

# Spring Polls Bulletin 4 – 24 February 2011

Dear Colleagues

This week I'm providing further information on printing the back of the May 5 referendum ballot paper, more detail on the national results collation rehearsal and advance notice of publications and meetings being held in the next couple of weeks, amongst other issues.

Live issues:

## **1. Back of the Ballot Paper**

For the referendum in Wales on 3 March, postal votes have started to be returned and administrators are finding that some people have cut the ballot paper and returned just the bottom section containing the answers and voting boxes. Postal ballot papers are only valid if the ballot paper number and official mark are present on the reverse.

For the Wales referendum, the Deputy Chief Counting Officer directed the layout that should be used for the reverse of the ballot papers. Based on previous experience in Wales of ballot papers being cut, the information on the reverse of the paper has been positioned at the bottom of the paper, so that it is still present if only the bottom portion of the ballot paper (the part with the answers on it) is returned.

For the UK-wide referendum in May, I haven't previously prescribed the layout for the reverse of the referendum ballot paper (see Spring Polls bulletin no.2, issued on 10 February 2011 for further information on the content as prescribed in legislation). I've issued all directions on the basis that procedures and processes won't be significantly different from those in place for other electoral events in the UK unless there is a clear need to make amendments in order to improve the experience of voters participating in the process, or to reflect differences between a referendum and an election. This is why I've provided a template for the front of the ballot paper, ensuring that it is laid out clearly for voters to read and use, but have left the layout of the back of the paper, which isn't used by voters, to the Counting Officer's discretion.

The ballot paper for the UK referendum is approximately half the size of the ballot paper for the Wales referendum, and so electors may be less likely to try and cut it down. However, based on our experience in Wales we think we need to address this risk, and therefore if you haven't yet finalised the layout of the reverse of the referendum ballot paper for your voting area, you must consider whether you can locate the ballot paper number and official mark in such a way that you avoid this issue. This means printing the ballot paper number and official mark in such a way that if the ballot paper is cut along the horizontal line

above the 'YES' answer, and only the bottom portion is returned, the ballot paper number and official mark are wholly visible on that portion of the paper. In practice this means this information needs to be contained within the bottom 50mm section of the paper.

There is further guidance in Circular [EC14/2009](#), issued in June 2009, about dealing with cut ballot papers.

## **2. National Results Collation Rehearsal**

Several of you have asked for further details about the national results collation rehearsal that I mentioned in last week's bulletin.

We are planning to set up and carry out systems testing on the morning of 8 April and then involve RCOs and COs in the rehearsal in the afternoon and I would like to thank you in advance for taking time out of your schedules to rehearse with us. RCOs will need to be available all day to make sure that their systems are set up and tested before the afternoon rehearsal, but COs should only need to be available for 3-4 hours from midday. You should try to use this opportunity to test the communications set-up at your count venue so that the rehearsal is as close to the real scenario as possible.

## **3. Queries from voters in polling stations about voting in the UK-wide referendum**

I mentioned in my last bulletin that, in consultation with the Steering Group, we had decided to produce a sheet of additional frequently asked questions for polling station staff specifically relating to queries from voters in the polling station on the referendum. We have now drafted a set of frequently asked questions, which will be shared with the Steering Group today. Following consultation with the Steering Group, I will be issuing a formal direction on this, including the frequently asked question sheet, next week.

## **4. Legislation update**

The **Welsh Forms Order** is currently being prepared by Cabinet Office and is likely to come into force in the next week or so.

In circular [EC06/2011](#), issued on 17 February, we told you that we were in the process of finalising the guidance for making claims for **fees and charges** and that it would be circulated as soon as it is available. We have been having discussions with Cabinet Office to agree the final content and I will keep you updated on when we expect the guidance to be available.

## **5. Referendum campaigners**

We have started registering permitted participants for the 5 May referendum and at the time I write this, we already have 6 participants signed up. These are:

- Electoral Reform Society Limited
- Labour No to AV
- Labour Yes
- No Campaign Limited
- Unlock Democracy
- Yes in May 2011 Ltd

The register is updated daily, and you can find an up-to-date version 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.

## **6. Circulars and Alerts**

On Friday we will be issuing a circular drawing your attention to the new version of the Electoral Commission and Association of Chief Police Officers *Guidance on preventing and detecting electoral malpractice*. This has been published as part of a range of products and initiatives to promote electoral integrity in 2011 which are also highlighted in the circular.

## **7. Publications and Materials**

Tomorrow (Friday 25 February) we will be publishing templates for polling station and polling booth notices. The instructions on usage will be issued to you as an alert and the pdf files will be available to download from our website. The wording is based on the statutory notices but made clearer and simpler for voters to understand, and the notices also contain illustrations to assist voters. I want to make sure that voters find it as easy as possible to participate in the May 5 polls and this is why I'm directing all Counting Officers to use these templates.

We're also circulating a template news release to electoral administrators and local authority communications teams, to coincide with the [Office for National Statistics' publication of electoral registration data](#) earlier this week. Further template releases focussing on voter registration and voter information will be issued on 11 March.

## **8. Meetings and Key Dates**

Tomorrow the Eastern Region are holding a pre-referendum seminar and on 4 March Stephen Hughes, the RCO for the West Midlands is hosting a referendum briefing for Counting Officers.

The Elections and Referendums Working Group are meeting today (24 February) in our London office, and I will circulate the link to the draft minutes of this meeting in next week's bulletin.

If you have any further thoughts or suggestions to make on format or content then please contact Barbara Lines ([blines@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:blines@electoralcommission.org.uk))