

Spring Polls Bulletin 3

Dear Colleagues

Yesterday we sent out a circular ([EC06/2011](#)) to confirm that the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act was given Royal Assent just before midnight on Wednesday 16 February. This means that there is sufficient time for the statutory minimum 10-week timetable for campaigning set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 before a UK-wide referendum is held on 5 May, as planned.

Live issues:

1. Directions for the May 5 Referendum

It was good to meet and speak to a number of electoral administrators at the AEA Conference in Brighton this week. I understand from the conversations I've had with some of you that there is still some confusion around my directions on certain issues and I hope some of these points help you achieve clarity:

2. Ballot paper size

I have not issued a direction on a specific ballot paper size.

The ballot paper specifications issued in [EC02/2011](#) can easily be accommodated and printed on an A5 sheet. However, you may use a smaller (or larger) ballot paper size as you see fit, so long as the final product conforms to the specifications in our guidance.

3. Counting methods

I have not directed that you should use a particular verification and count method.

However, I have directed that the model you use must conform to some key principles which I have set out in section 3 of the Verification and Count instructions.

On 7 February we published a [count model](#) which incorporates each of these key principles and which you are free to adopt if you think fit. You may also choose to adapt the count documents included in the appendices to reflect practices at your own count.

4. Identifying directions

In response to a request we received last week from the AEA we are today publishing numbered lists of directions (one for the referendum and one for each combination of polls) on our website and I hope these are useful for you. The lists will be available from 5pm today, Friday 18 February, on the following page on our website:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/referendums>

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

I mentioned in my first bulletin that the Steering Group would be deciding what information could be provided for polling station staff to help them answer queries from voters about the referendum choices. We have decided to produce a sheet of additional frequently asked questions specifically relating to this issue. Polling station staff should only use this frequently asked questions sheet, which will focus on the practicalities of voting. It's vital that we can guarantee consistency across the country when answering – or, just as importantly, declining to answer – questions from electors. Providing information about the subject of the referendum, explanations of first past the post and the alternative vote systems and the political implications could leave any of us involved in the administration of the referendum open to accusations of bias. I will be issuing a formal direction on this, including the frequently asked question sheet, next week.

6. Postal Voting Amendment

Last week I highlighted the amendment to the PVSC Bill concerning the granting of postal votes and wanted to provide further detail which you may find useful.

The Act now provides that a person is entitled to a postal vote for the referendum if:

- they have made a specific application to vote by post at the referendum, and this application has been granted;
- they are on the standing postal voters list (definite/indefinite period) to vote at a parliamentary election; or
- they are entitled to vote in the referendum and in a poll that is taken together with the referendum and are included on the postal voters list for that poll.

Polls that are 'taken together' with the referendum are local authority elections, local referendums and mayoral elections in England, National Assembly of Wales

elections, Scottish Parliamentary elections, Northern Ireland Assembly elections and local elections in Northern Ireland.

This means that if you are in a voting area in England with no local government elections being held, an elector who has chosen to be on the definite/indefinite list for local, but not parliamentary, elections would not be automatically entitled to a postal vote.

I will be issuing more detailed information about this change next week. Staff at your local Commission office will also be happy to discuss this amendment with you and talk through any particular issues that it raises in your local authority area.

7. Referendum campaigners' access to the register

Campaigners who have notified the Commission that they are permitted participants at the referendum are entitled to free copies of the electoral register and absent voters' lists, in the same way as candidates are at elections. It is important they receive copies as quickly as possible.

This is because the lead campaign groups for 'Yes' and 'No' are able to send out mailings free of charge, and campaigners who want to be designated as the lead campaign groups are likely to need to make preparations for these mailings in advance of the Commission's designation decision. The mailing is an important way for campaigners to communicate the arguments for their side of debate to voters, and delays in accessing electoral register data could impair their ability to do this.

We start registering permitted participants from Royal Assent and at the time I write this, we already have 4 participants signed up. You can find the register on our [website](#). If a campaigner tells you that they have notified us that they are a permitted participant, but you cannot find them on the register, this may be because their notification has been within the last working day. In these cases, please call our Party & Election Finance Team on 020 271 0616 for confirmation.

8. Promoting Participation

Some of you have expressed concerns that promoting participation in the referendum will be difficult as PPERA prevents local authorities from undertaking this type of work within 28 days of the poll. To clarify the position on Counting Officers' ability to carry out public awareness within 28 days of the poll, the Commission intends to ask all Counting Officers to carry out public awareness activities on our behalf during this period. The costs of such activities will be recoverable in the usual way under the fees and charges provisions. The

Commission will be writing to Counting Officers separately about this and will do so by Friday 25 February.

9. Circulars and Alerts

As well as confirming Royal Assent, circular EC06/2011 also provides details of the exceptions process which Counting Officers will need to follow, should they wish to apply to their RCO for permission to conduct the May Referendum in a way which does not comply with my directions.

10. Publications and Materials

We have published new materials and guidance this week, including a number of resources to support you with the administration of the postal voting process. Further materials will be available on our website later today, including the postal voting guide for you to include in postal ballot packs if you wish. You may also choose to adapt this guide to suit your local circumstances, or include your own guide instead.

11. Meetings and Key Dates

On Tuesday I will be at the North West Counting Officer's seminar, which is being held at the Guildhall in Preston, and on 24 February Andrew Scallan and I will be at a briefing in Edinburgh for Scotland's ROs/COs.

I would also like to flag up that we have identified Friday 8 April to hold a UK-wide rehearsal for the referendum verification and count communication process, where we will be working with Regional Counting Officers to ensure that the results collation and transmission system is fully operational. We would like as many Counting Officers – and also their electoral services teams – as possible to take part in this rehearsal, and we will be circulating more information about the processes involved in early March. While the rehearsal should be quite straightforward and not onerous for Counting Officers, we obviously appreciate that early April is a very busy time and we will be grateful for your active support and participation in the rehearsal. This won't be an ideal date for everyone: I recognise that. But I know that many of you will be familiar with this kind of run-through from the European Elections and will know how important it is.

We have published the minutes of the January Steering Group and RCO Communications Network meetings on our website.

Several of you fed back that the formatting of my emails wasn't always clear by the time they arrived in your inboxes and so I have sent this week's bulletin as a

PDF which I hope will solve these issues. If you have any further thoughts or suggestions to make on format or content then please contact Barbara Lines (blines@electoralcommission.org.uk)