

Report to: Cabinet

Date of Meeting 27 November 2024

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Update on the 2024 Elections

Report summary:

After an election it is best practice to carry out an evaluation of election processes seeking feedback from appropriate stakeholders. That exercise has been carried out and will inform the project plan and risk register for future elections. This report specifically updates on the printing issue that led to a significant number of residents not receiving their poll card in a timely manner and the steps that have been taken to minimise the risk of this occurring again.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That Cabinet note the update.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure that members are updated regarding the printing issue that arose in relation to the Parliamentary elections and that the learning from that and other lessons learnt, helps to inform the project plan and risk register for future electoral events.

Officer: Melanie Wellman, Returning Officer

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Communications and Democracy
- Economy
- Finance and Assets
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: High Risk; There are reputational and organisational risks if we do not ensure that we review and learn lessons from elections.

Links to background information None

Link to Council Plan

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
- A greener East Devon
- A resilient economy
- Quality Services

Report in full

1. It is best practice following an election to carry out a thorough evaluation of all processes involved in an election, seeking feedback from appropriate stakeholders and ensuring that lessons learnt are used to inform the project plan and risk register for future elections. This report specifically updates on the printing issue that led to a significant number of residents not receiving their poll card in a timely manner for the Parliamentary election and the steps that have been taken to minimise the risk of that occurring again.
2. Overall, both the Police and Crime Commissioner and Parliamentary elections went well and were free from any legal challenge. As with any election, however, there are always lessons that can be learnt to improve processes moving forward. Whilst neither election resulted in any challenge, there was a significant issue that arose in relation to the parliamentary election, namely the failure to send out a significant number of poll cards. This issue was promptly notified to the Electoral Commission.
3. After every election the Electoral Commission undertakes a review of all the issues that arose to consider whether they reach the level where they would assess that elements of the performance standards that are set by the Electoral Commission have not been met. The Electoral Commission have finished their evaluation process and have determined in relation to this Council that no further action is needed, and they thanked us for providing such a robust and detailed timeline and background to the issue.
4. As a result of the error that arose our printers undertook a thorough investigation, and several recommendations were made and agreed to help reduce the risk of such an error occurring again in the future. It should also be noted that the councils printing contract is up for renewal in 2025 and therefore a fresh procurement exercise will need to be undertaken.
5. The key findings of the investigation were: -
 - a. On Thursday 30th May, the printers received 9 poll card data files on the secure Mimecast portal. The files were for 2 constituencies (Honiton and Sidmouth & Exmouth and East Exeter) and contained some 'shared data' files from Exeter City Council and Mid Devon District Council. All files were downloaded and passed on to their team for proofing. The expectation was that poll cards would be released into the mail on the Monday of the following week.
 - b. Proofs for all variants of the poll cards were signed off by the Council late on Friday the 31st of May. The printers merge data files and dynamically bring in templates for each type of card, and in this case demonstrated that all constituencies and variants were proofed and approved. They then worked an overtime shift over the weekend

and despatched approximately 105,000 poll cards over 2 days on Monday 3rd and 4th of June.

- c. In late June and early July, we had dialogue with the printers due to EDDC receiving a large number of complaints from residents, due to non-receipt of poll cards. This was with a backdrop of the national picture where widespread delays were being reported in the national press in relation to the postal service. Initially we were advised that everything had been passed to the postal carrier and a handover proof was supplied, and a complaint raised with the carrier. However, having reviewed the handover proofs, we raised a discrepancy with the overall quantity shown in the proof of delivery relating to station poll cards for the Honiton and Sidmouth constituency. Upon further investigation with the printers, it was identified that although multiple files received on the 30th May had been passed over to their data services team, one file had not been merged. This file was the East Devon data file for the Honiton and Sidmouth constituency (ordinary voters) containing 49,955 records.
- 6. This error was discovered on Monday 1st July. To resolve the issue the printers mobilised their teams to see if cards could be processed and despatched at short notice that day. After several rounds of proofs, they were signed off at approximately 3pm that day and the cards were printed that afternoon and handed over to the Royal Mail distribution centre personally. The additional cost to upgrade the post to a 1st class service was met by the printers and the mail arrived with residents (or were with Royal Mail sorting offices) on Tuesday 2nd July.
- 7. The printers were extremely upset by the error and took full responsibility. They advised that it exposed a gap in their front-end processing quality checks that needed to be addressed. Due to the nature of quick turnaround proofs and the reduced timetable for election printing (especially at a parliamentary election) the need to get work into the factory meant that their team concentrated on getting proof approval and jobs out as quickly as possible.
- 8. To ensure the issue does not occur again they introduced (with immediate effect) a process to validate both the number of data files received, but also the count per data file received and a total number of files and records received. This is then validated by the Council. They also sought to introduce a pre-validation step in that when files are uploaded by the Council, they are accompanied by a table containing information on the files and the quantities per file. In this way, both parties can be 100% certain that any pre-processing checks have been completed.
- 9. Following the printer's investigation, we met with them to discuss implementation and to identify any other improvements moving forward. The following was agreed:
 - a. A reconciliation report to confirm data receipt and counts for each file received. This will be applied to both poll cards and Postal Vote pack data files received. They also added internal checks at the printers. The printers will also issue postal dockets (with counts) once poll cards have been released into the post.
 - b. For major elections they will use a consolidated checklist. This is a document that will be sent to us and completed 2 months before the election to collate the necessary information required.

- c. To raise overall awareness of the election and the importance of the mail being received, we also asked the printers to update our postal vote outer envelopes with purple flashes added.
- d. There was another issue that we had identified and resolved before they were issued to polling stations in relation to the numbering on the rear of the ballot papers. This was rectified but to ensure no repeat moving forward, both the postal ballot paper and station ballot papers will now be proofed to us, and the versions will be identical (face and reverse).

10. These new processes were (except for b.) implemented for a by-election in September and the new processes worked extremely well.

11. It is clearly unfortunate that this issue arose, but the printers took full responsibility and quickly took steps to try and resolve the issue once aware. We ourselves also took a number of steps to raise awareness of the issue including significantly upscaling our communications to ensure voters were aware that they did not need a poll card to vote and to help them identify where their polling station was. We also stepped up our customer services support, to assist the elections team in managing the increased calls. These crucial actions, together with the steps taken by the printers, led to the constituency returning more votes than the national average which is an encouraging statistic given concerns that the lack of poll cards might of resulted in a drop in turnout.

12. These issues fed into our overall evaluation of all processes involved in both the Police and Crime and Parliamentary elections. We have sought feedback from appropriate stakeholders and are ensuring that lessons learnt are used to inform the project plan and risk register for future elections.

13. Conclusion:

This was clearly a fundamental error that caused reputational issues for the Council, but it is very pleasing to see that prompt action (once identified) was taken by the printers, that they fully accepted the error was theirs and have made robust changes to ensure that the risk of such an error is mitigated moving forward.

Financial implications:

The additional cost arising from the error was met by the printers and not the Council.

Legal implications:

There are no substantive legal issues to be added to this update report