

## **Cabinet Office Elections Policy and Coordination Group**

**1<sup>st</sup> Meeting, 13.15-15.15, Monday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011  
Admiralty Arch North, G.45**

### **Attendees**

#### **UK Government**

**Alex Thomas** Acting Head of Division, Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office (Chair)

**Philippa Baker** Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office

**Paul Brunton** Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office

**Matt Carey** Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office

**Paul Docker** Elections and Democracy Division, Cabinet Office

**Jon Hoare** Electoral Registration Transformation Programme, Cabinet Office

**Neil King** Home Office

**Peter Newbitt** Wales Office

**Paul Rowsell** Department for Communities and Local Government

#### **Welsh Government**

**Hugh Rawlings** Director, Constitutional Affairs and Inter-Governmental Relations, Department for the First Minister and Cabinet

#### **Returning Officers (and/or representatives)**

**John Bennett (JB)** Greater London Returning Officer

**Michelle Chard (MC)** Manchester City Council

**Robert Connelly (RC)** Birmingham City Council

**Bill Crawford (BC)** Sunderland City Council

**Mark Heath (MH)** Southampton City Council

**Paul Morris (PM)** Borough of Poole Council

**Bryn Parry-Jones (BPJ)** Pembrokeshire County Council

**Mary Pitcaithly (MP)** Falkirk Council and Convener, Electoral Management Board for Scotland

**Shirley Plenderleith (SP)** Kettering Borough Council

#### **Association of Electoral Administrators**

**John Turner** Association of Electoral Administrators

#### **Electoral Commission**

**Peter Wardle** Chief Executive

**Tom Hawthorn** Head of Electoral Policy

**Chris Morgan** Policy Adviser (Electoral Policy)

**Andrew Scallan** Director of Electoral Administration

## Apologies

**Sir Howard Bernstein** Manchester City Council  
**David Cook** Kettering Borough Council  
**Stephen Hughes** Birmingham City Council  
**Barry Quirk** Lewisham Council  
**Joanne Roney** Wakefield Council  
**Sheila Scobie** Scotland Office  
**Dave Smith** Sunderland City Council  
**Graham Shields** Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland  
**Rachel White** Northern Ireland Office

## Minutes

### 1. Welcome and introductions

1.1 Cabinet Office (CO) opened the meeting and welcomed members to the newly formed Elections Policy and Coordination Group. The agenda for the first meeting was intended to give members an overview of the role of the Group and the kinds of issues it would be invited to consider. Future meetings would mainly focus on specific topics, such as funding and preparations for the 2015 elections but also cover wider strategic issues.

### 2. Co-ordination of Elections Across Whitehall (CO)

2.1 CO noted that the Group's membership was subject to change, and that the substantive membership of the Group would comprise of Police Area Retuning Officer (PARO) regional representatives, once they were appointed. CO advised that the EPCG's initial role would be to coordinate policy for the polls scheduled for May and November 2012, but would then take forward a similar role for subsequent electoral events. The Group would consider high-level strategic or cross-cutting issues, whilst specific issues would continue to be considered in greater detail by other groups such as the Elections and Registration Working Group.

2.2 It was noted that referendums were mentioned under point 1 but not under point 2 of the terms of reference, and it was agreed that point 2 would be clarified to make explicit reference to referendums. **Action: CO**

2.3 The Electoral Commission (EC) queried the extent to which the Group would act as a forum to coordinate the activity of the various Government Departments with responsibility for elections, giving the example of the need for a consistent approach to be taken to statutory forms. CO confirmed that any Departments looking to introduce or develop provisions for statutory elections would be invited to the Group, and that the Group's aim is to support consistency of elections policy across Government. It was agreed that the EPCG will be a useful forum for coordination, and this function of the Group needs to be emphasised in the terms of reference, which would be modified to reflect this point.

2.4 CO introduced a paper on the co-ordination of elections, which set out the roles of key Government Departments and listed other groups and individuals with a role in the coordination of elections. MP suggested that the Electoral

Management Board in Scotland should be added to the list and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) noted that it was also responsible for policy relating to the boundaries for local elections. It was agreed that the paper would be updated to reflect these comments. **Action: CO**

### Summary of Actions

- **CO to redraft Terms of Reference to reflect members' comments (Paras 2.1 & 2.3)**
- **CO to make requested additions to Co-ordination of elections paper (Para 2.4)**

### 3. Update on the Localism Bill

3.1 DCLG updated the Group on the progress of the Localism Bill, and the various electoral events associated with it, namely: mayoral referendums (and elections), council tax referendums and neighbourhood planning referendums. The Bill was expected to receive Royal Assent within a matter of weeks, and no major amendments were anticipated. It was noted that the rules for the corresponding elections would also need to be laid as a separate Order. Secondary legislation would also be needed for council tax referendums and neighbourhood planning referendums. DCLG noted that the Chair of the Electoral Commission had written to DCLG Ministers about council tax referendums, and a response would be forthcoming shortly.

3.2 DCLG advised that separate funding would be available for mayoral referendums, which ROs would be able to claim back from DCLG (via the Elections Claims Unit), and mayoral elections would be regarded as local elections (for which funding is provided through the Revenue Support Grant). It was noted that Mayoral referendums were planned for May 2012, and where there was a 'yes' vote, it was expected that mayoral elections would take place shortly thereafter. It was agreed that it would be desirable to establish firm timescales for legislation and implementation for all proposed polls under the Bill as soon as possible, taking account of the need for legislation to be in place in good time for planning and preparation to take place.

3.3 The EC asked what consideration and consultation would be conducted to ensure that, if mayoral elections and PCC elections were combined, voters would be clear about the distinction between the respective offices of PCC and local mayor, and whether any risks involved in combining two novel polls would be considered before a final decision was taken. DCLG affirmed that the EPCG presented an opportunity to consider such issues. The AEA asked whether a technical discussion could take place to consider more specific issues arising from this proposed combination, such as the hierarchy of polls and the rules for the counting of votes where constituency boundaries are not co-terminus, or the ROs for each poll in a given area are different individuals. It was agreed that a discussion around this would take place and the outcome would be reported to the Group at the next meeting of the EPCG. **Action: CO, DCLG, Home Office (HO), EC and AEA**

3.4 The AEA asked whether DCLG had any plans to bring the rules for parish polls into line with other local elections, or abolish them altogether. DCLG agreed that this issue needed further analysis. It was agreed that DCLG would keep the

Group updated on any developments in this area, and on the progress of the Localism Bill and associated measures more widely. **Action: DCLG**

## Summary of Actions

- **CO, DCLG, HO, EC and AEA to consider matters arising from the potential combination of mayoral and PCC elections in November 2012, and report back to the EPCG (Para 3.3)**
- **DCLG to keep the EPCG updated on the progress of the Localism Bill and associated electoral events (Para 3.3)**

## 4. May 2012- Local and GLA elections

4.1 CO informed the Group that an Order setting out the Rules for the GLA elections in May 2012 would be laid shortly. It was not anticipated that there would be any major changes to the existing rules, and the focus of the changes would be on technical corrections to the existing rules. JB hoped to be in a position to determine the GLRO's directions to CROs soon, and noted that these were contingent on the Rules being laid by the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission's performance standards for ROs being published.

4.2 The Group discussed the wider issue of the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers at elections held under the SV system, including GLA and PCC elections. CO noted that the Chair of the Electoral Commission had written to the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform about the interpretation of the current law surrounding the adjudication of ballot papers where a mark appeared in the second preference column only. A response to this letter would be issued shortly. The EC indicated that it intended to consider issues around SV ballot papers in the near future. The CO agreed it would be beneficial for various stakeholders to be engaged in this and that the outputs would be considered when looking at future policy. The HO advised that it was planning to conduct testing on the ballot paper design for the PCC elections, but this may not be the right opportunity for a comprehensive assessment.

## 5. Update on PCC elections

5.1 The HO set out the plans to hold PCC elections in 41 Police Areas across England and Wales (with the exception of London) from November 2012. The elections will be on a four year cycle, the plan being that they would revert to the date of the early May local elections from 2016. Whilst the primary legislation for the polls is already in place, the detail of the secondary legislation is being finalised, but would broadly follow existing electoral practices.

5.2 The Welsh Government asked how the funding for PCC elections will operate in Wales. The HO confirmed that it will be consulting on this subject. CO advised that it was working to establish how the elections would fit with the 2012 annual canvass, and will update the Group on this point by the next meeting. **Action: CO**

5.3 The requirement for each candidate to have 100 subscribers when standing at a PCC election was discussed. The HO confirmed that the rationale for this was to ensure that only serious candidates with a broad level of support stood for election. It was suggested that it should be relatively easy for candidates to secure enough signatures to meet this requirement, although concerns were

raised about the burden on ROs to check signatures at short notice, with reference to a number of electoral registers in the case of Police Force Areas. The EC suggested that a broader consideration of the rules around subscribers and the disqualification of candidates was needed, and that it would conduct a scoping exercise for a review of this issue in the New Year. CO noted this, and said that the EPCG would be a useful forum to take forward consideration of these issues.

## Summary of Actions

- **CO to update the EPCG on proposals for the timing of the 2012 Annual Canvass**

## 6. Possible Elections of National Park Authority Members

6.1 CO outlined DEFRA's proposals to introduce provisions for the election of members of National Park Authorities. It was noted that such elections already take place in Scotland and MP suggested they worked well. CO asked members to consider the possible options for the conduct of these polls, and agreed to keep the group informed of any developments. **Action: All**

## 7. Update on Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

7.1 CO updated the Group on the current status of the IER proposals. The White Paper had been subject to pre-legislative scrutiny, and the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee had just published its report on the proposals. The Government was considering this report, as well as responses to its consultation on the White Paper, and would publish the final proposals as part of the upcoming Bill. CO noted that the Group could expect fairly regular updates on IER.

7.2 RC and the EC asked when EROs could expect to have clarity on the funding of the implementation of IER, given that work was beginning to establish budgets for registration activities from 2013 and beyond. CO noted this point, and agreed to update the Group as soon as possible. **Action: CO**

7.3 The EC queried what work would be undertaken to ensure that the gap between the December 2013 register update and the proposed July 2014 invitation to register under IER did not result in voters failing to receive communications because they had moved, for example. The AEA suggested it would be desirable to have early clarification of the dates of elections due to be held during the transition to IER.

## Summary of Actions

- **CO to update the Group on the funding arrangements for IER as soon as possible (Para 7.2)**

## **8. Update on the electoral administration provisions within the upcoming Bill**

8.1 CO updated the Group on the electoral administration measures, apart from IER, which had been announced for inclusion in the upcoming Bill. The Government had announced: the extension of the timetable for UK Parliamentary elections from 17 to 25 days; that parish polls would no longer be automatically postponed where they fall on the same day as a General Election; that candidates standing under a joint-description at a UK Parliamentary election would be allowed an emblem on the ballot paper; and that polling place reviews would now take place every 5 years, in line with the 5-year electoral cycle for UK Parliamentary elections. Two measures had also been announced which would be brought forward in secondary legislation: mandating the 100% checking of postal vote identifiers; and the extension of emergency proxy voting to those absent because of Service or employment. The proposals which had already been announced were the only measures which were planned for inclusion in the Bill. CO agreed to keep the group updated.

### **Summary of Actions**

- **CO to keep the EPCG updated about the upcoming Bill**

## **9. Any other business**

9.1 No other business was discussed.