

# European Parliamentary Elections

## 23 May 2019

### 1.0 Background

- 1.1 Officers received notification on 1 April 2019 from the Regional Returning Officer (RRO), Mark Heath from Southampton City Council, that it was possible that the European Elections would be held on 23 May 2019, after the UK did not leave the EU on 31 March as originally planned.
- 1.2 On 1 April it was also confirmed that Local Returning Officers would be able to incur reasonable expenditure to plan for the European elections. However, at this stage, the elections had not been confirmed, therefore no official communications could be sent to electors regarding the election.
- 1.3 The Notice of Election was published on Monday, 15 April, on the instruction of the RRO.

### 2.0 European Electors

- 2.1 A significant challenge for preparing the European Elections was the registration of European Union citizen electors.
- 2.2 EU citizens may only vote once in one member state at a European election. Where EU citizens, registered to vote in the UK, wish to exercise their European Parliamentary vote in the UK, these electors must complete a separate application and declaration form (known as a UC1). The deadline to return this form was the same as ordinary applications to register, Tuesday, 7 May 2019.
- 2.3 The law does not require EROs to send out a form to all EU citizens, though at previous European elections, EU citizen electors have been contacted in the January prior to the election to complete the form. This exercise did not apply to citizens of Ireland, Cyprus or Malta, who have full voting rights in the UK.
- 2.4 In consultation with the Deputy Electoral Registration Officer, all EU citizens were contacted on 11 April (by letter or where held, by email). In total, 5,273 electors were contacted. Each elector was given a copy of the declaration to be completed and details of the deadline for submission.
- 2.5 Additional information was available on the Council's website regarding this issue, with a blank declaration available to complete.
- 2.6 A reminder was sent to all non-responders around 29 April. Although this was close to the deadline, Officers considered another reminder would ensure all EU electors had every opportunity to register for this election.
- 2.7 Unfortunately only 948 EU electors (18.0%) completed and returned the declarations by the deadline. 161 forms were received after the deadline, and these electors were not able to vote at the election.

### 3.0 Election Staff

- 3.1 Four DROs were appointed with full powers whose main roles were to adjudicate on returned postal vote statements, inspect polling stations and oversee individual count

teams. Additionally, the Democratic Services Manager was appointed a DRO for the postal vote opening process and the count.

- 3.2 The election was managed by the Electoral Services Manager (ESM), with support from two Electoral Services Officers and one Electoral Services Assistant.
- 3.3 The issue and opening of postal votes was managed by the Democratic Services Manager, supported by the Democratic Services team.
- 3.4 Staff were notified that, when accepting an offer of employment to work in a polling station they were consenting to work during the hours of poll without a rest break and in excess of the maximum working hours provided by the Working Time Directive.

#### **4.0 Staff Training**

- 4.1 Due to the proximity to the Borough elections on 2 May, one training session was held on Tuesday, 30 April 2019, prior to the ballot boxes being collected, which emphasised the key differences for the election, and also updates on performance from the Borough elections.
- 4.2 Count supervisors were briefing prior to the verification and count.

#### **5.0 Nominations**

- 5.1 Nominations for the election were dealt with by the Regional Returning Officer.

#### **6.0 Poll Cards**

- 6.1 Given the short notice of the election, poll cards were not sent when the Notice of Election was published on 15 April 2019. Poll cards were printed and issued on 18 April, with most electors receiving their poll card after the Easter bank holiday.
- 6.2 Three further poll card mailings were sent throughout the election period, to ensure all eligible electors received official notification.
- 6.3 Several queries were received from electors who had not received their European Parliamentary poll cards. It is likely that there was some confusion caused due to the proximity of delivery of these poll cards to the Borough elections. Several electors contacted Electoral Services to advise they had been sent a duplicate poll card, however on closer inspection they realised it was for the European election.

#### **7.0 Postal Votes**

##### Issue of Postal Vote Packs

- 7.1 The first issue of postal votes was on Wednesday, 8 May 2019. Further of postal votes were issued on 9 May and 16 May 2019. These were for electors who registered to vote on 7 May 2019 (registration deadline), EU electors who returned a UC1 form who already had a postal vote, and those who applied for a postal vote on 8 April (postal vote deadline). In total, 13,225 postal votes were issued.
- 7.2 25 replacement ballot paper packs were issued, in cases where the elector advised that they had spoilt their ballot papers, lost their postal ballot papers, or had not received them. In such circumstances, the original postal vote ballot paper was cancelled and new postal vote pack issued.

### Opening of Postal Votes

- 7.3 Opening sessions started on Monday 13 May 2019. The opening sessions were held in the Kemp Room at HG Wells Conference and Events Centre, managed by the Democratic Services team. As in previous years, the DROs adjudicated the postal vote scanning. Agents were advised in advance of the dates of the opening sessions.
- 7.4 In total nine opening sessions were held. The final opening session was held on Friday, 24 May which dealt with those postal votes arriving in the post on the day of the election, those handed in at either the Civic Offices or polling stations and those returned by the Post Office through the final sweep.
- 7.5 The post box at the Civic Offices was checked at 10.00 pm and a final 'sweep' was undertaken by the Royal Mail at their delivery office, which resulted in further postal votes being received.

### Returns Analysis

- 7.6 Postal votes are opened and the contents checked prior to the checking of the postal vote statement. At this stage, a postal vote can be rejected for the following reasons:
- Ballot Papers Numbers do not match – ballot papers cannot be accepted where the number on the ballot paper envelope does not match the number on the postal vote statement.
  - Ballot Paper Envelope missing.
  - Postal Vote Statement was absent.
- 7.7 The number of statements rejected at this stage was:

	<b>Total Envelopes Received</b>	<b>Total Statements Rejected/Absent</b>	<b>Total Sent to Scanner</b>
<b>Woking</b>	8,879	120	8,759

### Verification of Postal Vote Statements

- 7.8 After the initial checks, postal vote statements are verified, to ensure the signature and date of birth provided on the statement matches those on the original postal vote application.
- 7.9 The reasons for rejecting a postal vote at this stage are:
- Date of Birth Rejected – either the date of birth has not been entered on the postal vote statement, or it does not match the date of birth provided on the postal vote application.
  - Signature Rejected – either the signature has not been entered on the postal vote statement, or it does not match the signature provided on the postal vote application.
  - Signature and Date of Birth Rejected - either the voter did not complete the postal vote statement or both the signature and date of birth provided on the postal vote statement did not match the signature and date of birth provided on the postal vote application.

7.10 The table below sets out the rejection rates at the scanner for the postal vote statements:

	Valid	Rejected		Rejected		
		No.	%	DOB & Sig	DOB	Sig
<b>Woking</b>	8,585	174	1.99	12	49	113

7.11 The rejection rate for statements at the scanners was 1.99%. This compares to 2.01% for the Borough elections, 1.44% in 2018 and 1.45% in 2019.

#### Post - Scanning Checks

7.12 Following the scanning of the postal vote statements, the contents of the ballot paper envelope are checked. A postal vote can be rejected at this stage for the following reasons:

- Ballot Papers Numbers do not match – ballot papers cannot be accepted where the number on the ballot paper does not match the number on the ballot paper envelope.
- Ballot Papers were absent

7.13 The number of postal votes rejected at this stage is set out below:

	Total accepted at the scanner	Rejected at post scanning stage	Total Postal votes accepted
<b>Woking</b>	8,585	5	8,580

7.14 The overall rejection rates are set out below:

	Postal Votes Accepted	Ballot Papers Rejected	% of Ballot Papers rejected
<b>Woking</b>	8,580	299	2.58%

7.15 The overall rejection rate was 2.58% which was lower than recent elections.

7.16 Any errors relating to personal identifiers were recorded at the scanners. Where electors needed to update their identifier, they were contacted following the election. Any clerical errors were also corrected.

## **8.0 Polling Stations**

8.1 43 polling stations were used for the elections in 29 venues. All polling equipment were delivered prior to polling day and Presiding Officers were asked to record any issues that occurred or were reported on polling day in a log book. This included possible errors on the register, visits from Police Officers and cases where electors were marked as an absent voter and claimed not to have asked for a postal vote. This information has been analysed and, where appropriate, electors have been contacted.

8.2 Officers were notified on Monday, 20 May that a banner promoting voter ID was still in place at The Vyne, which had been amended to reflect the date of the European Parliamentary election. The banner was taken down and additional guidance was published across the Borough advising electors that they were not required to take ID to vote on 23 May.

## **9.0 Verification and Count**

- 9.1 All polling station documentation and ballot boxes were returned to HG Wells on Thursday, 23 May following the close of polls. These were stored in the Wells Room overnight with additional security guard presence, which was kept on all day. On Friday 3 May, the Wells Room was accessed to sort all the returned documentation from the polling stations and to finalise the set up for the verification and count.
- 9.2 The Wells Room doors were secured when all the postal ballot papers were transferred following the completion of the final postal vote opening session.
- 9.3 The verification and count was held on Sunday, 26 May at HG Wells Conference and Events Centre from 11.30am. There were five count teams consisting of a count supervisor, an assistant count supervisor and twenty count assistants. Three Count teams were located in the Wells Room and two teams were located in the Kemp Room.
- 9.4 The verification figure was required to be submitted to the RRO by 3pm, therefore the verification commenced at 11.30am, to ensure that there was sufficient time to submit the figure in case of any problems. In the event, the figure was submitted to the RRO at 1.25pm.
- 9.5 The count of the ballot papers could not commence until after 4pm, therefore the count teams were released for a lunch break and returned at 4pm. The count of the ballot papers commenced at 4.30pm and the provisional total for Woking was submitted to the RRO at 7.40pm.
- 9.6 The DRO shared the provisional result with the agents at 10pm, as no announcement could be made locally before then, including sharing the result with local agents. The RRO was advised that the result had been confirmed locally at 10.02pm.
- 9.7 The RRO had instructed that all count teams should remain in place in case of any recounts required at 10pm, therefore all staff remained at HG Wells until this point. Following the confirmation of the local result, all count teams were released at 10.15pm, and SERCO removed all documentation and equipment from HG Wells to the secure store.
- 9.8 During the count, security staff were in place at the entrances to the Wells Room and the Kemp Room. CCTV cameras were installed at HG Wells which covered the document sorting area, the counting areas and the entrances to the rooms.
- 9.9 Colour coded badges were issued to attendees, to differentiate between levels of security access for all those in attendance. Several political parties standing in the election appointed counting agents to attend the Count and all Borough Councillors were invited to attend as guests of the LRO.

### Storage of Documents

- 9.10 All documents returned from polling stations and counted ballot papers were sorted into crates in the Wells Room and these were sealed and removed to a secure store on Friday, 24 May and Sunday 26 May.

### Turnout

- 9.11 The turnout for the elections was 39%.

## **10.0 Electoral Integrity**

10.1 Several queries were received regarding the provision of elector details to political parties for their campaigns. These electors were advised that by law the ERO is required to provide registered political parties with the full electoral register.

10.2 No further issues were reported to the DRO nor to Surrey Police.

REPORT ENDS