commission was for advice about electoral legislation. Finally, only one (A)RO said that they thought the Commission had sent out too much material after the calling of general election.

Conclusions

1.81 Our survey findings paint a generally positive picture of (A)ROs' experience of administering the 2005 general election. At the same time, however, the survey identifies several key areas of concern. Among these are the increasing volumes of requests for postal votes and the challenges this presents for administrators, the increasing practice of electors handing in postal votes at polling stations and the tight timescales involved in electoral administration. The findings suggest current and potential difficulties in despatching, processing and counting postal votes, particularly at combined elections.

1.82 Almost one in five (A)ROs said that they had received a report or allegation of fraud in their constituencies and many reported gaps in public awareness of registration requirements with electors being dismayed when told that they had missed the cut-off date. (A)ROs also suggested that not knowing the date of the election made it difficult to undertake publicity relating to the general election and arrangements for it.

Appendix – survey design and sampling

Approximately 240 constituencies were selected as targets for the survey from a total sampling frame of 646 constituencies across the UK. Questionnaires were sent to (A)ROs covering approximately one third of constituencies within the UK. An additional survey was also sent to Scottish Electoral Registration Officers' survey.

We used SPSS statistical software to randomly select a sub-sample of 164 constituencies in England, 12 constituencies in Wales and 6 in Northern Ireland. With the exception of Scotland where we wanted to collect information from each constituency, the selected size of the sub-sample in each part of the UK was designed to be proportionate to the percentage of the actual number of constituencies accounted for by that country within the UK.

Table 22: (A)RO Survey sample

| | Constituencies in 2005 | No. selected for sub- sample | % of UK total | % of total sample |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| England | 529 | 164 | 81.9 | 68.1 |
| Scotland | 59 | 59 | 9.1 | 24.5 |
| Wales | 40 | 12 | 6.2 | 5.0 |
| NI | 18 | 6 | 2.8 | 2.5 |
| UK | 646 | 241 | 100 | 100 |

Once the sub-sample was selected, its profile was compared to that for all 646 UK Parliamentary constituencies in terms of key demographic, economic and social characteristics in order to check the representativeness of the sub-sample. In the few instances where there were significant differences between the aggregate and sub-sample profiles, new selections were made.

The response rate to the survey across the UK was approximately 62%. The response rate for Northern Ireland was approximately 100%, 75% for Scotland and 75% for Wales. The regional profile of (A)RO respondents in England adequately covered all geographic regions, with roughly equal number of respondents from North, the Midlands and the South East and South West.

Where the response rate was relatively low, particularly in England, we analysed the demographic profile of responding constituents against the aggregate profile (the number of Parliamentary constituencies was reduced in Scotland and it was not possible to utilise 2001 Census data which was based on old boundaries). We found a very close match and were satisfied that the survey sample was representative enough to allow us to make generalisations from the survey sample.