

TITLE	Update on Local Elections
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 September 2021
WARD	None specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Assistant Director Governance - Andrew Moulton

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The purpose of this report to provide information on the learning from the May 2021 elections.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to note the report and associated action plan, and advise any further feedback to improve future election processes.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

On Thursday 6 May 2021, combined elections were held for the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner election, Borough and Town/Parish council elections. These polls were delivered against the backdrop of significant public health restrictions which presented complex new challenges for all involved in the electoral process including residents, candidates, agents and elections staff. These elections were postponed from 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Committee considered the planning for the May 2021 elections on two occasions in 2020/21. This report offers an opportunity for the Committee to consider the learning from May 2021 and build this into the processes for delivering future elections.

The Committee also noted that the Audit Committee, through its responsibilities for overseeing the Council's Corporate Risk Register (CRR), had included "elections" to the CRR. Members of the Audit Committee have been invited to attend the Committee for this item.

Overall, the May 2021 elections were delivered successfully benefiting from extensive planning and cross-Council effort. This was recognised in the post-election feedback received. However, in the spirit of continuous learning, there are a small number of actions emanating from this review which are set out in paragraph 5 of the report.

Background

1. At its February 2021 meeting the Committee requested:-

“A joint meeting of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee be arranged in the late summer or autumn of 2021, to evaluate lessons learned from the running of this election in conjunction with the corporate risk register.”

Introduction to May 2021 Elections

2. On Thursday 6 May 2021, combined elections were held for the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner election, Borough and Town/Parish council elections. These polls were delivered against the backdrop of significant public health restrictions which presented complex new challenges for all involved in the electoral process including residents, candidates, agents and elections staff. These elections were postponed from 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Given the additional risks associated with this series of elections, it was agreed to add “May 2021 elections” to the Council’s Corporate Risk Register (CRR) which provided a further corporate focus and capacity to ensure the successful delivery of the polls. The Audit Committee, which is the responsible body for overseeing the Council’s risk management arrangements, considered the elections risk as part of its review of the CRR, and subsequently agreed at its June 2021 to remove the Elections risk following the successfully delivery of the May elections.

Returning Officers Report to Annual Council – 20 May 2021

4. The Council considered a report from the Returning Officer which gave details of the results of the local elections held on 6 May 2021. The report outlined the election process, the results and the turnout for each Borough ward contested. The overall conclusion reported to Council was “the elections processes for May 2021 were complex, labour intensive, and delivered in accordance with public health restrictions. In the main, the various processes ran smoothly and in accordance with plans. Where any improvements are identified, these will be built into our processes for future elections.”

Analysis of Learning from May 2021

5. Officers have used a combination of feedback forms and surveys to collate the following Action Plan. The Committee is invited to scrutinise these actions and put forward its own feedback on areas for further improvement for future elections.

Process	Description	Action
Nominations	The revised process worked satisfactorily with positive feedback from candidates agents. Informal pre-checks of nomination papers worked well together with a stricter appointment system for submission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue with offering pre-checks prior to submission • Encourage use of appointment system for the formal submission of papers.
Postal voting	There was a significant increase in the numbers of electors choosing to vote by post. The printing, dispatch and return of postal votes worked well. One area for future focus is developing further support and guidance for voters in addition to the statutory guidance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Communications colleagues to develop further support for postal voters e.g. video on “how to fill in Postal Vote Statement etc.
Polling Places	Significant additional work took place to ensure all polling places were safe for voters and staff. This included the temporary re-designation of a small number of polling places (largely schools). Residents raised concern about one polling place (Oaklands School).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake an interim review of selected polling places to be reported to Council in January 2022. NB: there is a statutory requirement to undertake a full polling places review every 5 years – the next will take place in 2023/24.
Counts	The usual count venue (Loddon Valley Leisure Centre) was used but spread over three days and spaced across two rooms with timed counts. Covid-security was achieved with generally positive feedback from staff, candidates and agents. The decision not to undertake an overnight verification/count helped in terms of availability of experienced staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for May 2022 elections to assume a daytime verification/count on Friday 6th May.

Future Elections

6. The next planned elections will be held as follows:

Date	Description
May 2022	Borough elections (18 seats)
May 2023	Borough elections (18 seats) Town & Parish Councils
May 2024	Scheduled Parliamentary elections Police & Crime Commissioner Borough elections

Other Information

7. The Elections Bill 2021 is currently being considered by Parliament. The Bill contains a number of measures that, if passed into law, will impact the planning and delivery of future elections. Appendix A contains a summary for Members' information.

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)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

Cross-Council Implications

Delivering elections requires a cross-Council approach recognising the importance of this major corporate event.

Public Sector Equality Duty

This is an information report for which an equalities assessment is not required.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

Elections Bill 2021

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