

## **London Borough of Barnet**

### **ARO's Preliminary Report on the conduct of the General Election June 2017**

#### **1. Summary:**

Not surprisingly, the calling of a snap general election posed significant logistical challenges for election teams and Returning Officers across the country, and overall, teams responded very well to this challenge. In Barnet the process for the administration of the General Election ran smoothly across all three Parliamentary constituencies and the level of turnout (both in-station and postal voting) across the constituencies indicates that voter engagement and participation was at an extremely high level.

The preparations in Barnet involved confirmation of nearly 100 polling venues (including in a few instances where pre-designated venues had to be replaced at very late notice), the count venue, and the coordination of multiple statutory processes that involved over 700 staff across polling stations, security and logistics, postal voting and finally, the count and declarations. It also involved standing up additional resources to manage the typical surge in registration around national elections, as well as the preparation and issuing of polling cards, postal votes, proxy votes and so on. Further to this the requirements of staff recruitment and training and the preparation of materials and equipment for ballot boxes, polling stations and the count were all successfully delivered in just 50 days.

#### **2. Staffing and Preparation**

The Electoral Services team was quickly supplemented with an additional five members of full-time staff, who were seconded-in from across the Assurance Directorate (4) and Adult Social Services (1). The full complement of staff was then split between a 'Registration Team' and an 'Elections Project Team' although a high degree of flexibility in temporarily moving staff members between these teams as required (e.g. to meet specific statutory deadlines etc.) was necessary in order to make best use of these available resources.

The Acting Returning Officer held a weekly Election Project Board to ensure that full oversight was maintained of ongoing activities and to ensure that organisational resources were sought and supplied as required. In particular, partners in CSG were tasked with providing essential support via the implementation of a dedicated Elections Call Centre to ensure that all enquiries from electors, residents and other stakeholders were suitably responded to.

Recruitment started immediately for staff that would be required for polling, counting and other electoral duties. In addition to contacting staff that had worked on recent elections, a relatively low-key campaign seeking applications from current staff from LBB and partner organisations was highly successful and recruitment to the approx. 725 posts was well managed throughout. A key element to ensuring staffing levels were sufficient throughout was to 'over-recruit' to key polling and count roles and this successfully compensated for the inevitable late staff withdrawals and the handful of no-shows on the day.

#### **3. Electoral Registration**

Despite some initial public opinions that eligible electors might not engage in high levels with this election, activity on the electoral register increased significantly (even beyond the levels witnessed for the EU Referendum last year) with almost 19,000 amendments being made to the register of electors during the period following the announcement of the election and the publication of the final election register on 1 June 2017. This figure included over 12,000 additions to the register so that it currently stands at its highest ever level in Barnet at 253,591 (this includes electors without

the Parliamentary franchise). This total register figure was also achieved on the back of the annual register published on 1 December 2016, which itself stood at a post-annual canvass record of 241,737 (and represented an increase of 4.7% over previous year, versus the average London increase of circa 3.6%).

However, whilst registration applications have undoubtedly been simplified and aided by the 'gov.uk/register-to-vote' online registration portal that was introduced under Individual Electoral Registration (IER), a known side-effect of this application channel is the significant number of duplicate applications made. These duplicate applications cause a great deal of unnecessary administrative time and effort.

Further to this, as the deadline for registering in time for the election approaches, the high number of late applications made via the gov.uk route subsequently created a high number of contacts in the run up to and on the day of polling, enquiring as to whether their application has been successful (under IER all applications to join the register must be verified against DWP held data, or otherwise confirmed against additionally supplied documentary evidence). Currently, an applicant via the gov.uk portal receives an acknowledgement email from the site stating that the application has gone to a specified local authority, but does not explain that the success of the application is still subject to a central government verification process and may also yet require the applicant to provide further documentary evidence (potentially within a very short period of time). Whilst the vast majority of these enquiries were successfully resolved and it was clear that all processes utilised were statutorily correct, it will be worth reviewing whether any improvements to existing internal processes are possible and could be made ahead of future elections. It is considered that the Electoral Registration Officer and Head of Electoral Services will make representations to the Cabinet Office (most probably via the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators), regarding the need to clarify that processes are still outstanding in the acknowledgement emails that are sent to applicants from the gov.uk portal. There were also a significant number of proxy applications for this General Election, which despite following on from a trend seen at the EU Referendum (and attributed to a 'June election date' meaning that there is an increased number of electors 'away' on polling day), was up significantly even from those numbers. This caused significant numbers of queries and a lot of administrative time and again it will be worth reviewing this process to understand if the administration of these can be improved.

#### 4. Postal Voting, Polling and Turnout

The number of registered electors in Barnet opting to vote by post continues to increase and 48,828 of those eligible to vote at Parliamentary elections chose this voting method for this election. This represented 21.5% of the eligible electorate and is again a new record number (at the General Election in May 2015 -19.5% of the eligible electorate had a postal vote). A total of 39,849 postal ballot packs were returned by 10pm on polling day, giving a turnout from postal voters of 81.6%. Overall a total of 266 replacement postal vote packs were issued (equating to 0.54% of all postal vote packs) from NLBP and Hendon Town Hall for lost, spoilt or non-received postal vote packs.

On polling day, 120,800 electors cast their votes across Barnet's 155 polling stations at 93 locations, giving an in-person turnout of 67.8%. Anecdotal feedback from polling staff and election agents is that the process ran more smoothly in Barnet than has been the case over recent elections. Registers were complete at all polling stations, and the overall number of queries and complaints around postal votes and polling cards was lower than has been the case historically. Unfortunately there were a small number of issues reported with the behaviour of tellers on polling day that Presiding Officers and Polling Inspectors had to resolve. It will be worth reviewing

the communication, guidance and Returning Officer instructions given to Election Agents in this area, in order to ensure that such issues are not repeated at future elections.

Additionally, due to the late changes that had to be made to a small number of polling venues, it is anticipated that the Council's annual 'Interim Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places' (scheduled to be undertaken and then report to GFC this coming autumn/winter) may be more wide-ranging than has been the case in recent years

At 70.7%, overall turnout across Barnet was exactly 2% higher than that nationally (68.7%) and gives good assurance that there were no wide-spread issues that stopped eligible electors from either getting registered or casting their votes in the manner of their choosing. *At present figures for turnout in London as a whole are not yet available.*

#### 5. Counts and Declarations

The count process ran extremely smoothly, with all constituencies completing their initial counts just before 4am. Whilst this does not match some of the exceptionally fast counts seen in particular parts of the country, it compares favourably with the majority of other London boroughs. However, the results at this election mean that all three of Barnet's constituencies would reasonably now be labelled as 'marginal'. As a consequence the very close results in Hendon and Chipping Barnet in particular meant that Election Agent's requests that 'bundle-flick' rechecks of vote bundles be carried out were agreed by the ARO. This resulted in the declarations for these two constituencies being delayed until 5.15am and 5.40am respectively. Whilst it is felt that there are some further efficiency that can be found, these counts did represent a quicker process than has historically been seen in Barnet, but vitally retained the necessary high levels of transparency and accuracy to ensure confidence in the declared results.

#### 6. Next Steps

A full internal review of the planning and implementation of all activities for the conduct of the General Election on 8 June 2017 will be continue between now and the October GFC to further consider all of the matters outlined above, along with any other elements that the committee feels need to be considered. The 'Smith Review' (of Electoral Registration and Election Services) reported to GFC on 9 November 2016, commended as good practice Barnet's use of such post-election reviews, but these will now also be presented to GFC following each election in future. Although this election necessarily paused many of the planned activities to implement the complete suite of recommendations made by the Smith Review (and accepted in full by the Returning Officer), these will now be rescheduled with progress also being reported to GFC at the meeting in October 2017.