

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>FORTHCOMING ELECTION COUNTS</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 January 2014
<b>WARD</b>	None specific
<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTOR</b>	Andrew Moulton, Head of Governance and Improvement Services

**OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

That Members have an understanding of the issues which will affect the timing of the various counts that will take place in 2014 and 2015.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the following information about planning for the election counts in 2014 and 2015.

**SUMMARY OF REPORT**

On Thursday 22 May 2014, there will be joint elections held for the European Parliament and local Borough Council elections in 18 out of the 25 Borough wards. There will also be elections for four Parish Councils which may or may not be contested.

With regard to the European election, Wokingham Borough is part of the South East region reporting in to the Regional Returning Officer (RRO). The European count will take place on Sunday evening, 25<sup>th</sup> May, so that the result can be announced soon after the close of polls in the rest of Europe at 9pm. No formal direction has yet been received from the RRO but he has indicated that he will ask for the European verification figures by 2pm on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Verification for all elections takes between 3 to 4 hours and it is planned to conduct this on the morning of Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

There is also new legislation that will come into force for the elections in 2014. Two parts of this will directly affect the timing of the count process for the local elections – new checks of postal votes and queues at polling stations when the poll closes.

For the above reasons, the count for the Borough and Parish elections is planned to commence on the afternoon of Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

The position for the 2015 elections is less clear. The elections that are expected in May 2015 are the UK Parliamentary election, Borough and Town/Parish council elections. Current legislation requires Acting Returning Officers to commence the count for the UK Parliamentary within 4 hours of the close of poll. However it is possible that this legislation may change.

## **Background**

On 15 November 2011 a paper was presented at The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee about the constraints that affected the timing of the various counts that took place following elections on 5 May 2011 and for the Committee to put forward their views on the timing of election counts to the Returning Officer. One of the outcomes of these discussions was that the Returning Officer would return to The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in advance of the next combined elections to inform the Committee of the planning taking place in respect of the timing of the election counts.

## **Analysis of Issues**

On 22 May in 2014 there will be elections held for the European Parliament in addition to elections in 18 out of the 25 Borough wards. There will also be elections for four Parish Councils which may or may not be contested.

For elections to the European Parliament, the Returning Officer for the Wokingham Borough becomes one of the Local Returning Officers for the South East Region and reports to the Regional Returning Officer (RRO). The RRO for 2014 is Mark Heath who is the Returning Officer at Southampton. It is the RRO who has overall responsibility for the European elections run in this area and so has the authority to make certain decisions and issue directions as he sees fit. The European election will be seen as the principal election on 22 May 2014 and all additional elections held on that day are secondary elections.

One of the decisions that the RRO will make will be concerning the timing of the verification of all ballot papers and the timing of the subsequent count. No formal direction has yet been received but he has indicated that he will ask for the European verification figures by 2pm on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May. The European count will take place on Sunday evening, 25<sup>th</sup> May, so that the result can be announced soon after the close of polls in the rest of Europe at 9pm. The RRO has already stressed the importance of accurate verification figures and stated that he will be insisting on a zero tolerance for the figures. It is unlikely that he will direct the start times of each Authority's Verification but will want the assurance from all that the timing of it will enable complete accuracy.

There is new legislation that will come into force for the elections in 2014. Two parts of this will directly affect the timing of the count process. Firstly, it will now become compulsory to check 100% of identifiers from postal voters. Currently, we only have to check 20% of these and while we have always tried to check 100% we have known that if any problems occur at the final postal vote opening session, which deals with all of the final postal votes that can be handed in until 10pm on election day, we could revert to manual 20% checking if any IT problems occurred. Postal vote opening sessions are held at Loddon Valley on election day so if a system failure happened at the final session all of the postal votes would have to be transported back to the Civic Offices to be checked against the election management system (EMS) held at the offices. The EMS is not able to be used remotely.

The other change to the legislation concerns queues at polling stations at the close of poll. The current law states that only people issued with a ballot paper at 10pm are able to vote. From now on any voter who is in the queue at 10pm will be able to vote. This will mean that polling stations may now have to remain open longer to deal with any queuing voters who will now be eligible to vote. If this happens, it will delay the arrival of the ballot box at the count venue.

The verification is likely to take between three and four hours to achieve. There will be approximately 85 ballot boxes containing European ballot papers, 68 containing Borough ballot papers and potentially 9 ballot boxes containing Parish ballot papers if those Parish wards are contested. Experience has shown that in many polling stations there will need to be extra ballot boxes issued because of the size of the European ballot papers.

Taking all of the above into consideration, it is likely that the Verification will start at either 9.00am or 9.30am on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May. This will then enable us to get the Verification figures to Southampton within the expected timescales. The Borough and Parish counts will commence immediately after this on Friday afternoon, 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

Arrangements for the elections in 2015 are less clear. The elections that are expected in May 2015 are the UK Parliamentary election, Borough and Town/Parish council elections. Of the Town/Parish council elections it is the three main Town councils that are up for election in addition to some rural parishes. It is likely that most of the Town council seats will be contested but as usual no certainty will be received until the close of nominations which is currently 19 working days before polling day. Current legislation requires Acting Returning Officers to commence the count for the UK Parliamentary within 4 hours of the close of poll. It is possible that this legislation may change depending on what else has changed.

However, it is likely that verification and counting will take place over more than one day. The Returning Officer will consider all options available including counting over the week-end. The requirement that all elections must produce accurate results in which all stakeholders are confident will be uppermost in the Returning Officer's mind when making these decisions.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION**

***The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.***

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	**	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	**	Yes	Revenue

#### **Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision**

\*\* The costs of elections are not separately broken down within the service budget for Electoral Services.

**Cross-Council Implications** (how does this decision impact on other Council services and priorities?)

Many parts of the Council are involved in ensuring the elections are operated effectively and efficiently e.g. provision of poll clerks.

**Reasons for considering the report in Part 2**

Not applicable

**List of Background Papers**

None

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