

INFORMATION ITEM

REPORT OF	MEETING	DATE	ITEM NO
RESOURCES DIRECTORATE	FINANCE AND DEMOCRACY COMMITTEE	28 JUNE 2021	15
ELECTIONS 2021 - FEEDBACK			

PUBLIC ITEM

This item is for consideration in the public part of the meeting.

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Elections in 2020 were postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The rescheduled Police and Crime Commissioner Election was combined with the Lancashire County Council Elections on Thursday 6 May 2021.

Tracy Manning, Local / Deputy Returning Officer has collated the post-election review feedback from candidates, agents and staff. The report below gives an outline of feedback received.

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Tracy Manning – Local / Deputy Returning Officer

WHY IS THIS INFORMATION BEING GIVEN TO THE COMMITTEE?

To provide an outline of feedback received.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact Tracy Manning, 01253 658521, tracy.manning@fylde.gov.uk

Election Feedback

- Members will appreciate that the work associated with managing elections must comply with statutory requirements for which we are accountable to the Electoral Commission. The role of the Returning Officer must be impartial and the role is to ensure that the conduct of the elections is in accordance with the law.

Joint directions were issued by the Returning Officer at Lancashire County Council and the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) at Blackburn and there is a duty to follow these.

It should also be noted that the Local / Deputy Returning Officer's responsibility is one of a personal nature distinct from the duties of an employee of the Council. The government provided an extra personal indemnity for Returning Officer's to account for any issues arising as a result of the pandemic.

- However, where the Local / Deputy Returning Officer is able to make adjustments and improvements, he/she does so year-on-year. With this in mind, feedback was invited from candidates, agents and staff on the

effectiveness of the arrangements for the 2021 elections and any suggested improvements were invited.

3. Post-election feedback was collated from all staff that worked on the elections, together with suppliers and the core team following which the feedback was overall positive. The pandemic has made this one of the most challenging polls to date. However, as ever, everyone pulled together and rose to the challenge and the elections were administered without event.
4. A questionnaire was also sent to all candidates and agents. The questionnaire gave opportunity to feedback on all processes including nominations, postal voting, polling Stations and the count.
5. We received feedback from 40% of the candidates / agents standing. A summary of feedback is set out in the below.

General feedback from Candidates and Agents:

100% of Candidates / Agents satisfied with –

- The Nomination process and access to documents they required.
- They found it easy to contact the Elections office in a timely manner. Staff were found very helpful.
- Considered the election was well planned and effectively administered, especially on polling day
- Felt confident about the integrity of the process.

Postal Voting

Most Candidates / Agents were satisfied with the postal voting process. However, the following comment was made:

- *We often get caught out on the postal voting arrangements as Fylde are often early in sending out the ballot papers. It would be helpful if the date that postal ballots are to be sent out could be communicated to candidates and agents at the outset of the campaign and kept to. It would make a real difference.*

Action: The dispatch date is included in the nomination covering letter to Candidates and Agents and included in any briefings. The team could however confirm to Candidates and Agents when the postal packs are handed to Royal Mail as this is often following the quality checking stage.

Count

100% of Candidates / Agents were satisfied with the Count layout, however the following comments were made regarding the process –

- *The only negative comment about the count process is to do with the verification. Not all staff verified the votes face up and had to be reminded of this on some occasions. Please pick this up as a training issue.*
- *There was inconsistency across the teams with the verification process, particularly with the postal ballots. Some tellers helpfully presented the ballot papers on the table face up as they were being counted. However, others held the ballot papers in one hand whilst flicking through the corner of each batch to confirm the total number. The verification process is important for candidates to ensure that all the ballot numbers tally up. Voting slips should be methodically checked and not raced through. If this process was done consistently and openly, then I would have been able to fully observe the process.*
- *Some ballots were sorted between LCC and PCC on a central table and not at the Counting table. This was rectified after being brought to attention.*
- *Some counters made "personal" piles of Ballots before adding them to the mound of Ballots for each candidate, so it was difficult to check whether the correct sorting between candidates had taken place. It would have been better if each Ballot was put separately into the mound.*
- *I did feel it was much harder to observe the counting at the verification than usual. I do understand the limitations put on the Counting staff, due to the Pandemic.*
- *In the light of Covid-19 it was very well controlled.*

Action: Review the verification and count training to ensure consistency across count teams ensuring the process is open and transparent for observers.

Other Comments

- The majority of Candidates / Agents thought the result was fair, impartial, and transparent.
- Candidates and Agents thought the elections run during a national pandemic were extremely well organised, professional, well managed by friendly staff and very safe.
- *There must have been a lot of preparation with this election. It was not a normal type election process, but I felt very reassured with the social distancing, marked out areas and sanitiser stations.*

Feedback from Core Staff:

The pandemic brought new issues to these Elections including:

- Constant changes to national guidance from the government gave staff the uncertainty on whether the polls would go ahead.
- A high number of polling station staff drop-outs at the final hour due to concerns about the virus.
- Polling station issues particularly around the use of schools.
- Difficulty around how much PPE to order and budgets.
- Increased number of postal vote applications and returns to process.
- Early communication to Candidates and Agents regarding nominations due to the Town Hall being closed. A number of hand deliveries of packs were made.
- Royal mail was used for poll card delivery due to pandemic, which has a high increase in costs. This would not occur in usual polls.
- Increase pressure on the printers resulting in late arrival of tendered ballot papers.
- Additional training given to all staff on equipment set up, health and safety at both polling stations and the count.

Actions:

- Carry out a Review of polling stations and polling places following the local boundary review and avoid using schools wherever possible in terms of suitable viable alternatives.
 - Build on staff reserves list.
 - Raise issues with the printers during annual meeting.
 - Continue to use the current count layout but explore building capacity within the current count venue.
 - Continue to look at different methods of counting and make improvements to staff training.
6. To conclude, the May elections were an overall success. The feedback and suggested areas for improvements have been welcomed and improvements will be made for the next elections scheduled to be held in 2023.