

COMMITTEE REPORT

CORPORATE AFFAIRS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

4 December 2014

Combined Elections 2015 – Briefing Paper

Karen Whitmore, Returning Officer

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. In May 2015 the Council will hold a number of elections all at the same time. This may impact on the political leadership and makeup of the region and the Council and therefore may attract a lot of local and national media attention.
2. This briefing note is to inform Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee of the planned timetable for the elections and to the rationale underpinning the timetable.

BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

3. In May 2015 the Council will hold the following elections:
 - a. Parliamentary General election,
 - b. Mayoral election
 - c. Elections for 46 local ward councillors; (for 20 wards)

The two parish councils may also have elections, this will not be known until the close of nominations (19 working days before the poll). If parish elections are not contested then candidates will automatically be elected and so no there will be no further election process required.

4. Middlesbrough crosses two Parliamentary boundaries this means we will need to collaborate with Redcar and Cleveland Council. Middlesbrough Council has 17 polling stations that fall into the Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland constituency for the Parliamentary election. Middlesbrough hold all the constituents' registration details for those wards and will be staffing the polling stations. Therefore, it is proposed that Middlesbrough conduct the poll in relation to the above and verify these votes. They will then be transferred back to Redcar and Cleveland at the end of the verification process for Redcar and Cleveland to Count.

5. There are two significant local issues that come into effect in May 2015:
 - a) changes by the Local Government Boundary Commission Council to Middlesbrough local ward boundaries – reducing the number of wards from 23 to 20.
 - b) a polling station review (the outcome of which is being reported to this committee) which may result in changes in the number and location of some polling stations.
6. Tower Hamlets has recently received significant negative publicity arising from problems that occurred in their mayoral, local and European parliamentary elections. The Electoral Commission have investigated Tower Hamlets and their findings demonstrate how, without adequate planning and resources, it is very easy for elections to go wrong resulting in reputational damage and the election being open to a legal challenge.
7. The Electoral Commission's report has a number of recommendations under the following headings:
 - Overall planning and management approach.
 - Consideration of size and suitability of count venues.
 - Transparency of verification and count processes.
 - Behaviour and management of attendees at the count.
8. Most of the recommendations in the report are actions that Middlesbrough Council already incorporates into its election planning processes as a result of issues experienced in 2007 and 2011. However, there are some recommendations that Middlesbrough intends to adopt, these are detailed later in this report.
9. When Middlesbrough ran the combined elections in 2007, a key member of staff went off with stress and did not return to work. A consultant from another authority was seconded in; legislation changed and postal votes identifiers were introduced, leading to a raft of new performance requirements, plus new processes and systems to be implemented and managed. On polling day the count had to be halted and restarted the next day as there were a number of close run ward elections and a number of recounts were called.
10. In 2011, similar issues occurred: a key officer showed signs of stress due to the amount of work to be carried out and as above there were a number of recounts which saw staff counting from 10:00pm to 5:00am. This resulted in inconsistent count results due to overtiredness. Concerns were subsequently raised regarding the ensuring key staff had adequate rest breaks.
11. There are a number of a number of legislative changes/ requirements and performance measurements that the Council has to report back to the Electoral Commission on throughout the planning process. This includes providing an election and risk management plan and evidencing that appropriate resources are in place. It is a legislative requirement to ensure sufficient resources are in place to adequately run elections.
12. As a result of all of the above more resilience and better planning is clearly required. Middlesbrough has initiated a project management board which is

chaired by the Returning Officer (Karen Whitmore), where plans and processes are discussed and monitored; the electoral services team now forms part of a larger team to provide some additional administrative support leading up to elections, however capacity still remains an issue.

Summary of proposals and Timetable

13. A detailed election plan is being prepared. However, there are a number of key issues that Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee should be aware of, these are outlined below.

Venue

14. It is proposed to use Southlands Centre as the venue due to its size, flexibility of rooms, easy access for returns from the polling stations, space for candidates/ agents and the media, plus its parking facilities. The Rainbow Centre has been identified as a backup for disaster recovery purposes; however this does not fall in the Middlesbrough constituency for the Parliamentary election and guidance states that the count should take place in the area you are voting in.
15. Alternative non council venues may also incur additional costs and added complexity as access to the Council network and election management systems are required to run an election and submit results. The obvious alternative venues e.g. school and university premises have exams during May and therefore are unavailable.

Verification and Count

16. It is likely that there will be greater demand placed on the election process in 2015; due to:
 - Three elections on the same day (Parliamentary, local and mayoral) and the associated increased campaigning which is already occurring are likely to result in a high turnout.
 - It is likely that the mayoral and ward elections will be closely contested, which may lead to the counting of second preference votes in the mayoral election and a number of recounts for individual wards.
17. A key factor that led to mistakes in Tower Hamlets and in Middlesbrough in 2007 was overtiredness of staff. On polling day some key staff are on duty from 6am to deal with polling stations issues, deal with any electoral incidents, oversee the set up the count venue, then conduct the election on the night; this has been previously known to last possibly through to 4/5am. This is clearly unacceptable. The detailed planning will aim to ensure that no member of staff is on duty for this length of time, without a suitable sleep break.
18. There are insufficient numbers of appropriately experienced staff to enable all three elections to be counted on the same night and it is too high risk to allow inexperienced staff to hold these key positions during the election and the count. Consequently the workload will be divided as follows:
19. Day One - Thursday 7 May 2015. Votes for all three elections will be verified and the Parliamentary votes will be counted. This is required by law, it is also proposed that we verify all of the ballots and postal votes that relate to

Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland Parliamentary constituency then transport them to Redcar for Redcar and Cleveland to count the actual votes.

20. Day Two - Friday 8 May 2015. Start at 12 noon to enable staff working on Thursday 7th May sufficient rest. Count the votes for the Mayoral and Local elections on the afternoon, announcing the results as they become known. It is predicted that this will be complete by 6pm but there is the option to continue until later in the evening if required.
21. This division of work will enable sufficient suitably experienced staff to be present at each count. It also mitigates the risk of mistakes made through tiredness.

Resources and Staffing

22. The planning and administration of the elections is undertaken by staff in Legal and Democratic Services, however the majority of count and polling staff traditionally come from other service areas of the Council and the public. As the number of staff employed by the Council is falling, filling the posts has become an issue.
23. To address this the Returning Officer has agreed with Mouchel that Mouchel staff can be used subject to service needs and the terms will be the same as for Middlesbrough staff e.g. staff will be released from work and will not need to take a day's holiday.
24. There will be open recruitment to the election role vacancies via an advert placed on the intranet. Staff will need to seek agreement from their manager to be released for this work. Executive Directors and Assistant Directors are requested to support staff to undertake this work.
25. There is also risk of key electoral staff not being available and therefore contingency resources will be identified in case there is a need to fill a specialist knowledge gap at short notice.

Timetable

DATE	EVENT	TIME (approx.)	VENUE
4 -7 May 2015	POSTAL VOTE OPENING 1 session each day	TBA	Town Hall/ Southlands
7 May 2015	POLLING DAY	7:00 am – 10:00 pm	Various -70 polling stations
7 May 2015	VERIFICATION All ballots (count number of ballot papers in each polling station ballot box)	10:00 pm -1:00 am	Southlands Centre
7 May 2015	COUNT Parliamentary (Count actual votes cast for each candidate)	1:00am -4:00 am	Southlands Centre
8 May 2015*	COUNT Mayoral and ward councillors (Count actual votes cast for each candidate)	12:00 pm -6:00 pm	Southlands Centre
11 May 2015	Candidates sign the declaration and appointment takes affect		

*If there are parish councils, the votes will be counted either on the 8th May or at a separate session on 11th May – this will be clarified at the detailed planning stage.

Potential Legal and Financial Implications

26. The Parliamentary election is funded by central Government; however the Mayoral and local ward elections are funded by the Council. Redcar and Cleveland will be recharged for the elements of the parliamentary election we undertake on their behalf.
27. The Council has a reserve fund £145,000 that is accumulated over a number of years to fund local elections, however due to the number and type of elections taking place it is envisaged that there may be an additional funding requirement. It is envisaged there will be a requirement for additional staffing for polling stations in order to meet Electoral Commission guidelines, an increase in counting teams from 12 to 20 in order to cover the 20 Ward and Mayoral Counts, cost for training sessions, plus additional equipment such as ballot boxes and possibly polling booths.
28. The Council will keep a record of its costs, to enable the recharge to Central Government, and this will detail the costs of the election.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND/OR ISSUES ON TO NOTE

- I. Venue to be used is Southlands.
- II. Timetable – specifically that on Day One votes from all elections will be validated and the parliamentary votes will be counted. Day two – votes for the mayoral and ward elections will be counted.
- III. Potential increase in budget.

Lead Officers: Karen Whitmore – Returning officer
 Sylvia Reynolds - Deputy Returning Officer