

From: Ben Watts, County Returning Officer  
To: Selection & Member Services Committee, 5 March 2025  
Subject: Review of the 2025 Kent County Council Election  
Status: Unrestricted

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## 1. Introduction

- a) The Kent County Council (KCC) election for all 81 County Council seats took place on 1 May 2025, with the results being announced on 2 May.
- b) Ben Watts in his role as the County Returning Officer (CRO) was responsible for the conduct and delivery of the election.
- c) The KCC Election and related activities would not have been as successful as they were without the hard work of many people in KCC and in the 12 District, City and Borough Councils. They have all been thanked directly, but this paper provides an opportunity to recognise their achievements for the record.

## 2. Election Planning

- a) Preparations for the election began in Autumn 2024. This included an event, held at Sessions House in October 2024, for prospective councillors to find out more about the role and responsibilities of county councillors. 91 people registered to attend the event, of which 49 attended. Of these, 32 ran in the election and 11 were elected.
- b) At the start of December 2024, the CRO appointed a Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) in each of the 12 District Councils to administer the KCC election within their council area on his behalf. The CRO also issued directions relating to the discharge of his function in each council area.
- c) On 16 December 2024 the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#) which proposed significant reform to how local government would be structured in England. On the same day, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to council leaders setting out next steps to taking the proposals in the White Paper forward with a deadline of 10 January 2025 for areas to submit a formal request to be included in the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP).
- d) Whilst it was noted that acceptance onto the DPP may lead to the County Council election scheduled for May 2025 being postponed subject to ministerial decision, preparations for the election continued as planned.
- e) The Leaders of KCC and Medway Council submitted a joint letter on 10 January to Ministers requesting that Kent and Medway be included in the DPP.
- f) On 5 February 2025, Government announced the areas that had been chosen and the Leaders of KCC and Medway Council received a letter stating that Kent

and Medway would not be included in the DPP. This provided final confirmation that the KCC election would go ahead as planned on 1 May.

- g) The CRO & Deputy CRO, Lizzy Adam, regularly attended the Joint Kent Chief Executives meeting to provide updates, receive feedback and discuss issues related to the election with the 12 DROs.
- h) In addition to weekly email updates, the Deputy CRO also met with Electoral Services Managers as part of the Kent Association of Electoral Registration Officers and Staff (Kent AEROS) on 17 December 2024 and 11 March 2025.
- i) The CRO would like to thank the twelve DROs, their Electoral Services Managers and Elections Teams for the safe delivery of the KCC election particularly given the initial uncertainty about whether the election would go ahead following Kent & Medway's submission to join the DPP.

### **3. Election Act Changes**

- a) The Elections Act 2022 brought in a variety of changes to the UK electoral system which were in force for the KCC election. These included:
  - i. The requirement to show a valid form of photo ID and the introduction of the Voter Authority Certificate as a valid form of photo ID.
  - ii. Changes to the process of applying for postal votes and new rules on handling postal votes, including a limit on the number of postal votes an individual can hand in.
  - iii. Changes to the process of applying for proxy votes, and limits on the number of people an individual can be a proxy for.
  - iv. Introduction of new provisions to improve the accessibility of elections for disabled voters.
  - v. Changes to the offence of undue influence to simplify and clarify the offence and define the types of behaviour used to unfairly influence someone's vote.
  - vi. Changes to the rights of some EU citizens to vote and stand in UK elections.
  - vii. Introduction of a new penalty to prevent candidate intimidation.
  - viii. Changes to the rules about candidate and agent notional spending and making payments.
  - ix. A requirement for campaigners to include imprints on certain digital campaign material to show who produced and paid for the material.
  - x. Changes to legal requirements for political parties and non-party campaigners.

### **4. Staffing**

- a) An internal campaign to promote KCC staff working at a polling station or the count was launched in March 2025. 181 staff members expressed an interest, and their details were passed onto the relevant DRO.
- b) The CRO would like to thank all polling and count staff for delivering the KCC election including KCC staff who worked in a polling station or at a count.

## 5. Venues

- a) 19 KCC buildings were used as polling stations including Community Centres, Family Hubs and Libraries. The use of KCC buildings was centrally coordinated by Infrastructure to ensure all sites were booked and managed in a consistent way.
- b) The CRO would like to thank Calum Farmer for coordinating the use of KCC buildings to be used as a polling station and all KCC staff who enabled the buildings and sites to be used.

## 6. Implementation of New Boundaries

- a) Following a Community Governance Review undertaken by Ashford Borough Council in 2022, there was a proposal for the [hatched area](#) to move from the KCC division of Ashford Central to Ashford Rural West. [The Ashford \(Electoral Changes \(No. 1\) Order 2023\)](#) enacted this alteration and came into effect for the 2025 KCC election.
- b) A further Community Governance Review undertaken by Maidstone Borough Council in 2022/23 which included proposals to make [five alterations](#) to KCC division boundaries in the Maidstone area. [The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) Order 2025](#) enacted this alteration.
- c) Following an error in the original Order relating to Alteration 1 in Barming, a new [The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) \(Amendment\) Order 2025](#) was enacted.
- d) The boundary was implemented in line with the proposal endorsed by the Electoral & Boundary Review Committee in October 2024 except for a small area between the two shaded 'A' areas on the [map](#). This area contains no properties or electors. Electors in the two shaded 'A' areas moved from Maidstone Central to Maidstone Rural West as planned.
- e) Maidstone Borough Council notified the relevant election agents, updated the electoral register and postal voting lists and provided copies to candidates who requested them. They wrote to 80 electors who were originally in Maidstone Central but moved into Maidstone Rural West as a result of the related alteration coming fully into force. The impacted electors voted at the same polling place and had amended poll cards issued to them. The Electoral & Boundary Committee were kept up to date throughout.

## 7. Nominations

- a) Following the temporary reduction to subscribers for the 2021 election, the number of subscribers required for a nomination paper has permanently reduced from 10 to 2.
- b) Nominations were able to be submitted between 24 March and 2 April 2025 to the DROs in the 12 District Councils. 427 candidates were validly nominated, up from 348 in 2021.
- c) Details of nominations received were sent daily from the DROs to KCC to check that no candidates were nominated in more than one electoral division in the KCC electoral area. No duplicate nominations were received.

- d) The Statement of Persons Nominated & Notice of Election Agents for each electoral division were checked ahead of publication on 3 April 2025 at 10:00. The CRO would like to thank Anna Ballara, Megan Bennett, Siân Connelly, Joel Cook, Linda Elsalakhy, Kay Goldsmith, Hayley Savage, Gileta Tarvydaite, Anna Taylor, Isabella Wilson and Alex Wiseman for logging nominations and reviewing the election notices.

## **8. Operation Ford**

- a) In February 2025, the UK Government launched 'Operation Ford' to strengthen protective security measures for councillors and candidates. This included:
- the introduction of Operation Ford incidents - acts committed against a serving elected official or candidate with the intention of intimidating or harassing them in connection with their official position or potential future position.
  - a requirement for each Police Force to have at least one Force Elected-Official Advisor (FEOA) to act as the dedicated named police contact for raising concerns and provide personal security briefings.
- b) Returning Officers were requested to work with FEOAs to provide candidate contact details to them as soon as possible after the close of nominations. This was facilitated by an optional KCC Election Candidate Contact Form whereby candidates were asked to consent to their contact details being shared with Kent Police's FEOAs.
- c) The Deputy CRO liaised with Kent Police's FEOAs to arrange two online briefings on 9 & 11 April for KCC election candidates on security and personal safety. Of the 310 candidates who consented for their contact details to be shared with the FEOAs, 37 candidates attended the briefing. An email summary of the guidance provided at the briefings was circulated to the relevant candidates.
- d) The CRO would like to thank T/Supt Elena Hall, Kent Police's strategic lead for Operation Ford, and PCs Matthew Lehman & Darren Blackburn, Kent Police's Force Elected Official Advisors (FEOAs), for providing support, advice and briefings on security and personal safety to the candidates during the election.

## **9. Polling Day**

- a) Polling day went well and there were no reports of any significant problems. The CRO and Deputy CRO were both contactable from 30 April – 2 May at all times for DROs and other election staff in case assistance or advice was required, but nothing of significance arose.
- b) Following agreement by the CRO, electronic polling was successfully used in polling stations in Ashford, Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells. Using Modern Democracy's digital polling station platform, polling station staff used iPads to mark the electoral register and corresponding number list and issue paper ballot papers to voters. Electronic polling costs will be reimbursed in line with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) 2024 guidance, where they are equivalent or less than would be incurred in undertaking the polling station work in a traditional fashion.

## **10. Verification and Count**

- a) The CRO directed that the verification was to commence at 10:00 on Friday 2 May 2025 followed by the count.
- b) All KCC results were declared by 17:00; the majority of results were declared around 14:30.
- c) A KCC officer from the then Governance, Law & Democracy division attended each count venue for the purposes of inputting the election results onto KCC's Modern.gov system as soon as possible after the result for each division was announced.
- d) The CRO would like to thank Anna Ballara, Elizabeth Barber, Megan Bennett, Sarah Bonser, Siân Connelly, Joel Cook, Linda Elsalakhy, Jackie Hicks, Jo Holmes, Peter Healey, Georgia Humphreys, Lauren Jones, Tahj McFarlane, Jenny Ongley, Jaime Palmer, Hannah Rumball, Katy Reynolds, Sofia Seijas Rodriguez and Anna Taylor for uploading the results and reviewing the Declaration of the Results ahead of publication on the website.

## **11. Election Results**

- a) The interactive election results map originally developed for the 2017 election by Marketing and Resident Experience (MRX) team was updated for use in 2025. The map was populated using the data from Modern.gov and was displayed on KCC's website and at count venues, at the discretion of DROs. The live election results page was viewed 120,792 times on 2 May 2025 by 41,484 unique viewers.
- b) The result for each division was also published via KCC's X and Facebook feeds.
- c) A media hub was held in the Darent Room, Sessions House with representatives from local and national media organisations in attendance.

## **12. Public Awareness**

- a) The aims of KCC's public awareness raising activities were: to ensure the public were aware that the KCC election was happening amidst the national news coverage of cancelled elections elsewhere; to promote voting and ensure voters were aware of the Election Act changes that were in effect; to encourage candidates to stand; and to publish the statutory electoral notices in relation to the KCC election.
- b) Social media messaging began on 21 March 2025 with the publication of the Notice of Election and continued until 2 May 2025 on Facebook, X, LinkedIn & Instagram. Electoral Commission graphics were used for posts relating to key election dates and information; and KCC produced graphics and videos were used to explain council services to encourage voter turnout.
- c) On Facebook, there were 38 organic posts, with a reach of 175,182, generating 1,752 clicks, 1,119 reactions and 496 shares. On X, there were 38 posts. Analytics are unable to be accessed from X directly, but GrokAI

estimates these posts had a reach of 7,311, and generated 374 clicks, 13 reactions and 11 shares. On Instagram, there were 22 posts, reaching 34,687, generating 1,259 clicks, 57 reactions and 117 shares. On LinkedIn there were 38 posts with a reach of 7,460, generating 1,259 clicks, 57 reactions and 91 shares.

- d) Paid social media advertising began on 1 April 2025, but on 22 April MRX advised that Facebook had stopped the ads from running as they had been classed as political. Prior to the advertising being suspended there were 9 adverts, which had a total reach of 239,903, 11,682 clicks.
- e) Alternative paid advertising options were investigated, and the decision was taken to use the In Your Area platform to promote the election from the 24 April to 1 May. The In Your Area advert was served 13,303 times and generated 6,212 viewable impressions.
- f) In total, social media and paid advertising reached 470,755 people.
- g) KCC's election pages on the website were also updated; division maps, statutory notices and information for candidates and voters were provided. In total, the election webpages were viewed 208,628 times between 21 March and 2 May.
- h) The CRO would like to thank the MRX Project Team for their support throughout the election, including Lidor Lapid for the election results map; Kristie Lawton for the KCC Election webpages and notices; Andrew Bose, Charlotte Brown and Genevieve Case for social media and campaign messaging; Lucy Mayor, Jo Godden and the Press Office team for media liaison; and Christina Starte for coordinating communication activity.

### **13. Candidates' Spending Returns**

- a) In accordance with The Representation of the People Act 1983, agents for candidates standing at local government elections are required to submit a spending return and declaration to the Returning Officer within 35 calendar days of the election results being declared. This deadline was 6 June 2025. A separate declaration by each candidate must be submitted within 7 working days of the spending return being submitted.
- b) As of 26 February 2026, 16 spending returns are incomplete or outstanding out of a total of 427 candidates. The remaining documentation is available for public inspection in accordance with the legislation.

### **14. Election Accounts**

- a) DROs are able to claim back from KCC the costs of running the KCC election in their area in line with the KCC Scale of Fees & Expenses.
- b) The deadline for the submission of the districts' election accounts was 30 January 2026. All 12 district councils submitted their final accounts ahead of the deadline and are in the process of being reviewed. The unvalidated total cost is around £3 million.

## 15. KCC Election & Member Induction Project Team

- a) The CRO and Deputy CRO were supported by Siân Connelly who coordinated communications, election notices, nominations, prospective councillor and count preparation activities. As part of continuous development, effective succession planning and to assist with the planning and preparation of KCC elections, Siân completed the Association of Electoral Administrator's Electoral Administration Foundation Course in 2023. The CRO wishes to thank Siân for her outstanding work, support and commitment which directly contributed to the success of the election.
- b) The CRO was further supported by the Election & Member Induction Project Team particularly Anna Ballara, Linda Elsalakhy, Isabella Wilson in supporting the delivery of the election, Joel Cook, Tristan Godfrey & Katy Reynolds in supporting the pre-election period and Kay Goldsmith, Ollie Unthank & former colleague Jill Kennedy Smith for the development and delivery of the Member Induction Programme.
- c) In addition to assistance provided by the above-mentioned Project Team and colleagues in Infrastructure and MRX, the CRO was further assisted by:
  - Fiona Dawson for enforcement activity relating to campaign material on the highway
  - Jeanette Forster and Jodie Foster for support with KCC boundaries and mapping
  - Lee Manser for insurance queries relating to the election
- d) The CRO would also like to thank the Association of Electoral Administrators for the provision of training, advice and guidance over the course of the election.

## 16. Recommendation

The Selection & Member Services Committee is asked to note the report and endorse the actions of the County Returning Officer in conducting the 2025 Kent County Council election, as set out in the report.

## 17. Background Documents

Electoral & Boundary Review Committee, 27 March 2024

[Agenda for Electoral and Boundary Review Committee on Wednesday, 27th March, 2024, 10.00 am](#)

Electoral & Boundary Review Committee, 15 October 2024

[Agenda for Electoral and Boundary Review Committee on Tuesday, 15th October, 2024, 10.30 am](#)

Electoral Commission (2024) 'EA Bulletin: 408 England - May 2025 elections: supporting the security of elections (14/02/2025)', [EA Bulletin: 408 England | Electoral Commission](#)

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024) 'English Devolution White Paper (16/12/2024)', [English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

UK Parliament (2023) 'The Ashford (Electoral Changes) (No. 1) Order 2023 (16/02/2023)', [The Ashford \(Electoral Changes\) \(No. 1\) Order 2023](#)

UK Parliament (2025) 'The Maidstone (Electoral Changes) Order 2025 (11/02/2025)', [The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) Order 2025](#)

UK Parliament (2025) 'The Maidstone (Electoral Changes) (Amendment) Order 2025 (01/04/2025)', [The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) \(Amendment\) Order 2025](#)

## **18. Report Author and Relevant Director**

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