

REPORT FOR: **CABINET**

Date of Meeting:	20 November 2014
Subject:	Elections and Individual Electoral Registration
Responsible Officer:	Hugh Peart, Returning and Electoral Registration Officer
Exempt:	No
Wards affected:	All
Enclosures:	Appendix 1 Confirmation IER Process Appendix 2 HEF Process

Summary

This report updates members on this year's combined elections and progress in the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration

FOR INFORMATION

1. INTRODUCTION

The Council's Constitution provides for the Licensing and General Purposes Committee to keep under review and determine the arrangements for the holding of elections and to initiate or respond to any proposals to the change of ward, constituency or borough boundaries. In addition, and in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972 and Representation of the People Act 1983, Council has appointed the Director of Legal & Governance Services as the Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer.

This report is to update Cabinet in relation to the recent Local and European Parliamentary Elections, the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and the forthcoming Parliamentary Election in 2015.

2. Local & European Parliamentary Election 2014

The preparation for the 2014 Local and European Parliamentary Elections commenced in 2013, when a new electoral management system was procured and implemented which was better able to support what is an increasingly complex process.

2.1 New Candidates

A key element of the planning process was making potential local election candidates aware of what the council does, how they could stand for election and what the role of councillor was if elected. In January 2014 Harrow hosted its first ever Prospective Councillor Evening.

The event was widely publicised through a number of print and online publications and attracted extensive interest. The event was attended by 82 participants and the programme consisted of:

- An Overview of the borough by the Interim Head of Paid Service
- Corporate Directors giving a brief account of the functions of their respective departments
- An explanation of both Election process – timetable, qualifications, disqualifications, nominations, agents, polling day, count and expenses.
- Information regarding how the Council makes decisions, functions and its Committee Structure
- Talks by a cross-party group of current members regarding their personal experiences of being Councillors, and
- Support arrangements and allowances for Councillors.

Feedback on the event was very positive, with most attendees saying they had found the event helpful.

2.2 Postal Voters

In the lead up to polling day, postal votes were dispatched and received back as normal, Harrow registering over 3,000 more postal voters than in 2012 for the GLA Elections.

2.3 Polling Day

The combined Local and European Parliamentary Elections were held on 22 May 2014, and although polling day and the arrangements for the count went smoothly minor issues were raised, all of which were immediately resolved, and without delays to the process.

This was the first set of elections where the new regulations relating to “queues” had to be dealt with and plans were put in place for dealing with queues at Polling Stations. There were no reports of unmanageable queues and any queues that built up were dealt with in accordance with local plans and without incident.

In the planning for the election and during both polling day and the 2 counts Harrow was very effectively supported by the Metropolitan Police and the Electoral Commission who sent an observer visit on polling day.

2.4 Electoral Commission

Max Caller CBE Electoral Commissioner was present in the borough on polling day, visiting a number of Polling Stations. He was also present on 23 May to observe the Local Elections count.

On Polling Day Mr Caller noted at one particular station that tellers (who were party workers) were behaving in a very aggressive way, were pushing literature into the hands of voters and talking to them (through the door) as they collected their ballot papers.

During the preparation and briefing of candidates and agents, their attention was drawn to the Guidance for Tellers produced by the Electoral Commission. However, Mr Caller has suggested that in future elections additionally consideration should be given to drawing up a tellers' protocol. The suggestion will be taken on board and discussed with the parties with a view to getting such a protocol in place for all elections.

In relation to the Local Count on 23 May, Mr Caller noted that despite the team only finishing verification at 5.30am, everyone involved did very well and that conflicts were handled with patience and care.

However, he observed that in future elections there should be a system in place for recording unmarked, partially rejected and void ballot papers. Mr Caller also commented that the data input process was slow, which is a common failing at counts.

These have been already been taken on board in planning for the 2015 election, when officers are confident that the historical bottle neck around inputting data from count teams will be resolved.

2.5 IT

The entire election process is reliant on IT and Capita provided dedicated IT support from the publication of the Election Notice through to the close of the process on Sunday 23rd May. An innovation made possible by the new elections software were the electronic display screens in the Byron Hall which provided real time election updates.

2.6 Members' Welcome Evening

Concurrent with the preparations for the Local & European Elections, extensive work was undertaken by the team for the Members' Welcome Evening following the Local Elections. This evening was attended by 61 Councillors, 26 of whom were newly-elected. Members were provided with a detailed compact style handbook.

The evening launched the programme of Member Induction and included short sessions on the following: robe-fitting, a welcome by the Interim Head of Paid Service, a brief presentation by Members of the Harrow Youth Parliament, a talk in the Mayor's Parlour giving a potted history of the Borough and the Signing of the Declaration of Office.

The evening ended with refreshments and an opportunity for Members to network, meet senior staff and ask questions. The preparation and delivery of the Welcome Evening followed an intense period of work for the Democratic & Electoral Services Team having just finished work on the elections, and the very positive feedback from both Members and officers regarding the event was welcomed.

2.7 Parliamentary Election 2015

The date for the next Parliamentary Election has been set for 7th May 2015 and the planning for this election started in the summer.

The Electoral Commission has published the election timetable and guidance for the administration of the election. In addition guidance has also been published for Candidates and Agents. The current schedule provides for Parliament to be dissolved on 30th March, with the publication of the Notice of Election no later than Thursday 2 April. Once the Notice has been published, purdah rules will be effective and guidance will be circulated to Members and officers as normal.

In accordance with regulations, the count will commence immediately on the close of poll at 10pm on 7th May, and this will continue through until the early hours of the following morning.

2.8 Constituencies

Members may be aware that in 2010 Harrow's Parliamentary Boundaries changed. Hatch End, Pinner and Pinner South Wards are now within the Constituency of Ruislip Northwood and Pinner which is the responsibility of London Borough of Hillingdon.

However, the residents of these Wards are on the Harrow Register of Electors, and the Acting Returning Officer will be working closely with the Acting Returning Officer for Hillingdon to ensure a seamless service is provided to all Harrow residents throughout the entire election process.

The remaining 18 Harrow Wards form the Parliamentary Constituencies of Harrow East and Harrow West.

2.9 Polling Stations

There will be changes to a number of polling stations for the Parliamentary Elections. As a result of the current schools expansion programme a number of primary schools eg Marlborough and Whitefriars which are normally used as polling stations will not be available. Alternative venues are being considered by the Polling District Review Working Group and these proposals which will be submitted to Licensing and General Purposes Committee for approval on 25 November.

The plans that are in place for dealing with polling station queues will be reviewed and updated as necessary.

Members should note that unlike local elections, where the Local Authority is responsible for funding, the budget for the forthcoming Parliamentary elections will be provided by the Cabinet Office. Every effort will be made to ensure that the cost of the election does not exceed the allocated funding as any shortfall will have to be met by the Council.

3. INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

3.1 Background

The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced individual electoral registration, which is the most significant change to the registration system for many years. The change is aimed at tackling perceived electoral fraud and improving both the perception and the integrity of the registration process.

Individual Electoral Registration is also intended to provide a more convenient, secure and modern way for individuals to register and thereby maximise both the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register.

3.2 Online Registration

Individual electoral registration is dependent on the ability for residents to register online. During the developmental stage of IER, as Harrow was the only authority in the country offering an online registration system, Members of the Cabinet Office IER project team visited Harrow to view the system. This led to the Director of Legal & Governance Services being a member of the Cabinet's IT and Digital Project Board.

With the impending roll out of Individual Elector Registration, the Cabinet Office put in place Regional Delivery Managers who would act as intermediaries between local authorities and the Cabinet Office. Subsequently County Leads were appointed who would act as further conduit between the authorities and the Regional Delivery Manager.

3.3 County Leads

The process involved the County Lead calling meetings with the Electoral Services Managers within the County Area to discuss issues and concerns with regard to the IER process. These concerns would be relayed by the County Lead to the Regional Delivery Manager who in turn would raise these with the Cabinet Office Delivery Team. The Cabinet Office asked the Democratic & Electoral Services Manager to be the County Lead for Harrow, Brent, Barnet, Camden, Haringey and Enfield.

3.4 Registration

Members will be familiar with the previous system of electoral registration and the annual canvass form which was sent to every residential property in the

borough. One person in the household was then responsible for completing this, to register everyone who lived at that address.

With the introduction of IER, each person wishing to be entered on the Electoral Register is required to register to vote individually, rather than by household. In addition, residents are asked to provide identifying information, such as a date of birth and national insurance number. This enables their application to be verified with the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) records before they are added to the register. In specific circumstances people who cannot provide this information may prove their identity using an alternative form of evidence. Registration can be done online or by form.

3.5 Go Live

Following the going live of IER, on 16th June the Register of Electors was sent to the DWP for data matching against their records. Of 184,912 electors on the Register, 149,010 were successfully verified against the DWP records and registered automatically. They subsequently received Confirmation Letters based on templates required by the Cabinet Office.

3.6 Confirmation Letters

There were a number of issues encountered relating to the content of the Confirmation Letters, including confusion about whether residents had been included on the Open Register or not; and why they had been included on the Open Register.

3.7 Invitation to Register

35,900 electors' details were not successfully verified with the DWP. They were subsequently sent Invitations to Register (ITR), which asked them to provide details of their National Insurance Number and their date of birth so that they could be re-checked and successfully verified against the DWP's records.

Officers received a number of complaints from residents unhappy that they had been advised in the Invitation to Register letter that failure to complete the form could result in a civil penalty of £80. In response to this Electoral Services advised residents that the Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 required that the ERO provide information to all relevant electors on the level of fine if they failed to comply in providing the information requested in the form.

3.8 Household Enquiry Forms

The new system also introduced Household Enquiry Forms (HEF). These are similar to the former canvass forms and used in instances where a potential change of residency at a property has been identified. All new electors identified on HEFs are invited to provide their personal identifiers. As part of the Confirmation Live Run 12,552 properties (the majority of which were empty properties) were identified as requiring a HEF to be sent to them.

3.9 Reminders and Canvass

As part of the new requirements, non responses to ITRs and HEFs must be followed up with two reminders sent to the relevant elector and/or property respectively. Personal canvassing i.e. a personal visit is also required and may be conducted when sending any of the relevant reminders.

3.10 Canvass

A transitional canvass is currently being conducted in order that as required on 1 December a new register will be published which will comprise all electors confirmed by data matching, all those who have made successful individual applications, and those on spring 2014 register who have not yet reapplied.

However, in accordance with regulations, details of any electors who did not respond to the 2013 canvass and who again fail to respond to a HEF by the conclusion of the canvass in November 2014 will be deleted from the Electoral Register published by 1 December 2014.

3.11 Register and Absent Votes

It is important to note that all electors with an absent vote (postal or proxy) must be verified against DWPs records. Failure by any elector to provide their personal identifier will result in them losing their absent vote arrangements (but not necessarily lose their entitlement to vote) on publication of the revised register on 1 December 2014.

4. ELECTORAL SERVICES

Electoral Services have experienced a significant increase in its workload since the introduction of IER. Registration is now an all year process and involves sending reminders and conducting a personal visit in the event that a resident fails to respond to letters. This has inevitably led to a significant increase in the number of procedures to follow, the number of different workstreams under way at any given moment and an increase in documents to produce in comparison to the previous Electoral Registration system.

There have also been a number of changes made to the Council's Electoral Management System, Xpress. This software has changed considerably since IER has been introduced. These changes have reflected dealing with practical issues, changes in guidance and requests for its customers. There are almost weekly updates to Xpress as learning and experience grows in this field.

As a result of the increased pressure exerted by IER, members of the Democratic Services Team are now cross-working with Electoral Services in performing the tasks required and providing extra capacity.

5. THE FUTURE

Up until March 2015, there will be a focus on completion of the transition, with targeted activity prior to March focusing on those existing electors who have not been successfully verified with the DWP's records, identifying further missing electors and encouraging their applications. This is in order to ensure

that the Electoral Register is as accurate as possible for the General Elections on 7 May 2015.

In the autumn of 2015 a HEF will be sent to every household in the borough to confirm who lives there and anyone new invited to register individually. By 2016 it is expected that the new system will be embedded and in place.

6. Financial Implications

Funding for the forthcoming Parliamentary Elections will be largely met by the Cabinet Office. With regard to the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration, funding of £114,124 for 2014/15 has been received from the Cabinet Office and additional funds have been provided by the Council as part of its duty in relation to electoral registration and the annual canvass process. A decision is currently awaited as to whether further funding for 2015/16 will be received from the Cabinet Office.

7. Council Priorities

The Council's vision:

Working Together to Make a Difference for Harrow

The delivery of all elections and the process for enabling residents to be entered on the Register of Electors contributes to the administration's priorities of making a difference for communities and families.

Name: Simon George	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 10 November 2014		

Ward Councillors notified:	NO
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Contact Details and Background Papers

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Background Papers:

Council's Constitution

<http://www.harrow.gov.uk/www2/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=1092&Info=1&bcr=1>

The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/6/contents/enacted>