

12 May 2011

Andrew Boff AM
Chair
2010 Elections Review Working Group

Dear Andrew

VOTE OF CONFIDENCE?

We welcome the Assembly's review of events at the combined Parliamentary and local elections in May 2010 and the opportunity it gave – for the professionals and the political parties – to reflect, after the dust had settled, on what constitutes good practice for the efficient conduct of elections and how best to achieve a fair and consistent voter experience across London.

Separation of powers

The issues raised are not easily resolved because the law allocates responsibilities in some detail and sets a returning officer in a position of personal accountability (separate from their authority's) for the conduct of the election. With regionally organised elections, the borough returning officers' decisions may be directed by the regional returning officer but the use of this power has been exceptional rather than routine.

The Electoral Commission's 2008 report on electoral administration in Great Britain recommended regional electoral management boards, aimed at building consensus between all the returning officers in each region but with one selected to exercise executive power as necessary to secure consistent good practice. Only Scotland has so far begun to move down that path.

In London – for GLA and European Parliament elections and for the recent referendum – the consensual approach has been the preferred mode, using influence and persuasion to secure continuous improvement.

London practice

London Elects has a statutory role solely in relation to GLA elections although the team seeks to leave a positive legacy after each set of elections through improved practice (eg polling station notices in community languages – piloted in London in 2004 and rolled out nationally subsequently), tangible benefits (eg the 2008 'training the trainer' programme gave almost all boroughs at least one member of electoral services staff a course in training skills) and influence (eg developing best practice for handling postal votes). Successful innovations at GLA elections are then available to be used by the boroughs as they deliver Parliamentary and local elections.

Staff guidance and training come in the category of what London Elects cascades to and through the boroughs by consent. The communications strategy, however, is driven by the GLRO.

London Elects City Hall The Queen's Walk London SE1 2AA
Tel: 020 7983 4416

The Office of the Greater London Returning Officer

TRAINING FOR POLLING STATION STAFF

Recommendation 6 in *A Vote of Confidence?* proposes that -

London Elects should set out in its response to this report the key strands of its training strategy for polling staff. In particular, how it will support election staff to ensure that there is a consistent approach to contingency planning (including dealing with a late surge in voters) for the 2012 GLA elections.

The London Elects training strategy for 2012 intends to continue its policy of concentrating on improved consistency across London. It will also focus on lessons learned from past GLA elections and other elections that form a part of the normal democratic cycle. Many of the unexpected problems that have occurred in recent years can be clearly linked to changes in electoral practice. As one example, the replacement of the ballot paper counterfoils with a Corresponding Numbers List (CNL) led in 2008 to some confusion in a few polling stations resulting in the elector number being written on the ballot papers. At last year's combined elections the queues that built up at some polling stations at close of poll arose because of the numbers of electors allocated to polling stations and the time involved in dealing with the different requirements of each election.

As in the past, the training provided by London Elects will be rolled out using a cascade system of dissemination to cover all those with involvement in the different parts of the election process. The training approach and support materials will be designed to support the different learning styles of all those attending to ensure that the key messages and routine processes are not diluted during the delivery of the programme. In addition we will restrict the number of delegates attending each training session to provide a suitable environment that encourages participation, learning and development. This type of approach is particularly crucial and encouraged when local authorities are dealing with the training of polling station staff.

In recent years returning officers have imposed a condition when recruiting to the posts of presiding officers or poll clerks that formal appointment is dependent on their attendance at a structured training session to ensure that it is seen as a mandatory part of their preparation for polling day.

With regard to the issue of queues at close of poll, unless the Government are minded to change the law, we will seek agreement across London for plans to be put in place to deal with queues should they arise again. The training to achieve a consistent approach will cover the following procedures:

- Returning Officers to assess any possible 'hot spots' in their areas, especially polling stations located within the catchment area of a university campus or similar establishment, and have contingency plans in place to manage any instances of a late surge in voters. This will include clear instructions to polling staff as to what action to take and who to contact in the event of queues after 8pm, and a response plan for returning officers to implement at short notice.
- Returning Officers should consider more flexible methods of staffing the polling stations, possibly using part time poll clerks to assist the evening session, or have standby staff available to supplement the staffing arrangements where any polling station needed extra resources.
- As part of the Presiding Officer's duty, they should regularly monitor the number of electors attending to vote throughout the day (hourly statistics) and be particularly vigilant from the hour of 8 p.m.

- Polling Station Inspectors should also keep in close touch with their presiding officers throughout the period 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. and be prepared to assist the staff.

The training that will form part of the strategy will, of course, only be successful if all those that are tasked with the actual delivery have been properly trained to undertake their role. As a result, the London Elects training strategy makes provision for all those that have not been previously trained to undertake a 'Training the Trainer' course to ensure they feel confident and are competent to undertake the training delivery in their borough.

All the core training events will be supported with suitably designed guidance material (both hard and soft copies) and, where appropriate, some training will be supplemented with computer based training tools to ensure learning continues from the formal sessions through to the actual hands-on delivery. This approach will be of particular importance when dealing with the training of the staff involved with e-counting as, given the numbers to be trained and the need to start this training before the election timetable commences, we need to maintain a learning culture throughout the period between formal training and the day of the count.

The strategy also recognises that project and contingency planning and risk management are key components that underpin the administration of an election. To this end the training schedule will include dedicated workshops to help local authorities deal with the planning concept. Delegates attending the workshop will use a range of tools to assist them in their project management role and guide them to identify risks and develop solutions to mitigate against any problems that may arise. We will, therefore, assess the level of preparedness across London by reviewing copies of project plans and risk registers in line with the practice being adopted by the Electoral Commission in relation to this year's referendum.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE ELECTORATE

Recommendation 7 in *A Vote of Confidence?* proposes that -

London Elects should set out in its response to this report the key strands of its communication strategy. This should include how members of the public will be informed what the ballot paper will look like when they come to vote, how it will communicate with Londoners' whose first language is not English and how it will highlight the time of the polls closing.

The report highlights two key areas of concern to Assembly Members – correctly filling in the ballot paper and ensuring enough information is provided to those people for whom English is not the first language. By providing a summary of the planned campaign for 2012 we will demonstrate how we are addressing the issues raised by the Working Group as well as overcoming other barriers that exist to potential voters.

2012 is a busy year for London and there will be a lot of media noise. Our public awareness campaign for the election aims to break through that and both inspire and educate Londoners. We want to get people talking about London, the role they play within it and how they can have their say.

There are two key objectives of our campaign, both of which help to fulfil our duty under section 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006:

- To increase understanding
- To increase participation.

Within this, there are several specific things that we want to ensure;

- People know what the elections are for
- People know how to find their polling station
- People know how to fill in the ballot papers
- People know when the polls close and the importance of not leaving it till the last minute.

The first phase of the campaign will look to educate London on what the upcoming elections are all about. It is likely that the 'celebrity' aspect of the Mayoral campaign will attract a high degree of media attention but it will be important to ensure Londoners - including the media - don't lose sight of the fact that the London Assembly is also being elected. This first phase will occur up until the registration deadline so people can understand why they should register and still have time to do so. It will make reference to the deadline but the focus will be on how these elections will affect Londoners.

The second phase, post registration deadline, will be about when to vote, when polls close, what to expect when voting at a polling station and how to fill in the ballot paper. The secondary messages in this phase will still be about the role of the Mayor and the Assembly.

In 2008 the focus was divided between electoral registration and how to vote. This was because the campaign was run jointly with the Electoral Commission. In 2012, the London Elects focus will be almost entirely on voter education. The Commission will continue their ongoing national campaign to increase voter registration.

The budget for the campaign is significantly lower than in 2008, and at a time of public sector cuts, we want to ensure that we run a cost effective campaign. A reduced budget (only one half of the 2008 spend) means that to maintain – or indeed to increase – our visibility, we need to use lower cost channels to achieve a high impact. Channels such as PR, online and social media will be a key focus although advertising will still be used.

Booklet

As required by legislation, we will send a public information booklet to every registered elector in London in the few weeks before the elections. This direct mailing is a way of providing information in an easy to digest format which people can read in their own time. It will include images of how to fill in ballot papers and clear pictorial reminders of when the polls close.

Booklets will also be available in large print, braille and audio. In addition, you will be able to download the booklet from the website and local authorities will be provided with a number to put in public buildings such as town halls and libraries. The braille and audio booklets will be proactively sent to relevant charities in London to encourage them to promote participation to their members.

The booklet includes mayoral candidates' election statements as well as information for the voter. We are looking at a number of ways to improve the impact of the booklet such as a 'cut out and keep' page to encourage people to take information with them on how to fill in the ballot paper if they are unsure.

Media

The London media will be a valuable source of information for voters. From local papers, TV and radio to online bloggers, national commentators and community publications, we will work closely with all elements of the media to identify

London [Elects](#) City Hall The Queen's Walk London SE1 2AA
Tel: 020 7983 4416

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opportunities – from articles, to web links and interviews - and ensure they have a wide range of accurate information and resources.

In the months prior to the elections, we will send out press releases on a range of topics from the launch of the website to unusual polling stations or a straight forward 'how to vote' story or a reminder of why you should vote early. also In conjunction with the releases, we will arrange interviews with key staff in print, online and broadcast media.

In addition, we will provide relevant photography. Images are a fantastic and effective way to reach out to people who have low levels of English.

Other opportunities we are already pursuing, in order to provide more media stories and more ways of Londoners finding out about the elections, are working with London venues and media partners to run competitions, and setting up a mock polling station in the LG floor of City Hall in the run up to the elections.

Community groups/Charities

We want people to be talking about these elections. The impact of word of mouth can be very powerful, especially when you are trying to elicit a behaviour change in an area where certain groups have little to no understanding or interest. Over the coming months, we will be developing our links with a large number of community groups and charities across London.

Especially for communities where English isn't the first language, there are educational or disabilities barriers or there are cultural barriers to voting, we want to create community ambassadors who will help take our message forward for us. To assist them, we will provide a range of translated posters and leaflets.

We will work with these organisations and London boroughs to identify the most commonly spoken/understood languages across London. With over 700 languages, we are unable to translate to them all but we want to ensure that we can reach as many people as possible whilst remaining within our budget.

Online

All our activity is going to direct people to the website for more information. We know that not everyone in London is online which is why we will not run an entirely online campaign. However, with a wide range of information in print media, access to the internet at libraries and community centre, we feel that online tools will be very powerful for us in this campaign.

The current website is being updated and made easier to navigate and access for those with limited interest, low literacy or special needs. We will also look at ways of translating the home page and any other key information pages into the previously identified key foreign languages for London.

We will make good use of social media. There are risks associated with this public two-way conversation but we will mitigate against all of these. The risk of not taking advantage of such a great new medium is much higher.

- Facebook is more about interaction on friend-friend basis. Here we can look at setting up an event page for polling day which will allow people to say whether or not they plan on voting and share that amongst their friends.
- Twitter will allow us to link to commentators and thought leaders to update them. We can also use upcoming tools such as *twibbons* and *twibutes* to raise awareness.

- We will put educational videos on YouTube so that people can watch visual examples of how to fill out the ballot paper, what to expect at a polling station etc.

Social media also provides us with a real time way of us outlining when the polls are closing.

To engage Londoners early on and create a message from one Londoner to another, we will also explore the option of a competition for budding film makers in London to create a 30 second video about voting in the upcoming elections.

We will look at other digital options available around apps for I-phones and also promotional activities through Google such as changing the 'o's' to ballot crosses for one day.

Advertising

Research has shown that if we see the same message through different mediums, then it has a greater chance of being retained and acted upon. We will therefore run advertising to reach people when they are away from a newspaper or their computer but we will be very targeted and ensure we can justify every spend – as with other aspects.

We will not use TV advertising as the cost is so high that we would not get very much air time for our money and there is a lot more we can do which is just as effective.

We will share our online advertising on our website so bloggers and other websites can add links, logos and messages to their own site if they are democratically minded. We will also talk to local authorities about the interest in sharing the advertising designs so they can simply add their logo to a pre prepared advert and thus save their own budget.

GUIDANCE TO POLLING STATION STAFF

Recommendation 8 in *A Vote of Confidence?* proposes that -

London Elects should set out in its response to this report the advice it will give to polling staff as to how to deal with groups that gather close to polling stations, to ensure that there is no possible intimidation of people as they make their way to vote.

It is the presiding officer's responsibility to maintain order in the polling station but legal advice is that the task of dealing with problems that may arise outside the polling station/polling place is the responsibility of the police or the appropriate statutory authority where property or the external infrastructure or the environment is at risk.

During the planning of all elections every local authority makes contact with their Single Point of Contact (SPOC) at the local police division. These officers are nominated by their borough commanders to support the election and will be involved in one of a series of seminars that London Elects will organise. These events will involve not only the SPOCs and their local authorities but also the political parties and other stakeholders. The purpose of these seminars is to discuss issues that may arise during the election and also to ensure that each SPOC is able to meet with his or her respective electoral service manager to analyse various case studies as a means of understanding the procedures to be followed if any integrity issues arise.

Quite separately during the planning for the election, each local authority will contact its borough commander about policing arrangements for polling day and will supply a list of polling stations annotated with any special concerns that the returning officer may wish to bring to the attention of the police.

This process will develop an agreed procedure for reporting to the police any potential public order or intimidation issue outside a polling station and the basis for the police response, and will identify the key elements of best practice for a presiding officer to follow in the event of disruption within a polling station.

OTHER ISSUES

Insofar as the recommendations of the report have implications for the GLA elections next year, we strongly support the proposals for -

- separating management of the delivery of the three strands of the elections (postal voting, polling day and the counts) within a unified project plan;
- monitoring the patterns of voting at polling stations during polling day in order to assist resource planning for future electoral events); and
- flexible staffing to cope with the possibility of a late surge at polling stations.

In conclusion, and in anticipation that the Assembly will wish to review the conduct of the 2012 GLA elections after the event, the London Elects team and I will be very happy to assist in its enquiries.

Yours sincerely

John Bennett
Greater London Returning Officer