

From: Ben Watts, County Returning Officer
To: Electoral and Boundary Review Committee, 12 March 2025
Subject: Kent County Council Election Update – May 2025
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary This report asks the Committee to note the update about the Kent County Council election.

1. Introduction

- a) The Kent County Council (KCC) election will be taking place on Thursday 1 May 2025.
- b) The County Returning Officer (CRO), Ben Watts, is personally responsible for the conduct of the KCC election. The CRO works in partnership with the 12 borough, city and district councils who administer the KCC election in their area on behalf of the CRO. The CRO has appointed a Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) in each district to carry out his functions.
- c) The CRO is supported by the Deputy CRO, Lizzy Adam and the Elections Team: Siân Connelly, Isabella Wilson, Anna Ballara & Linda Elsalakhy from within Governance, Law & Democracy's (GLD) Operational Delivery team. The Elections Team is responsible for the coordination and delivery of KCC elections. It has a longstanding positive working relationship with the districts in delivering KCC elections. It has specialist and technical knowledge, expertise and experience in electoral legislation and processes.
- d) An Election & Member Induction Project Team has also been established with representatives from Democratic Services, Governance and Operational Delivery teams in GLD. The Project Team meets weekly to discuss and update on the key activities relating to the election, member induction and the pre-election period.

2. Devolution Priority Programme

- a) Following the English Devolution White Paper, published on 16 December 2024, inviting councils to apply for priority status, KCC and Medway Council formally asked the government to be included in its Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). The Leader of KCC also submitted a request at the same time for the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution to consider postponing the KCC election scheduled for May 2025.
- b) On 5 February 2025, the Leader of KCC was notified by Government that Kent and Medway had not been selected as one of the areas that would be

part of its DPP. This notification confirmed that the KCC election scheduled for May 2025 would proceed as planned.

- c) Whilst a decision was awaited on the DPP, preparations and planning for the KCC election continued. The Elections Team attended meetings with the Kent Association of Electoral Registration Officers and Staff (Kent AEROS) in September and December 2024. The CRO and Deputy CRO attended the Joint Kent Chief Executive meeting in December 2024. Communications with the Districts was maintained with regular update emails. Directions were also issued to all DROs in December 2024.

3. KCC Election Notices

- a) The CRO is responsible for the publication of the following statutory notices for the KCC election:

Notice of Election	Friday 21 March
Statement of Persons Nominated	Thursday 3 April
Notice of Election Agents	Thursday 3 April
Notice of Poll & Situation of Polling Stations	Wednesday 23 April
Declaration of the Result	Friday 2 May

- b) These notices will be published at www.kent.gov.uk/elections and displayed outside the relevant district council office.

4. Nominations

- a) Following the temporary reduction to subscribers for the 2021 election, the number of subscribers required for a nomination paper has been permanently reduced from 10 to 2.
- b) Nomination papers for the KCC election can be submitted between Monday 24 March – Wednesday 2 April on working days between 10:00 –16:00 to the relevant DRO's election office. Nomination papers will be available from local election offices, who will be able to advise about:
- The arrangements for informal checks.
 - Whether an appointment is required to submit a nomination.
 - The dates of candidate and agent briefings to outline the election process.

5. Voting

- a) Local government electors must be registered to vote by midnight on Friday 11 April to vote in the KCC election. Electors will be able to cast their vote in person, by post or by proxy.
- b) The deadline to apply for a postal vote is 17:00 on Monday 14 April. The deadline to apply for a proxy vote is 17:00 on Wednesday 23 April. In certain circumstances, an emergency proxy vote can be applied for, applications can be made up to 17:00 on polling day.

6. Verification and Count

- a) The CRO has directed that verification is to commence at 10:00 on Friday 2 May 2025 followed by the KCC count first and then any other counts afterwards.
- b) A KCC representative from GLD will be in attendance at each of the twelve counts to upload the result.
- c) The results from the counts will be displayed on an interactive election map on KCC's website. A media hub will be in operation at Sessions House, County Hall.

7. Election Act Changes

- a) The Elections Act 2022 brought in a variety of changes to the UK electoral system which will be in force for the KCC election on 1 May 2025. The changes that will impact the election, voters, candidates and campaigners include:
 - 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 has produced and paid for the material.
 - x. Changes to legal requirements for political parties and non-party campaigners.

8. Boundary Changes

- a) New electoral division boundaries in Ashford and Maidstone will come into effect on 1 May 2025.
- b) This Committee noted the changes in Ashford at its meeting on 27 March 2024 and endorsed the then proposed changes in Maidstone on 15 October 2024.
- c) Since the Committee last met, [The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) Order 2025](#) has been made. The Elections Team has been liaising with Ashford and Maidstone to ensure the smooth implementation of the new boundaries.

9. Electronic Polling

- a) The CRO has agreed for electronic polling to be used in polling stations in Ashford, Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells.
- b) Using Modern Democracy's digital polling station platform, polling station staff will use iPads to mark the electoral register and corresponding number list and issue paper ballot papers to voters.
- c) The platform has been designed to:
 - modernise the check-in and verification process
 - remove human error by polling station staff
 - reduce queuing times for voters
 - provide real time analytics and instant generation of all post-election reports for the DROs and their Election Managers
- d) The platform was used in the 2024 Police & Crime Commissioner election and the UK Parliamentary General Election in Tunbridge Wells. Testing has been undertaken in by-elections in Ashford and Maidstone.
- e) The CRO has been provided with assurances and legal advice relating to the legality, safety and security of the platform. 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. Communications

- a) The Elections Team has been coordinating with the Marketing and Resident Experience Team (MRX) to implement a social media plan targeting residents within Kent. The planned social media communications will cover:
 - Election notices
 - Information for prospective candidates
 - Voter registration details
 - Voting methods

- The importance of voting
 - Changes due to the Election Act
 - Election results
- b) In line with the 2021 Elections Social Media Content Plan, these communications will be shared on the following KCC channels: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.
 - c) In light of the cancellation of County elections in surrounding areas, MRX are preparing a media release to confirm the KCC election will be going ahead on 1 May.
 - d) Work is also underway to update the KCC website with key dates and other election information for voters and prospective candidates.
 - e) Additionally, communications are planned internally for KCC staff, to raise awareness of the election and encourage KCC staff to work in polling stations and at the count to support the districts.
 - f) The Election & Member Induction Project Team are preparing a pre-information pack for candidates, which will be shared following the close of nominations. Candidate email addresses will be collected during the nominations process to enable resources to be shared with candidates directly and enable the smooth and swift organisation of the induction process for elected Members.
 - g) The Elections Team has also been communicating with the Kent Youth County Council (KYCC) and are arranging a virtual session with the KYCC's 16-18 year old members about the KCC election.
 - h) Furthermore, the Elections Team is also collating resources to be distributed to schools, sixth forms, and colleges across Kent to encourage voter registration and participation.

11. Motion for Time Limited Debate

- a) At a meeting of the County Council on 12 September 2024, a Motion for Time Limited Debate, 'Protecting Kent from hostile election interference' was agreed by the Council. It was requested within this motion that the CRO present a report to this Committee updating it on the issues highlighted in the motion and outlining how they intend to reflect the relevant Electoral Commission guidance regarding the management of misleading information within preparations for County elections.
- b) This section of the paper serves as the CRO's update to the Committee. Whilst it should be noted that the CRO does not have the power to regulate the content of campaign material and is therefore limited in taking action to manage misleading information, KCC's election webpages have been updated to signpost to the Electoral Commission's guidance on disinformation and generative AI in order to raise awareness to candidates and voters

- c) Further, work is ongoing to improve the Council's resilience against hacking and other cyber threats with Governance & Audit Committee regularly receiving updates from Counter Fraud and Internal Audit actions related to fraud and cyber security.
- d) Cyber security training has been offered to Members, with five training sessions held from September 2024 – February 2025. These were a mix of in person and virtual training sessions. Cyber security training will also be included in the Member Induction Programme.
- e) KCC staff also have access to cyber security training via the Council's e-learning platform, as well as guidance and information available on the Council's intranet.
- f) The LGA has recently published a resource of best practice guidance for handling situations caused by, or involving, disinformation for member organisations based on the experiences of local authorities across the country.

13. Recommendation

The Committee is invited to note the contents of this report.

Background Documents

County Council, 12 September 2024

[Agenda for County Council on Thursday, 12th September, 2024, 10.00 am](#)

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](#)

[The Maidstone \(Electoral Changes\) Order 2025](#)

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