

Spring Polls Bulletin 11: 14 April 2011

Dear Colleagues

Thank you to all of you who participated in last week's national rehearsal. I hope you agree that it was a useful experience and it helpfully highlighted a number of process and software issues which will be resolved over the next few days.

One of the key learning points from the day was the importance of putting robust contingency arrangements in place for staffing and IT. Several authorities had to revert to manual systems or make do without key members of staff at the rehearsal due to circumstances beyond their control, and it's likely that at least some of us will face similar issues on 5 and 6 May.

Following the feedback from the rehearsal and discussion with RCOs, we will publish an **updated version of the count protocol** on our website by the end of Friday 15 April, which will be clearly marked as a revised version. The revised protocol will be on the same page as the current protocol (in the 'Instructions and resources' section, under the heading 'The verification and count'). Please be assured that we are keeping amendments to a minimum by making alterations only where absolutely necessary to ensure clarity following the rehearsal. We are also working with RCOs on some technical issues relating to the software and communications systems and on their checklists and reports to make sure that they are as clear and easy to follow as possible.

I also wanted to highlight part of **the process for announcing totals locally and regionally** where there appears to be some confusion.

As set out in Chapter 6 of the count protocol, the legislation requires Counting Officers to declare the local totals for their voting area once they have agreed them with the Regional Counting Officer.

The announcement should be made at the local count centre by the CO, rather than at the regional centre by the RCO. We will also be making sure that all local count totals are fed through to our website as quickly as possible. Once all local totals have been announced, the RCO will announce the regional total at the regional count centre.

Some RCOs may additionally decide to announce each local total at a regional level, but that is at the RCO's discretion and is not a substitute for local totals being declared locally by COs.

Electoral Reform Services Ltd

You may be aware of concerns raised in the press about the role of Electoral Reform Services Ltd in the referendum. Yesterday I issued a statement to the press to give voters some reassurance on the issue, and I've reproduced it here for your information:

“[The Commission has] put in place detailed and comprehensive arrangements for monitoring the performance of Counting Officers and their suppliers, and I have no reason to believe that there is any risk to the integrity of the administration of the postal voting process.

Suppliers, including Electoral Reform Services Ltd, provide support to many Counting Officers. This is no different from the statutory elections and local referendums which have taken place for many years. As is always the case for elections, only staff working for the independent statutory officer – Counting Officers – will handle returned postal votes for the referendum.

Any organisation which supplies Counting Officers with ballot papers, postal voting packs or IT support is subject to normal public procurement, contractual and legal confidentiality requirements. There is no suggestion that these have been breached.

As the regulator of party and election finance, the Commission does not comment on the financial or other interests of donors.”

If you receive any queries on this issue, please direct the caller to the Commission’s Press Office on 020 7271 0704.

Royal Mail Sweeps

In Spring Polls Bulletin no. 9 on 31 March I gave you further information about Royal Mail sweeps. Some people have raised concerns that there is not a full coverage of secondary mail centre sweeps. The agreement we have with Royal Mail is that there will be approximately 250 secondary sweeps of Mail Centres, based upon where they have taken place in the past and, in addition, where Royal Mail operational knowledge can identify that there will be sufficient quantities of mail to make such a secondary sweep viable. This will ensure that there is no less cover nationally than there has been in the past, but this does mean that some secondary Mail Centres may not be included. Our aim is to ensure that the most cost effective processes are in place to collect and deliver as many postal votes as possible to you from within Royal Mail Centres. If you continue to have concerns, please raise these with Royal Mail in the first place, and let your local Commission office know.

We have arranged with Royal Mail for the sweeps to be paid for nationally. There are still some actions Counting Officers need to take locally so can you please ensure that you have done the following to make arrangements for the sweep to take place in your voting area on 5 May:

- If you have not yet been in contact with Royal Mail to arrange for a postal vote licence, please do so as soon as possible. A Postal Vote Licence purchased from Royal Mail is a pre-requisite for the sweep.(Please see Spring Polls Bulletin no. 9 on the arrangements for claiming this cost.)

- Please ensure that you have agreed with your Royal Mail contact a delivery point for postal voting packs resulting from the sweep. They should be able to give you an approximate time for the delivery.
- If you have any queries on the arrangements for the sweep in your area, please contact the Royal Mail postal voting helpline on 08456 564988.

Feedback on the 5 May polls

I mentioned in last week's bulletin that we would provide more information about opportunities to let us know about your experiences and views after the 5 May polls. As in previous years, we will be asking Returning Officers and Counting Officers to provide electoral data and also to give us any views and feedback, and we sent out a survey and feedback form in Circular EC11/2011, which is available on the Commission's website. There will also be opportunities for face-to-face discussion with the Commission's devolved and English regional teams and both Max Caller and I hope to be involved in as many of those discussions as possible. We will also be inviting national representative bodies formally to submit evidence and views on the administration of the referendum, including both the Electoral Commission's role and my role as Chief Counting Officer. There will also be an opportunity for others, including referendum campaigners, groups representing people with particular accessibility requirements and academics, to make any observations about the administration of the elections and referendum.

Feedback on mailshot distributed by Yes to Fairer Votes

We would also be grateful for specific feedback on the impact of the Yes to Fairer Votes mailshot (distributed at the end of March and including a postal vote application form) in your area, to help to inform our reporting. Please use the Returning Officer/Counting Officer feedback form referred to in Circular EC11/2011 to tell us about your experience (The link in the circular will take you to the updated version of the form). If you have already downloaded and saved this form, please replace it with the new version, which contains a question specifically on this issue.

Communications in the run up to polling day

I want thank your communications teams, working both independently and in partnership with the Commission, for some great media coverage of the referendum, elections and the electoral registration deadline.

As the campaigns step up their efforts to persuade voters to go to the polls on 5 May, we are still happy to provide advice on specific requests if you are concerned that a press query has the potential to become wrapped up in campaign issues. Press queries on the overall administration of the referendum should also be referred to the Electoral Commission Press Office. You can contact the press office on 0207 271 0704.

Meetings

The RCO Communications Network is meeting on Wednesday next week, and there are meetings for Counting Officers in the North East and Yorkshire & the Humber on Monday 18th and Wednesday 20th respectively.

If you have any comments or suggestions to make about the content or format of these bulletins, please contact Barbara Lines (blines@electoralcommission.org.uk).