Terms of reference for a review of the district and parish elections and AV referendum in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse

Background

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils (South and Vale) operate a joint management structure. The joint chief executive is the returning officer for both councils. Key members of the elections team work across both South and Vale.

Last week South and Vale held all out district council elections (comprising 58 separate elections), 38 parish council elections (21 in South, 17 in Vale) as well as the AV referendum. The combined electorate of the two councils is 194,586, whilst the number of postal voters is 17,320.

Printing issues

Earlier this year the two councils appointed a printing firm, Paragon Group UK Ltd to provide a full range of services, including the printing and despatch of poll cards and postal votes, the printing of all ballot papers and the production of grass skirts for the count. Paragon had limited experience in the production of election material.

Paragon made a number of significant errors including:

- printing the name of the relevant district council on the reverse of parish council ballot papers rather than the parish council's own name

- poor quality ballot papers which did not meet legislative requirements

- failing to include the ballot paper number on the postal vote statements for the AV referendum

- failing to match the numbers on some postal vote statements with those on ballot papers and generally failing to match the numbers on postal vote statements and ballot papers with those on the Envelope A in which votes were returned

- sending postal voting packs to the wrong addresses in the case of at least two parish council elections (rectified by another printing company)

- failing to send out postal voting packs at all in the case of two parish council elections (rectified by another printing company)

- producing a ballot paper for one parish with candidates from another parish (rectified by another printing company)

- omitting a candidate's name on one parish ballot paper (rectified in-house)

- including withdrawn candidates on three parish ballot papers (rectified in-house)

- failing completely to provide grass skirts for the count (rectified by another printing company)

This list is by no means exhaustive but it gives a flavour of the problems that elections staff had to deal with resulting from the performance of Paragon.

Postal vote and poll card issues

A significant number of postal ballot packs were despatched later than agreed and did not arrive with their intended recipient. I have received documentary evidence from Paragon that they had passed all the postal vote packs to Royal Mail by the evening of Wednesday 27 April and I am now in correspondence with Royal Mail to establish why, despite five subsequent postal delivery days, so many postal votes appear not to have arrived with their intended recipient. Both councils received a high volume of calls from voters requesting replacement packs, although this was more of a problem in south than Vale. Staff dealt with the majority of these before 5pm on polling day, but some voters were unable to vote.

There is also evidence that some people did not receive their poll cards. This was mainly a problem in Vale, where I have been told of widespread non-delivery. I have not yet been able to establish whether Paragon can provide evidence of passing all poll cards to Royal Mail for delivery.

Election counts

The election counts were held at two venues – Abingdon for the Vale and Thame for South. There has been significant local criticism of the time taken for the counts at Thame, although evidence collected already suggests that this was not excessive.

What is required?

The councils require a review, including the production of a final report and a presentation to a joint meeting of the two councils' scrutiny committees, that looks at the whole election process and address the following questions in particular:

Was the procurement process that led to the appointment of Paragon sound? Should I have foreseen the problems that subsequently arose and appointed a different company?

Where did the problem over the non-arrival of postal votes emanate from? Was the problem greater than in other parts of England? Did council staff do enough to overcome the problems once they became aware of them?

Was the election count at Thame longer than necessary?

Did council staff do all that could reasonably be expected of them to mitigate the problems that they faced?

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