

INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE COUNT PROCESS FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY AND LOCAL ELECTION 2010

This report is prepared in the light of the fact that it took Thurrock a long time to produce the result of the Parliamentary Election on 6th May 2010. We estimate that the process took three to four hours longer than it should have taken. This report starts the process of an overall assessment of what worked and what we need to improve.

Holding a General election alongside a local election is always a demanding process. In Thurrock this was made even more difficult by having a split constituency which required votes to be verified in Basildon and subsequently transferred to Thurrock. Any difficulties Basildon experienced impacted on Thurrock.

Voting results for the Parliamentary constituency of Thurrock were also sufficiently close to require a recount on two occasions. Our original estimate did not take into account two recounts.

Our overriding concern was to ensure that residents were given every opportunity to vote in Thurrock and the count was as accurate as possible.

Nevertheless we accept that the count could have been undertaken quicker and we will be changing some of the arrangements for future elections in order to achieve a faster count whilst not compromising accuracy.

We believe that the most significant factor which led to the delay was not starting the count until all ballot boxes were at the count location. Whilst we and some authorities have adopted this practice in the past we believe that we can considerably reduce the count time by redesigning this early part of the process.

Over the next few days we will be undertaking a detailed assessment of what went right and what we need to improve. We will undertake a series of visits to other authorities to see how they managed their count and we will implement changes we believe to be necessary. This will not just be about speeding up our count but significantly improving the whole process of election management.

The decision to use only one ballot box for both the local and general election ballot papers was made by me, as the Returning Officer, after taking expert advice and local factors for example storage at Polling Stations and Count Venue. Many other authorities, including a significant number which announced their results earlier than Thurrock used a single ballot box. We do not believe that separating the two different types of ballot papers accounted for our delay.

LEARNING POINTS FROM THE 2010 ELECTION - WHAT WENT WELL?

1. All polling stations operated effectively. All issues which arose at polling stations were resolved by Polling Station Staff, Inspectors and DRO eg broken seals secured, queuing issues dealt with, extra polling booths supplied.
2. During the course of the day everyone who had issues and wanted to vote were able to do so because all clerical errors were corrected, postal votes were re-issued, lost or spoilt ballot papers were re-issued, etc. As far as elections staff are aware no voter who tried to vote and contacted us were disenfranchised.

3. All ballot papers were allocated correctly and therefore there were no shortages at polling stations. We printed 100% of ballot papers needed. Therefore unlike some other authorities we were not in a position where we had to close Polling Stations.
4. We dealt with issues that arose regarding IT in previous years and had excellent input from IT so that all equipment particularly scanners worked.
5. Count Layout worked well given the constraints of space.
6. 50% of count assistant did not work on election during the day and were able to carry on and willing to do so.
7. Extra staff were provided at short notice in the morning when we needed to relieve some staff.
8. All staff dealt with the very stressful process with good humour and team spirit.
9. Prior to 6th May and on the day the team dealt with 100s calls, including a large volume of unanticipated calls from unsatisfied Basildon voters. This was due to the fact that Basildon had not issued postal votes until Tuesday 27 or Wednesday 28 April. About 300 voters got missed the first time and got their ballot papers on Saturday 1 May.
10. Our decision to issue postal vote in-house was a good decision and we were able to issue postal votes on Friday 23 April. Basildon used the printers we used and had we used them we would have had more people dissatisfied.
11. We got all out ballot boxes out on time even though Basildon delivered theirs to us late and with no ballot papers which were subsequently delivered with wrong numbering – we made all the corrections and got all the ballot boxes out on time.
12. Our decision to do a combined issue of Parliamentary and Local postal votes was a success, especially considering we had not done this before.
13. Significant time was spent on training staff. Election staff provided some home visits and 1-2-1 sessions to ensure everyone was trained.
14. Candidate and Agents briefings were effective and we adapted our processes taking on board their comments. They were all informed of combined ballot boxes and only one candidate questioned the use of one combined ballot boxes and others were happy. We decided to have combined ballot boxes due to volume of boxes that would be otherwise required and their storage at Polling Stations, at the Count venue and at Council premises as well as the cost.
15. In the weeks leading up to the election we dealt with Candidate's and Agent's concerns even though these issues should have been reported to the Police and the Returning Officer has no role or the resources to investigate. We took a pragmatic approach and effectively dealt with issues relating to imprint requirements by telephoning and then emailing three independent and one BNP candidate/agent. We also responded to allegation of fly posting against the two main parties by contacting their agents.

I have not listed other detailed processes that made the voting and postal voting run smoothly up until the count.

LEARNING POINTS FROM THE 2010 ELECTION - WHAT WE NEED TO IMPROVE?

Staff capacity and resources

1. We need two Deputy Returning Officers one to deal with Postal Votes and another to be in charge of the Count.
2. We need to establish a call centre triage system to deal with calls in the weeks leading up to the election, during the day of the election up to 9pm. If we cannot use our call centre then three additional staff should be trained to check register and deal with queries. A script should be prepared for the day for FAQs - we can do this now and should do so while the calls are fresh in our minds. More difficult questions can be referred to the Election Team. This will free up time for election staff to prepare for election day.
3. We need 6 staff to help set out count venue during the late morning with DRO or one of her staff with written list of what is needed at each table - this should not take more than 2 hours.
4. We need a van to transport all material to count venue - written checklist for all material needed at count venue including screws and bolts etc so that nothing is missed out.
5. DRO to have time off - at least 1.5 hour from 5 till 6.30 or 7 till 8.30 before or after dinner that is provided. Election team staff to have similar breaks during the day.
6. Presiding Officers cannot be used for senior count team as they need to be at count by 9pm.
7. The double check system for local ballot papers being put in ward ballot boxes did not work and some papers were mixed although they were easily identified and returned to the right team for counting. Need more staff for checking this part in combined elections.
8. 50% of the Count Staff on the night did not work on election during the day – this worked well but we should consider 70% new staff and have standby staff at home on mobile – ideally middle managers who can take over if necessary. As much as possible use separate staff for the evening eg Inspectors.

Training

9. We will review the effectiveness of our training of Presiding Officers.
10. Also the count supervisors and the central count team should be trained together so that there is clear understanding of the roles and better coordination.

Preparation for the count

11. We need to reconsider our practice of waiting for all ballot boxes for a particular Ward to arrive before starting the count and replace it with another equally safe but faster system.
12. We need written flowchart of procedure for count – we will produce this now based on the draft already agreed and check this procedure with ROs and DROs in other authorities with the same management system.
13. We need to hold more meetings before the day of the election with senior count staff. Once procedure agreed and put in writing for Count there is to be no deviation

allowed unless this is absolutely necessary. If process changed on the night all senior count staff to be briefed together.

14. All count forms to be finalised and handed to senior count staff in advance (as with the material provided to inspectors) and additional copies to be available at the count. These should be organised better and in a hard folder/ ring binder.
15. We will do all the paperwork needed for the next election now and create a master folder of documents including eg count procedure, inventory of material needed etc (the documents that need candidate names could still be done with candidate numbers - names can be added the day the statement of nominated persons is published).
16. During the day there should be no preparation work other than setting up the count venue as set out in 3 above. RO and DROs should be available only to answer difficult questions and deal with complex situations that inspectors cannot resolve. This can be achieved by having separate DROs for postal votes and count and by having a call centre system for taking calls.
17. We should consider having a dress rehearsal the day before the count.

At the count

18. Brief outline of process to be displayed on projector / screen at the Count Venue and regular announcement to be made from 10pm.
19. Ballot boxes to be logged as they come in and passed on to count staff without delay under a new system that is to be devised.
20. Rubbish from polling station to have a designated space with bags numbered with Polling Station numbers.
21. We need clear chain of command and consistent communication during count - DRO -> central count team -> senior count supervisor -> count supervisor -> count assistant. Count supervisors to be Head of Service or above who will have the authority to refuse recount by candidates at the first stage. We will create an organisation chart.
22. Count assistants to count once only and pass on their first count figure to count supervisor for verification - not check and recheck as they did on 6th May. This added significantly to the delay.
23. Our security needs to be stricter - everyone will need a visible badge displaying their status - including count staff. We should employ Vertex Staff we know at the count venue so that it is easier to liaise with them.

Layout

24. Improve the layout further with a space cordoned off for candidates and agents only to meet RO when total numbers are being shown before announcements and to look at the adjudication of rejected ballot papers.
25. In the area for RO and candidates and agents set out a table for adjudicating spoilt ballot papers and stamp at the same time - one administrative staff needed to stamp rejected ballot papers.
26. We should allow less space for guests - two or three lines of chairs - 60 to 90 people maximum and more space for count tables and central count team.
27. The middle area got crowded as everyone gathered to assess the number of total votes and we need to manage this better.

28. We may need to rethink the location of postal vote opening at count venue and keep it further away from guests, as this issue was raised. However, postal vote opening needs to be transparent and candidates and agents need to be able to view what is happening.

Event Management

29. There is a big task of event management and this should be taken on by the Communications Team.
30. Event management should include provision of badges, reception duty, announcements and contact person for candidates and agents.
31. It would include sending out letters to guests etc.
32. This should also include transportation of equipment to the count venue and back by Environment services.

General

33. We will visit other Councils with similar numbers of electorates, which have consistently been fast at producing results.
34. We will have meeting with Inspectors to check if any polling stations had overly long queues and address issues for the future. However, some queues are to be expected and cannot get rid of queues.
35. Wireless communication between RO, DRO and senior staff at count venue during count to be explored. Mobile text messaging to all presiding officers to be explored.
36. Advise all concerned at briefings near the election about re-count process eg once a candidate wants a recount on reasonable grounds no one has the right to object, when is it reasonable to ask for recount, what are ROs powers to refuse a recount and under what circumstances.
37. Communications team to help with advance messaging to residents about registering (ie they are not registered unless they have confirmation from us) and about voting early in the day not at 9pm all at once, as may have happened elsewhere in the England.

Budget

38. We need to look at the budget – most improvements will require additional funding, for example, dress rehearsal, extra polling booths, additional staffing.

Note: our decision to use combine ballot boxes was the right one and should still be the same not least because of the number of ballot boxes that will be needed and space needed and cost. There were no mistakes in the sorting process. When checked no white ballot papers were found in the ward boxes.

Tasnim Shawkat

Acting / Returning Officer

10 May 2010