

Spring Polls Bulletin from the Chief Counting Officer: No. 1

Dear Colleagues

This is the first of a series of regular emails that I will be sending to you in the run up to referendum in Wales on 3 March and the elections and the proposed referendum on the UK Parliamentary Voting System on 5 May. As the polling days approach, the pace of communication between us may need to increase so that we can turn around quick decisions on emerging issues. These bulletins are designed to make you aware of the live issues around the elections and referendums that I am considering, giving you the opportunity to contribute local information via your Regional Counting Officer (RCO) where you think it will help, and provide you with direct and accurate statements on the conclusions I have reached. They will also let you know which referendum-related meetings are scheduled for the coming week, and exactly when you can expect to receive information and materials from us.

As the first bulletin, this one is fairly lengthy as there's quite a bit to cover, but I hope they will become shorter as they become more established.

Direction to submit planning documents

All project plans and risk registers for the Wales referendum have been reviewed, and form the basis of our on-going monitoring of the delivery of the referendum. I am grateful to Counting Officers in Wales for their strong lead. I asked all Counting Officers to send me copies of their project plans, risk registers and signed statements of adequate resource for the 5 May polls by the end of last week and I'm pleased that we've received full responses from over 87% of authorities. It's important that Commission staff are able to review these documents so that I can confidently report that all authorities have robust plans in place to deliver the elections and referendum effectively. Our teams in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and our English offices will be in touch over the next few weeks if your submissions raise any issues. If you haven't yet provided all of these documents then your RCO will be contacting you to discuss your plans to comply with the direction. In the meantime, if there is anything else that the Commission can do to support you with these planning processes then please contact the staff in your local Commission office who will be delighted to help.

Publications and Materials

All 5 modules of instructions have been issued to Counting Officers and are now available on the Commission's [website](#).

I know that you are planning your work carefully taking into account the dates you are expecting to receive things from me. The instructions modules were issued later than the dates on which you were expecting them and there was also a problem with the late delivery of polling station handbooks for the Wales referendum. I would like to apologise for these delays and assure you that we are working with our suppliers as well as establishing what we can do

better internally to catch these problems before they impact on your preparations.

On Friday 28 January we published the templates, style sheets and text to be used in the production of **poll cards, postal voting statements** (Great Britain) and **declarations of identity** (Northern Ireland) for use at the UK-wide referendum and the combined polls. Circular EC02/2011 gives full details of how the resources should be used, and they are all published on our [website](#). We had some comments and questions following publication and so on Wednesday, we issued circular EC04/2011, giving further clarification on poll card templates and texts and correcting some minor errors which have been identified in the text.

We are publishing the template for producing the **ballot paper** for the proposed referendum on Friday 4 February, along with the printing specifications and information about ballot paper unique identifying marks. An alert will be issued on Friday.

Postal voting quick-start guide

The instructions I issued for administering postal votes direct Counting Officers to produce a quick-start guide for postal voters using the template that I provide, and include a copy in every postal ballot pack. Concerns were raised by administrators and printers that this may be problematic and cause confusion for voters, due to the difficulty of producing a guide that was compatible with each of the varying types and designs of postal ballot packs.

I have decided therefore, to allow an exception to these instructions. Counting Officers will be required to include a guide in the postal ballot packs that explains to the voter how to use the various items in the pack, and how to return it correctly. However, this guide does not have to be based on the template provided by the CCO.

Circulars and alerts

In addition to the circulars and alerts mentioned above, we have also issued this week:

- **Circular EC03/2011**: Reporting on the administration of the 3 March 2011 National Assembly for Wales Referendum – data collection and feedback (Tuesday 1 February 2011)
- **Circular EC05/2011**: Insurance for the referendums (being issued on Friday 4 February)

Live issues:

Queries from voters in the polling station about voting in the UK-wide referendum

On Tuesday several RCOs and I discussed what information could be provided for polling station staff to help them answer voter queries. One of

the key principles underpinning my vision for the referendum is that all voters should have a similarly high quality experience, regardless of where or how they choose to vote. In this context it means that two voters asking the same question in polling stations at opposite ends of the UK should get exactly the same answer and feel equally reassured. This is why we want to make sure that all polling station staff have access to the same resources and are considering what support materials can be provided on a UK-wide, rather than local, basis. We've tabled this issue for wider discussion at the Steering Group meeting on 10 February and we will communicate our decision to you shortly afterwards.

Ballot paper size

I was made aware of rumours circulating towards the end of last week that I had directed that the ballot paper size for the referendum would be A4. These rumours are incorrect and our Circular EC02/2011 issued on 28 January sets out the ballot paper specifications and make clear that there is no need for the referendum ballot paper to be any larger than A5 in size. The template for printing the ballot paper is now available (see above).

Future meetings

Alongside guidance in polling stations, the Steering Group will also be discussing fees and charges, exceptions to the CCO's directions and verification, the count and the results collation system.

The Working Group will meet on 24 February and the agenda will be available on our website. Please do contact your RCO if you would like specific points raised against any of these agenda items at either of these meetings.

Earlier today the RCO Communications Network met for the first time. Representatives from each of the RCO's regions are working with Commission staff to share information about communications plans for the 5 May polls, and to identify and tackle any specific communications that may arise.

The Scottish Public Awareness Network met on Tuesday and the outcomes of that meeting will be circulated next week.

Minutes of all previous Steering and Working Group meetings are available on the Commission's website at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/elections-and-referendums-working-groups> and I will circulate the web address for the Communications group minutes in next week's email.

I or Max Caller my deputy will be attending as many of the upcoming regional meetings as possible and I hope to meet many of you there.

I do hope you have found this update useful. If you have any thoughts or suggestions to make on the format or content of these emails then please contact Barbara Lines (blines@electoralcommission.org.uk)