

Cabinet Office Elections Policy and Coordination Group

4th Meeting, 13.00-15.00, Wednesday 14th March 2012
Cabinet Office, Admiralty Arch

Attendees**UK Government**

Alex Thomas Head of Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office (Chair)
Paul Docker Head of Electoral Administration, Cabinet Office
Colin Dingwall Director, Electoral Registration Transformation Programme, Cabinet Office (*from item 6*)
Nerissa Steel Electoral Registration Transformation Programme, Cabinet Office
Matt Carey Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office
Ian Barber Department for Communities and Local Government
Paul Rowsell Department for Communities and Local Government
Neil King Home Office
Roddy Angus Scotland Office
Peter Newbitt Wales Office
Rachel White Northern Ireland Office

Welsh Government

Hugh Rawlings Director, Constitutional Affairs and Inter-Governmental Relations, Department for the First Minister and Cabinet

Returning Officers (and/or representatives)

John Bennett (JB) Greater London Returning Officer
Michelle Chard (MC) Manchester City Council
Robert Connelly (RC) Birmingham City Council
Trevor Holden (TH) Luton Borough Council (*from item 6*)
Paul Morris (PM) Borough of Poole Council
Bryn Parry-Jones (BPJ) Pembrokeshire County Council
Shirley Plenderleith (SP) Kettering Borough Council
Kath Richards (KR) Southampton City Council
Joanne Roney (JR) Wakefield Council
Graham Shields (GS) Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland
Dave Smith (DS) Sunderland City Council (*from item 6*)

Association of Electoral Administrators

Bill Crawford Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)

Electoral Commission

Andrew Scallan Director of Electoral Administration
Tom Hawthorn Electoral Commission
Alex Robertson Director of Communications
Chris Morgan Policy Adviser (Electoral Policy)

Royal Mail Group plc

Rachel Winham Head of Elections & Local Government (Royal Mail) (*for item 6 only*)

Apologies

Sir Howard Bernstein Manchester City Council
David Cook Kettering Borough Council
Mark Heath Southampton City Council
Stephen Hughes Birmingham City Council
John Kilner Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Mary Pitcaithly Falkirk Council and Convener, Electoral Management Board for Scotland
Barry Quirk Lewisham Council
John Turner Association of Electoral Administrators
Peter Wardle Chief Executive, Electoral Commission

Minutes

1. Welcome and introductions

1.1 Cabinet Office (CO) welcomed members to the fourth meeting of the Elections Policy and Coordination Group.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

2.1 There were no comments on the Minutes. CO noted that the Government's internal policy and co-ordination group was working to ensure a coordinated approach was taken to the development of electoral policy, as had been raised at the last meeting of the EPCG. CO noted that the minutes of past meetings had recently been published on its website, and this would be kept updated. If members of the Group wish to circulate minutes within their organisations or to other administrators prior to approval, they should emphasise that they had not yet been finalised and should not be published until the finalised version is available.

2.2 CO tabled a paper setting out the latest position on the legislation and consultation work which will support upcoming polls. This will be a living document to reflect future developments. The Electoral Commission (EC) asked for a minor amendment to a time-scale in the paper before it was circulated electronically. **Action: CO**

3. Update on the 2012 Annual Canvass

- 3.1 CO introduced a paper which explained that a direction had been issued to require the early conclusion of the annual canvass in 2012, to ensure that the polls set for 15 November will be run on an up to date register. CO emphasised the importance of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) commencing the canvass in their areas early, and at the latest by 2 July. The EC has produced guidance for EROs, and any administrative queries should be addressed to them in the first instance.
- 3.2 The EC noted that it had received relatively few enquiries following the issue of its guidance. Whilst this might be because EROs were already well-apprised of the plans to bring forward the canvass, it was agreed that all senior ROs should play an active part in cascading messages to EROs in their areas. **Action: ROs**
- 3.3 PM suggested that the EC might conduct a centrally co-ordinated information campaign to explain to electors that their canvass forms would be issued early this year. The EC did not think this appropriate as canvass materials should be self-explanatory – however it was noted that electors should be in no doubt about the deadline for returning completed canvass forms.

4. Supporting the Voter in 2012

i. Public Awareness for the May & November polls

- 4.1 The EC tabled a briefing paper on its public awareness plans for the polls scheduled to take place during 2012. The campaign ahead of the 3 May polls will focus on the need to register by 18 April in order to vote in the polls, and a booklet will be sent to electors in Scotland explaining changes to the ballot paper. The EC's public awareness materials will make it clear to electors that a mayoral referendum will be taking place in the 10 relevant cities, as will the 'About My Vote' website. The plan for the 15 November polls depended on the conclusion of the Home Office's consultation on the draft Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections regulations, which may specify a website for candidates' publicity as opposed to mailings being delivered at public expense. The EC plans to focus its own publicity on how to complete Supplementary Vote (SV) ballot papers and getting registered in time to vote at the polls.
- 4.2 JR emphasised the need for Police Area Returning Officers to take the lead on publicity in November rather than Government. CO and HO recognised this, noting that the aim is to make the process for the dissemination of publicity by PAROs at the November polls clear and straightforward.
- 4.3 The Welsh Government suggested that the HO engaged the Welsh Language Board if a website for candidates' publicity was implemented for the PCC elections. HO agreed this would be useful. **Action: HO**
- 4.4 JB outlined the plans for the London Assembly and London Mayoral elections set for 3 May. A traditional booklet explaining the voting process will be supplemented by information on the London Elects website, social media networks and newspaper advertisements. Particular attention will be given to targeting electors in areas where turnout or registration rates had been low in the

past, or where there had been a relatively high number of rejected ballot papers at past elections.

4.5 MC noted that ROs in the cities holding mayoral referendums in May will be distributing information leaflets explaining the choice voters will be asked to make, and asked about the Department for Communities and Local Government's (DCLG's) plans to fund these. DCLG advised the Group that it will fund the distribution the leaflets provided they comply with the requirement that the information within them is factual and fairly presented. Should this not be the case in a particular area, the RO will be free to distribute the leaflets but would not be reimbursed for the activity. The EC emphasised the importance of the messages within the leaflets remaining outside the influence of central Government, and the CO underlined that the Government had no intention of influencing the content of such communications.

4.6 RC suggested that at future polls, early engagement by Government on initiatives such as information leaflets will help administrators make timely preparations. This lesson should be learned ahead of the PCC elections in November, where, as JR noted, PAROs would be ultimately responsible for the smooth administration of public information campaigns at a local level. JR also suggested that voter information campaigns run over a longer period of time ahead of a poll would be more likely to encourage registration and support effective voting than a single communication in the weeks before a poll. CO agreed that early engagement on such issues should take place ahead of future polls, including those set for November.

ii. Co-ordination issues November 2012

4.7 CO explained that the Government was considering the best way to bring consistency between the 'new' voter-facing materials at the PCC elections in November (including the ballot paper) and those currently specified in the legislation for the mayoral elections which may be combined with the PCC elections in some areas. Extant legislation would require the 'traditional' mayoral forms to supplant the 'new' PCC forms where combination occurred. This matter was still under consideration, and further details would be given at future meetings. **Action: CO**

4.8 CO acknowledged that consideration would need to be given in the longer term to ensuring consistency in the voting forms specified in legislation across the piece. The EC supported a whole-sale review which looked at all voting forms.

4.9 Turning to the question of the timing of election counts at the November polls, CO and HO confirmed that the Government was not considering directing the time when counting must be completed at those polls, and that this should be a matter for PAROs to agree locally with local ROs. The EC informed the Group that it planned to publish its report on its consultation document on the timing of election and referendum counts in June, which has been deferred from late March to ensure more views could be submitted and taken into account. The EC invited views from all with an interest in the issues. **Action: All**

5. Electoral updates

5.1 HO informed the Group that, as its consultation on draft regulations was drawing to an end, it hoped to be in a position to lay regulations before Parliament soon after the Easter Recess. HO will circulate shortly the notes of the recent PARO seminar which will also include an invitation to the next seminar in September.

Action: HO

5.2 DCLG noted that the legislation for mayoral referendums and elections is in place, and that in addition to the referendums set for 3 May, mayoral elections are also scheduled to occur that day in Liverpool and Salford. No council tax referendums were scheduled for 3 May, pending the final decision on council tax levels by all authorities, which was expected very shortly. DCLG noted that it is also working on the conduct rules for Neighbourhood Planning Referendums. CO and DCLG agreed that a fuller session on these polls should be held at the next EPCG. **Action: DCLG**

5.3 CO explained that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) had published its consultation on the introduction of elected members of National Park Authorities. Defra was working to establish a coordination group for its polls, and invitations to prospective members would be issued soon. It was noted that the Boundary Commission for England would not be taking forward work to define the electoral boundaries at National Park elections, and the EC emphasised the need for this process to be taken forward with independence. It was agreed that the process for defining boundaries would need to be finalised with this in mind. **Action: Defra**

5.4 The EC asked what role the CO would have in preparations for possible National Park Authority elections. CO confirmed its role would be the same as it had been ahead of the PCC elections – Defra would be responsible for developing the policy and legislation, but CO would offer guidance to ensure the legislation is consistent with that for extant polls. CO encouraged the ROs on the EPCG and their colleagues to contribute any views they might have on Defra's consultation.

Action: ROs

6. Royal Mail Price Changes

6.1 Royal Mail tabled a short presentation to the Group which explained the changes it planned to make to its services and prices. Prices for services would increase in April 2012, although Royal Mail indicated this was in the context of years of price regulation which had kept prices artificially low. The Royal Mail's commitment to a universal service would remain and Royal Mail staff would work with Government to ensure its elections products are cost-effective suit the specific needs of administrators and electors. The presentation contained information about changes to which services would incur VAT and which would be exempt.

6.2 BPJ asked whether the current position where local authorities pay VAT on elections services and ROs then claim it back subsequently would remain. CO was aware of the issue and would consider it as part of its review of elections funding.

7. Update on Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

7.1 CO updated the group on recent developments. The response to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report on the draft IER legislation had been published during the previous month. This set out three key changes to the original draft proposals. Firstly, the data-matching pilots had revealed a high degree of correlation between the Department for Work and Pension's records and electoral registers. Both the CO and the EC had published evaluations of the data matching pilots. Subject to the outcome of further pilots planned over the coming months, consideration was being given to bring matched entries onto the register automatically without the need to register individually. Secondly, the autumn 2013 annual canvass would be moved to the spring of 2014, to ensure the register on which the IER transition is based is as up to date as possible. Thirdly, consideration was being given to whether a penalty would apply where individuals fail to register, and if so, what this penalty might be. A decision will be made on this before the legislation is introduced to Parliament.

7.2 CO was working with colleagues in the Government Digital Service to develop the IT infrastructure necessary for IER, and had consulted electoral management software suppliers from the outset. CO intended to ask administrators to help test the system as it is developed. Whilst the detail of the IER systems and processes would be for the Working Group to consider, CO hoped the EPCG would maintain an active interest and would keep the Group updated on developments.

Action: CO

7.3 The AEA suggested early clarity on the timing of the 2014 local elections would assist in planning for the spring canvass that year, and asked whether there were plans to move them to be combined with the June European Parliamentary elections. CO advised that the elections were set for May, but that the AEA should expand on the timing issues with CO officials in more detail outside the EPCG. **Action: AEA**

7.4 The Welsh Government noted that registration rates would need to be maintained in Wales over the transition to IER to ensure subsequent boundary reviews were based on the best possible data. CO advised that there were plans to hold data matching pilots in Wales, and the completeness and accuracy of the register is important not only for the purpose of boundary reviews but also for effective participation in elections and for the other purposes for which the register is used.

8. Any other business

8.1 CO informed the Group that the Law Commission was undertaking a project to consolidate electoral law. The first stage of the project – the initial scoping exercise – was underway. CO invited Group members to visit the Law Commission's website and contribute views on any systemic issues they would like to see addresses in the review. **Action: All**

8.2 CO updated the Group that DCLG's consultation on the superannuation of Counting / Returning Officers' fees (the draft Miscellaneous Regulations 2012) closed on 27 February. Officials and Ministers were evaluating representations and will consider the matters raised before reaching conclusions.