

Personnel Committee

16 July 2026



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

Title	Returning Officer Scale of Fees for Local Government Elections
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Jayne La Grua, Director of Legal & Democratic Services
Report author	Jayne La Grua, Director of Legal & Democratic Services
Lead Councillor	Cllr Liz Terry, Leader of the Council
Council priority	Not applicable, but still requires a decision
Recommendations	1. Approve the payment of the fee of £4,420.76 to the Returning Officer for the local elections held on 7 May 2026; 2. Approve the scale of fees shown in Appendix 1 to determine the remuneration for the role of Returning Officer for the local elections in May 2027; 3. Request that officers review and publish the Returning Officer Scale of Fees annually as part of the Pay Policy Statement and, where appropriate, apply the relevant national pay award percentage to ensure the fee is maintained in line with inflation; 4. Authorise the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer, to apply the scale to ordinary elections, by-elections and combined polls.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the current position relating to the payment of a fee in respect of the role of Returning Officer (RO) duties for the running of local elections and recommends a revised fee structure to reflect the duties and personal responsibility relating to the RO role.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. The Representation of the People Act 1983 requires each local authority to appoint a RO for the conduct of local government elections. In performing these functions the RO acts independently of the Council and is personally accountable to the courts for the lawful conduct of the election.
- 2.2. Section 63(1) and (3)(b) of the 1983 Act states that if the RO or appointed deputies are, without reasonable cause, guilty of an act or omission in breach of official duty they are liable on summary conviction to an unlimited fine.

- 2.3. The role of the RO is entirely separate to that of the postholder's responsibilities as a local government officer. The RO is not directly responsible to the local authority and is instead directly accountable to the courts as an independent statutory office holder.
- 2.4. As a result of the degree of personal liability and unique legal status, local authorities are required to have an appropriate fee structure in place for RO fees and associated expenses as determined by Section 36(4) of the Representation of the People Act 1983.
- 2.5. Local election RO fees are set locally, unlike parliamentary election fees which are prescribed nationally. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to publish details of the RO's scale of fees for local elections, adoption of a published scale will improve transparency, consistency and audit assurance.

3. Background

- 3.1 At a meeting of Council on 27 January 2026, the Executive Director of Resources was appointed as the Council's Returning Officer for local elections. Prior to that, the Council's Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services was the RO.
- 3.2 The fee paid to the RO for the 2024 local elections was £4,420.76 and the same budget provision was made for the 2026 local elections.
- 3.3 Benchmarking against comparable electoral areas suggests that the fee paid to the RO in 2024 was reasonable. However, there is currently limited information contained within the Council's Pay Policy Statement explaining how the RO's fees were calculated and approved, only that the RO's fees are "*as set out in the Council's budget estimates for local elections*" (see [Pay Policy Statement](#), paragraph 14.3).
- 3.4 There is no statutory requirement to publish details of RO fee scales and many authorities do not. Those that do vary significantly. Most calculate RO fees according to the size of the electorate, while some calculate fees based on the number of wards, and a small number have adopted the same fee scale as that used for parliamentary elections.
- 3.5 For an authority that elects by thirds, as Reading does, an adjustment needs to be made to take account of the fact that the RO is not delivering a whole-council election, which reduces the operational scale of the election but does not remove the RO's statutory responsibilities, recognising that many of the RO's tasks still occur across the whole borough including:
 - Poll cards issued to all electors;
 - Postal votes issued across the whole borough;
 - Polling stations open in all wards;
 - Count and verification processes;
 - Candidate and agent administration in every ward.
- 3.6 Remuneration of Deputy Returning Officer(s) is in the discretion of the Returning Officer. For the 2024 and 2026 local elections, this was set at a fixed fee of £500 for the count and verification and £350 for undertaking the duties of a Polling Station Inspector.
- 3.7 The rates of payment of other election staff, including polling station staff, count staff and postal voting hub staff, is determined by the RO within pay bands set by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

4. The Proposal

- 4.1 It is proposed that there be no change to the RO Scale of Fees for the 2026 local elections and that payment of the previously budgeted fee of £4,420.76 to the RO be approved for the local elections held on 7 May 2026.
- 4.2 In future, it is proposed that the RO Scale of Fees shown in Appendix 1 be used to determine the level of remuneration for the role and that the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer, be authorised to apply the scale to ordinary elections, by-elections and combined polls. It is also recommended that the fee scale be reviewed annually as part of the Pay Policy Statement and, where appropriate, the relevant national pay award percentage applied to ensure that the fee is maintained in line with inflation.
- 4.3 It is not possible to comprehensively benchmark RO fees across all councils, because many councils do not publish this detail. However, benchmarking has been undertaken against 4 authorities in South East England, namely Hampshire & Isle of Wight Council, Milton Keynes City Council, Slough Borough Council and Swindon Borough Council (which uses the Wiltshire Councils pay scales). Each of those authorities' scale of fees has been calculated using Reading's whole-council electorate of 117,269 to produce a comparison table set out in Appendix 2.
- 4.4 Hampshire calculates RO fees according to the size of the electorate. Milton Keynes calculates fees using a hybrid methodology which includes an amount per ward and an amount per elector in each ward. Slough previously calculated RO fees according to the size of the electorate but has recently adopted the pay scale used for parliamentary elections. Swindon calculates fees according to a formula which takes account of both the size of the electorate and the number of postal voters.
- 4.5 Comparator RO fees for a whole-council local election average £8,151.50. RO fee scales for councils that elect in thirds are typically 60% of whole-council elections equivalent fees. If a 40% reduction is applied to the whole-council equivalent for comparator councils, this produces an average of £4,758.32.
- 4.6 Recognising that the published comparator fee scales are each at least a year old, a 3.2% uplift has also been applied to the adjusted figures to take account of inflation. This produces an average of £4,910.59.
- 4.7 Where RO fees are calculated according to the size of the electorate, the average amount paid per 500 electors is £36.50.
- 4.8 Below is a worked example of RO fees calculated according to the size of the electorate applied to Reading, using the average amount paid per 500 electors, which is £36.50:

No. of Eligible Electors	Returning Officer Pay Scale	Whole Council Equivalent	60% of Whole Council Equivalent
111,269	£36.50 for every 500 electors (or part thereof).	£8,139.50	£4,883.70

- 4.9 A fee scale based on the size of the electorate, with a reduction applied to take account of Reading's electoral cycle is recommended, as set out in Appendix 1. The proposed scale reflects Reading Borough Council's elections-by-thirds cycle and recognises the personal statutory responsibility borne by the Returning Officer. For ordinary elections conducted by thirds, the fee is calculated at 60% of the whole-council equivalent fee. This reflects reduced scale while recognising fixed statutory duties.
- 4.10 An alternative method of calculating RO pay is by the number of contested wards or seats. West Berkshire Council has adopted this method, with each contested district ward attracting a fee of £244 and each contested parish or parish ward attracting a fee of £122. This pay scale would produce a disproportionately low rate of pay for the Reading RO because Reading has 16 wards, whereas West Berkshire has 24 district wards and 75 parishes/parish wards. However, a rate of £300 per contested seat in a ward would typically result in an RO pay award of £4,800, as 1 seat in each of Reading's 16 wards is typically contested in each ordinary election.
- 4.11 The benefit of using a flat rate for each contested ward is that, for an ordinary election, it produces a reasonably consistent rate of pay each year which can be budgeted for. However, this would be subject to fluctuations in the event that there are one or more by-elections, and the whole council equivalent is disproportionately high.
- 4.12 Below is a worked example of RO fees calculated according to the number of contested seats:

Returning Officer Pay Scale	48 seats	16 seats	1 seat
£300 for every contested seat.	£14,400	£4,800	£300

- 4.13 Another alternative would be to apply the same fee scale to local elections as for parliamentary elections, which are calculated at a rate of £475 per 10,000 electors. Where this amount would be less than £2,500, a 'floor' of £2,500 has been set to recognise that some level of work is required regardless of the size of the electorate. A copy of the MHCLG Expenses Guidance for Returning Officers (March 2026) is included in Appendix 3.
- 4.14 If the fee scale for parliamentary elections were applied to Reading's electorate, the whole-council equivalent would be £5,700 and 60% of this would be £3,420. Again, based on the size of Reading's electorate, this would produce an unusually low pay scale and is not recommended.
- 4.15 As set out above, remuneration of Deputy Returning Officer(s) is in the discretion of the Returning Officer. For the 2024 and 2026 local elections, this was set at £500 for the count and verification, with an additional £350 paid to Returning Officers undertaking the duties of a Polling Station Inspector. No change is recommended at this time.
- 4.16 The rates of pay of other election staff, including polling station staff, count staff and postal voting hub staff, is determined by the RO within pay bands set by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. A copy of these pay bands is included in Appendix 4.

5. Equality Implications

5.1 There are no equalities implications arising from this report.

6. Legal Implications

6.1. These are set out in the body of the report.

7. Financial Implications

7.1. The total Returning Officer fee payable for 2026 is £4,420.76, which can be met from existing election budgets.

7.2. The RO fee for the local elections in May 2027 is expected to be £4,883.70, which will need to be met from with the election budget for 2026/27.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft RO Fee Scale 2026/27

Appendix 2 – Comparator Authorities

Appendix 3 – Expenses Guidance for Returning Officers (Parliamentary Elections)

Appendix 4 – Elections Funding Pay Band Rates 2026/27