Elections

Scotland

Information Bulletin: March 2012

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Update from Mary Pitcaithly Convener of the Electoral Management Board

With the elections now only 6 weeks away (!) the volume of work in which we are all involved is growing and each week brings new deadlines! I met with Local Government and Planning Minister Derek Mackay yesterday. He is responsible for these elections and I was able to brief him on the preparations across the country, especially work around the eCount.

I do not want to give you extra work to do or more to read at this busy time, so this Bulletin will be kept short, but there remain some key items that I want to communicate to you.

Information at the Count Centre

The Board has circulated a set of materials focussed on ensuring that observers at eCounts are able to understand how the counts will be run and what part they can play. In terms of integrity, educated and well-informed observers are better able to provide proper scrutiny of the proceedings, to produce a transparent and secure count with results in which the voters can have full confidence.

Importantly, too the *more* that candidates and agents understand the process and appreciate the robustness of the approach that we are adopting, then the *less* likely they may be to seek recounts. They need to be fully involved in the count, not just given a result at the end.

The material was issued as guidance, a specimen of what you might wish to cover in briefings for candidates and announcements at the count centre. It could form the basis of scripts to be read at the event or of printed documents to distribute in advance. There are also ideas and suggestions for how you might disseminate information at the Count, for example through posters, signage and briefing areas. You may already have addressed these issues in your count planning, but the EMB has tried to collate all relevant issues in these documents to give a baseline and ensure basic consistency across the country.

Mock Election / Printing

The first Mock Election took place on Tuesday 21 February. The key purpose was to test the end to end print production process in every respect and to identify any improvements so that the actual election process runs as smoothly as possible. Feedback has been formally gathered from Councils by the contractor and they have addressed the points that were raised. The key areas for attention were around improving communications during the uploading/proofing element and providing further guidance on the data requirements. In addition, there are a number

of minor system updates that have now been applied such as updating EasyPrint with the latest Electoral Commission logos and the 'known name' fields.

A second Mock Election was run last week (12 March) to ensure that all these system updates have been successfully implemented, with a further print production run to test the print quality. I understand that this went well.

Forms Working Group website

For the last few years, the Forms Working Group website has been hosted by Communities of Practice (CoP). CoP will close at the end of March but active communities will transfer over to the replacement service called **KnowledgeHub**, as will your membership details.

The forms for this year's local government elections should be automatically transferred but please ensure you have downloaded all the forms by the end of the month to mitigate any transitional problems.

We will endeavour to upload the forms for other types of election over the summer but if you require them sooner, please contact Aileen Knudsen directly on aileen.knudsen@southlanarkshire.gov.uk or 01698 454872.

Absent Voting Applications

At briefings for candidates and agents, please ensure that you remind them of the Electoral Commission's code of conduct for dealing with absent vote applications. While things have improved in recent years there is still the occasional occurrence of over-zealous postal voting campaigns by local activists. Candidates and Parties have access to the absent voters' list and can be aware of whether a voter already has a postal or proxy vote and need not fill in another form. Some EROs have already noticed numbers of applications from existing postal voters which must be checked in case of some difference which the voter wants us to note.

One ERO has noticed several forms where the voters have given their postal address as a community centre and after enquiries, have stated that they did not want a postal vote anyway. This is obviously a waste of time in the run up to the election and a waste of the elector's time.

Two parts of the guidance which I would like to emphasise are firstly, the requirement to forward any applications received "directly and without delay to the local Electoral Registration Officer", and secondly, that a bespoke application form "should conform fully with the requirements of electoral law, including all the necessary questions and the options open to electors."

Absent Voter – Signature Verification

The four joint seminars that the Board promoted with the Electoral Commission concluded with the event in Edinburgh and I have received some very positive feedback on these meetings. One popular element was the presentation from the Forensic Science Service who gave a detailed explanation of the key issues that ROs and DROs need to consider in verifying the signature given as an identifier by absent voters. The principles that were laid out were very useful, but the presentation only emphasised that the assessment of signatures is a skilled and technical task.

With the ever-increasing importance of postal votes, politicians are more interested than ever in the way in which they are verified and it is essential that a clear defence can be given of adjudication decisions. The presentation has now been circulated by email; please ensure that it is cascaded to anyone involved in the adjudication of AVIs to ensure consistency and a clear understanding of the principles that need to be applied.

Adjudication of Doubtful Votes

Another issue covered at those seminars was the adjudication of doubtful votes, with

discussion of the principles to be applied and some specific examples.

It is imperative that consistent adjudication is delivered both within a single count venue and across the country. Any variation in practice might open the RO to calls for recounts. The principles need to be clear to both D/ROs and observers and the examples of valid and rejected votes the Electoral Commission guide/placemat must be applied in each count.

As a result of discussion at the seminars the Board intends to issue some further guidance well in advance of the count picking up on some specific adjudication topics .

Situation of Polling Places

At the Electoral Commission Political Parties Panel (PPP) on 7 March, parties made a request that candidates are given a copy of the polling scheme at nomination to assist in their planning and campaigning. This is something that many Returning Officers already do routinely, but I would encourage all of us to provide this to candidates. This information assists them in their campaigning, and allows better scrutiny at the count as they can be aware of the "identity" of each box.

Post Election Data

At the same PPP we also presented the politicians with a short paper that looked at a methodology for producing the post election data that is required by law in Rule 61. The rule expects data to be analysed by polling station unless there were fewer than 200 votes cast at a station in which case the figures are to be aggregated with other ballot box figures.

I have now circulated this paper to Returning Officers. The basic recommendation is that if aggregation is necessary it should be between boxes from comparable polling stations: ideally within the same place, if not then they should be chosen to be close geographically and similar so that rural boxes are not added to

urban for example. Where possible boxes should also be aggregated within UK Parliamentary constituency boundaries, although it is recognised that this is not always practical.

Scotland Office Referendum Consultation

The Board has made a response to the Scotland Office consultation on "Scotland's Constitutional Future" which asked for views on the arrangements for a referendum on independence / Scotland leaving the UK. The Scottish Government is running a similar consultation and we will also be making a response to that.

ACPOS – Police Support

The EMB was represented last week at an ACPOS meeting where the police were discussing their support for these elections. You should all have now made contact with your local force SPOC who can give a range of advice, from handling suspected criminal offences to security planning.

Feedback

Our focus is now mainly on this year's local government elections and if there are any further items which you would wish to see added to the Board's work programme, then please let us know.

Please continue to escalate any issues of concern and to identify any items on which you would appreciate guidance or clarity.

In the first instance you should contact Chris Highcock (0131 469 3126, chris.highcock@edinburgh.gov.uk) Secretary to the Board.

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