

TITLE	May 2021 Election Counts
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 December 2020
WARD	None specific
RETURNING OFFICER	Andrew Moulton

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

That Members and the public have an understanding of the issues which will affect the timing of the various election counts that will take place in May 2021.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee notes the arrangements for the various election counts in May 2021.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

On Thursday 6 May 2021, there will be combined elections held for the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner election, Borough, and Town/Parish council elections.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to impact how we live in Great Britain and presents particular challenges for Returning Officers (ROs) and their teams in preparing for and delivering the 2021 polls.

Planning is underway including risk assessing every step in the elections process. This initial work has informed the dates/timing of the various counts that will need to take place following close of polls at 10pm on Thursday 6 May.

In summary, for the reasons set out in this report, including the need for additional staffing at all stages of the elections process, managing the safety of candidates, agents and staff in the count venue, and the requirements of the Police Area Returning Officer, the count for the Borough and Town/Parish elections will take place during the day on **Friday 7th May** with the Police & Crime Commissioner local count taking place on **Monday 10th May**. All counts are expected to be held at the usual count venue of Loddon Valley Leisure Centre although contingency plans are being made should this venue not be available for any reason.

Background

The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of the rationale for the timing of election counts in May 2021.

Analysis of Issues

The Police & Crime Commissioner election is held every five years and will next take place on 6 May 2021. This is the election that was postponed from May 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The timing of the count is a decision for the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) – she has advised that the local count for Wokingham must take place on Monday 10 May 2020.

Also, on 6th May, Borough elections will take place across 18 of the 25 borough wards. These are the scheduled elections that were postponed from May 2020.

There are a number of Parish Elections scheduled for May 2021 for which elections may be necessary should seats be contested but as usual no certainty will be received until the close of nominations which is currently 19 working days before polling day.

Finally, at the time of writing two Town Council by-elections have been called by electors which will take place on 6 May 2021.

Considerations affecting the timing of counts in May 2021

The requirement that all elections must produce accurate results in which all stakeholders are confident is the uppermost consideration in the Returning Officer's mind when deciding the most appropriate timing of the respective counts.

For this series of elections, the impact of Covid-19 restrictions will be considerable meaning that:-

- Counts will take longer due to fewer count staff in use at any one time due to social distancing
- Additional contingency staffing will be required due to the possibility of staff self-isolating
- PPE may be required in the count venue dependent on the public health advice/regulations in place
- The various counts may need to be staggered due to the lack of space to enable all counts to take place at the same time.

Options

With regard to the Borough and Town/Parish counts, two possible options have been considered:-

1. Immediately following the closure of polls on 6th May and through the morning of 7 May - an overnight count.
2. During the day on Friday 7th May

Analysis of Pros and Cons

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivers results as early as possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not possible to secure experienced sufficient count staff as a number of these staff will be deployed in polling stations due to the additional requirements to ensure safe Covid-compliant polling stations. • Timing of results - likely that counts would continue on through Friday due to the additional time required to complete in a Covid-19 restricted environment. • Impact on the accuracy and timeliness of results particularly for those counts taking place later in the schedule when count staff are over-tired.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient experienced count staff available and properly rested. • Accuracy of results • Contingency of having Saturday 8th May available should counts not be completed on the Friday. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results declared day following election • Most Councillors would need to take a further day off from work. • Possible that all counts would not be completed in the daytime – however, there is the contingency available of Saturday 8th May to re-convene and complete any outstanding counts.

Initial indications from other local authorities show that only those authorities with a large-size count venue (i.e. larger than any available in Wokingham borough) are considering overnight counts.

For these reasons, the Returning Officer has decided to plan the count around option 2 – i.e. daytime counts for Borough and Town/Parish elections. The Police & Crime Commissioner local area count will take place on Monday 10 May as instructed by the PARO.

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

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

Electoral Commission guidance and performance standards for Returning Officers.

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