

# Elections Internal Review (Appendix B)

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## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise the feedback received from colleagues involved in the organisation and running of the local District and Parish Elections held on Thursday 4 May 2023. A total of 4 workshops were facilitated by Will Knights (Customer Insight and Intelligence Officer), Olivia Wicker (Process Improvement Officer), Sharna Baldwin (Digital Project Support Officer) and Gary Allen (Assistant Manager – Customer Operations) during May and June 2023. During the sessions, colleagues were encouraged to share their open and honest feedback about their experience working in the 2023 elections.

Workshop sessions were arranged for the following groups:

- Presiding officers
- Colleagues involved in nominations
- Parish Clerks
- Elections Team
- Customer services team
- Polling inspector written feedback was also captured.

Across all workshops, 20 different members of staff gave their feedback about the elections. Officers were also asked to provide their feedback via a short survey created using Microsoft Forms. This survey was also circulated to a wider audience in order to capture the opinions of those who could not attend the workshops or had further thoughts to add after their sessions. A further 87 responses were received via this survey. Feedback was also received via email in some instances.

Complaints data for the period 1 February 2023 to 31 May 2023 was reviewed by our Customer Liaison Officer, who shared details of one relevant complaint. An additional complaint was received by Electoral Services via the BMSDC Contact Us form on the website. We analysed a total of 50 calls which were received by Customer Services related to the elections on 4th May.

This internal review has been carried out using the [Performance Standards for Returning Officers](#), published by the Electoral Commission in December 2022, as a benchmark for success. The particular areas for concern, highlighted from this review, are shown in red.

## Outcome 1: Electoral services are robust and support the delivery of well-run elections

The Electoral Commission advise that meeting the following criteria demonstrates achievement of Outcome 1:

- Events are delivered in accordance with legislation.
- Elections delivered without legal challenge to the administration of the poll.
- **Analysis of team resilience, capability, and capacity.**
- Analysis of feedback on the delivery of polls and any complaints received.

- **Performance against measures and objectives set out in your project plans.**

## Outcome 2: Everybody who is eligible and wants to vote is able to do so and has confidence in the voting process

The Electoral Commission advise that meeting the following criteria demonstrates achievement of Outcome 2:

- Evaluation of public awareness activities.
- Analysis of feedback and complaints from eligible, staff, candidates, and agents.
- Analysis of available data relating to voters who have not been able to cast their vote (for example, due to not having appropriate Identification (at relevant polls)).
- No voters are prevented from casting their vote due to inaccessibility of polling station arrangements.

## Outcome 3: Everybody who is eligible and wants to stand for election is able to do so and has confidence in the process

The Electoral Commission advise that meeting the following criteria demonstrates achievement of Outcome 3:

- **No errors on the statement of persons nominated or ballot papers**
- **Analysis of feedback and complaints from candidates, agents, and other observers.**

## Outcome 4: Everyone can have confidence that the election process is well managed and in the accuracy of the results

The Electoral Commission advise that meeting the following criteria demonstrates achievement of Outcome 4:

- Elections delivered without legal challenge to the administration of the poll.
- **Analysis of feedback and complaints from candidates, agents, and other observers.**
- Election results are accurate and readily available.
- Analysis of police data relating to allegations of electoral fraud/integrity issues.

## Summary and recommendations

Based on the feedback received during this review of the 2023 elections, we can identify many areas of good practice. For example, interviewees and survey respondents spoke positively regarding the staff working the elections, with praise towards the collaboration, teamwork, and attitude of those involved. Presiding Officers gave largely positive feedback to the ballot box pick up from Endeavour House, and some of the aspects of the online training. Parish Clerks fed back that those working at the polling stations were organised and demonstrated experience. Positive feedback was also received regarding the implementation of the new voter ID legislation and reported very little disruption to the running of the election as a result of the new requirements. The customer services team praised the Elector8lite system and the FAQs they were provided to help resolve customer calls.

However, there are lessons to be learned from this year's election experience. Upon review of the responses received during our workshops and the survey, we have organised the feedback into key themes: communication, planning and organisation, knowledge and experience, training, and system issues. Key areas for improvement in each of these themes are outlined below, and it is our recommendation that an action plan be put in place to ensure these areas are addressed for the next election period.

### Communication

Communication was noted by most of the groups contacted as an area for improvement. It was highlighted that because an election team plan was not provided to the Elections Team, deadlines and responsibilities were not communicated to those involved in nominations. As well as this, colleagues at the count were not given safety information or a structure of the day. There was also criticism of the communication during the delivery of ballot boxes to Wherstead park, and during the count process itself. This lack of communication caused delays in hitting election milestones, and left staff feeling stressed and confused.

Some clerks also criticised the level of communication they received from the elections team, especially around the mistakes in the first publication in nominations. An improved communications plan and engagement with stakeholders is recommended to ensure key individuals are kept updated and informed. The communication plan, in addition to a robust and comprehensive election delivery plan, will ensure that all staff understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as key milestones and requirements for the election delivery.

### Planning and organisation

Improvements to the planning of the election was also suggested as an area for improvement. For example, staff involved in the nominations process expressed that the lack of notice they were given for where they needed to work negatively impacted on their other duties. The forward planning of the nominations process was criticised, and it is suggested that a work plan and test for the process is prepared

well in advance to ensure staff are confident in the process, and that potential system issues can be spotted beforehand.

Presiding officers fed back that on election day their boxes did not always contain all the relevant materials, and the instructions and paperwork were confusing and in some cases contradictory. It is recommended that more time is spent in advance to ensure all materials for presiding officers on the day is clear and consistent, and that officers have everything they need to effectively perform their duties.

Colleagues involved in the verification and count expressed that the process felt at times disorganised, and this led to staff working long hours and a perceived delay in the announcement of the results. Improved communication of the plan and coordination of staff during this process would have increased its efficiency.

It was highlighted in multiple workshop sessions that the planning of the elections should begin well in advance of the election date. It is recommended that doing a test election in advance would be a useful way to try out delivery plans, spot errors, identify risks and ensure preparedness for the real election.

Creating a comprehensive project plan for the elections team to work from that is clear and accessible is also recommended, to ensure that every member of the team knows what needs to be done, when deadlines are, and who is responsible for delivery.

## Knowledge and experience

A key concern raised by the Elections Team was regarding the inexperience of the current team. They did not feel they had received adequate training and support from management during the elections process and had to instead rely on an experienced external member of elections staff for help and advice. They argued that too much responsibility fell to a part time member of the team to coordinate the training process.

In order to prevent the same issues repeating in future elections, the Elections Team highlighted a requirement for more training for the team to address the current skills gaps. This would help give members of the team greater confidence in the delivery of future elections, as they expressed concerns that they would otherwise need to rely on external support again in the future.

It must also be noted that there were a large number of first-time presiding officers and inspectors during this election, and more support or specific training may have been helpful for these individuals. There were instances of experienced officers leading relatively small polling stations, whilst inexperienced officers managed busier ones. Better coordination of experienced officers to key areas may improve efficiency on the day.

## Training

The need for more training was expressed by the Elections Team and colleagues involved in nominations. In addition, presiding officers felt the training they received could be improved in order to better prepare them for election day. There were many

recommendations for improvements to training provided by those involved in the elections, including:

- Running a test election in advance to train officers and identify any risk areas.
- Having in person training sessions in addition to the online training for presiding officers.
- Allowing the opportunity to ask questions.
- Greater focus on completion of necessary forms.
- Delivering training further in advance.
- Including information regarding requirements for specific polling stations, where applicable.

Whilst there was positive feedback about the online training, many felt having some face-to-face training would also have been beneficial, especially for new presiding officers, to enable them to clarify and ask questions of the elections team, particularly with the new voter ID requirements which many officers were worried about before the election. Some also fed back access to the online training should have been given earlier to enable more time to complete the training and ask questions before the election.

## System Issues

The nominations group showed frustration with the elections software, as well as the system used for appointments. They stated that the elections software caused errors and delays in the process, as the team had to complete manual checking of the inputted information once it was saved. Mistakes in the initial publication of nominations, and postal ballot papers in one parish ward can be partly attributed to issues with the system. These mistakes caused reputational damage and required large amounts of officer time to resolve, involving officers outside of the elections team. It was also suggested that more IT equipment (such as laptops) would make the process more time efficient. It would be beneficial to complete a review of the current system and escalate concerns to the system supplier ahead of the next election in order to reduce this risk.

Feedback from the nominations group suggested that the appointments system needs refinements in order to achieve its full benefits. For example, eliminating the possibility of booking multiple appointments in the same timeslot, and allowing for greater flexibility in the duration of appointments. Improving the appointment system for nominations with these refinements is recommended to ensure the nominations process runs more smoothly in the future.

## Next Steps and Action Plan

Based upon our summary and recommendations, we propose that a comprehensive action plan is developed over July so that lessons are learned, and appropriate steps are taken to ensure the continuous improvement of electoral services.

This action plan should be created with and owned by the Elections Team, alongside the wider corporate body, with clear commitments and responsibilities for its implementation. We propose the following actions should be included within it:

### Project Management and Process Mapping

We need to ensure effective project management, and that key elections processes are run effectively.

- Draft a comprehensive and robust elections team plan with key milestones, actions, dates, and responsibilities that can be used by the Elections and wider project team. Ensure it is drafted well ahead of the next election so it may be refined iteratively.
- Map the changes in elections legislation to ensure that we are fully prepared for the next election and have appropriate communication and support in relation to this.
- Process map the key election processes (e.g. nominations process, postal vote processing) to ensure that the Elections team and related teams understand the processes, steps and what needs to be done at each stage.
- Plan and conduct a 'test' election well before the next election period, to ensure business continuity and that processes and plans are robust.
- Create a comprehensive risk register, capturing all potential risks and issues faced, ensuring they have all been properly documented and that appropriate mitigations have been identified and implemented as a tool to proactively manage the project.

### Communications and Engagement

- Create a comprehensive communications plan that spans the lifecycle of the elections process to provide a view of ongoing activities to help with the smooth running of future elections. Ensure that communications are informative and consistent and are given to appropriate stakeholders at the right time.
- Review key stakeholder groups, both internal and external, and ensure that all stakeholders are captured within the communications plan.
- Communications should be sent after this election review to those who worked in the latest local elections, thanking them for their feedback and hard work. This is to ensure recognition of efforts and that an appropriate number of staff will volunteer again to work in the next election period.
- Communication of this review (together with the external review commissioned from the AEA) and the actions being taken, should be sent to all key stakeholders.

## Resource

- Complete a polling station review to ensure that all venues chosen are appropriate in terms of accessibility. Work with our partner groups, such as the Disability Forum and the Shaw Trust, who could support with this. This will help us to ensure venues are appropriate and we are aware of any additional resources that may be required (e.g. lighting, coins for meters or poor phone signal).
- Work with existing Presiding Officers to create short information packs for each polling station to help Presiding Officers set up, and to provide key information that may need to be known about each location.
- Review staff numbers required for each election process (e.g. nominations, count) and ensure a robust recruitment plan is drafted ahead of the election period.
- Ensure appropriate allocation of staff to each polling station; try to ensure more experienced staff are assigned to larger or busier stations, and that the number of poll staff is appropriate for each location.

## Training and Development

- Review the online training available to staff ahead of the elections to ensure that any additional training materials can be planned out and documented.
- Create a training plan ahead of the next election, explore the possibility to add in-person or specific training to first-time presiding officers, poll clerks, count supervisors or those who may need additional support.
- Create a training and development plan to support the ongoing development of the Elections team, perhaps with the offer of external mentors and support to share best practice.
- Training and development of all support staff including Customer Operations to ensure that more demand can be resolved at the first point of contact.

## IT

- Review the issues experienced with the elections system and ensure these are raised and resolved ahead of the next election.
- Create a training plan for those that need to utilise the system to ensure appropriate levels of skill and confidence.
- Using feedback from those involved with nominations, look to improve upon the appointment booking system to ensure that it works as well as possible for the team.