

Information Bulletin: November 2011

In this Bulletin

Welcome from the new Convener

The role of the Board: coordination, support and best practice

What is coming

Looking back to 2011

Looking forward to 2012

Timetable

Timing of the count

Update from Mary Pitcaithly Convener of the Electoral Management Board

This is the first bulletin that I can write as newly appointed Convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland.

Following an application process and interview, I have now been appointed by Ministers. I am excited by this new post and by the prospect of leading the electoral community in Scotland in the coming years, ensuring that all we do is focussed on the voter, putting them first in all our activity.

The Board consists of 5 Returning Officers (or Depute Returning Officers) and 3 Electoral Registration Officers. Advisors from the Scottish Government, Scotland Office, the Electoral Commission and COSLA also attend meetings.

Coordination, Support and Best Practice

The Act defines the role of the Board as “.. *co-ordinating the administration of local government elections in Scotland.*”, and further explains that in terms of

- *assisting local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions*

in relation to local government elections, and

- *promoting best practice in local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise).*

Those key areas of **coordination, assistance/support and the promotion of best practice** will shape my approach to the role of Convener as they did the work of the interim Board over the past three years.

Obviously individual Returning Officers are personally accountable for the conduct of the election in their own area, but I have no doubt that politicians, the media and the voter will look to the Board to provide leadership nationally and to take the blame for any major problems.

The voter is the priority in all this. The Board is currently finalising its work plan for the coming months to ensure that we work closely with Election Teams across the country offering you clear support, guidance and direction to achieve these aims.

What you can expect from the Board in the coming year

This work plan will include:

- Regular communication with Returning Officers and their teams
- Directions where appropriate, perhaps around Count Timing
- Guidance on timetable issues, for example with respect to poll cards and postal vote dispatch

- Guidance on process matters such as recounts, adjudication of doubtful votes and signature checking
- Liaison with suppliers and partners such as Royal Mail and ACPOS
- An EMB website

Review of 5 May 2011 Electoral Events

The Scottish Parliamentary Elections and the UK Referendum held together on 5 May 2011 brought many challenges and were perhaps the most complex polls that we have had to manage.

I am sure that you have all completed your own reviews of your planning and delivery of those events, identifying lessons to be incorporated into your project plans and risk registers for 2012 and other elections and referendums in the future. Indeed, this will be something that the Electoral Commission will be raising with each RO as part of their Performance Monitoring in the next few weeks.

The Electoral Commission have published reviews of both, which are available on their website. Their review of the Scottish Parliamentary election highlights the work of the Board and commits to "*seek to support it as it develops into the national focal point for the administration of elections.*" Similarly, I look forward to leading our community in our work with the Electoral Commission.

Looking forward to 2012

While May 2011 fades into memory, we need now to apply its experience to our planning for 3 May 2012.

E-counting

The E-counting Project Board met last month and formally signed off the testing stages of the project. In essence, the core system has now been locked down, subject to one minor modification to one of the system reports.

A number of technical reports were issued by the Scottish Government at that time.

E-counting - User Agreements

While there is an overall national framework agreement that the Scottish Government has awarded to Logica, each local authority has an individual User Agreements for the system.

At the point of writing this update, almost all 32 User Agreements have now been signed.

There are a number of elements to the agreement of which you need to be aware in your planning for next year. These include:

Total ballot papers, including postals and tendered, are estimated on 2010 electoral register figures – not the current electoral roll – you can of course clarify these figures closer to the election.

Racking and ballot paper trays will not be supplied by the Contractor and are the responsibility of the User

The payment schedule sees the initial payment for the system being made in December 2011; we will each need to ensure that there are funds in place for this.

All this emphasises that planning for next year needs to be started now, particularly the logistics, layout and accommodation for your count.

With regard to the financing of the system, at my request the Scottish Government issued a letter of clarification, dated 26 October, explaining that they will cover the costs of the specified set-up for each authority, exclusive of the costs of ballot papers.

The Election Detailed Specification – in effect a step by step implementation plan - will be developed over the next few months by Logica working closely with the E-counting User Group to refine the various processes.

Training

There will be role specific training for all count staff which is currently scheduled for March 2012. The exact locations for the training has not been finalised. Online training material will also be available shortly.

However, you should be aware that the eCounting equipment and sample ballot papers are still in Pentland House in Edinburgh. Should you wish to spend some time there with your count teams to become more familiar with the system ahead of the formal training, please contact your Logica Project Manager. I would certainly encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity if you can.

3 May 2012 Election Timetable

As I noted above a key responsibility of the Board is to coordinate these elections and I see appropriate consistency in the conduct of next year's elections as fundamental to that. The Board and the Electoral Commission will agree a draft timetable on the basis of the final Order

In addition to the statutory timetable, the Board will encourage all ROs and EROs to aim for a national uniform date for the dispatch of poll cards and postal votes. I expect all postal votes to be dispatched by **23 April** 2012 and all poll cards should be issued by **2 April**.

Postal Vote Printing Issues

Returning Officers will need to discuss postal vote dispatch issues in detail with both Logica, who are printing all ballot papers, and with the printers who are supplying your mailers, to ensure that the material can be compiled accurately and in good time. You will also need to instruct Logica of the location to which the postal ballot papers should be delivered for them to be put into the mailers. I already circulated an email stressing the importance of this.

Nomination Period

I am also recommending that Returning Officers publish the notice of election as early as possible – on **13 March 2012** - to ensure that the nomination period can be maximised, allowing **nominations from 14 to 29 March**.

Pre-election Period

Another area of coordination that the Board wishes to promote is with respect to the “Pre-Election Period”.

At a recent meeting of the National Communications Advisory Board there was a clear desire on the part of the Councils in attendance that we should pursue some measure of consistency for the 2012 elections, not least the date on which it comes into force. The Board strongly supports this position.

Stewart Argo from City of Edinburgh Council will lead on this, with support from colleagues in Falkirk.

If the Notice of Election is published on **13 March** the Pre-Election Period would commence at that date.

AVI Checking – Refresher Training for DROs

Following this year's electoral events a number of ROs and DROs contacted the Board to raise concerns about the practice of AVI checking.

With the volume of postal votes continuing to rise their importance to the outcome of many polls is increasingly recognised. . Rejection rates in Scotland rose noticeably this year to 5.8% on average, a trend that was mirrored in England and Wales. I am not aware of any instances of deliberate or systematic fraud. Rather, in reviewing these identifiers as ROs we generally have had to reject postal votes due to mismatched signatures from the elderly or infirm.

When AVI checking was introduced for the 2009 European elections the Forensic Science Service provided some basic training on signature verification, arranged by the Electoral Commission.

With the experience of several elections now under our belts we are all more familiar with the practical issues associated with checking signatures. The Board recognises that there has been a turnover of staff involved in the verification of AVIs and has contacted the

Documents and Handwriting section of the Forensic Services section of the new Scottish Police Services Authority to arrange some refresher training on AVI checking. These will be funded by the Electoral Commission as part of four training events in early 2012 at locations around Scotland. You will be contacted with details of these in coming months.

The locations will be:

- Perth 10 Feb
- Kilmarnock 16 Feb
- Glasgow 23 Feb
- Edinburgh 1 March

Further details will be provided from the Electoral Commission as soon as arrangements are finalised.

Timing of the Count

The Elections Order does not specify a time for the Count. It remains a decision for each Returning Officer to identify the most appropriate timing which will facilitate an accurate, secure and efficient poll in which the voters can have full confidence. **However, this is one area in which I am considering issuing a direction.**

The EMB has been clear and consistent in its promotion of counts on the day following the election to promote accuracy, security and the completion of the increasing logistical challenges most notably around postal votes. The case for a Friday count next year is only strengthened by the use of the electronic scanning equipment, where technical support and will be more readily available during daytime hours.

The Board will be producing a consultation paper on Count Timing in the next few weeks with a view to issuing a direction on Count Timing by the end of the year. I would like to deliver a clear national position on this matter.

Board Activity

The action notes of Board meetings are circulated through SOLAR, the AEA and to the Political Parties Panel I hope that the work of the Board is clear from that. To give you a further flavour of our recent activity, work has included:

- Discussion with the Boundary Commission for Scotland on their proposals for revised UK Parliamentary constituencies;
- Reviewing and commenting on the proposed guidance material to be issued by the Electoral Commission to support next year's elections;
- Providing comments to the Electoral Commission on their proposed approach to assessing Returning Officers against Performance Standards; and
- Working with the Electoral Commission to plan briefing events for Returning Officers and their staff in the coming months.
- Consideration of how we can address the increase in the number of rejected postal votes within the current rules.

Boundary Commission Proposals

Hugh Buchanan of the Boundary Commission for Scotland attended the Board meeting in October to discuss proposals for new Westminster constituencies. You should all now be aware of the proposals for your local constituencies. The size of the new constituencies is based on the December 2010 register and will not change, even if there are significant changes to the electorate.

All Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers are encouraged to provide comments to the consultation even if they are content with the proposals. Hugh Buchanan stressed that if ROs support the proposals then explicit comments of support would be valued.

Communication and Other Issues

Our focus initially is on next year's local government elections and if there are any further items which you would wish to see added to the Board's work programme, then please let us know.

Please continue to escalate any issues of concern with the Board or to raise any items for discussion.

In the first instance you should contact Chris Highcock (0131 469 3126, chris.highcock@edinburgh.gov.uk) Secretary to the Board.

Mary Pitcaithly

Convener, Electoral Management Board for Scotland