

**London Borough of Barnet**  
**Annual Electoral Services**  
**Overview Report**  
**September 2021**

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## Executive Summary

***‘This was one of the most complex sets of polls held in recent times, with the additional challenges presented by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Even with these challenging circumstances people had high levels of satisfaction with the process of registering to vote and voting, and were confident that they were well run.’*** - Electoral Commission (Report on the May 2021 Elections in England) 14 Sept 2021

The purpose of this Overview Report is to provide an update on the activities of Barnet’s Electoral Services Team throughout 2020 and 2021 (thus far) and to report on the delivery of the Mayor of London and London Assembly Member (GLA) Elections and the by elections in the Edgware ward and East Barnet ward that all took place on 6 May 2021.

As with all council services and other organisations across local and central government, the COVID19 pandemic caused significant and wide-ranging changes to the planned electoral activities and events (including the postponement of the GLA elections for a year from May 2020) and the way that Barnet’s Electoral Services had to operate and deliver their statutory functions. This report gives a high-level summary of the essential work that took place within Barnet’s Electoral Services team to maintain the Register of Electors to a high level of accuracy and completeness and the significant impact that the COVID19 pandemic had upon the preparations and delivery of the elections held on 6 May 2021.

As with previous Electoral Services reports, key lessons have been taken from the election ‘project’ so that they may be reviewed to inform and improve the planning and delivery of future elections in the borough.

As the Annual Electoral Registration Canvass is currently underway (in line with the new ‘Canvass Reform’ legislation<sup>1</sup> brought in by the Government in December 2019), this report provides key information based upon Barnet’s Register of Electors at the time of the GLA elections on 6 May 2021. Where information is provided on ‘current’ registration levels, it should be noted that these figures may be subject to significant change by the time of the annual publication of the Revised Register of Electors on 1 December 2021.

There were 270,895 electors on Barnet’s Register of Electors on 1 December 2020. However, it should be noted that, due to COVID19 restrictions, no personal visits took place to properties that were required to respond but had not, during the Annual Canvass period in 2020. Subsequently, high numbers of Registration Reviews<sup>2</sup> were conducted during January and February 2021 and the Household Notification Letter (HNL) activity that was conducted in February and March 2021 removed more electors than is typical for this activity.

Ahead of the elections on 6 May 2021 there were high ‘pre-election’ levels of activity from citizens registering to vote, but there was more activity than ever from electors changing their voting arrangements (predominantly from ‘in-person’ to ‘postal’). The number of electors on the register at the time of the elections on 6 May 2021 was 264,169 and on 1 September 2021, there were 265,270 electors registered. There are currently a high number of daily elector additions and deletions affecting this figure.

Despite the many necessary changes to the way in which polling, postal vote verification and the counts (and a myriad of other election activities) had to be planned and conducted, the elections

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<sup>1</sup> [The Representation of the People \(Annual Canvass\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2019](#)

<sup>2</sup> Registration Reviews are conducted when a single piece of ‘evidence’ has been received (in most cases, the law requires two) by Electoral Services to inform us that an elector has moved away or is no longer eligible to vote from an address.

held on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021 in Barnet are considered to have been successfully delivered. There was high turnout from voters, good levels of satisfaction from staff and high confidence in the processes and results was and continues to be expressed by electors, candidates, and other stakeholders. However, despite the successful delivery of this highly challenging set of elections, there were still several key lessons that can be taken forward to help inform the preparations for future elections.

Among these lessons are:

- that securing suitable venues for critical electoral activities is set to remain fragile and increasingly expensive - not only polling stations, but venues that can offer halls or areas that are large and secure enough for election preparations and for example, postal vote verification sessions etc.
- that the high volume of the 'late' surge of application and absent voting applications will continue to put enormous pressure upon the registration team within Electoral Services in the run up to future statutory elections
- that the management of postal vote verification sessions will require increasingly high numbers of staff, specialist equipment and knowledgeable management of the complex statutory processes as postal voting continues to grow (made even more difficult at the May '21 elections by the pandemic restrictions that were still in place)
- that there is a lack of resilience in the current Public Sector Network (PSN) secure IT connection that is required to download registration applications from Barnet residents from the Government's online registration portal

## 1. Key Activities of the Electoral Services Team in 2020/2021

The table below provides a high-level timetable of the key registration and election activities that were undertaken by Barnet Electoral Services since the publication of the Annual Register of Electors on 1 December 2020:

Period:	Description of Activities
January – March 2021	<p><b>Statutory refresh of Absent Vote Personal Identifiers</b> – 10,553 Letters and Reminders sent to electors with an absent vote in place for over 5 years. Absent Vote arrangements must be cancelled where new personal identifiers are <u>not</u> provided.</p> <p><b>Registration Reviews for incomplete elector removals</b> – Registration Review letters sent to 9,589 registered electors, giving a time-limited window to respond (as single piece of evidence received that the elector is no longer eligible to vote from said address since 1 Sept '20)</p>
January – May 2021	<p><b>Planning, preparation and delivery of the Mayor of London and London Assembly elections (as well as two Local Government by-elections) on 6 May 2021</b> – The challenges of delivering key elections during the pandemic were considerable and detail is provided later in the report.</p> <p><i>In summary, turnout in Barnet was 44.3% (vs 42.9% across London) and means that 116,000 electors voted (Mayoral Contest figures).</i></p>
February – March 2021	<p><b>Household Notification Letter sent to all residential properties</b> – HNL mailed out to over 163,000 properties and individual processing of all subsequent registration amendments and requests.</p> <p><i>A flyer was included with the HNL to inform electors that polling stations would be safe, but that queues were likely. It also encouraged electors to apply for a postal vote – the aim was to reduce pressure on polling stations and to ensure electors that might have reservations about voting in-person during the pandemic were still able to vote.</i></p>
March – May 2021	<p><b>Registration, postal and proxy vote applications and registration processes for elections on 6 May 2021</b> – between 4 Feb (when the HNLs were despatched) and 19/20 April (deadline to register/apply for a PV), Barnet's Electoral Services received 11,285 applications to register (approx. a third were duplicates) to vote and removed almost 5,000 electors. Within the same period, over 12,000 Postal and Proxy voting applications were made – with 10,823 new postal and only 242 new proxy votes put in place.</p>
June – July 2021	<p><b>Registration processes and delivery of the West Finchley Area Neighbourhood Planning Referendum on 9 July 2021</b> – the first time a Neighbourhood Planning Referendum has been held in Barnet.</p>
July – Sept 2021	<p><b>Planning and commencement of the Annual Household Canvass</b> (2<sup>nd</sup> under new 'Canvass Reform' legislation) – a full data-matching exercise between Barnet's full electoral register and central government records (in June 2021) gave Barnet a healthy 71% match score. Following this (and local data matching with Barnet's own Council Tax records) approx. 66,000 Household Enquiry Forms ('CCBs') were sent out in August to households across Barnet from which a <b>response is required by law</b>. Shortly, a further 93,000 Household Enquiry Forms ('CCAs') will be sent to those households where all elector data was matched and a <b>response is only required if there are changes</b> that we need to be informed about.</p>

Whilst the table above details the priorities of Electoral Services during the periods outlined, regular day to day activities and processes have continued to be delivered for individual citizens and residents. These processes are of considerable importance to the individuals involved, especially as in many circumstances it has a bearing on their credit rating, pension or tenancy. Taking into account the figures above, there have been over 94,000 amendments to the Register of Electors since 1 December 2020.

As much of the work of Electoral Services continues (by law) to offer postal and in-person processes to residents and electors, officers from the team have worked a hybrid model of in-person and remote working to ensure that there is somebody in the Council office every working day (whenever the Government’s pandemic restrictions have allowed).

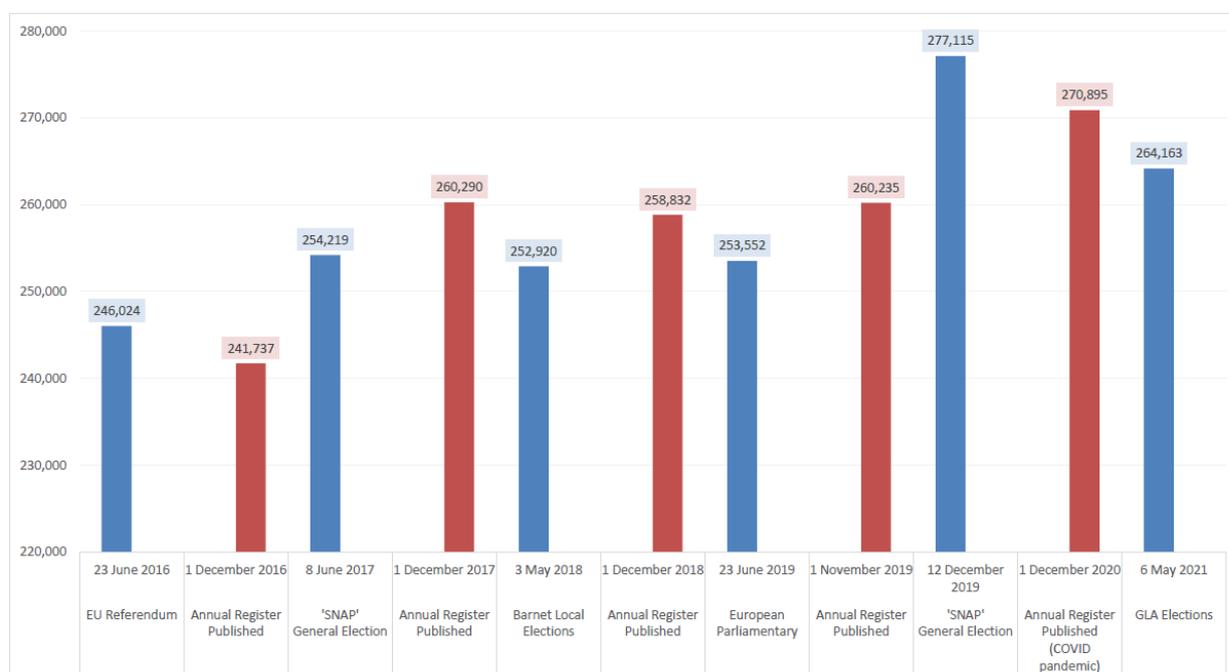
## 2. Analysis of Barnet’s Register of Electors

As has been acknowledged by the Electoral Commission; public interest in the UK’s major electoral events, combined with an accessible online registration process, increasingly drives high volumes of registration applications to occur just before elections. It has been true for a long time that (high-profile) elections drive people to register, whilst the Annual Canvass is better at removing people (those no longer eligible at addresses) from the register.

The graph below illustrates the movements of Barnet’s Register of Electors, based upon milestone dates, over the past five years.

### Full Register totals at Elections and Annual Publication 2016 to 2021

This graph (shown full size at Appendix A) shows the total number of registered electors at the annual date of publication of the Full Register of Electors and at last ‘Notice of Alteration’ before borough-wide elections.



## 2.1 Snapshot statistics from Barnet's Electoral Register

As the Annual Canvass is currently in progress, the statistics provided below are subject to considerable change before the formal publication of the Annual Register of Electors (due on 1 December 2021).

- The number of electors on the register at the time of the elections on 6 May 2021 was 264,169 and on 1 September 2021, there were 265,270 electors registered.
- 1,409 eligible 16- and 17-year-olds ('attainers') are currently registered across Barnet and will be able to vote as soon as they are 18 - *figure was 1,517 on 1 December 2020 published register.*
- 32,371 EU nationals are currently registered to vote in Barnet – *33,152 on 1 December 2020.*
- 58,003 electors in Barnet currently have a postal vote and 1,165 have a proxy vote. The rise in postal voters over 2020 was driven by the May 2021 election (although many electors also set up a temporary postal vote to cover just one election) – *1 December 2020 figures: Postal Voters = 52,354 and Proxy Voters = 1,355.*
- 191,122 electors (72%) are 'Opted Out' of appearing on the Open Register (the version of the register that can legally be purchased by anyone). This figure continues to grow the vast majority of electors now register online – *71% on 1 December 2020*
- 1,234 Overseas Electors registered in Barnet. As overseas electors must re-register each year and cannot vote in local elections, many 'fall off' the register between national elections – *2,417 on 1 December 2020.*

### **3. Delivery of the Mayor of London and London Assembly (and two Local Government by elections) on 6 May 2021**

On 6 February 2020, the Government postponed all elections scheduled in May 2020 for one year, due to the global COVID19 pandemic. The Mayor of London and London Assembly (GLA) elections were therefore held on Thursday 6 May 2021. In Barnet there were also two Local Government by-elections (each to elect one councillor) on this date, one in Edgware ward and one in East Barnet ward.

The GLA elections are amongst the most complex sets of polls that are held in the UK and for the elections held on 6 May 2021, the preparation and delivery of these polls took place under the extreme and wide-ranging challenges presented by the ongoing Covid19 pandemic.

#### **3.1 The Election Project's objectives:**

The key objectives for any statutory election or referendum held within the borough are broadly similar and are predominantly set by relevant legislation, with further enhancement based upon the guidance and performance standards issued by the Electoral Commission.

Barnet has for several years captured these as follows:

- All eligible electors can vote, using their preferred voting method and know that their vote will be counted in the way that they intended.
- All statutory and necessary electoral processes are conducted in a consistent, professional and transparent manner, complying with legislation and statutory deadlines and take heed of relevant Electoral Commission guidance.
- The elections and subsequent results are delivered through processes that are secure and transparent and accepted as such by voters, candidates, staff and observers.
- The elections are implemented utilising an effective project management approach, ensuring that all necessary stakeholders within the organisation are effectively communicated with and have confidence in the progress of the project's activities.
- All processes are carried out consistently and efficiently and in such a way as to offer best possible value and effective use of public money.

For the elections, being delivered in May 2021 against the backdrop of the Covid19 pandemic (and changing statutory Covid restrictions and other related health and safety guidance), an additional objective was also adhered to throughout the delivery of the project:

- All electors, staff, candidates, agents and observers must have confidence that the election venues where they vote, observe or participate in election activities are set-up, managed and maintained as 'Covid-secure' environments, with appropriate equipment, PPE and processes to minimise the potential spread of coronavirus.

#### **3.2 Election Project methodology:**

Following the Parliamentary General Election in December 2019, preparations had immediately commenced for the GLA elections that were then still scheduled to take place in May 2020.

However, it was very soon after this that news of the Covid19 global pandemic started to emerge and of course, quickly grew. On 13 March 2020 the Government, as was widely expected at that time, announced that all UK elections scheduled for May 2020 were to be postponed for one year

until 6 May 2022. Shortly after the first lockdown began on 23 March 2020, the whole Electoral Services team was re-deployed to support the council's response to the pandemic and worked on the COVID Community Help Hub.

From the end of June 2020, Barnet's Head of Electoral Services was part of a London working group of election administrators<sup>3</sup>, which included the GLA's Elections Project Manager. The group was tasked with assessing every element of delivering the May 2021 elections, creating a comprehensive risk assessment, to identify relevant mitigations and to propose changes to processes where necessary.

Barnet's Elections Project Team, led by the Head of Electoral Services and Head of Assurance and Business Development re-commenced with full planning in September 2020 with immediate priority given to creating a full project plan and risk register. This work made it clear that detailed assessments would be required of all polling and other election venues, as well as reviewing the steps and processes followed to deliver the statutory activities of the May 2021 elections.

Despite the changing restrictions in place as the UK went through different stages of lockdown and associated restrictions, this work informed the detailed plans that were being developed for staffing, polling and other election processes. Due to the large and growing number of electors in Barnet that have a postal vote, a separate piece of work was initiated early on to completely review and redesign the way in which Barnet's Postal Vote Verification processes are carried out.

The Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) reconvened the Elections Project Board on 9 December 2020 which met every month until March 2021 and then fortnightly until the last two weeks before the election when it met each week. This ensured full oversight of the project's progress and created resilience in case of the loss of any key stakeholder, as knowledge of ongoing activities and issues was appropriately shared and cleared. Barnet's Head of Health and Safety was added to the Elections Project Board to ensure that there was good oversight and support for the essential work to ensure good Covid-secure preparations were in place throughout.

In addition, the CRO met with the Borough Returning Officer (BRO) from Camden, Jenny Rowlands – London Borough of Camden's Chief Executive, along with key project board members from both Barnet and Camden every four to six weeks throughout the project.

In addition to these meetings, The Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO), Mary Harpley – GLA's Chief Executive, held London-wide CRO and BRO meetings approx. every six weeks, to discuss guidance and to issue a limited set of directions to London's CROs to ensure consistency of approach and delivery across some aspects of the election.

Barnet's Head of Electoral Services and Head of Assurance and Business Development attended further meetings on an ad-hoc basis with the GLA's elections team and other London Election Managers and also held weekly meetings with Camden's Electoral Services manager.

Throughout the delivery of the election, Electoral Services was supplemented with additional staff resource. Whilst this larger cohort of staff worked together across the entire range of activities, it was broadly divided into two teams. The 'Project' team planned, prepared and managed all resources (staff, venues, equipment etc.) and processes that were specifically required to deliver the various election activities, the 'Registration' team managed and delivered the heavily increased workload in dealing with applications to register to vote and for postal and proxy voting arrangements. The Registration team also liaised directly with the Call Centre,

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<sup>3</sup> This working group comprised seven Electoral Service Heads of Service from across London and was initiated by the London Branch of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA)

ensured that the additional Electoral Register updates (specific to the election timetable) were published and prepared the polling station registers.

Amongst the most critical project activities undertaken were:

- Securely managing the registration surge, as outlined by the huge quantity of registration activities within the table at section 2 above (in particular the exceptionally high number of postal vote applications).
- Venue, bookings and preparation including assessment visits to 160 polling stations across 96 polling places (inc. 4 at 'temporary offices', 4 in temporary marquees and 31 school sites), the postal vote verification and ballot box preparation venues at the RAF museum in Colindale and the by election count and GLA E-count venue at Alexandra Palace.
- Recruitment and training (including additional training specific to health and safety processes required due to the pandemic) of over 750 elections staff required for polling, postal vote sessions, elections count, venue preparation and security etc.
- Set up (including training for all Call Agents) and oversight of the Elections Call Centre, managed by CSG and hosted at their Coventry offices.
- Ensuring that the candidate nominations process was conducted in compliance with all relevant electoral legislation, the elections timetable and the new temporary 'covid' legislation.
- Whole-scale re-design and delivery of the Postal Vote Verification processes, in order that they could be Covid-secure, whilst remaining robust, statutorily compliant, and also transparent and observable.
- Working in close liaison with the GLA and the London Borough of Camden's Returning Officer and Elections team, to plan and deliver the election e-count (and manual count for By Elections) and declarations of results at Alexandra Palace, which took place on Saturday 8 May 2021.
- Working with GLA, PHE and Health and Safety colleagues to create and revise Covid-secure processes (including the procurement of PPE equipment and materials) to be used at election preparation, polling, and count venues

All of this work included working closely with the London Borough of Camden's Borough Returning Officer and her Elections team at and also the Greater London Returning Officer's Team elections project at the GLA.

### **3.3 Assessment of Election Project's Performance:**

Based upon the objectives set out at 3.1 above, the project to deliver the elections on 6 May 2021 is assessed as having been highly successful.

Key information leading to this assessment includes the following:

- Despite Covid19 pandemic and the various restrictions that were necessary across all electoral processes, turnout across Barnet for the London Mayoral elections on 6 May 2021 was healthy at 44.3%. This compares favourably with London as a whole, where turnout was 42.9%.
- For the Mayor of London election, 115,867 electors cast their votes. Of this figure 75,762 electors voted 'in-person' (37.5% turnout) and 40,105 voted by post (67.5% turnout).

- For the two by elections turnout was even stronger, with turnout in the Edgware by election at 44.2% and in the East Barnet by election at 48.5%.
- Despite handling over 7,000 emails and over 4,500 telephone enquiries during the election period, the number of complaints received was extremely small. In total, just 23 contacts were received that specifically alleged; poor or slow service, incorrect information provided, non-receipt of forms or related to polling stations<sup>4</sup>. All were resolved quickly and only one complaint<sup>5</sup> progressed to being a formal complaint.
- The e-count for the Mayor of London and London Assembly elections and the two by election counts, that all took place on Saturday 8 May 2021 at Alexandra Palace, progressed efficiently and calmly through to their respective declarations.
- All Candidates, Election Agents and other observers in attendance at the election counts expressed their satisfaction with the effectiveness and transparency of the processes used. Declarations of results were made at 1.50pm for Edgware ward, 2.20pm for East Barnet Ward (both by election counts had started at 10am) and for the Barnet and Camden London Assembly member at 5.30pm (the e-count started at 8am).

### **3.4 Lessons Learned and Future Recommendations:**

Barnet's Electoral Services have conducted reviews of all borough-wide elections since the GLA elections in May 2012. The recommendations from each of these reviews are then carried forward and be actioned or revisited to inform the work to plan and prepare for following elections.

Following the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE) statutory review of Barnet that completed in January 2020, the May 2022 elections in Barnet will elect councillors to Barnet's new set of 24 Wards. Due to this, no recommendations in relation to polling arrangements are being put forward in this report – as they are fully reviewed and detailed proposals resulting from that separate project work are being put forward in a separate report to this committee.

The key learning and recommendations from this Election Project are listed below. Whilst considering the specific requirements that were necessitated by the Covid19 pandemic, all the action points are designed to improve good practice at future scheduled elections.

The recommendations presented in this report are all based upon lessons which are specific and localised to Barnet. Both the Electoral Commission (link: [Report on the May 2021 elections in England](#)) and the Association of Electoral Administrators (link: [AEA-2021-Post-Polls-Review.pdf](#)) have produced national reviews of the elections held in May 2021 and Barnet's Head of Electoral Services has contributed via surveys and submissions to each of these. These national reviews make recommendations linked to legislation (especially statutory election timetables), funding for elections, national public health guidance and practice and other elements that Barnet's ERO/RO or CGP committee cannot affect or influence at a local level.

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<sup>4</sup> Six email and three telephone complaints were received specifically in relation to the incorrect information sent to electors in the HSB polling district stating that their polling station had been moved to 2 Bristol Avenue (this information was meant for electors in HSD).

<sup>5</sup> The one formal complaint was related to Barnet's IT data handling policies, as staff were prohibited from opening a specific type of email attachment that an elector had sent in.

The next scheduled borough-wide elections in Barnet are the Local Government elections on 5 May 2022 and at time of writing, it cannot confidently be predicted whether any ongoing restrictions might still be officially in place (or brought back), preferred or desired or if future elections will be able to largely revert to pre-pandemic arrangements.

#### **3.4.1 Electoral Registration Staffing**

It is essential Electoral Services has additional trained and capable staff available to effectively process the high level of registration activity that is typical within the short period created by statutory election timetables. As this level of ERO resource is not needed across most of the year, this is best achieved by either bringing in agency staff (sufficiently early enough that they can be trained and become competent ahead of the election period) or by utilising pre-trained and experienced staff from across other teams in the council. Both approaches have worked individually and in combination at elections over recent years, but this approach places a high burden on the Assurance Directorate, where most existing 'electorally pre-trained' staff have their substantive roles. There is also a risk that relying on a small number of existing staff or newly recruited agency staff creates a lack of resilience should they not be available or willing to work on future elections (as legislative deadlines approach, extended working hours become inevitable at times).

- 1) It is recommended that the Head of Electoral Services and Executive Director of Assurance review other establishment models – perhaps having additional Electoral Services Officers that can be seconded to work with and support other teams and services outside of election periods?

#### **3.4.2 Postal Vote Verification (PVV)**

When the final Notice of Alteration (NOA) for the elections on 6 May 2021 was published (on 28 April 2021), the number of Postal Voters in Barnet had reached a record high of 61,362 (this figure included Overseas Electors that were not eligible to vote on 6 May 2021). Although this figure has fallen since as some temporary Postal Votes have been cancelled, it is expected that over 20% of voters in Barnet will continue to use a Postal Vote for future elections. Evidence from recent elections and across London shows that this is certain to be the case even as Barnet's electorate grows in coming years.

The Halton Gallery at the RAF Museum (or a venue of similar size) will continue to be required for PVV sessions at future borough-wide elections. In addition, many of the processes changes that were designed and brought in for the PVV sessions (mainly due to increased volumes, but also to allow for staff and observer social distancing to be observed) for the elections on 6 May 2021 should be retained, whether any pandemic restrictions are in place during future election periods or not, as they allowed for greater volumes of Postal Votes to be verified and prepared for the count.

- 2) It is recommended that an early booking is made for the Halton Gallery, to secure it's availability for the required period for the May '22 elections. In addition, the PVV processes in place at the May '21 elections should be reviewed (and adapted as required) ahead of the May '22 elections and that PVV staff recruitment is commenced early to ensure sufficient numbers and availability is confirmed.

#### **3.4.3 Election Preparation and Count Venues**

For the elections in May 2021, it was necessary to introduce social-distancing and the use of PPE, into what are typically very busy and quite crowded spaces where key electoral activities take place. As Barnet's electorate is expected to grow quickly over coming years and there remains a

possibility that social-distancing and PPE may still be required or desirable, it is important that Electoral Services are able to identify and secure the use of large election venues.

To this end:

It is important that the Dermot Boyle Wing at the RAF Museum (or an equally large and accessible venue) continues to be available for election preparation activities and that the Olympic Bar at StoneX Stadium is available for future borough-wide election counts (this is a minimum requirement – more space may in fact be preferable for May 2022 given that there will now be 24 ward election counts to complete).

- 3) It is recommended that an early booking is made for the Dermot Boyle Wing at the RAF Museum, to secure it's availability for the required period for the May '22 elections.
- 4) It is recommended that contact is made immediately with Saracens to ensure that the Olympic Bar at StoneX Stadium is secured for the May '22 election counts.
- 5) It is recommended that the RO start considerations as to the date, timings and layout options that are available for the local election counts following polling on 5 May 2022. The RO will need to evaluate the options available and make decisions as early as possible to facilitate the planning and stakeholder communication that will be directly affected by these decisions.

#### **3.4.4 Election Proofing Process**

For a variety of reasons, all specifically related to the COVID19 pandemic, a total of 14 polling places were changed shortly before poll cards were despatched to electors. Although all polling cards issued to electors across the borough were effectively proofed and contained the correct data, a decision was taken to send an additional information letter to those electors that were going to a different polling place than that used at previous elections.

One of the polling places that was changed was located within the HSD polling district, but this letter was incorrectly sent to electors in the HSB polling district. This error was not identified until polling day when some electors turned up at the wrong polling place - the letter directed them to the Council Offices at 2 Bristol Avenue, when they actually needed to attend the Grahame Park Community Centre to vote. Fortunately, the impact was relatively minor, as these two polling places are less than 500 metres apart and additional staff and signage was provided very early in the day to ensure that electors were aware and did not unnecessarily queue to vote at the wrong polling place. However, there was some inconvenience caused to approx. 150 electors<sup>6</sup>

Despite all usual proofing processes having been followed for the additional letters, the data had to be extracted from the Elections Management System, so that the letters could be created and mail-merged for despatch external to the system (due to the bespoke nature of this communication). Because of this, the proofing processes used by three separate officers did not pick up that HSB data had been extracted and not HSD.

- 6) It is recommended that the documented Electoral Services proofing processes be reviewed to ensure that they include specific steps for bespoke or one-off communications to ensure that they are fit-for-purpose and are indeed being sent to the intended recipients.

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<sup>6</sup> Information on the number of electors known to have attended the wrong polling place (142) was collated by the hour in the polling station at 2 Bristol Avenue.

- 7) It is recommended that this decision to send an additional and discretionary communication to electors during an election period is carefully reviewed (and again before any similar decision is taken), as the impact was shown to be minimal – it is evident from this incident that the poll cards had already been wholly effective in letting electors know where they needed to vote.

### **3.4.5 Elections Management System (PSN)**

On Friday 9 April 2021, Electoral Services officers were unable to download and action that day's online applications to register to vote (made by residents via [www.register-to-vote.gov.uk](http://www.register-to-vote.gov.uk)) due to an error message occurring within the Electoral Management System. This was immediately flagged with the supplier, who ran some checks and said that the issue must be either at the Barnet or Cabinet Office end of the PSN connection to the portal, as the software system was operating normally. The issue was escalated and IT support from both Barnet and the Cabinet Office said that they could see no issues at their respective end, but that they could see that downloads were failing for some reason.

Despite various checks, the issue was not resolved for several days until a third-party supplier that supports the PSN identified that they had applied an update that had blocked Barnet's connectivity to the registration portal. At the point that the connection was restored, just under 2,000 applications to register to vote that had backed up had to be processed. This incident, as well as causing immense stress to the Electoral Registration team due to the 19 April '21 deadline for registering in time for the election, also highlighted key fragility within the PSN that online registrations currently rely upon.

The PSN is already earmarked for obsolescence within a few years and the Cabinet Office is already beginning to transfer some local authority Electoral Registration systems to an alternative and secure 'over-internet' download connection. Barnet's current EMS can be transferred to the new 'over-internet' connection, but this will incur additional costs of c. £5k per annum.

Following the announcement of the first lockdown and the postponement of the May 2020 elections to May 2021, an emergency two-year extension to the contract with the current EMS supplier was agreed and the planned 2021 procurement activity for a further four- or five-year contract was arranged to take place in 2023 (the next year free from 'scheduled' elections). Some EMS suppliers (including Barnet's current supplier) are now offering 'hosted' solutions that will reduce some of the local IT management dependencies and connectivity issues further (as officers can access via online secure processes and will not be dependent upon Barnet network or VPN etc.).

- 8) It is recommended that the Head of Electoral Services prioritises the move of the current EMS to 'over-internet' secure connection as soon as possible.
- 9) It is recommended that initial information is sourced from EMS suppliers so that early assessments can be made on the resilience of Hosted EMS offerings. In addition, Barnet's Commercial team should be tasked with initiating discussions with Barnet's IT supplier on releasing costs from the overarching IT contract related to the costs of hosting and servicing the current EMS on their servers.

## 4. Summary and Upcoming Priorities for Electoral Services

Barnet's Electoral Services team is currently engaged in delivering the 2021 Annual Electoral Registration Canvass. The various activities that make up the annual canvass will continue right up to the publication of the next Revised Register of Electors on 1 December 2021.

In addition, the project to ensure that the new warding arrangements are successfully implemented across the council is also currently underway. Of utmost importance within this project is the delivery of the Local Elections in Barnet across the new 24 wards on 5 May 2022. For this, Electoral Services is responsible for delivering the new polling arrangements, so a much work has and continues to go into assessing polling places, analysing elector convenience and accessibility to these places, and generating new polling districts to optimally serve all electors within each ward. A statutory public consultation on the proposed new polling arrangements must also be conducted and this is scheduled to take place from mid-October for six weeks.

In January, the Absent Vote Refresh must commence, whereby any elector that has had a permanent absent voting arrangement in place for over five years must provide new copies of their personal identifiers.

In February or March, an additional full re-publishing of the register will take place, necessary to renumber electors to the new wards and their polling districts. Following this, Electoral Services will again conduct a full 'Household Notification Letter' (HNL) campaign, as in the previous five years. During this period, to supplement the daily and weekly processes that check for duplicate applications to join the electoral register, a full review is undertaken to identify and remove any duplicates that may occur (e.g. where different permutations of surname and forename, or use of middle names or initials may have been previously missed).

Even before full approval of the new the polling arrangements, the project to deliver May '22 elections will have commenced (officially from early December '21, although many preparatory activities will start prior to that). As well as the huge range of activities that go into delivering a high-profile borough-wide election, from March '22 (typically kicked off by the despatch of polling cards) through to May '22 will of course be an extremely busy time for Electoral Registration and Postal Voting applications.

Following the delivery of the elections in May, in June '22 it will again be time for the data matching exercise that now precedes the start of the annual Household Canvass that will run from July to December.

# Appendix A

