

TITLE	Update on May 2021 Elections
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 February 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director Governance

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

That Members and the public have information on the elections scheduled to take place in May 2021.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee notes the update on the elections taking place on 6 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.

These polls are likely to be delivered against the backdrop of evolving public health restrictions. These present complex new challenges for all involved in the electoral process.

At its meeting on 22 December, the Committee noted the timing arrangements for the May 2021 counts and asked for a further update which this report seeks to provide.

The Government announced on 5 February 2021 that, “the May 2021 polls will take place in a way that is fundamentally similar to previous polls – but there will be differences, as there have been in many areas of life during the pandemic.”

Detailed planning for the successful and safe delivery of polls on 6 May continues including risk assessing every step in the elections process.

The report provides updates on:-

- The Government’s announcement of 5th February 2021
- The verification and count
- Polling stations
- Communication
- Risk Management and mitigation

Background

The purpose of this report is to provide a further update for the Committee about the plans and preparations for the elections on 6 May 2021.

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. 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 also take place on 6 May 2021.

Updates

Government Announcement of 5th February

The rules for the May 2021 polls are set out in legislation and guidance. The polls will run as normally as possible, and sensible measures are being put in place to protect against spread of disease and overcome practical challenges.

The electoral process formally begins with the notice that a poll is going to take place and, for elections, the nominations process where candidates are required to obtain signatures from a certain number of supporters, in order to get their name onto the ballot paper. Campaigning will be ongoing up until the elections.

Voters will continue to have access to three methods of voting:

- in person at a polling station
- by postal vote
- by proxy vote

The Government is proposing to change the rules for proxy voting to ensure that anyone who is self-isolating can request a proxy vote at the last minute – up to 5pm on polling day itself. The Government is working with suppliers, local authorities and Royal Mail, who are ensuring the COVID-19 secure and effective operation of the postal vote system, from the issuing of postal vote applications to the point where they are counted. The Government has assured close working with local authorities who will ensure the COVID-19 secure and effective operation of polling stations. Voting in person will still be available for all those who would like to, and there will be no change to the hours of polling.

Following the closure of polling stations, votes must be counted and results announced as soon as is practicable. As with the voting process, plans are being put in place to ensure this process is COVID-19 secure and effective. The Government expects the

counts may take more time than for previous polls. However, results should of course still be announced before the terms of new elected officials begin.

Further details of the Government's Delivery Plan can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/may-2021-polls-delivery-plan/may-2021-polls-delivery-plan#electoral-process-and-how-it-will-run-in-may-2021

Election Counts

The latest planning assumptions show the following:-

- the verification of all polls will take place on Friday 7 May;
- the Borough elections counts will take place on Saturday 8 May (with the contingency of Sunday 9 May if required); and
- the Police and Crime Commissioner count for the Wokingham area and Town and Parish counts will take place on Monday 10 May;
- All counts will be at the usual count venue of Loddon Valley Leisure Centre, albeit there will be different arrangements to ensure a COVID-safe environment.

Polling Stations

At its meeting of 18 February, the Council is being asked to re-designate a small number of polling places either due to non-availability on 6th May or due to being unsuitable from a health and safety perspective due to the additional requirements to ensure all polling stations are COVID-safe for voters and staff.

With regard to the four schools in the Borough that are used as polling stations, work continues to minimise any disruption to these schools.

Communication

The Council's website remains the main source of essential information for residents. In addition, the Council's social media accounts are also used to promote key messages such as, for example, reminding residents how they can apply for a postal vote.

For candidates, agents, and any member of the public considering standing as a councillor, a briefing has been organised for 1 March which will provide interested parties with an overview of the elections process and ask questions of the Returning Officer and his staff. This will be followed by further detailed briefings as appropriate. Anyone wishing to attend the briefings should contact the Electoral Services Team at electoralservices@wokingham.gov.uk.

Risk Management and Mitigation

Using guidance from the Electoral Commission, a detailed risk register is in place covering such aspects as staffing, communication, contractors and suppliers, the nomination process, postal voting, polling stations, and the verification and count. All detailed assessments are being produced in consultation with Health and Safety and Public Health colleagues.

Given the additional risks associated with this series of elections, it has been agreed to add "May 2021 elections" to the Council's Corporate Risk Register (CRR) which

provides a further corporate focus and capacity to ensure the successful delivery of the polls. The Audit Committee at its meeting of 22 February will be reviewing the CRR.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	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.

Public Sector Equality Duty
Specific elements and processes associated with the elections process e.g. re-designation of polling places will be assessed individually prior to implementation.

List of Background Papers
None

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