

Minutes of the Elections, Referendums and Registration Working Group

25 September 2012

Present: Louise Cooke (Dover District Council)
George Cooper (London Borough of Haringey)
Paul Docker (Cabinet Office)
Kathryn Dunn (Electoral Commission)
Debra Harrod (Poole Borough Council)
Keith Hathaway (London Elects)
Tom Hawthorn (Electoral Commission – afternoon session)
Ailsa Irvine (Electoral Commission)
Neil King (Home Office – morning session)
Laura Lock (Huntingdonshire District Council)
Jennifer Martin-Kohlmorgen (Electoral Commission)
Jacqui Milnes (Wakefield District Council)
Glynne Morgan (Pembrokeshire Council)
James Pack (Electoral Commission)
Karen Quaintmere (AEA)
Ian White (Kettering Borough Council)

Apologies: Kate Brown (Manchester City Council)
Robert Connelly (Birmingham City Council)
Lindsay Dixon (Sunderland City Council)
Alex Doyle (Home Office, represented by Neil King)
Sandra Hardy (Wakefield District Council, represented by Jacqui Milnes)
Chris Highcock (City of Edinburgh Council)
Debbie Janes (Luton Borough Council)

(Note: the minutes may not reflect the exact order in which the items recorded under each item were discussed - some items have been grouped together for ease of reading).

1 Welcome and apologies

1.1 Ailsa welcomed the group and noted apologies. She went through the outstanding action points from the last meeting.

- **Queries on tax returns:** Laura Lock has now e-mailed Paul Docker with her specific queries.
- **Royal Mail sweeps funding:** Paul confirmed that the Home Office would centrally fund sweeps and that this would include secondary mail centres identified by Royal Mail.
- **PARO Designation Orders:** Home Office confirmed that links to the legislation had been circulated.
- **Tactile voting devices:** Paul confirmed that the purchase of tactile voting devices would be centrally funded.
- **Deadline for submission of candidate addresses to the Secretary of State:** Neil King confirmed that Home Office had sent an e-mail to all PAROs regarding the deadline for submission of candidate addresses to the Secretary of State.
- **Information in polling stations:** Ailsa set out the Commission's view that the household booklet should not be made available in polling stations, noting that the booklet contains information not relevant to voters by the time they get to the polling station and that the information on marking the ballot paper and the voting system to be used is already contained on the official polling station notices. **Post-meeting note:** This position was communicated to all PAROs, LROS and electoral administrators in England and Wales through the Commission's [EA Bulletin 20](#), issued on 3 October.
- **Count forms:** Ailsa notified the group that the requested count forms had now been published in Word format. The group also requested these to be made available in Excel format if possible. **Post-meeting note:** The Excel count forms were published on the Commission's website on 9 October and can be found here: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/police-and-crime-commissioner-elections>
- **Funding for public awareness activities:** In response to a request by members of the group, Neil said that he would check what PAROs were allowed to spend their money on under fees and charges for the purposes of raising awareness of the election. **Post-meeting note:** Neil e-mailed the Commission to say that the issue was also raised at the last elections panel meeting and that the West Midlands were co-ordinating the sharing of ideas on how best to spend the budget for awareness activities efficiently.

2 Issues for consideration from the electoral regions

2.1 The following issues were raised:

- **Tactile voting devices and ballot paper design:** Paul explained that as the directions for printing do not prescribe ballot paper width, LROs who alter the dimensions of the ballot paper as provided by the PARO could find that the tactile voting device no longer fits their ballot paper. Paul said that he would make printers aware of this at the next suppliers' group meeting.
- **Image quality of the ballot paper instructions in the schedules of the Order:** Laura said that the image quality of the instructions was poor which was making it difficult for printers to follow them. Neil explained that they were aware of the formatting issue that had affected the resolution of the ballot paper instructions in the final version of the Order and that the Home Office had noted this so that it would not happen again in future.
- **Volume of queries from LROs and added pressures due to overlap of canvass and election planning:** members noted that, as PARO staff, they were receiving a significant number of questions from LROs and their staff from across their areas, which was increasing at an already busy time when staff were working on the canvass and planning for the 15 November polls.
- **Combination of PCC elections with UK Parliamentary by-election:** Ian White noted that the uncertainty over whether there would be a UK Parliamentary by-election taking place at the same time as the PCC elections in his area had created administrative challenges, particularly in relation to the colour of the ballot paper, the production of postal voting packs and poll cards. Paul explained that the writ had to be moved by 23 October for any UK Parliamentary by-election to take place on 15 November. In relation to election stationery and combination, Paul recommended that administrators contact Alex Doyle at the Home Office and Paul Brunton at the Cabinet Office to discuss what would and would not be funded.

Continued absence of a Welsh Forms Order: Glynne Morgan expressed frustration on behalf of administrators in Wales about the fact that the Welsh Forms Order had yet to be made and that it now only prescribed the form of the ballot paper. He thanked the Commission for producing Welsh versions of the nomination papers. Neil King apologised for the delay and explained that the Order would be laid in the UK Parliament at the earliest opportunity, i.e. on 15 October, and that the Order was scheduled to be made, subject to Parliamentary approval, on 31 October. He also said that the Home Office would cover

the costs of any Returning Officers in Wales who had decided to print both an English-only and a bilingual ballot paper as contingency. **Post-meeting note:** The Order was approved by both Houses of the UK Parliament on Monday 29 October 2012.

- **List of schools that candidates can use for public meetings:** Louise Cooke noted that there was some uncertainty over whether the list needed to include all of the publicly-funded schools in the local authority area or whether only a selection could be included. The Commission agreed to confirm the position and issue advice on this point. **Post-meeting note:** The list needs to include all of the publicly-funded schools in the local authority area, and advice to this effect was disseminated via [EA Bulletin 19](#).
- **Use of schools as polling stations:** There was consensus among members that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find schools that were co-operative and were willing to offer rooms as polling stations. Paul said that this was an issue he would be raising again with the Department for Education and the Home Office.

3 PCC elections

Home Office update

3.1 Neil King provided an update to the group:

Welsh translations of the candidate website

3.2 Neil updated the group on the progress of Welsh translations of the candidate website and phone line. The Welsh forms Order was with the Commission for consultation who would expedite their consultation response and there were plans to lay the Order in Parliament as soon as possible. Preparations were on track for a Welsh version of the candidate website and phone line.

Public awareness

3.3 Neil explained that the Home Office would be running its public awareness campaign from 5 October to 24 October. The candidate website and order phone line would be going live on 5 October to coincide with the launch of the campaign.

Oath of acceptance of office

3.4 It was noted that the consultation on this has now closed, and the wording has been cleared and sent for translation into Welsh.

PARO seminar update

3.5 In response to a request made by members at a previous meeting for an opportunity to hear feedback from the 14 September PARO seminar, Neil King provided an update and explained that the Home Office had demonstrated the candidate website to PAROs, as well as the back-end of the website, and recorded PAROs' feedback. He also told the group the log-on IDs would be distributed as soon as possible. Laura Lock asked if there were plans for a debrief session with PAROs after the poll and Neil said that he thought it would be useful to have one and would take the suggestion away for consideration.

PARO Communications Network

3.6 In response to feedback at the previous meeting about the dissemination of information from the Communications network, this item was added to the agenda.

3.7 Ailsa updated the group on the Commission's public awareness campaign plans. She explained that the booklet would be publicly available in the week commencing 1 October on the Commission's website and that distribution would commence in the week of 22 October, with delivery completed by 2 November.

3.8 Ailsa also summarised some of the Commission's media work, which included the publication of the media handbook on 2 August, the issuing of press releases by the Commission, and the provision of template letters and releases for local use, including on integrity.

3.9 She also offered to circulate the minutes of the 10 September Communications network meeting to the group. **Post-meeting note:** minutes have been circulated by e-mail.

Feedback from members on preparations for the PCC elections

3.10 Ailsa invited the group to share any issues they thought it would be helpful for the group to consider and invited discussion on approaches to managing the election process, with a particular focus on preparations and levels of preparedness for the count.

3.11 Members said that to their knowledge most if not all LROs and electoral administrators had either attended a mock count or were about to attend one. Louise Cooke mentioned that the higher volume of doubtful ballot papers was in many cases proving a challenge. Different models were being proposed for sifting through the higher volume of doubtful ballot papers, but in most cases they followed a broadly similar approach: counters were being asked to count only those ballot papers which were marked in accordance with the rules (or mostly in accordance with the rules and with a clearly apparent first

preference vote), with any other ballot papers being sent to count supervisors who would sift out any straightforward 'good' votes and reintroduce them into the count, before passing the rest of the ballot papers to the LRO for adjudication.

3.12 The group asked the Commission to consider producing doubtful ballot paper placemats to help LROs to manage the volume of doubtful ballot papers at PCC elections held under SV. To this end, it was suggested that a placemat with very basic examples be produced for counters to use, with a further placemat developed for count supervisors, containing more complex examples. Ailsa agreed that she would explore producing doubtful ballot paper placemats for PCC elections held under SV for the purposes requested by the group. **Post-meeting note:** the Commission published a set of placemats to support LROs at an SV count on 15 October. Three placemats were published, having been developed in consultation with the Working Group: a placemat with basic allowed examples; a double-sided placemat with more complex examples containing allowed and rejected votes; and a placemat containing 'allowed first preference only' votes. They are all available for download from our website:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/police-and-crime-commissioner-elections>

3.13 Jacqui Milnes noted that the tracking of ballot papers during the transition from the first count to the second count was going to be challenging due to the need to sort the ballot papers into the relevant piles in preparation for the second count.

3.14 Glynne Morgan mentioned that his PARO was considering directing all LROs in his police area to undertake a trial count.

4 Suppliers meeting

4.1 Paul Docker wanted to make the group aware that he had received several queries from administrators who had concerns about the look of poll cards designed by their printers, and who had been told by their suppliers that the format had been changed to accommodate Royal Mail requirements for clear zones and address bar codes in order to reduce delivery costs. He said that he would raise the issue at the next suppliers meeting.

4.2 Ian White noted that discussions were on-going, including with printers, about the colour of ballot papers to be used at the UK Parliamentary by-election in Corby and the Northamptonshire PCC elections in the event of combination.

5 Future role of the Elections and Registration Steering Group

5.1 Tom Hawthorn updated the group on the latest discussions at the Steering Group about its future role, including its relationship with the Working Group. He explained that there was a desire to improve linkages between both groups, giving the example that the Steering Group would seek to agree the overall approach to guidance and performance standards, with the Working Group retaining its existing role in scrutinising the detail. There was broad support among group members for this approach. The group also suggested closer alignment of meeting dates to support mutual engagement, and requested the interchange of meeting minutes.

6 Individual electoral registration (IER)

6.1 Ailsa invited Paul to provide an update on the progress of secondary legislation and any other IER issues.

6.2 Paul explained that the Bill was currently at Committee stage and would be put before the Lords on 23 October. He noted that Cabinet Office plan to publish the third tranche of draft secondary legislation before that point.

6.3 He highlighted that work on data matching pilots was also underway, with all commercial EMS suppliers involved.

6.4 On funding, Paul reassured the group that the government was committed to funding the full cost of IER implementation.

6.5 Ailsa highlighted that if for any reason the secondary legislation was not in place by summer recess in 2013, some or all of the guidance would likely not be available until after the current planned publication date of September 2013. She asked the group for their views on what the impact of that would be.

6.6 Louise Cooke said that the sooner the guidance was available, the better, as this would promote engagement with the requirements of IER at an early stage. Members noted that in general IER was not currently being seen as a priority for administrators. Laura Lock and Karen Quintmere also noted the potential overlap of preparations for IER with the preparations for the canvass and the European Parliamentary elections, and highlighted that any significant delays could lead to administrators being under pressure from three sources: IER; the canvass; and the European Parliamentary elections. The group agreed that it was preferable for guidance to be available in good time so that administrators have time to consider and digest it before starting the delayed 2013 annual canvass.

6.7 Tom Hawthorn said that a balance needed to be struck between allowing time to get the legislation right and laying it in sufficient time to allow for implementation.

7 Integrity review

7.1 Tom updated the group on the Commission's plans to revise the Code of conduct on handling absent vote applications and postal votes as part of its wider integrity review. He mentioned that the Code would contain agreed standards of acceptable behaviour and would be expanded to cover proxy voting and campaigning outside polling stations on polling day. An initial discussion would be held with the PPP in mid-November 2012, with the aim of obtaining sign-off of the revised Code by the end of the year.

7.2 Laura Lock mentioned that it was important that it also covered independents specifically rather than seek to encourage them to sign up because the main political parties have signed up to it. George Cooper welcomed the extension of the Code to proxy voting and said that a key message needed to be that the proxy should know the elector they are voting on behalf of.

8 Future meetings

8.1 The next meeting will be held after the 15 November elections, on Friday 30 November.