

Benchmarking of Returning Officer Fees

1. Purpose of benchmarking

- 1.1 This appendix provides a benchmarking comparison of the proposed Returning Officer (RO) fee scale for Reading Borough Council against a selection of named comparator authorities and also against the fees set nationally for parliamentary elections.
- 1.2 The benchmarking exercise is intended to demonstrate that the proposed approach is reasonable, proportionate and consistent with sector practice, taking account of Reading Borough Council's elections-by-thirds cycle and a borough-wide electorate of 117,269.

2. Electoral scale and context

- 2.1 Reading Borough Council elects by thirds and has a borough-wide electorate of 117,269, placing it at the upper end of electorate size for authorities operating elections by thirds.
- 2.2 This electorate is:
 - materially larger than many district councils operating ward-based remuneration models; and
 - smaller than some neighbouring unitary authorities, such as Wokingham and Bracknell Forest, which operate whole-council election arrangements.

3. Elections by thirds

- 3.1 Benchmarking demonstrates that authorities electing by thirds do not typically reduce Returning Officer fees in simple mathematical proportion to the number of wards or seats contested.
- 3.2 Instead, sector practice shows that authorities commonly:
 - identify a whole-council equivalent fee; and
 - apply a moderated percentage reduction in ordinary election years to reflect reduced operational scale, whilst continuing to recognise fixed statutory duties and legal risk.
- 3.3 Percentage reductions for councils electing in thirds range between 50% and 70%, with 60% being the most common.

Comparator councils using a fee scale based on electorate size:

Council	Elects in thirds or whole council?	Returning Officer Pay Scale	Whole Council	60%	+ NJC uplift
Hampshire & Isle of Wight Council (2023/24)	Whole Council.	£100 for the first 1,000 electors. £38 for every additional 500 electors or part thereof.	£8,498.00	£5,098.80	£5,261.96
Milton Keynes City Council (2024/25)	Thirds at the relevant date. Has since moved to whole council elections.	£125 for each ward £10 for the first 500 electors in each ward. £40 for each additional 500 electors or part thereof.		£4,280.00	£4,416.96
Slough Borough Council (2019)	Whole Council.	£35 per 500 electors.	£7,805.00	£4,683.00	£4,832.86
Swindon Borough Council (2021)	Thirds at the relevant date. Has since moved to whole council elections.	£32 for first 500 electors. £8.50 for each subsequent 250 electors or part thereof. £12 for first 50 postal voters. £2.50 for each subsequent postal voters or part thereof. £14 poll cards per contest OR £0.23 per 100 poll cards, whichever is greater.		£4,971.49	£5,130.58
		Average	£8,151.50	£4,758.32	£4,910.59

3. Application to Reading Borough Council

3.1 The proposed Reading Borough Council approach is consistent with this established practice by:

- calculating a whole-council equivalent fee by reference to the full borough-wide electorate of 117,269; and
- applying a reduced fee for ordinary elections conducted by thirds.

3.2 In benchmarking terms, the proposed Reading RO fee scale:

- results in remuneration higher than ward-based models such as West Berkshire;
- remains lower than whole-council equivalent unitary authority levels in ordinary election years; and
- is proportionate to Reading's electorate size, urban density, electoral complexity and statutory risk profile.

4. Comparator approaches: Ward-based

4.1 [West Berkshire Borough Council](#) operates a ward-based model, under which the Returning Officer fee is derived from a per-ward calculation. This reflects a smaller electorate and produces relatively low aggregate remuneration. If this fee scale were applied to Reading's 16 wards, it would produce an RO fee of £3,904, which would be unusually low:

Returning Officer Pay Scale	24 District Wards 4 Parishes	16 Wards
• £244 per contested District Ward (24) • £122 per contested Parish Ward (4 at the last ordinary election in May 2023)	£6,344	£3,904

5. Comparator approaches: Parliamentary elections

5.1 The fee for RO's services for the conduct of a Parliamentary election is 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. If this fee scale were applied to local elections, it would produce the following fees:

Rate	Whole Council	60%
£475 per 10,000 electors. Subject to a minimum amount of £2,500.	£5,700	£3,420

5. Benchmarking conclusion

5.1 Benchmarking against named comparator authorities confirms that the proposed Returning Officer fee arrangements for Reading Borough Council are consistent with approaches adopted by authorities of comparable scale and appropriate for an authority electing by thirds with a borough-wide electorate of 117,269.