

By: Graham Gibbens, Chairman of the Electoral and Boundary Review Committee

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To: Electoral and Boundary Review Committee  
2 August 2012

Subject: Kent County Council Election – May 2013

Classification: Unrestricted

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Summary This report updates Members on work being undertaken with the District and Borough Councils in Kent to plan for the County Council elections in May 2013 and the publication of the election results on the County Council's website.

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## **1. Election Planning**

(1) The County Returning Officer (CRO) and his staff are already working closely with Deputy Returning Officers and Electoral Services Managers in the 12 District Councils in relation to planning and co-ordinating the 2013 County Council Elections.

(2) Committee Members will recall that there was an internal audit review of election expenses for the 2005 and 2009 County Council elections in 2011, which resulted in a number of recommendations being made as to future arrangements for dealing with the expense claims from District and Borough Councils for undertaking work on the County Council elections. The CRO has held productive discussions with the Kent Association of Electoral Registration Officers and Staff (Kent AEROs) Group and agreement has been reached in the following areas:

- (a) Each District/Borough Council will provide the CRO with a detailed costs estimate for running the County Council elections in their area.
- (b) Advance payments will be made to District/Borough Councils at no less than 75% and no more than 90% of the estimate supplied. It is the final decision of the CRO as to the exact proportion of the advanced payment, which will be based on an assessment of the performance by the relevant District/Borough Council at the previous County Council election, including the timely submission of accurate accounts.
- (c) The CRO will provide a standard document to each District/Borough Council, which will mirror the document used by the Election Claims Unit when operating national elections (for Government departments and the Electoral Commission), to ensure

that the format for submitting expenditure returns is consistent across all District/Borough Councils;

- (d) Clear definitions of the limits and detail of allowable expenditure will be provided to all District/Borough Councils based on the Scale of Election Fees and Expenses approved on an annual basis by this Committee. Because the CRO is not VAT registered, all costs on election expenditure claims will be shown as gross amounts. KCC will then reclaim the VAT on those amounts from HMRC.
- (e) All District/Borough Councils have been advised that they must submit their completed election expense claims to KCC within 6 months of the date of the election. Failure to do so will affect their advance payment for the following election.

(3) Further liaison meetings are planned with the relevant District and Borough Council staff between now and the elections next May to ensure that the County Council's expectations with regard to the running of the elections are achieved.

(4) At its meeting on 1 March 2012, this Committee asked for a report on alternative methods of running County Council elections, including the option of KCC running its own elections. The CRO has given this matter serious consideration and is of the view that the existing arrangements with the District and Borough Councils, which have worked largely successfully for many years, should continue for the following reasons:

- (a) The District and Borough Councils are the electoral registration authorities and are also responsible for running all other elections, viz. European Parliament; Parliamentary; District, Town and Parish; Police Commissioner and all referenda. If any of those elections or by-elections take place at the same time as a County Council Election, statutory rules on the combination of polls would apply, which means that whilst there is nothing to prevent the County Council running its own election, much of the decision-making about the organisation of the poll and the counting arrangements may not be the County Council's responsibility but allocated to whoever is appointed as the Returning Officer for the primary election. Accordingly, the County Council could only investigate alternative methods of running its own elections (and have complete control over the detailed arrangements) where there is not a combined poll, which is very infrequent;
- (b) Because of the role undertaken by the District/Borough Councils in running all types of elections, and because it is highly unusual for a 12 month period to go by without any elections taking place, the District and Borough Councils have built up considerable expertise in running elections, including significant investment in IT and other systems, which would take the County Council years (and considerable expense) to replicate;
- (c) All District/Borough Councils have supply contracts in place with the owners/occupiers of properties in which polling stations are located; printers, logistics companies; trained casual staff; etc, all of

which can be deployed at short notice in the run-up to an election. It would require considerable investment in time and resources for the County Council to seek to replicate these arrangements for their own elections;

- (d) There are three different electoral registration and election IT systems deployed in District and Borough Councils across Kent: Halarose; Strand; and Express. The IT systems are utilised for a number of essential election tasks, including the production of polling cards; matching postal vote requests and signatures to entries on the electoral register; producing postal votes; and clarifying the attestation of candidates' nomination forms. It would be a difficult and potentially expensive task for the County Council to seek to co-ordinate the output from three different IT systems used in the 12 District and Borough Councils on an infrequent basis;

- (5) The good working relationship with the Kent AEROs group and the supportive approach that has been negotiated in relation to the recommendations of KCC's internal audit team has meant that the CRO is confident that the County Council elections will be run efficiently and effectively by the District and Borough Councils in Kent, who are best placed to continue to perform this role for KCC.

## **2. Election results**

- (1) As Members will be aware, it has become custom and practice to display the County Council election results on a large screen at County Hall and on KCC's website as and when the results for the individual electoral divisions are announced. The CRO and his staff are currently undertaking work with colleagues in the Digital Services Team and the ICT service to ensure that this is achieved in the most effective and cost-efficient way for the elections in May 2013. It is intended the Committee Management System, "modern.gov", which is used to publish committee agendas, minutes and the Member pages on KCC's website, will be used to store the election results and feed the live results web page. This is a no-cost option as the software is already able to sort and publish this data. The modern.gov system has been tested by inputting the data from the recent Tunbridge Wells East by-election. The systems capabilities will be demonstrated at the meeting.

- (2) Work is underway to develop this in order to display the results in more detail on the day that the results are announced. The requirements for ICT to carry out the supporting work are currently being drafted.

- (3) Work has also been carried out by the Digital Services Team to produce some visual examples of how the website could display the results as they are announced in a usable and accessible way. The Digital Services Manager will be attending the Committee meeting to demonstrate these examples to Members and to get their feedback to inform the display of the election results.

### **3. Recommendations:**

The Committee is recommended to agree the following:

- (a) The Committee notes the progress made with regard to planning for the 2013 County Council elections and confirms that the running of County Council elections remains with the District and Borough Councils; and
- (b) that the progress made to date on the display of election results for the County Council elections in May 2013 be noted and that Members be invited to give feedback on the way that these should be visually displayed on the website.

### **Background papers:**

Kent Audit Review of County Council Election Expenses for 2005 and 2009

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