

Capacity and resilience workshop

Information for attendees

What do I need to do?

We are providing advance information for attendees as part of a workshop session on Capacity and resilience.

We ask you to read the information in advance and come open and prepared with thoughts, ideas and experiences to allow participants to get the most out of the session.

We welcome all contributions and inputs at all levels of the community in both electoral registration and electoral administration.

Purpose

The workshop will provide a forum for:

- consideration of the challenges facing our electoral community at a strategic level
- establishing actions we can implement individually and collectively
- initiating conversations, developing ideas and fostering collaboration to further build resilience and capacity and reducing risk to delivery.

Format

Attendees will be split into four groups. We have 4 topics to discuss being whole organisation approach, supplier capacity and resilience, succession and experience, and staffing.

We will set the context and ask questions, asking people to share their thoughts, experiences, and possible solutions and ideas. **We do not expect you to be able to answer all these questions but pose them to encourage discussion and debate.**

There will no centralised feedback at the event, a paper will follow, providing a summary of the core themes discussed, ideas for development and possible solutions and a reference in your development/review of approach in service delivery.

Context

Building capacity and embedding resilience form part of the backbone in successful planning, management and delivery of electoral services. Elections are critical, non-fail, highly scrutinised and emotive events, with polling day being the embodiment of the democratic process.

Electoral services form just one part of the important range of functions that local authorities deliver. Many of the issues that exist around capacity and resilience have been persistent for some time and continue to evolve. The layering of the challenges created by the Elections Act 2022, constituency boundary changes and the contraction of resources in local government combine to intensify these issues.

In the lead-up to a UK Parliamentary general election the lack of a fixed date presents a series of challenges for our planning and preparation; securing of resources and staff, refining new processes, booking of polling places, count venue availability, staffing and particularly public awareness activity which will need to be extensive for the forthcoming election.

Topic 1 – Whole organisational approach

There has been long seated feedback and commentary on the capacity of councils and Valuation Joint Boards (VJBs) to continue to deliver electoral services at critical points of the election timetable.

In Scotland there is recognition of the separate entities of the ERO and RO and the variance in organisation of electoral services, which need to dovetail successfully and effectively in delivery.

A 'whole organisation' approach to supporting elections helps ensure capacity and capability is available and the right people and expertise within the organisation(s) can be drawn in to lead on key elements and deliver on the diversity and scale of the work involved. Yet organisations have increasingly limited resources, capacity and staff.

The frequency and scale of elections mean these events should be regular part of ongoing business drawing on expertise in a variety of departments rather than standalone events.

Questions:

Q1 – What new approaches could the council / ERO undertake to release resources / create capacity prior to an election?

Q2 – Can you share thoughts or experiences in how the Electoral registration element in their area informs and is integrated into the wider project plan for election delivery?

Q3 – Does anyone have any specific examples of whole organisation delivery successes brought about by a change of approach / buy-in to the registration and election process?

Topic 2 – Supplier capacity and resilience

In the delivery of our services, we outsource delivery of some specialist functions to external suppliers but the personal responsibility and accountability rests with the Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officer. With this in mind, it is important to understand from suppliers whether there is more that can be done to recognise the potential points of failure and how risks can be mitigated.

Some issues include:

- Election Management System (EMS) suppliers are integral to registration and elections delivery, yet the market is limited and performance can vary. The speed and effectiveness of implementing legislative and bedding in new processes to the systems can compound risk.
- the printers' ability to deliver material is fundamental to elections, and near-misses illustrate how stretched capacity is.
- an unscheduled general election will mean demand for paper for voter facing materials will be at a premium at very short notice, putting print delivery at risk.

Questions:

Q1 – How can you measure / be reassured about their key suppliers' capacity management and their ability to meet your contractual demands during poll?

Q2 – In the event of supplier failure, has anyone documented / delivered a 'Plan B' and the communication prompting that process?

If not, how would you approach an EMS / large scale print failure in your contingency planning?

Q3 - Has anyone undertaken an exercise to identify alternative supply or explore and test documented contingency, its rigour and agility?

Topic 3 – Succession and experience

In this topic we are going to think about permanent staff and core election team staff issues, particularly surrounding loss of experience, resilience and succession planning.

Whilst it is natural that staff come and go from the profession or organisation the turnover of experienced staff at both senior and administrative levels in the elections sector since 2019 is significant.

The changes to work-life during the pandemic and the contraction of organisations in the face of limited resources is telling with the loss of valued and experienced staff. Against a backdrop of complex electoral law, the frequent layering of new processes alongside boundary changes all add to the challenge in retention and development of core staff.

Questions:

Q1 – Has any organisation here been able to redesign their approach to service delivery - implementing changes to staff role or complement and increasing resilience and capacity?

Q2 - EC performance standards for ROs highlight regular monitoring of succession planning in an electoral service – is anyone able to share their approach in planning succession for their team or implemented changes to manage succession in RO or ERO teams?

Topic 4 –Staffing

Increasingly a major challenge for elections centres around staffing both at the core and in recruiting temporary staff. This is not an isolated issue and has been seen to some effect across the UK in both councils and EROs with a lack of available staff to service canvass, poll, counts and postal vote verification.

In May 2023, the AEA put out a call for councils in a non-election year to support those councils that had local government elections in England. Staff resources in some places were able to move across boundaries to support one another. This facility won't be available during the general election as all ROs/ EROs / administrators prepare to deliver this nationwide event.

Issues identified include:

- an aging core workforce where temporary staff are often older/retired, and some are not open to the magnitude of change / challenge they might face at polls
- experienced staff are leaving the sector / staff numbers within councils decreased >25% in the last decade resulting in reduced capacity
- requests to other public sector organisations for assistance for staffing for polling day is generally not supported
- some areas of the country don't have wider civil service agencies based in their area so don't have a wider resource to call on
- level of fee paid is an issue, taking account where fee levels set by central government
- how to target those who don't normally engage with what is already on offer

Questions:

Q1 – Is anyone able to share their organisation's approach where you may have had less of an issue in attracting / retaining staff?

Q2 – Does anyone have arrangements in place with their temporary staff to allow them to share their data with the ERO or RO to staff canvass or polls in a reciprocal way?

Q3 – Does any organisation here include a requirement in staff contracts to be prepared to support elections / polling day as a part of all job descriptions?