

Draft Minutes of EC/RCO Comms Network

3 February 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)
- Rose Peacock (North East)
- Caroline Binnie (Scotland)
- David Thomas (Wales)
- Clinton Proud (EC)
- Euan Holloway (EC)
- Cahir Hughes (EC)
- Sarah Mackie (EC)
- Phillippa Saray (EC)
- Chris Hind (EC)
- Owen Williams (EC)
- Nieves Gómez (EC)

Apologies:

- Simon Houlby (West Midlands)
- Heather Gilling (Eastern)
- Ian Turner (South West)
- Tbc (South East)
- Rhydian Thomas (EC)
- Adrian Green (EC)
- Barbara Lines (EC)

1. Introduction and purpose of the group (Alex Robertson)

This group has been set up as a result of a recommendation from the Elections and Referendums Steering Group.

Because of the nature of referendums, where there is only one overall result (in contrast with elections, that are a combination of local results) they require a joined up approach across the country. The value of this group will be to

coordinate responses, in particular to live issues on polling day, and ensure that consistent messages are communicated to all stakeholders.

To achieve this we will share our communications plans with the group and discuss at future meetings what process we should put in place to respond to any emerging issues.

2. Overall communication strategy

Overall strategy (Alex Robertson)

We are currently in phase 1 of our Communication Strategy as the PVSC Bill is still going through parliament. According to current provisions in PPERA, there should be 10 weeks between Royal Assent and the day of the referendum. In line with those provisions, for the referendum to go ahead on 5 May, Royal Assent is needed by 16/2.

Our main activities during this phase have been communicating our views on readiness to Parliament, working closely with Regional Counting Officers and Counting Officers to ensure plans are being put in place and preparing draft guidance.

Once we have Royal Assent we will move to phase 2. The communication activity for this phase will include the launch of our public awareness campaign, and briefings to the media and political audiences.

Phase 3 is polling day and the count. This is when it will be particularly important to ensure our communication is co-ordinated effectively.

Public awareness campaign (Clinton Proud)

Our public awareness campaign will launch on 1 April. The campaign is based around a voter information booklet that will be delivered to every household. There are different versions of the booklet for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales to take into account the different election/referendum combinations in each country.

The booklet will be distributed through Royal Mail from Monday 4 April in Great Britain. Distribution is planned to be completed in that week (by Friday 8 April).

In Northern Ireland distribution will happen one week earlier (28 March to 1 April) as their deadlines are earlier.

The first phase of advertising will support the distribution of the booklet. It will raise awareness that a referendum/elections are happening and that a booklet will be arriving through the letter box.

Once the booklet distribution has been completed, the second phase of advertising will start. This will be a reminder that a referendum/elections are

taking place, polling station opening hours, how to get copies of the booklet (if it hasn't arrived), etc. We are also looking into the possibility of developing some interactive tools that people can use to learn about both systems (FPTP and AV).

A draft of the booklet can be found on our website. The booklet has 2 sections: the first being on elections, the second on the referendum. The referendum section covers what a referendum is, explains the question and the FPTP and AV systems. It also includes registering to vote information, and information about the different ways of casting a vote (proxy, post, etc).

The booklet is customised to each country. For England the focus is on the referendum. As it is difficult to cover all the different local elections, this booklet only contains general information in that area.

The booklet for Wales will be bilingual.

The media planning hasn't been finalised yet, therefore at this point we don't have the list of stations that will broadcast the adverts. Once the schedules are available we will share these with the group.

Because of the nature of this advertising campaign (being a final reminder in phase 2), we don't anticipate the bank holidays in April will have a significant impact.

We have appointed an independent company to track coverage of the booklet distribution. Clinton asked the group to feedback to him if they become aware of any distribution issues in their areas.

Some in the group fed-back a general concern from local counting officers about polling station staff having to deal with public information requests on polling day. This is an issue that the Elections and Referendums Steering Group are discussing at their next meeting on Thursday, 10 February. We will update this group at our next meeting.

Resources (Clinton Proud, Euan Holloway)

In support of our public awareness campaign we will be developing a wide range of resources to support public awareness at Local Authority level. All these templates have been designed to be customisable and include dual branding.

Currently our plans are that these resources will include:

- Press adverts and posters based on the campaign artwork
- A package of press release templates covering: deadlines to register, voter information, statistics on registration (statistics on registration are due to be published by ONS at the end for February, local authorities can insert the numbers relevant to their areas in this press release)

- Props for media photos (eg. big size booklet cover, registration form, ballot paper). We can supply actual props, alternatively pdf files will be available to download
- Free photo library
- Media handbook. This is a resource for journalists, a booklet that provides background information and reduces the number of general queries to the press office. The media handbook will be distributed to journalists once we have Royal Assent

The resource pack will also be available on alternative formats and other languages. A decision as to what languages these resources will be translated into hasn't been made yet. A list of planned languages and formats will be shared with this group once ready.

All these resources will be made available through our "do politics" website and we will let the group know when we have a date for when they will be available from.

This is the link to the resources page for the Wales referendum, as examples of what will be available for the UK:

<http://www.dopolitics.org.uk/electoral-eventreferendumswalesreferendum>

The group were asked to feedback any comments and/or suggestions to Clinton Proud.

Results event (Alex Robertson)

The count for the referendum will start on Friday 6 May at 4.00pm with verification to be completed by 1.00pm

The collation of national results will take place in Excel (London). This is where the Chief Counting Officer will be based with a team of Commission staff.

The draft protocol for how the totals will be announced is being discussed with the Elections and Referendums Steering Group and will include the following elements:

- How local totals are announced and updated to our website
- How regional totals are announced by the Regional Counting Officer and CCO
- How the one final overall result will be announced by the CCO in London

In our planning for the national results event we have been talking to broadcasters to ensure we are aware of any practicalities we need to take into account. The level of media interest is difficult to predict at this stage and will

depend largely on how close the result is perceived to be nearer the day. We have facilities for significant numbers and don't envisage space at Excel being an issue even if numbers are higher than our current assumptions.

It will be important for there to be clear and robust processes in place to support communications with the media and the management of any live issues on the day.

We expect national broadcasters will be broadcasting the results and some interviews from Excel but with their programmes possibly based in an outside studio. We also expect they will be sending people to regional count centres and some local ones.

The interest of local media is likely to be linked to local elections rather than the referendum with the exception of areas with a specific interest.

3. Communication challenges (all)

The group was asked for their views on what the main communication challenges in their areas were.

London – raising awareness and increasing engagement. The lack of other elections on the day means there is currently little interest. Local counting officers would like public information materials in polling stations.

Yorkshire and Humber – there will be strong media interest in Sheffield. Local count interest likely to be limited.

East Midlands – helping local media understand what we are dealing with. The media handbook and working closely with them will support this.

North West – potential for demonstrations in areas with a high student population and communicating polling station changes.

North East – lack of engagement and ensuring a consistent message across the region

Scotland – the focus will be on the Scottish Parliament elections

Wales – lack of understanding and interest. The focus will be on Assembly elections.

In Wales, comms officers from the 22 councils meet regularly to deal with electoral comms issues. It has not been possible to arrange a meeting prior to the Welsh Assembly powers referendum (to be held 3 March) but specific and targeted guidance notes had been sent out by EC's Wales Office to the communications officers network. This had been copied to electoral administrators. It was suggested that this approach might be adopted for the May referendum.

Electoral Administrators receive a regular circular from the Commission but this information isn't always passed on to communications teams. There may be a need for specific resources with a communications focus for this group.

The group agreed to act as regional champions, circulating information and guidance and providing support and advice to comms colleagues at local level.

4. Future meetings

The group agreed to hold 2 further meetings before 5 May. One in the second week of March (after the Wales referendum) and one in early April (face-to-face meeting)

Agenda items for next meeting:

- Public information campaign and resources
- Issues / risks
- Count – coordinating messages in the run-up and on the day
- Feedback from Wales referendum / lessons learned

5. Actions from this meeting

- NG to circulate a link to the resources web page for the Wales referendum (link inserted in this document - see "Resources" above)
- NG to set up meetings as above
- NG to ensure that JW's weekly updates to Counting Officers are copied to this group
- Group to act as regional communications champions and circulate information to colleagues