
PURPOSE
This case study sets out the experiences of Ryedale District Council's Democratic Services Team in relation to the impact of a parliamentary election being postponed owing to the death of a candidate and details what has to be done in these circumstances. It is intended to provide guidance to any other authorities that find themselves in this situation.

Which Council Aim does this case study deliver?
Aim 5 - To Transform the Council.

BACKGROUND
Ryedale District Council was the lead authority for the 2010 Parliamentary Election in the new constituency of Thirsk and Malton, which also takes in areas from Hambleton District Council and Scarborough Borough Council.

Ryedale District council was informed on 22 April 2010 of the death of the UKIP candidate who had been nominated to stand in the 6 May 2010 parliamentary election.

Because the death was after the close of nominations, in accordance with Parliamentary Election Rules the election had to be cancelled and rescheduled (ref PER 60-64) within a specified period time.

The decision was taken to re-schedule the parliamentary election for the 27 May 2010. The Council would still run its local District By-Election on 6 May however.

There was a particularly high level of local, national and international media interest, which had to be managed. This was because, in advance of 6 May, it was thought that this constituency may have affected the outcome of the election nationally, and then, after 6 May, it was seen as the first test of the new coalition government. Previously in Ryedale, as a safe rural constituency that had carried a large Conservative majority, there had not been any television coverage of our election counts and results – however on this occasion both BBC TV and Sky wished to do continuous live broadcasts from the venue throughout the night, in addition to the usual local media including BBC Radio York.

THE KEY ISSUES
What actions did we take?

The key was to make sure all relevant and interested parties were informed of the postponement as soon as practicable. The following people/groups/organisations were informed for the following reasons:
Before the postponement of the election was made public, the new date was agreed, so that both could be publicised at the same time, along with new registration and absent vote deadlines.

**Media Coverage**

Co-ordinated media coverage was a key success factor. Regular meetings were held between the Council’s Media Relations Officer and the Deputy Returning Officer to ensure that a clear and consistent message was delivered. Recognising that the message needed to be delivered to a range of different audiences, in addition to the electorate, a variety of media tools were used in order that as wide a coverage was reached as possible.

As soon as the death of the candidate was announced a press statement was issued and subsequent interviews arranged with the (Acting) Returning Officer or Deputy Returning Officer and the local media. These included:

- BBC Radio York
- BBC Look North
- Tyne Tees TV
- Gazette and Herald
- Ryedale Mercury

Once the new date was set key messages where publicised via:

- Press releases
- Regular updates on the Council's Website
- Other authorities' websites (cross boundary partners, County Council)
- Poster campaign
- Word of mouth
- Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter

A message was attached to the Email footer of all outgoing Council emails.

Due to the rarity of the postponement a great deal of national media coverage was achieved and all efforts were made to ensure that the new election date of May 27 was promoted.

All media coverage was monitored and copies made by the media relations officer.
Actions for the Democratic Services Team – the Project Plan

Critical to the success of this election was the publication to all appropriate staff of the revised project plan. A number of critical tasks needed to be carried out quickly:

1. Cancelling and rebooking polling stations – this also included locating and booking replacement polling stations where the planned station was not available on the new date. This had to be completed prior to the reissue of pollcards.
2. Notices were issued to go up at polling stations on the original election date
3. Cancelling and rebooking staff for polling stations; the count; postal vote opening and ballot box packing. This included having to secure replacement staff where people were not available for the new date.
4. Printers – a new schedule was agreed, including the prompt release of poll cards to be delivered before the original election date.
5. EROS system – a number of changes were needed to the Council’s software system including a change of election date, and transfer of all temporary postal and proxy voters to the new date (with letters then issued to inform these voters).

The Council had a district by-election on the same date as the Parliamentary election which still went ahead. This allowed the team to review the lessons learned from the District By-Election on 6 May and the experiences elsewhere in the UK of the parliamentary election. In particular the national issues around the close of poll and the number of ballot papers allocated to each polling station could be considered.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Frequently asked questions
The decision to postpone naturally prompted a host of enquiries from candidates, agents, the public and the media. Below is a list of the frequently asked questions and the answers we gave:

Typical Questions asked from candidates/agents:

What happens about election expenses?
*Double the short campaign expenses were allowed. Further information was provided by the Electoral Commission.*

What happens about free mail shots from Royal Mail?
*No extra ones except for the new candidate. Further information was provided from Royal Mail.*

What is the new date of the election?
*The Electoral Commission provided a timeframe in which the election had to be held in accordance with legal requirements. The ARO chose a date within that timeframe (taking into consideration parish elections and committee timetables etc).*

Can any other party change their nomination?
*As the death was after the close of nomination, other candidates could choose to withdraw. However they could not re-nominate.*

Can new parties/candidates put in nominations?
*Only the party whose candidate died could put in a new nomination.*
Why didn’t you continue with the election?  
*By law the election had to be postponed and rescheduled.*

Will the District By-Election still take place?  
*Yes. The District By-Election still had to take place on 6 May.*

**Typical questions asked from voters:**

Can I vote elsewhere?  
*Voters can only vote in the constituency in which they are registered.*

Will my vote still count as the rest of the Country have voted?  
*Yes, you are still voting for your local MP in your constituency and it could have an effect on which government is elected.*

The postponement not only impacted on the work and planning for the Democratic Services Team but on other people whose involvement is critical to the successful delivery of an election.

**Staffing Impacts to consider:**

The main issues facing the staff were an increased work load and informing the public. The Council’s Customer Services staff covered the telephone queries; service staff from various Council departments were released to assist with the additional work; the staff at Streetscene built the new arrangements into their schedules and senior staff took a lead responsibility for managing some of the sensitive media enquiries. In summary, all staff pulled together to ensure a successfully run election. An excellent example of team working across the Organisational Development service and the Council as a whole.

**Media Management**

It was recognised early in the process that the capacity of the count venue would be a significant challenge. In addition to the usual people to accommodate there was the added pressure of media equipment and reporters. Requests to attend the count were received from 8 television companies, 5 radio stations and 12 print media organisations. The media requirements were carefully assessed and consideration was given as to how to accommodate them in a way that did not compromise the Count but ensured their needs were also accommodated.

It was agreed that space be allocated in the Count room itself for the declaration and staging was erected to accommodate the equipment safely. In addition it was agreed that for the duration of the count itself a separate media centre be identified in order to assist the Media Relations Officer in the management of the various teams. The Council’s canteen was opened up, serving light refreshments for the media and staff and a section of the Count Centre’s Reception area. There was no access to the count centre itself until the declaration.

Technical set up issues also needed planning eg: where to park satellite trucks, where to run cabling, getting WiFi in the media centre. A list was prepared for security purposes of who was coming and from which organisation, and police carried out security checks where appropriate (eg: an enquiry from an Iranian TV company and a foreign freelance photo agency). Regular updates on proceedings in the count centre were relayed to the media centre on a large TV screen. With the eyes of the nations media on us, banners were ordered as the stage backdrop for the declaration of result (corporate image/promoting Ryedale as place to visit).
Local Elected Members
The local Councillors were kept informed as key local leaders. By ensuring they had the key facts meant they could inform their electorate.

External Contractors and Suppliers
As the postponement meant rescheduling work for the election good relationships with suppliers were of great importance.

Other local authorities
Regular discussions were held with neighbouring authorities to share expertise and exchange good practice. As the parliamentary constituency cross district boundaries this was essential in delivering the election in the case of cross boundary partners.

Other organisations, eg: the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators – providing training and advice.

Cross-authority support and planning
The Parliamentary constituency crossed three district boundaries. This split constituency was difficult to manage. Issues included:
- Different software systems - Additional IT support is needed. Additional costs – needs to be recognised in the fees and charges.
- Transfer of data is becoming a problem – conflicts with principles of data protection and government connects (large files to transfer).
- Confusion for voters, particularly where local elections were also taking place.
- Postal votes sent out on different dates – electors couldn’t understand why they received two different sets of paperwork for each election.
- Publicising the change of date in the areas outside of our authority was more difficult.

Who was involved and how on polling day?
Police – dealing with anti-social behaviour at polling stations, visiting polling stations, presence at the count.
Media management - press officer was primary point of contact. Police security on hand. Other staff updated display screens in media centre.
Health and Safety – Count risk assessment carried out in advance of polling day, in liaison with the Council’s Facilities Management staff. Streetscene and media then set up in accordance with plans.

Electoral Commission involvement
The postponement also prompted a visit from the Electoral Commission. They visited polling stations and two inspectors were employed to inspect the count. Although this added additional pressure for the staff on the night the report back from the Electoral Commission was extremely positive:
“You will be pleased to know that there were no concerns on the processes that we observed.”

What was achieved?
The postponed Election was successfully delivered, with 50.04% turnout (compared to South Staffordshire’s turnout of 37.7% in similar circumstances in 2005).

Feedback from candidates, agents and the Electoral Commission was excellent.
No significant problems encountered with postal vote opening, polling or the count. Minimal number of complaints received from electors.

High level of media interest was successfully managed and their presence accommodated at the count. Good feedback received from the media.

Who benefited and how do we know?
The candidates – were able to take part in a well run and problem free election.
The voters – were able to cast their votes for the MP for this constituency.
The media – were able to provide the coverage that they had requested.

LESSONS LEARNT

Getting the message across to every single voter is a really difficult challenge. The only way to ensure that every voter is informed is to write to each individual. This is worth doing if funds and time allow.

A large volume of calls were taken from postal voters to ask why their ballot packs had not arrived in advance of 6 May. In hindsight it would have been advantageous to contact all postal voters in order to reduce the number of calls.

Other methods could have been used to raise awareness such as leaflets on wheelie bins and publicity stands on market days in the main towns.

Use of pre-paid envelopes to encourage prompt responses from staff and polling stations to appointment and booking letters.

Given the success of the media centre, these arrangements will be carried on for election counts in the future.

CONCLUSION

This case study sets out how a parliamentary election was delivered under intense scrutiny, on a date of which there had been very little notice and dealing with a variety of unusual issues and queries. It will hopefully provide other authorities in a similar situation with some of the guidance that was not available in April/May 2010 when this authority was dealing with it.

FEEDBACK

Copies of the feedback received from the candidates and agents are appended to this case study.
Revised Project Plan for 27 May
Risk Register
Communications Plan
Training Plan
Equality Impact Assessment
Electoral Integrity Plan
Count Risk Assessment and Layout Plan
Postal Vote Layout Plan
Performance Standards Self-Assessment