

Minutes of EC/RCO Comms Network

10 March 2011

Present:

- Alex Robertson – Chair (EC)
- Sarah Garrett (London)
- Brenda Haywood (Yorkshire and Humber)
- Shirley Plenderleith (East Midlands)
- Guy Holloway (East Midland)
- Sara Tomkins (North West) – via teleconference
- Jeremy Wicking (North East) – via teleconference
- David Thomas (Wales)
- Caroline Binnie (Scotland)
- Rhydian Thomas (EC)
- Clinton Proud (EC)
- Euan Holloway (EC)
- Cahir Hughes (EC) – via teleconference
- Sarah Mackie (EC) – via teleconference
- Phillippa Saray (EC)
- Owen Williams (EC)
- Nieves Gómez (EC)

Apologies:

- Simon Houlty (West Midlands)
- Heather Gilling (Eastern)
- Ian Turner (South West)
- Adrian Green (EC)
- Barbara Lines (EC)
- Chris Hind (EC)

1. Public information campaign and resources (Clinton Proud)

The focus of the public awareness campaign is the information booklet that will be distributed to every household in the UK, commencing on Monday, 4 April (expected to be completed by Friday 8 April) and one week earlier (Monday, 28 March) in Northern Ireland.

The booklet will be supported by a TV campaign to promote the booklet in phase 1 and a final reminder in phase 2 (starting 10 days before polling day

on 5 May). The ad is designed to inform those that may not have received a copy of the booklet on how to download it from our website.

The draft booklet is already available on our website. The final version will be available from tomorrow (Friday 11 March). The user research report that supported the development of the booklet will be published on our website too.

This type of distribution exercise usually has a 95% success rate. As we are trying to reach the whole of the UK population, even in the best case scenario the numbers that are likely not to receive a copy are significant. To avoid confusion we are planning to communicate with stakeholders (primarily local authorities) which are likely to get calls about this, and give them the information they will need to direct callers to the right place (ie. our website and/or call centre). We will also highlight as part of our advertising that calls about the booklet should be directed to the Electoral Commission.

We now have media schedules with ITV, Channel 4, S4C, Channel 5 and Sky channels. The ads for terrestrial TV will be specific to that region but the ad for digital TV will be a more generic version as it is not possible to break the feed with digital.

Radio ads will be specific to each region. We don't have specific dates/spot times for these yet, but they will be made available to us closer to the start of the campaign. We will let the group know when we have them.

Public awareness campaigns at local level will be supported by a suite of resources that we will make available through our "dopolitics" website. These are due to be published tomorrow (Friday 11 March) and will include posters and press release templates that local authorities can customise.

There are 2 versions, one to promote the voter registration deadline and the second to build awareness of the date of the elections and/or referendum.

All the artwork will be based on our referendum brand as shown on the booklet cover.

2. Feedback from Wales referendum (Rhydian Thomas)

As with the UK-referendum campaign, the focus of the campaign for the Wales referendum was a voter information booklet that was distributed to each household.

This was supported by press releases from local authorities and the Commission focusing on the major announcements (designation, registration deadline and how to vote – a week before polling day). A media handbook was developed and media briefings were delivered across the country ahead of the event. A further press briefing was held before the start of the event for all those journalists present at the Senedd on 4 March.

All the main broadcasters wanted to film in the Senedd. Various meetings were held with them to plan this aspect of the day. The main live media coverage was focused on the local level, the same can be expected to be the case on 6 May.

Another area of interest was the very positive feedback we got on our results website.

In Wales, a FAQ's document was made available to polling station staff. They also had our booklet. This won't be the case for the UK referendum. The Elections and Referendum Steering Group have agreed that information at polling stations in May should be kept to a minimum. A final package of information for polling staff is yet to be agreed but it won't, for example, explain the voting systems. This will be made available through our website when ready.

David Thomas confirmed few queries were received at local level in Wales.

3. Media issues and risks across the UK

Wales – have just started to work on 5 May as they have been busy with their referendum until now. No issues or risks have been identified yet.

South East – the main issue is the low level of interest. Media interest is likely to be on the local elections in Brighton but the count for the South East will be in Southampton. This will be a challenge when planning communications resources to support the count and manage the media.

Yorkshire and the Humber – as with the South East the expected media interest in Sheffield will be focused both on local elections and on the referendum due to the link with the DPM. The regional count will be in Wakefield. The regional comms team will need support from the Sheffield team.

London – the main issue is expected to be low turnout as there are no other elections in this region.

The media interest varies among broadcasters. ITV and Sky have only requested a feed of the declaration. BBC are planning a more substantial presence.

East Midlands – the main media issue is dealing with the different information requirements for elections and referendum.

Local authorities are nervous about voters trying to have conversations with polling staff about the voting systems and the potential for debate. They will appreciate clear guidance as to what they are expected to do in this case.

It was noted that this clear guidance had been given through the polling station FAQs in Electoral Commission circular EC08 (2011).

During discussion it was commented that there were no cases we knew of where polling station staff had been asked to explain the referendum question in Wales. There was also a suggestion that media work could be done ahead of polling day to remind voters that they would need to decide which way they wanted to vote before they got to the polling station.

North East – no particular issues at the moment, likely to be some focus on areas that had problems with polling station queues at the General Election.

Eastern – no particular issues at the moment.

South West – not present for this part of the meeting.

Scotland – the media focus is expected to primarily be on the Scottish Parliament elections. The media interest is likely to be around the timing of election and referendum results (which will be known first) and rejection rates

Northern Ireland – the media focus is likely to be on the Assembly elections. There is little awareness and public interest in the referendum at the moment.

Wales – as above the interest will be around the Assembly elections. It will be difficult to get the referendum message out

North West – the main issues are lack of interest and information about campaign arguments, particular if the Commission is not able to designate lead campaigners.

4. Coordination of media messages (Owen Williams / Euan Holloway)

Owen Williams's discussion paper on media handling will form the basis for of a protocol to help co-ordinate engagement with the media.

Media handling for the referendum will follow three key principles:

- Clear messages
- Quick responses
- Local issues to be dealt with at a local level

The group discuss how messages should be co-ordinated, where this would be needed and where this wouldn't. (Advice on media handling has now been issued in Electoral Commission Circular EC XXXX)

Owen Williams updated the group on planning discussions with broadcasters.

The Electoral Commission is developing branding to dress the regional count centres (pop-ups). This will provide visual consistency between the regional

and national centres. These items will be produced by the Commission and delivered to each regional centre ahead of polling day.

The group would like to have some guidance on managing the liaison with broadcasters at their end.

Owen Williams will develop a short paper for broadcasters on what they can expect and a regional contact they can talk to for planning purposes. (This has now been circulated to broadcasters and the communication network)

The group discussed what would be the most effective way of communicating with each other on 5 and 6 May. E-mail will probably be the main system of getting messages out, but the group members thought this system shouldn't be relied upon as the only communication system as it's not always 100% reliable.

Owen Williams highlighted the importance of communicating with the Commission's press office straight away if any issues come up that may generate interest from the national media. There will be one single point of contact at the Commission to collect and disseminate information and the group will discuss further at its next meeting how best to make this work in practise.

The members of the Regional Comms Network expect to be based in their offices on polling day (5/5) and at the regional count centres on 6/5.

The members of the group were asked to think about who the best spokesperson would be in their respective areas.

5. Future meetings

One more meeting will be held before polling day, in April (after 8/4 – rehearsal day). Nieves Gómez will circulate possible dates to the group and arrange.

Agenda items for next meeting:

- Guidance on media handling
- Broadcasters expectations and contact

6. Actions from this meeting

- Clinton Proud to circulate copy of the booklet cover to those participating via teleconference
- Clinton Proud to circulate dates/spot times for advertising schedules when known
- Nieves Gómez to arrange a meeting in April
- Owen Williams will develop a short paper for broadcasters on what they can expect and details for regional contacts

- The Electoral Commission to consider including messages in their media relations plans about polling station closing time and information voters shouldn't expect from polling staff