READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICER AND RETURNING OFFICER

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	27 NOVEMBER 2017	AGENDA ITEM:	10
TITLE:	ELECTORAL REGISTRATION AND ELECTIONS – UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR LOVELOCK	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

1.1 Further to Minute 56 of the Policy Committee of 30 November 2015, this report reviews the UK Parliamentary Election held on 8 June 2017, and provides an update on the annual electoral registration canvass which is currently underway, and which will produce the register for 2018 on 1 December 2017.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

2.1 **That the position be noted.**

3. POLICY CONTENT

3.1 This is the fourteenth report reviewing the election process.

4. UK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION – 8 JUNE 2017

4.1 General

4.1.1 The UK Parliamentary Elections were held on Thursday 8 June 2017.

4.1.2 The UK Parliamentary Elections were held in two constituencies, Reading East and Reading West. The constituencies covered all 16 Reading wards, together with three Wokingham wards in Reading East and six West Berkshire wards in Reading West.

4.1.3 The Prime Minister announced her intention to ask Parliament to approve a General Election on 18 April 2017. The UK Parliament was dissolved on Wednesday 3 May 2017. Writs in respect of Reading East and Reading West constituencies were received on Thursday 4 May 2017. The Notices for the UK Parliamentary Elections in both constituencies were published following receipt of the Writs later on the same day, Thursday 4 May 2017.

4.1.4 The deadline for the delivery of nomination papers for the UK Parliamentary Elections was 16.00 on Thursday 11 May 2017.

4.1.5 The last day for new or changed registrations was midnight on Monday 22 May 2017; for new or changed applications for new postal votes, the deadline was 17.00 on Tuesday 23 May 2017 (day -11).

4.1.6 Postal ballot packs were issued on 19 May 2017 and a second issue went out on 30 May 2017.

4.1.7 Poll cards were issued on or around 4 May 2017 (1st despatch) and Poll cards were despatched to empty properties on 12 May in order to allow electors reasonable time to contact the Electoral Services team to make late requests for postal votes by 23 May 2017. Postal poll cards were issued to people with postal votes. The 2nd despatch of Poll cards was issued on 31st May 2017.

4.2   Turnout

4.2.1 The UK Parliamentary total eligible electorate was:

Reading East: 75,522
Reading West: 74,518

4.2.2 The UK Parliamentary Election total turnout was:

Reading East: 55,395
Reading West: 51,920

4.2.3 The percentage turnout totals were therefore, as follows:

Reading East: 73.35%   (69.21% in 2015)
Reading West: 69.67%   (66.87% in 2015)

4.3   Postal Votes

4.3.1 For the 2017 Elections, a total of 27,262 postal votes were issued, as follows:

Reading East: 14,008 postal votes
Reading West: 13,254 postal votes

4.3.2 A total of 23,027 postal votes were received and put forward for verification:

Reading East: 11,909 (85.0%)   (82.8% in 2015)
Reading West: 11,118 (83.8%)   (81.9% in 2015)

4.3.3 Table 1 breaks down the take-up of postal votes by constituencies in respect of the UK Parliamentary Election.

Table 1

Constituency	Eligible Elector-ate	PVs issued 2017	%		PVs received	% of no. issued	% of total electorate		Total rejected	% of no. received
Reading East	75,522	14,008	18.5		11,909	85.01	15.77		307	2.19
Reading West	74,518	13,254	17.7		11,118	83.88	14.92		294	2.22
TOTAL		27,262			23,027					

4.3.4 The Electoral Administration Act 2007, accompanying regulations, and updates, include provision for the receipt and opening of postal vote ballot packs. Sections 10ZC and 10ZD of the Representation of the People Act 1983 also include IER postal vote guidance. Any new applicant for a postal vote must be registered individually in order for their application to be determined and accepted.

4.3.5 The postal vote packs are opened, the contents checked to ensure ballot paper(s) and the completed postal vote statement are included in each and every pack, and then 100% of postal vote statements are submitted for verification by electronic scanning. The personal identifiers for individual postal voters held on the Council's electoral database are compared. Four checks are made:

- To confirm the signature and date of birth have been completed
- To confirm that the date of birth is the same
- To confirm that the signature is the same
- To match the barcode on the postal vote statement with the database address record.

4.3.6 We scanned 100% of all postal votes received, through the establishment of a scanning hub at Floor 4, 2 - 4 Darwin Close, staffed by 2 Northgate and 5 Council staff on every scanning day. On Polling Day a reduced number of staff was made available to open and verify postal votes.

4.3.7 As a result of this exercise, and as shown in Table 1 above, a total of 307 Reading East UK Parliamentary postal statements were rejected, and a total of 294 Reading West UK Parliamentary postal statements were rejected. The rejected ballot papers did not go forward to the Verifications and Counts.

4.3.8 Incomplete packs were subject to the "orphaned ballot paper" check, whereby a statement/ballot paper without a ballot paper/statement were checked electronically in order to match them for verification, and paired up where possible.

4.3.9 Tables 2 below gives a detailed breakdown of reasons for rejection of postal votes after submission for verification by scanning, in respect of the UK Parliamentary Election:

Table 2 – UK Parliamentary Election 2017 (Breakdown by Ward)

UK Parliamentary Elections - Reason	Reading East	Reading West
Signature		
▪ *No signature*	16	21
▪ *Unmatched*	96	111
Date of Birth		
▪ *No DoB*	0	0

▪ *Unmatched*	108	91
Signature and Date of Birth		
▪ *No signature and no DoB*	22	18
▪ *One mismatched*	0	0
▪ *Both mismatched*	31	15
Postal Vote Statement		
▪ *No Statement*	7	10
Ballot Paper		
▪ *Not returned*	27	28
TOTAL	307	294

4.3.10 I was responsible, as Returning Officer, for the quality checks of the postal vote issues which were undertaken by me and one of my DROs. The quality checks demonstrated that the postal vote packs were accurately printed and of good quality, before being issued. Also, as Returning Officer, I checked each of the unmatched or invalid returns, in the postal vote hub. In this task I was supported by a Deputy Returning Officer, who has previously held the role of Returning Officer at past elections. The postal vote opening process was open to Candidates and Agents to attend.

4.3.11 Having undertaken these tasks, it is my view that there was no evidence of systematic fraud in the issued and returned postal votes. In the majority of cases, the rejections seemed to reflect confusion by the voter in completing the statement.

4.3.12 Following the election, as per previous elections, Electoral Services wrote to the postal voters whose postal votes had been rejected. This was to inform them that their vote was not included in the Electoral Counts and to request their personal indicators again to ensure that those held were correct. In 2017 (to date), no complaints have been received.

4.4   Polling Stations

4.4.1   On polling day, 110 polling stations were opened, across Reading East and Reading West boundaries, including Reading Borough wards that were located in Reading East and Reading West constituencies. In Reading Borough there were 75 polling stations, in 50 polling places (some of which had more than one polling station). Of the 50 polling places in the Borough, 24 were schools.

4.4.2   Reading East constituency had a total of 56 Polling Stations, based within the following wards:

Reading Borough Wards, Reading East:

Abbey
Caversham
Church
Katesgrove
Mapledurham
Park2Peppard
Redlands
Thames

Wokingham Borough Wards, Reading East:

Bulmershe & Whitegates
Loddon
South Lake

4.4.3   Reading West constituency had a total of 54 Polling Stations, based within the following wards:

Reading Borough Wards, Reading West:

Battle
Kentwood
Minster
Norcot
Southcote
Tilehurst
Whitley

West Berkshire District Wards, Reading West:

Calcot
Pangbourne
Purley-on-Thames
Theale
Westwood
Birch Copse

4.4.4   All polling stations within Reading East and Reading West boundaries had been confirmed as accessible and suitable for purpose. All polling stations were open from 7.00am to 10.00pm. The next review of polling stations is due to take place in early 2018.

4.4.5   We used two new polling places, housing three polling stations as follows:

- Battle A – Polling Place moved from Cranbury College to the Emmanuel Methodist Church, Oxford Road (two polling stations). This arrangement worked and will continue.

- Caversham MB – Polling Place moved from Amersham Road Youth & Community Centre to adjacent Caversham Children's Centre, due to building works at the former. This arrangement worked, due to the good will of the Children's Centre, staff and users, but was not ideal and the polling place will return to the refurbished Community Centre, now called The Weller Centre, for future elections.

4.5   Access

4.5.1   The Electoral Commission works closely with Mencap in the build up to the registration deadline and on polling day. They jointly designed a voting factsheet which was placed both on the Electoral Commission and Mencap websites and was circulated to all partners via their fortnightly Bulletin.

4.5.2   Reading polling station staff were made aware of dealing with all people attending the polling station in order to vote. During their training briefings, polling staff were made aware of the importance of:

- Setting up a polling station for complete accessibility for all.
- Attending a voter who is visually impaired. Every Presiding Officer in their ballot box has a tool to enable a visually impaired elector to vote in privacy.
- Awareness of special needs of any voter, including any companion attending with the voter with special needs.

4.5.3   In addition, an Elections Officer also works with the Shared Lives Scheme, which facilitates placements in non-professional carers own homes for vulnerable adults. The primary service user group is for adults with learning disabilities. Electoral information is actively made available for carers and service users, as carers are expected to advocate for their service users. Elections Officers were available on the elections phone lines for the duration of Polling Day in order to give support to any Presiding Officers calling in if they had any questions about supporting people with a learning difficulty to vote.

4.5.4   Although time was restricted, due to the short notice of the snap election, an Elections Officer was able to contact key partners, including local Community Centres, Libraries, Leisure Centres, ACRE & RCLC, and provided them with Electoral Commission information.

4.5.5   Reading Borough Council utilises the Handbook for Polling Station Staff supplied by the Electoral Commission which includes guidance and instruction in respect of people with disabilities. These handbooks are distributed to all Presiding Officers in advance of all elections at training and are included in their ballot boxes for use on Polling Day.

4.6   The Count and Ballot Box Receipt

4.6.1   As at previous elections, the Verification and Count for both constituencies were held at Rivermead Sports Centre. The Reading East count was held in the Bowls Hall; the Reading West count in the Sports Hall.

4.6.2   It should be noted that Rivermead had an existing and significant booking for Thursday 8 June 2017, which finished at 17.00. The staff at Rivermead, and Council staff, therefore had a restricted time slot in which to get the venue ready for the count by 22.00. This was a challenge to which both rose, and for which I am very grateful. It was identified as a serious potential risk in the election planning process, and was a matter of personal concern to me on election day.

4.6.3   The receipt of ballot boxes, at close of poll, was held in the Thames Suite of the Rivermead Leisure Centre. The success of the Verifications and Counts seriously depended upon the correct number of ballot boxes being received from the respective wards. Six receiving teams of two people each, in addition to the Electoral Services Manager and the Deputy Electoral Services Manager, using their ballot box number matrix to double check ballot boxes received as the Ballot Box Receipt progressed. This tightly-run exercise ensured that all ballot boxes were received safely. In addition, a team assisted Presiding Officers with boxes with their returned items. The Head Floor Controllers in the Count Halls were responsible for ensuring that the received ballot boxes were set next to the correct relevant Ward Count Tables. This controlled system worked excellently.

4.6.4 The last ballot box was received at 23.11pm, ie only 71 minutes after close of poll. This was a significant improvement on the 2015 general election, when the last ballot box was not received until 23.46pm.

4.6.5 There were 12 Count Tables in Reading East and 13 in Reading West. Sealed postal vote ballot boxes were brought to the Ward Count Tables in advance of the Verifications. These contained all postal ballot papers received up to and including the morning of polling day, where the postal ballot packs had been opened and scanned in advance, and the ballot papers put into sealed ballot boxes by constituency and date of receipt

4.6.6 During polling day, and at close of poll, a further 2,817 postal ballot packs (10.3% of the total issued, 12.2% of the total returned) were received from the Royal Mail, collected from polling stations, handed in at the Civic Offices, or handed in at polling stations and brought to the count by Presiding Officers. These all had to be opened, scanned and verified before the postal ballot papers could be returned to the count in sealed ballot boxes by constituency for verification and counting.

4.7 Verification and the Counts

4.7.1 The first stage in any count is to verify the number of ballot papers in each ballot box, against the total recorded on the ballot paper account for the polling station. Overnight on 8-9 June 2017 we were verifying the ballot papers for two elections, from 22.01 onwards on Thursday, 8 June 2017:

- Reading East UK Parliamentary – Reading Borough, Reading East Wards and Wokingham Council, Reading East Wards
- Reading West UK Parliamentary – Reading Borough, Reading West Wards and West Berkshire Council, Reading West Wards

4.7.2 Verification commenced at 22.01 on Thursday, 8 June 2017.

4.7.3 As in previous elections, the verification and count were organised as a series of mini-counts, with count tables based on wards. However, the postal ballot papers were not returned or sorted by ward, and were put into ballot boxes and introduced to count tables based on date of receipt across the constituency. Therefore it is not possible to give an accurate breakdown of voting by ward.

4.7.4 Each count moved on to counting by candidate within two hours, as required by the Electoral Commission. Reading West commenced the Count at 00.16 and Reading East at 23.58.

4.7.5 The UK Parliamentary Election Counts were completed by 03.33 (Reading West) and 04.08 (Reading East) on Friday, 9 June 2017.

4.7.6 Whilst the Electoral Commission has yet to inform Reading Borough Council that the Electoral Services Team met all of its Electoral Commission Performance Standards in administering the 2017 elections, I am satisfied that the timings of the declarations of results in both Count Halls ensured as speedy and as thorough Verifications and Counts as possible, also given the added complications of:

- snap election;
- cross-boundary polling stations;
- cross-boundary postal votes;

- the tiredness but efficiency of staff;

4.7.7 Under normal circumstances, detailed and thorough project planning and preparation is undertaken from as early as 12 months in advance of an election. Despite the short notice of the snap election in June 2017, site visits to the Count Centre were made as soon as possible and IT requirements and specifications were discussed with Northgate IT. Count Spreadsheets were designed and competently used by the Top Tables, ensuring accurate results. Count Table Folders and Top Table Folders were prepared immediately following Nominations week, once candidates' names had been confirmed. Additional halls, tables, chairs, crash barriers, storage rooms, security, refreshments, microphones, stationery, counting staff and floor plans were also were arranged within the exceptionally short timescales.

4.8 Election Debriefs – IER Registration of new Electors and new Postal Voters

4.8.1 The Electoral Services Team continues to face the challenges that IER brings. Previous debrief reports, produced by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), have stated that:

"Electoral administrators continue to deliver elections within an increasingly complex and challenging environment even when the odds are stacked against them".

This was even more pertinent regarding the snap election held on 8 June 2017. Electoral administrators and suppliers were completely stretched from the moment the election was announced on the 18th April 2017, right up to polling day. Whereas the usual preparation period for a parliamentary election can be as much as 12 months leading up to polling day, electoral teams and suppliers had only just over 7 weeks to prepare for the snap election, with issues such as structures, processes, available resources and people delivering electoral registration and elections all to be taken into account.

4.8.2 I agree that the run-up to an election is now much more complex in order to meet the IER legislation. In the past, for example, it was routine for the Electoral Services team to move from registration activity to election activity after polling day – 6, (31 May 2017), that is, once the register is confirmed and can be printed for use at Polling Stations. The more complex method of registering to vote under the IER system has meant that anyone who submitted a registration application, either online or by returning a completed registration form, on the last day to register (22 May 2017) had to remain off of the register until their details had been matched with the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) database, through the national IER-DS computer link, before that applicant's details could officially be placed on the electoral register.

4.8.3 In turn, this meant that anyone with a postal vote application, in such circumstances, would not be entitled to a postal vote until they had been registered and until the statutory 5 day determination period had passed. Their postal ballot paper pack could not be posted out therefore until on or after 31 May (polling day – 6), in case any objections were received during the determination period. As a result, this had implications for electors going on holiday, or overseas electors who had registered on the last day but requested their postal vote to be sent abroad. This meant that in some cases there were only six days for the postal vote pack to be posted out abroad, completed and returned in order for it to be counted.

4.8.4 This is a national challenge. The same AEA debrief report has also acknowledged that:

"The processing of checking IER documentary evidence and the attestation process up until day - 6 had significant staff resource implications at a time when at previous elections those staff would have moved off registration to prepare for the elections after day -12."

4.8.5 One of the practical implications, experienced at the 2017 Elections, as at previous elections, was that we had to delay the printing of the Polling Station Registers so that the hard copy registers were as up-to-date as possible when collected by the Presiding Officers. However, new electors were being added to the Registers after this, right up to Polling day, as DWP confirmation of individual electors was received. This required further registration updates after the printing of the Polling Station registers, which had to be securely emailed to the Presiding Officers, showing qualifying electors' names, addresses and poll numbers on them, in spreadsheet format, so that the newly registered electors would be enabled to vote in the 2017 Elections. The registration administration continued up to and during Polling Day, when it became necessary to phone the Presiding Officers if a new name needed to be added/deleted/amended to the register. Electors qualifying for a postal vote at this late stage had to have their entry on the Polling Station register noted that they were absent voters, not polling station voters.

4.8.6 In practice, this meant that any new postal vote application forms received and processed on or by the deadline date of 23 May 2017, (a date that is both 5 working days before the date of determination and the deadline for receipt of completed postal vote application forms, known as polling day -11) in respect of newly registered electors, or electors awaiting a positive match from the IER-DS database, did not have a postal vote pack automatically printed for them by Electoral Reform Services (ERS), our printers.

4.8.7 Once a person who had applied to register and to vote by post had confirmation from synchronisation with the IER – DS database that they could be registered under IER, and could therefore receive a postal vote, the Electoral Services Team were then obliged to make up a postal vote pack for them from blank stationery and then be responsible for ensuring that the postal vote pack could be delivered on time to the elector.

4.8.8 The activities described in the above three paragraphs were introduced as a direct result of the introduction of IER in 2014. They required the adoption of additional resource- and time-consuming administrative procedures to keep on top of them. They also generated an increased number of enquiries and complaints from electors who did not understand, or appreciate, that the Council was prevented by the IER Regulations from processing their new registration or postal vote applications to a quicker timescale (as would have been the case in previous years).

4.8.9 As a consequence, the Electoral Services Team successfully arranged, and fully staffed in advance, a total of four Electoral Services Teams, in addition to the postal vote opening team and the postal vote hub:

- *The IER Registration Team* – [dealing with] processing and approving registration applications received before deadline but not yet matched under IER. This continued up to and including Polling Day. In total, since the announcement of the election on 18 April 2017 and the registration deadline on 22 May 2017, Reading Electoral Services Team received, scanned and processed a total of 15,568 changes in registration, of which 5,606 were new registration applications. Approximately half of these were received in the last week before the final deadline. Processing by

matching with the IER-DS database continued until Polling Day. In addition, a total of 501 new postal vote application forms were received, scanned and processed actually on the Registration and Postal deadline days of 22nd and 23rd May 2017. Again, further processing of postal votes continued up to and during Polling Day, with the last postal vote packs being delivered by hand at 20.00 on Polling Day.

- *The Postal Vote Pack Creation and Delivery Team* – based both in the Civic Offices Reception booth and at Darwin Close. These teams worked closely together and created and delivered postal vote packs once the determination date had passed, and once new registrations were confirmed, then delivered them by hand to Reading addresses. They also undertook these tasks in respect of lost and spoiled replacement postal votes. This required queueing in the Post Office for stamps for the overseas electors' postal votes so that they could receive them in good time. They continually procured postal stamps and attended Post Offices in order to continue to send local postal vote packs. As Polling Day approached, these teams got into cars and delivered postal vote packs around Reading.

- *The Election Preparation Team* – based at 2-4 Darwin Close. They prepared the ballot box documents and met and advised the Presiding Officers when they collected their ballot boxes. They prepared Ballot Box Receipt briefing notes, check lists and signs, Verification and Count Trays and Folders, Top Table Folders, Polling Station Inspector documents, Head Floor Controller and Floor Controller instructions, and Count Supervisor instructions. They received and distributed ballot papers and Corresponding Numbers Lists to Reading Borough, Wokingham (Reading East) and West Berkshire (Reading West).

- *The Emergency Proxy Application Team* – based at Floor 2, 2-4 Darwin Close. One of my DRO's kindly supported this function, allowing legitimate approval of any claims. A total of 18 emergency proxy votes were allowed for Reading East and 11 for Reading West for the 2017 Elections.

4.8.10 In addition, a Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) worked with the above teams to respond to complaints received which the Electoral Services Team passed on to me for resolution. In total, I responded directly to 10 complaints about this year's election process, a surprisingly small number given the complexities of IER described above. I believe that this reflects the thorough and efficient project planning and operational methods employed by the Electoral Services Teams.

4.9   Cross-boundary Issues

4.9.1 In running the Parliamentary elections in Reading East and Reading West, the Council had to work with the Electoral Services in Wokingham and West Berkshire. This was a common pattern across the country. The AEA debriefing report stated that:

> "Parliamentary elections bring with them cross-boundary issues because a large number of parliamentary constituencies cross over local authority boundaries. The impact of cross boundaries includes the giving and taking in of electors from other local authority areas which can have implications for the administration of the elections, such as software systems, poll cards, postal votes, ballot papers, polling station staff appointments and training, delivery of ballot boxes and the count. Combined polls also add to the complexity of dealing with cross-boundary issues. EROs and ROs agree and adopt a contract or some form of memorandum

of understanding in relation to the administration of cross-boundary elections and work closely together in partnership."

4.9.2 Reading liaised closely with Wokingham and West Berkshire. We attended a meeting at Wokingham, with Berkshire colleagues, in advance of the elections to identify possible issues. Post-election, a de-briefing session has taken place, hosted by Wokingham Borough Council, with Berkshire colleagues, to identify future improvements, such as:

(1) The transfer of postal vote elector data between authorities.
All three authorities now use the same software system – Xpress. However, despite receiving assurances from the software company that the data could be transferred electronically with ease, in the 2015 election, this did not happen in practice, and we had to revert to the employment of data USBs. In 2017, we still experienced this problem, but had anticipated and therefore prepared for this. The impact was to delay the scanning of returned postal vote packs from Wokingham and West Berkshire postal voters, but due to planning, a delay did not occur in 2017.

(2) Staffing of Polling stations
At previous general elections, Wokingham and West Berkshire have taken responsibility for engaging the staff in the polling stations in their wards. West Berkshire continued to do this, but Wokingham did not. Reading therefore had to recruit staff to cover polling stations in the Wokingham wards in Reading East at short notice.

4.10 Ballot Box Receipt leading into the Verifications and Counts

4.10.1 The professionally focussed and detailed project planning in advance of Ballot Box Receipt meant that all ballot boxes were accounted for and all relevant documents collected. Specialist staff were used to move ballot boxes, on receipt, to the correct Ward Count Tables in the Count Halls as quickly as possible.

4.10.2 The use of experienced Head Controllers and Floor Controllers helped the proceedings progress smoothly. The two Top Tables staffed by experienced Auditors and Accountants meant that no re-counts were necessary and the results were accurate.

4.10.3 Reading successfully used its 'mini-count' system again this year. The Verification and Count exercises are divided down into smaller parts by count table, thus allowing the control table to audit and double check the totals of ballot papers by count table as the Verifications and Counts progress.

4.10.4 A de-brief meeting took place on 18th September 2017, with myself, one of my Deputy ROs and the Electoral Services Team, including staff members responsible for Postal Votes opening and scanning hubs. Future operational improvements were identified and discussed.

4.11 Staffing

4.11.1 For the June 2017 elections, the Elections and Electoral Services team had a permanent and temporary total establishment of 3.49 Full-time Equivalent staff plus up to 7 casual "as and when" staff.

4.11.2 Approximately 900 jobs were successfully staffed by the Electoral Services Team, who had to commence the 2017 election staffing project as soon as the election was

announced on 18th April 2017. The usual number of jobs for one local election is normally 500, so filling this much higher number of jobs had been a complex and long-term task, especially in view of the short notice and the added pressure of having to find a significantly higher number of polling staff, but was successfully implemented.

4.11.3 The postal vote project was run in two parts. The opening of the postal vote statements and ballot papers project was run by two Legal Executives. The postal vote statement scanning verification project was run by a Senior Legal Executive with support from the Northgate IT Department and one Deputy Returning Officer. I was responsible for the final adjudication on postal vote statements.

4.11.4 I noted at the Electoral Services Debrief, held on 18 September 2017, that staff had performed highly successfully in very difficult and hectic circumstances. It was also noted that staff were generally tired during the Election period and especially once they had arrived at the Polling Day Verifications and Counts.

4.11.5 On Polling Day, Reading engaged a total of 110 Presiding Officers working across Reading East and Reading West constituencies, broken down as follows:

Reading East within Reading Borough:	42
Reading West within Reading Borough:	33
Reading East within Wokingham Council boundaries:	14
Reading West within West Berkshire boundaries:	21

The number of poll clerks employed was as follows:

Reading East within Reading Borough boundaries:	85
Reading West within Reading Borough boundaries:	69
Reading East within Wokingham boundaries:	23
Reading West within West Berkshire boundaries:	41

West Berkshire Council engaged their own polling staff for stations within their boundary. As mentioned in 4.9.2 above, this year Wokingham did not.

4.11.6 We engaged a total of 32 staff to open postal votes, at 12 sessions (with a maximum of 15 staff at each session). We had 5 staff plus 2 IT staff at 11 postal vote verification sessions. We had approximately 160 staff involved in the UK Parliamentary Verifications and Counts, in various activities, together with Promotions and Rivermead staff. Please note – many of the staff involved in different processes were the same people.

4.11.7 I ran 6 training sessions for polling staff, and 1 for count staff. All people were paid for attending, and turnout was good. I chaired the training for the Top Table staff and Polling Station Inspectors. An experienced Presiding Officer ran a mop-up training session for polling station staff who could not attend other events.

4.12 Fraud

4.12.1 Concerns about fraud, in particular with postal votes, were an issue in some elections in the years following the introduction of postal voting on demand, over 10 years ago. This

year, as in recent years, there were no issues in relation to fraud, either perceived or actual.

4.13   Website

4.13.1 The website uploads were received and uploaded successfully by the Web and Promotions team. It worked well, with Notices of Election and Persons Nominated etc. plus declared results being published to deadline.

4.14   Agents

4.14.1 I held a meeting with Agents before the start of the election period, to explain how I would be running the elections. The efficient planning of documents for the Agents' meeting well in advance worked well and this process will be used again in 2018.

4.14.2 Full Registers were made available at the Agents Meeting prior to the receipt of Nominations forms.

4.15   Poll Cards

4.15.1 A two-team of two process for poll-card proof-reading worked very well in 2017 and will be used again in 2018.

4.15.2 Poll cards were issued in early May 2017. Reading Borough Council issued its own poll cards and the cross-boundary authorities issued their own poll cards.

4.16   Nominations Processes

4.16.1 Electoral Services continued good practice by allocating a team to input and check Nominations and an additional team to meet with Agents and liaise between the Inputting Team and Agents. Two DROs in addition to myself checked and proof-read all Nominations, ensuring the correct documentation and complete forms were received in respect of each set of Nomination papers. Again, Reading was successful with its Nominations processes and procedures.

4.17   Ballot Paper Proof Reading

4.17.1 The now established three team system of proof-reading ballot papers worked excellently with the DRO approval and my final approval as Returning Officer being achieved in situ, at Darwin Close.

4.17.2 Reading's party emblems were correct on the ballot papers we submitted to our printers, as they were the most up-to-date emblems uploaded to the Electoral Commission website, thanks to the Reading Nominations Inputting Team. Reading directly accessed the party emblems from the Electoral Commission website for Reading's ballot papers.

4.18   Telephone Contact and the Call Centre

4.18.1 The telephone call statistics were fully monitored. The following were worth noting:
   • 344 calls were received directly by the Call Centre on Polling Day, with constant support of the Electoral Services Team, who answered calls all day until 22.00, close of poll.

- 99% of the calls were answered within the Council wide service level of 60 seconds.
- The majority of calls were received between 09.00 and 19.00.

4.18.2 The Electoral Services Team fully staffed their telephones from 06.00 until 22.00 on Polling Day, and team members were continually available on their mobile phones during the Verifications and Count. In the run-up to Polling Day, one additional agent in situ in the Electoral Services Team alleviated the constant pressure of working on IER registration and taking telephone calls at the same time.

4.18.3 It was acknowledged at the Electoral Services Debrief that the Call Centre and Electoral Services Teams did an excellent job answering calls. Calls were also answered directly by the Polling Station Inspectors and the Electoral Services Teams at the Civic and Count venues.

5. 2018 ELECTIONS

5.1 <u>Local Borough Elections – 3 May 2018</u>

5.1.1 The next Local Borough Elections are due to be held on 3 May 2018 and will include 15 of Reading's wards. There will be no Local Election in Mapledurham. The Local Borough Elections will be run as usual with the "first past the post" being the candidate who is elected, per Ward.

5.1.2 The Electoral Commission, in a previous Election Debrief report, stated that Polling stations in England, Scotland and Wales will be required to provide proof of voters' identity before being issued with a ballot paper and allowed to vote, as has been required in Northern Ireland since 2002. The Electoral Commission is continuing to develop detailed proposals and costings for implementing an identification scheme in time for the May 2019 elections.

6. 2017 REGISTRATION PROCESS – 2018 REGISTER

6.1 <u>2018 Annual Canvass</u>

6.1.1 The 2018 annual electoral registration canvass started on 14 July 2017, and will run until 22 November 2017. Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) were sent out to 71,892 households in Reading, landing on doormats on or around 18 July 2017. These were followed up with two reminders, the first sent by post in August 2017, and the second delivered by door-to-door canvassers. If no response to HEF's are received at 31 October 2017, a further and final reminder HEF will be sent for completion. Any additional or new residents noted on a completed HEF form will be sent an Invitation to Register (ITR) letter (which is the registration form). Two reminders for non-responses to ITRs will be sent. Door-to-door Canvassers will deliver the 3rd reminder ITR. If no response to the third ITR a requirement to register final letter will be sent. At all points in the canvass, people will be encouraged to register on-line.

6.1.2 The new (2018) register will be published on 1 December 2017.

6.1.3 At the time of writing – week 17, ending 10 November 2017 – the canvass had had responses from 58,934 households, or 81.80%.

6.1.4 I shall submit a more detailed report on the outcome of the 2017 annual canvass to your meeting in February 2018.

6.2   Household Notification Letters

6.2.1   The Electoral Commission have identified sending a letter to all households listing who was registered to vote at that particular address as a key activity which could contribute to helping Returning Officers ensure that their registers were as accurate and complete as possible ahead of future elections. This 'household notification letter' (HNL) shows who is registered to vote at that address and prompts anyone who is not yet registered to do so. For obvious reasons, this activity did not take place ahead of the snap parliamentary election. This activity is scheduled for February 2018, in preparation for the Local Borough elections in May 2018.

7.   BACKGROUND PAPERS

        2015 Debrief reports from the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators and Reading Borough Council Electoral Services.

        IER Further information

        Electors are steered towards the register on line option and business cards to this effect are distributed (www.gov.uk/register-to-vote). If they would like to know more about the changes to the electoral registration system they are encouraged to visit the 'Your Vote Matters' on the 'Gov' website.