



**THE ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL
ADMINISTRATORS**

**Official Post
Election Report**

May 2007 elections

July 2007

1. The Association

1.1 The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) was founded in 1987. It is the leading professional body in the United Kingdom solely interested in the administration of electoral matters. It is a non-governmental and non-partisan body and has nearly 1,550 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services.

2. Introduction

2.1 This is the first post election report that the AEA has published. Its purpose is to inform stakeholders of the issues that Returning Officers (RO) and Electoral Administrators (EA) experienced in the lead up to and the conduct of the May 2007 local elections. At the outset, the point needs to be made that, for many members of the AEA, these were the most difficult set of elections to administer within living memory.

2.2 Evidence has been gathered from many ROs and Administrators which has served to support this report and highlight key operational issues which were very difficult to overcome. The report focuses on the implementation of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the consequential secondary legislation, particularly absent voting processes, the collection and checking of personal identifiers, the later registration date, resources and funding.

2.3 The report will conclude with several recommendations for the Secretary of State for Justice to consider.

3. 2007 Elections

3.1 England

Elections for local Councillors were held in 312 Councils in England on 3rd May 2007. A number of these Councils had combined Parish and Town Council polls.

3.2 Scotland

Elections were held in each of the 73 constituencies and eight Parliamentary regions of the Scottish Parliament. Alongside these, elections were also held for each of Scotland's 32 Councils.

3.3 Wales

Elections were held in 40 Assembly constituencies and 5 Assembly regions across Wales.

4. Implications of the Electoral Administration Act 2006

4.1 There was general support for the changes outlined in the Electoral Administration Act 2006. The AEA along with other stakeholders had enthusiastically supported the modernisation agenda and saw the tightening of absent vote processes as a crucial initiative in restoring public confidence in

the democratic process following a series of court cases and judgments in recent years. Other changes such as:

- later registration deadline
- replacing lost ballot papers
- improving participation
- ability to rectify clerical and administrative errors
- introduction of performance standards

were also supported.

4.2 However, the AEA's formal response to the draft regulations published by the Department of Constitutional Affairs in March 2005 included significant concerns over the proposals for the collection of personal identifiers and the checking of these at the postal vote opening process. In addition to the AEA's response, many Councils and EAs raised similar concerns. It is fair to say that almost everyone involved in the conduct of elections in accordance with the statutory duties of EROs and ROs were concerned at the impact the regulations would have, both in financial and human resource terms. There were also issues of confidence in the process particularly from other stakeholders as the new systems had not been subject to any significant testing.

4.3 As the implications of the EA Act 2006 became apparent the AEA continued to raise concerns over various elements of the legislation.

Postal Vote Identifiers

4.4 The administration and collection of personal identifiers caused significant difficulties. AEA members expressed dissatisfaction with the advice issued by the Electoral Commission about the collection of the personal identifiers (EC26/06) and on handling requests for a waiver of the signature requirement (EC04/07). The lack of helpful advice from the Commission, particularly on the waiver was, however, a direct consequence of the legislation itself which failed to provide clarity on this point.

4.5 Circular 04/07 stated that "Confusion has arisen in that the legislation does not specify the steps a registration officer may wish to take in order to be" satisfied that an applicant was unable to supply a signature or a consistent signature for the reason stated. The circular then stated that EROs had "no power to ask for the nature or extent of an elector's disability". The only requirement was to ensure that a simple declaration was made by someone assisting the elector requesting the waiver.

4.6 This situation immediately compromised the integrity of the absent vote system. Given that the introduction of personal identifiers was a major step in dealing with fraud, this anomaly opened up the opportunity for fraudsters to potentially steal votes.

4.7 Additionally, it was noted that there was no legal limit to the number of waiver statements that could be made by a person on behalf of electors (for example, in a nursing or residential home).

4.8 The only categories specified for a waiver were the inability to sign, or sign consistently, due to any disability or inability to read or write. Issues of temporary disabilities would undoubtedly cause the RO problems in the eventual determination of the post voting statement yet advice was lacking in this regard. Indeed, the Electoral Commission's Guidance Note (EC21/2007) concentrated solely on specific advice and patterns to be followed in validating a signature and date of birth. It provided no examples of potential matches or mis-matches and did not deal with the temporary disability issue at all.

11 day registration deadline

4.9 There was support for the proposal to extend the registration deadline. There was concern, however, that the appointment of 11 days was too close to Election Day and compromised other key statutory timetable functions. The AEA recommended in its formal response that consideration should be given to an adequate objection period and a timeframe in which electors making late registrations can receive poll cards and apply for absent voting facilities.

4.10 The AEA proposed a registration deadline of 13 days before polling day and a reduction in the objection period to 48 hours. There appears to be no reason why the 13 day deadline and 48 hour objection period could not be common to rolling registration throughout the calendar year.

Hours of Poll

4.11 The extension of polling hours had been introduced for the May 2006 elections but for many, and on a much wider scale, this turned out to be a further complication in securing accommodation and staff. Whilst the consolidation of polling hours is supported, consideration of voting patterns and the usefulness of the additional hours will need to be kept under review.

Postal Vote Identifier Checking Process

4.12 AEA members saw this new process as potentially the most difficult to implement. Apart from the issues relating to the collection process outlined above (see 4.4), the AEA forcibly expressed its concerns over the wisdom of introducing these new measures without proper testing and validation.

4.13 In September 2006, the Chairman and Executive Director (Policy) made representations to the Minister about the considerable concerns that members had expressed over these new provisions. Those "representations" are attached to this report as Appendix 1 and information contained later in this report confirms and indeed substantiates the concerns that members had.

Participation

4.14 There have been concerns for many years about declining turnouts at elections. Previous to the introduction of the EA Act 2006, it was widely considered that the political parties were responsible for increasing participation and encouraging electors to cast their votes. The RO's role was seen as a purely operational responsibility. The new legislation did however introduce new responsibilities on ROs to increase participation at elections.

5. Training of Staff/Guidance/Advice

5.1 Because of the complexities of the new legislation both the Electoral Commission and the AEA embarked upon a series of awareness sessions. The Commission arranged regional seminars on the new arrangements and the AEA introduced two sets of comprehensive training programmes dealing with the collection of personal identifiers, the new provisions relating to clerical errors, lost ballot papers, new voting procedures and most importantly the personal identifier checking process.

5.2 Additionally, in advance of the introduction of the revised legislation, the Department for Constitutional Affairs combined with the Electoral Commission to set up a series of stakeholder meetings to consider the implications of the new provisions.

5.3 It was a feature at all these events that the issues of IT resilience, management of outsourced contracts, resources and funding needed very careful consideration. As a consequence, advice and guidance would be essential to enable the proper and consistent delivery of each election.

5.4 It was apparent at the first raft of EC seminars and AEA training sessions held in the latter part of 2006 that Administrators had two very significant concerns, namely:

- the collection of personal identifier data
- reliance on untested IT systems

5.5 In the main these issues prompted AEA Officers to raise these concerns with the Electoral Commission and Officers of the DCA as these concerns were now reinforcing the issues raised with the Minister previously. Given that ROs were now fully aware that these new arrangements were to be introduced, good advice was essential. It is the view of many ROs and Administrators who have submitted evidence to AEA Officers in writing, at Branch Meetings and at the post election seminar held in Coventry on 18 May that the advice given by the Commission was sometimes late, particularly in the case of signature and date of birth checking processes, and unhelpful in the case of how to deal with applications containing the waiver option and dealing with issues of temporary disability (see 4.8).

6. Funding

6.1 The AEA has argued for some time that additional central funding for electoral services is essential. As early as 2005, DCA recognised the impact on local authority resources that the EA Act 2006 would have in terms of the implications for electoral registration and election management. As a result, DCA identified additional grants for the 2006/7 and 2007/8 financial years. As has been widely reported before, the failure to ring fence this additional grant resulted in wide disparities in allocation to electoral services. An exercise undertaken by the AEA in 2006 revealed that out of 187 Councils researched, only 35% made the grant solely available for electoral services, around 30% allocated a partial amount and 35% none at all.

6.2 DCA made further grants available as follows:

- for the process of collecting and storing personal identifiers
- the checking of these against postal vote statements
- increasing participation

6.3 The AEA assisted in the exercise of identifying the probable cost of collecting the personal information but did so based on no previous evidence of undertaking such a task. After considerable debate on the basis of the funding and warnings by the AEA that the allocation would be insufficient, DCA announced a grant allocation based on the number of registered postal voters Councils had at 31 December 2006. This did not take into account the large volumes of potential additional absent voters identified through the annual canvass process that most Councils were unable, due to resource issues, to process before 31 December 2006.

6.4 It was apparent at the outset and certainly confirmed at the conclusion of the collection exercise that most, if not all Councils, had incurred costs over and above those anticipated. Significant issues with waivers, incomplete and incorrect information provided by absent voters and increased costs relating to IT and software provision all led to a more resource intensive exercise than envisaged.

6.5 The allocation of funding for personal identifier checking was also welcomed but was insufficient. Whilst it is appreciated that time did not allow a more detailed assessment of individual costs for each local authority, it has now become evident that some Council's costs were much greater than the funding provided. There was no precedent in identifying costs but the AEA had, in its representations made to the Minister in September 2006 (see Appendix 1), highlighted the costs that would be associated with local IT configuration, additional accommodation and staff, training and development. The AEA also referred to the Newham pilot where an overspend of £118,500 had occurred.

6.6 Applying the funds also caused problems in Wales. The make up of the Regions and responsible areas of "Local Returning Officers" were not co-terminous and, as such, identifying the appropriate level of funding across the area has become difficult.

6.7 Apart from the issues raised above, it became immediately apparent that resources would be stretched in most Councils. Despite the additional funding provided by DCA, 2007 electoral budgets had in most cases been set in the autumn of the previous year and, in fairness, those preparing budgets were unable to assess the full implications of the new legislation particularly as much of it had not been drafted. Set against the usual financial situation that now prevails in local government any opportunity for growth in electoral budgets was low or, in many cases, non-existent.

6.8 Information provided in section 7 below outlines the considerable resources that ROs were forced to apply to the elections in 2007. It is not, however, just a case of identifying additional finances. Electoral Services is a complex area with ROs and Administrators working to strict statutory deadlines and performance. Although additional funds provide the opportunity to appoint more staff, the need to train them and ensure all elements of registration and election management are delivered properly is paramount. In short, throwing money at the problem is not an effective solution, even in the short term.

7. The Issues

7.1 Appendix 2 provides actual evidence of the situation that prevailed in many electoral offices in May. The AEA had given ample warning to the Minister, DCA Officers and the Electoral Commission that rolling out legislation on such a wide scale would put ROs and their staff under considerable pressure. The introduction of the personal identifier collection and checking process in itself was over-ambitious without proper robust trials. The Government has been keen to introduce alternative processes and voting methods since 2000 in the form of pilot schemes many of which have been successful and supported by the AEA, EROs, ROs and Administrators. It was with real and proper concern that the AEA called for a deferment of the process until robust piloting had taken place. Unfortunately the fears that were expressed at that time came to fruition. AEA Officers have since requested that a panel of experienced Returning Officers and Administrators be convened to consider the practical implications of future legislation.

7.2 As processes change, more reliance is being placed upon suppliers particularly within the IT sector. Whilst computerisation undoubtedly improves efficiency and the ability to fast-track certain processes, the control of the Returning Officer is beginning to be compromised by this and the need to outsource certain aspects of the election gives further cause for concern.

7.3 Appendix 2 details actual and serious situations. A summary of these are as follows.

Suppliers

7.4 Because of the complexities of the new provisions, many Returning Officers were forced to outsource work. This included the PI collection process, the production of postal vote packs as well as the normal requirements of polling

cards and ballot papers. More attention was required for the printing of polling cards to include other information in an effort to increase awareness and participation.

7.5 A majority of ROs also sought to outsource the printing of postal vote packs to include the new statement and envelopes. The changes to the ballot paper design and need to include unique identifying marks and security marks resulted in a number of ROs seeking new contractors as some existing printers did not have the capability to comply with the new requirements.

7.6 What this all led to was a restricted market place. ROs were generally courting the same contractors and a fear of over capacity became clear in early 2007. Many of the comments made in Appendix 2 refer to substantial problems in meeting timescales. Several IT suppliers were having significant problems installing the signature and date of birth recognition systems. Much of the installation was too late to undertake any realistic testing and "fixes" in some cases were being applied right up until election day.

7.7 In some areas, electoral data base information (postal voters' details) were corrupted leaving contractors printing the postal packs in an impossible position in trying to meet specified deadlines.

7.8 The need to use new printers and contractors in some areas led to a number of problems in getting the data/information right. Because of the need to comply with certain deadlines and obvious need to issue postal votes by a specified date, some ROs had little opportunity to undertake the usual high level checking processes to ensure the information was compliant. This approach flies in the face of all good project management practices in terms of introducing a complex IT. system.

7.9 Unfortunately, it was also the case in some areas that suppliers had failed to reach deadlines because of their own internal problems be that over capacity, lack of resources or understanding of the requirements. In several cases, ROs and the electoral officers were being fed unreliable information on delivery dates and quality of products.

11 day registration deadline

7.10 The extension of the deadline for electors to register to vote was generally welcomed but this, in itself, introduced other difficulties. The 5 day objection period for these electors further condensed the time available to comply with other issues such as poll cards and postal votes. The difference in deadlines for registration and postal vote application on the same day also produced problems whereby a late applicant for registration (after 5pm on the 11th day but before midnight) would be too late to apply for a postal vote.

Resources and timescales

7.11 As outlined in other parts of this report, the pressure on ROs and Administrators was extremely high. Many had planned to deal with the

elections in the usual way but the new provisions of the EA Act 2006 introduced considerable extra pressure. One of the key objectives in the AEA's training strategy is highlighting the virtues of project planning. To apply this approach does though require the proper allocation of resources, trained and developed staff, the resilience of IT and support mechanisms, good contractors and planned contingencies. Unfortunately, not all Councils are in a position to apply this approach and those that were not clearly suffered more than others.

7.12 What is clearly evident is that the timescales to undertake all the statutory processes, apply rigorous quality checks on both contractors and products requires adequate time. Time pressure compromises accuracy and the ability to deliver. The timetable pinch point occurs around the latest date for the delivery of nomination papers. This triggers a considerable amount of processes many of which (e.g. poll cards, postal poll cards, postal ballot packs and ballot papers) are outsourced. This cascade of tasks applies significant pressure on contractors to deliver and on Administrators who need to ensure appropriate quality checks are made.

Personal Identifier checking process

7.13 Section 6 of this report refers to the practical issues associated with the PI collection process. The checking of the PIs however brought other problems. Apart from the aforementioned request to the Minister to defer this part of the legislation, most if not all ROs realised the potential ramifications of only applying a 20% check as outlined in the legislation. This appeared to be an unfair approach in that all other aspects of electoral law and good practice highlights the need to apply equality to every elector and, by implication, therefore every vote that is cast.

7.14 To undertake the full 100% check at every opening session did however place considerable reliance on IT systems. This process alone demanded a complete re-assessment of resources, both in financial and human terms, appropriate accommodation, facilities for observation and above all 24/7 expert standby arrangements.

7.15 As will be seen many ROs were forced to abandon the 100% check. In the main this was due to IT failure but other issues such as time and available staff resources also had an impact. The decision to defer to the 20% check was clearly unavoidable in these cases but, in doing so, an element of mis-trust and reduced confidence crept into the proceedings. Despite the AEA's strong views on advising 100% checking, the safety valve of 20% became an unexpected bonus in times of real pressure.

7.16 The legislation, as currently drafted, provides no power for the RO to follow up situations where postal voters have failed to understand the requirements of the postal vote statement or given incorrect information at the application stage. The entitlement for postal voters also to contact the RO and confirm receipt of the postal vote is also unhelpful as no further action can be taken other than merely confirming that the postal vote was included in one of the provisionally rejected lists.

Media intrusion

7.17 It is not unusual for the media to seek out problems associated with the elections and this has indeed been a regular feature since the problems encountered in Birmingham in 2004. This year the media swiftly latched on to the difficulties being experienced by ROs, particularly in the area of personal identifier checks, and the inability of software to undertake that process in many parts of the country. The AEA was mindful of the need to restrict scaremongering but found itself caught between real concerns being expressed by ROs and that of the DCA which, despite being aware of the problems, failed to recognise them and be positive about addressing them. There was also a lack of intervention by the Electoral Commission in maintaining a stance on the difficulties being experienced in electoral offices.

7.18 It was clear from the vast number of media enquiries made to AEA Officers and the eventual reporting of comments that the media were intent on generating a picture of real conflict between the Commission, DCA and those attempting to resolve the issues in electoral offices. Despite the fact that opinion was divided on a number of issues, as this report clearly demonstrates, the public perception was one of confusion. This does little to improve trust and participation in the democratic process.

8. Pilot Schemes

8.1 A number of pilot schemes were again introduced in May. Although the AEA maintains its support for this agenda, the focus of DCA and indeed certain suppliers seemed more directed towards the success and support for these when electoral offices elsewhere were struggling to maintain normal service and cope with the severe difficulties which are reported in Appendix 2.

9. Conclusion

9.1 No one associated with the organisation of elections denies that the process has inherent pressure and problems. Most, if not all electoral offices, strive to deliver an election to the very best of their ability ensuring that every elector who has a right to vote can do so and that the election of each representative is conducted fairly, consistently and in accordance with the Rules.

9.2 To achieve these objectives, however, the RO must have the proper resources available to comply with the statutory responsibilities. May 2007, and the lead up to it, saw many ROs and their staff in precarious situations brought about by a variety of issues.

9.3 Despite the undoubted need to bring elections into the 21st century and general support for the provisions of the 2006 legislation inappropriate consideration was given to the repercussions or practical implications of certain parts of the legislation. To be able to absorb and comply with new arrangements, the staff responsible for the conduct of the elections must first

know that the requirements are deliverable and that adequate resources are identified and available to them.

9.4 It has been a feature for many years for legislators to introduce new Rules without any understanding or appreciation of what the impact and practical implications will be. The outcome of the May 2007 elections was, to the uninitiated, that they were conducted satisfactorily. Eligible voters were able to vote, candidates did get elected. However the real issue lies behind those outcomes.

9.5 ROs in the main delivered because of the unstinting work, dedication and professionalism of their staff. Many were forced into practices alien to normal arrangements and probably feared the possibility of challenge or close scrutiny. Plans in many areas were seriously compromised by the failure of suppliers and, given that this was an election year with large parts of the country not being contested, the ramifications for a General Election are indeed extremely worrying unless measures are introduced to address the key issues identified in this report.

10. Recommendations

10.1 That the application process for a postal vote be reviewed and consideration be given to requiring applicants to state a reason for a waiver similar to those relevant to proxies.

10.2 That Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers be given power to investigate personal identifier information and make corrections.

10.3 That the Electoral Commission reviews the advice given on waivers and personal identifier checking.

10.4 That a thorough review of funding for electoral services be undertaken.

10.5 That all future funding for electoral services is ring fenced.

10.6 That a debate be initiated on the future provision of electoral services in the UK.

10.7 That a panel consisting of experienced Returning Officers and Administrators including separate representation from Wales and Scotland be appointed to consider the specific implications of future legislative changes.

10.8 That current election timetables are reviewed and the period between the close of nominations and polling day be increased by a minimum of 5 working days.

10.9 That the performance of suppliers be reviewed at the earliest opportunity with the objective of identifying an adequate data base of suitable contractors for future elections.

10.10 That the 11 day registration deadline be reviewed including the alignment of deadlines for registration and postal vote applications.

10.11 That the Electoral Commission and Ministry of Justice along with the AEA develop a media strategy panel.

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THE ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

Postal Vote Identifiers - Issues and Concerns

Introduction

1. The Association of Electoral Administrators' (AEA) formal response to the draft regulations included significant concerns over the proposals for the collection of personal identifiers and the checking of these at the postal vote opening process. In addition to the AEA's response, many Councils and Electoral Administrators raised similar concerns and it is fair to say that almost everyone involved in the conduct of elections in accordance with the statutory duties of Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers are concerned at the impact the draft regulations will have both in financial and human resource terms. There are also issues of confidence in the process particularly from other stakeholders. Finally, the Association has concerns that, if the regulations are implemented as currently drafted, there could be a further lessening of trust in the postal voting system within the country generally.

Draft Regulation 3 – the collection of personal identifiers

2. The regulations as drafted will require the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to collect personal information from all existing and new postal vote applicants. The current proposals will require the ERO to potentially write three times to an applicant to obtain and confirm this information. Given that response rates to electoral registration and election matters from the general public are in decline, this is likely to have significant resource implications. It could also have an adverse effect on participation and turnout rates. An assessment of the financial implications of this process is given later.

3. Apart from the data collection process, other issues will need careful consideration:

- The format of the application form to ensure data can be properly captured and stored electronically
- The data standards to be applied in terms of the collection, security, storage and retrieval of the identifiers
- Compatibility of application forms
- The software and hardware facilities required
- The human resource implications for local authority election offices

Draft Regulation 7 – checking personal identifiers

4. The draft regulations propose a 20% sample check of postal vote statements at the opening process. We understand that the intention is the 20% check will apply to every ballot box that is opened. Of itself, that is a major undertaking given the relatively small number of returned postal vote envelopes that can be contained in a single ballot box. Regardless of the resource implications which flow from that, there are significant issues associated with this requirement many of which were included in the AEA's original response. These issues are categorised as follows:

The rationale for 20%

5. Essentially, every vote carries equal weight. As such equal consideration should be applied to each vote as the current election rules require. The sample 20% removes the consistency of this approach potentially denying good votes and allowing others which may not satisfy the rules. This approach also opens up the possibility of vastly increased number of challenges to election results based on an approach which is likely to lead to inconsistent and random practices. If this were the case, it would undoubtedly undermine confidence in the whole electoral process.

Checking process

6. There are a number of concerns associated with the checking process. It is without doubt that candidates, agents and Returning Officers (ROs) and their staff wish to see a transparent process based on consistency and fairness. To ensure this, it is the AEA's view that electronic signature recognition is essential in most if not all cases if only to provide a consistent approach to the initial querying of an identifier. Whilst this will bring significant financial and resource implications, the following issues illustrate why this approach should be adopted.

Availability of records

7. To undertake the checking/validation process, ROs will need direct access to the data previously collected, i.e. signature and date of birth records. Because of the high increase in postal voters over the past few years, it is not uncommon for ROs to be dealing with in excess of 20,000 postal votes at an election. Indeed some areas will have up to three or more times this amount. It is probably impossible from an operational, logistical and resource viewpoint to initiate a process of manual checking by accessing records in such cases of high volume postal voting within a 20% parameter. Indeed, even in an election with a smaller number of postal votes (say, 1000), the process of comparing the data is going to be time consuming, difficult and lead to inconsistent approaches. Electronic recognition facilities would substantially decrease the time and afford greater consistency (but see comments below).

Devolved Count Centres

8. In many electoral areas, several devolved count centres are used in local elections. For example, Leeds has 14 different count centres. This will bring added complexities to the checking process no matter what methodology is adopted.

Consistency of approach – rejecting ballot papers

9. It is universally agreed and is indeed the strap line of many political campaigns during election periods that every vote counts. If that is to be the case, then every vote requires equal consideration. To achieve this, as previously mentioned, an electronic process is the only realistic option. There are, however, other important issues.

10. The decision on rejecting a vote is normally made by the Returning Officer or a formally appointed Deputy. The requirement to check even 20% of returned postal votes will apply enormous pressure on a few officers but candidates and agents have a right to expect that every vote, doubtful or otherwise, will have been given appropriate consideration. Indeed, current legislation expects that candidates and their agents have a right to be involved in every case where a vote is to be rejected and to express their own views on that proposed rejection. This well-established principle will have to disappear if the current proposals are implemented. Such a step is seen by many as a retrograde one as should any suggestion that removes equitable scrutiny from the election process.

11. Manual checking will not realistically provide the opportunity to achieve proper scrutiny and checking by key stakeholders in the process. Equally, ROs are not experts in signature recognition and it is unrealistic and probably impossible to apply a consistent tolerance level to their matching.

12. Whilst electronic facilities will largely overcome this problem, the issue of several officers having to deal with potentially "bad" postal vote statements will raise concerns over consistency and process. The use of electronic systems, however, will also have an effect on the ability of candidates and agents to "oversee" the complete process in the sense of having enough people to participate all stages of that process and at every opening session.

13. This whole situation will be exacerbated when different ROs are appointed for certain elections such as a ward contained in an adjoining parliamentary constituency outside the local authority area. This is particularly true in the scenario of the local election RO employing manual techniques at one election and the Parliamentary RO applying an electronic process at another for the same postal voters. There is also the issue of the Royal Mail sweep where there is already inconsistent practice on the use and take-up of this facility. We considered it to be inappropriate that some ROs have this facility and others do not. Those that do are likely to undertake either a full or 20% sample check bringing yet further inconsistency to the process in areas where ward boundaries straddle constituencies.

Identifying potentially fraudulent votes

14. The current system of manual checking of postal votes is a time-consuming and costly process. It is also a process that is open to abuse and manipulation. The current system of manual checking of postal votes is a time-consuming and costly process. It is also a process that is open to abuse and manipulation. The current system of manual checking of postal votes is a time-consuming and costly process. It is also a process that is open to abuse and manipulation.

Manual Checking

21. It is difficult to predict the costs as this type of arrangement has not been properly tested. It is anticipated, however, that staffing and accommodation costs will be significantly higher.

The Estimate of Costs

22. It is accepted that the majority of software costs will be incurred in year 1. However, depreciation costs, additional licence fees and maintenance agreements will be required thereafter. In addition a move to 100% checking would see further increased costs for resources such as hardware, staffing and accommodation.

Conclusion

23. It is without doubt that everyone involved in the provision of electoral services wishes to conduct an election which is transparent, fair and consistent with good practice. The primary objective for a Returning Officer is to ensure that everyone who has made a conscious effort to cast a vote has that vote counted. Elements of the draft Regulations for postal voting personal identifiers will compromise that position. Additionally, the current proposals, if not properly resourced, will undoubtedly lead to an inconsistent approach in terms of the validation or rejection of postal ballot papers. These proposals represent a significant change in process not just for the elector but for the validation of postal ballots which will amount to millions of votes next May. It is critical that such a fundamental change is introduced with due and proper process and the necessary resources to ensure that voters are not disenfranchised.

24. It is only right that the election process is given close scrutiny particularly given regular close results at local elections and the resultant hung Council administrations that have become more prevalent in recent years. Against this background, it would be wholly inappropriate to see outcomes challenged on the grounds of uncertainty in the actual process of electing our representatives.

25. Since 2000, the Government has been keen to explore a modernising agenda for elections. The approach to change has been to trial alternative processes in order that full assessment and evaluation of all aspects is undertaken and considered by stakeholders. The Association strongly recommends that the Government considers delaying the implementation of the regulations as currently drafted and, before doing so, engages in a series of pilots on personal identifiers for May 2007 to enable a full and proper evaluation.

26. The AEA has contributed strongly to the agenda for modernisation and, as the only representative stakeholder which experiences and plans for all practical implications associated with the conduct of elections, it is indeed qualified to foresee and identify significant problems in adopting these proposals. The proposals contained in Amendment Order Number 2 do present serious practical difficulties in the shape of financial and human resources, consistency of practice and the integrity of the electoral process.

27. The proposals also run the risk of provoking complaints about and legal challenges to election results on an unprecedented scale. If that were to happen, it would undoubtedly bring the election process into disrepute and further erode the public's confidence in what should be seen as the corner stone of the democratic process in this country. Such an effect should not be countenanced. We strongly urge, therefore, the Government to abandon the current proposals and instead to encourage a limited number of pilots to properly test and refine this system.

John Turner
Chairman

Malcolm Dumper
Executive Director (Policy)

September 2006

AEA Members' Comments

Local Elections

May 2007

PERFORMANCE OF SUPPLIER(S)

We used J. We have used them successfully for postal packs in the past but this time they also did our ballot papers. We had the following problems:

- The company requested ballot paper details in a spreadsheet for each contest. This meant re-typing data from D. They did not make their requirements clear and the job had to be done twice. There were set-up errors which, if they had been able to take either data or a pdf direct from our D software would not have occurred.
- Each spreadsheet was headed by a two digit code to identify the electoral area and another two digit code to indicate the number of seats contested. In spite of this the company got this wrong, not just once but in several repeated proofs of some of the ballot papers.
- When the final proofs were agreed for the parish ballot papers I asked J to destroy the previous data files. They did not do so as the next bullet point shows.
- The postal ballot papers for one parish ward came in correctly inviting voters to vote for no more than three candidates. Three hours into the poll a candidate reported that the ballot papers in the polling station instructed voters to vote for no more than two candidates. I immediately instructed the PO to amend by hand all remaining ballot papers, action then confirmed as appropriate by ***** at the EC. As a result, ninety one people who voted early in the day were given an incorrect option in the polling station and a local elector has been advised on the procedure for an election petition.
- Polling station ballot papers were still being delivered to us in the afternoon of Wednesday 2nd May and the final ballot boxes were handed over to POs at 7 p.m.
- The corresponding number lists for the postals did not correctly list the ballot paper numbers for the parish election. All our postals ran late due to the problems of agreeing the ballot paper proofs and there was no time to ask for the corresponding number lists to be re-printed. Fortunately there was a remedy in that the parish number also matched the district number. However, in the lateness of getting postals out as late as, by hand, on the Saturday before the election, one ward went wrong giving us a further problem. Whilst this was our error, it would not have happened if we had been able to stick to our timetable.
- The late postal issue included some ballot papers which J were unable to supply when we wanted them. An adjoining local authority helped us out by printing enough for three contests as they had fairly sophisticated printing equipment. This was all on the Friday before the election!

The five authorities in ***** worked together this year to come up with a postal vote solution which, it was hoped would save money and time. Unfortunately, we chose A

The initial stages went well and we all had confidence in company from the meetings we held with them. However, at close of nominations, the upload of data was a complete problem. It would seem that A had not discussed their new upload procedure with D or E (2 of our suppliers), however, ***** used B and seemed to be ok.

Following on from close of nominations, it took until Monday 16 April to get ballot paper proofs. To get to this stage had included broken promises and "it will be with you by 9am" and even a "you will have to come in on Saturday to check". As we still did not have a single ballot paper (of 29 for *****) that was usable, we took the decision on 17 April to pull out of the contract.

***** Four pulled out. ***** were in a better position than us as they had the proofs and information they needed (possibly because they were working with B data) so they remained in the contract.

Using a local supplier who had quoted for postal packs and ballot papers, we reverted to the 3 envelope method and issued our postal votes on Saturday 21 April. From the response rate (75%

as at 2 May in *****), I believe that the public probably understand this system much better than one-piece mailers and we will consider using this tried and tested method at future elections.

I'm not sure what the solution is to these problems, but I think many ROs will be looking for local suppliers next time. It would be useful for all concerned if the suppliers who had difficulties could be "brought to book" by AEA/Electoral Commission to find out what the problems were and if they can be addressed.

All in all, this was a really bad experience, but having made the decision to leave the contract, all went well under our control - a lesson learned !

I am completely prepared to second anybodies comments about how abysmal B and L have been in facilitating this.

18 April

We have B and the A system and are still not able to test the system, though may be able to later today. In addition we have asked A to do our packs. Our ballot papers are being printed elsewhere (locally - traditional) and we shall "stuff". I asked for packs today so could check tomorrow and despatch on Friday. The Friday date has been given to applicants for postal votes. This was agreed and data given early to A so that the deadline could be achieved. I was then told delivery Thursday as they did not have envelopes. I have been told this morning that they will not arrive till Friday, no reason given except still not printed - I have twenty plus staff lined up for 10.00am and the post office to collect at 4.30pm. I know the data I sent was in good order because they complimented me on it. Am examining options at the moment - pull the plug now and despatch on Monday, but I only have the room for a couple of hours. Get more staff in so can get it done on Friday pm, but not sure when we shall get them on Friday. Will not post some on Friday and rest on Monday as unfair on those who have to wait.

Even worse is that I checked the printer proofs over Easter and was sent revised proofs last week, but they were wrong (all said vote for zero candidates!) - the originals had been right. If I had only checked the alterations I would not have picked it up. Have not seen anything since and no confidence that corrections have been made. Am considering getting notices printed before hand so can insert correct ones as we go if necessary. Cannot remove instructions if wrong because the elector's address is on the reverse and needed for window envelope.

Just thankful I am doing my own ballot papers, but even then I had problems because the Council's nominated printer pulled out on Maundy Thursday afternoon giving me a nasty few hours.

I hope to retire in two years, a feeling reinforced by the thought of a combined General / Euro / County election in June 2009 (two weeks after my 60th!!)

21 April

Just to keep you up to date. I am in the office this afternoon to check if my PV packs were delivered as promised. They were not! Thought I would write this now as expect to be busy on Monday. In any event, I decided yesterday (Friday) to start plan B. We have printed three small wards in house using the envelopes we hold for by-elections. I have ordered envelopes from a local printer that will be over printed with all the non-variables. They will feed these to me during the course of Monday whilst the staff called in to dispatch will write on things like ballot paper numbers. We have laser labels on order for delivery Monday am on which we will print multiples of ward names and the elector name and address labels. The RO has promised me whatever staff I need and I hope to have the bulk or at least half out on Monday. The rest should go out on Tuesday if all goes to plan. We had planned to issue on Friday last. Not only do I now not have any real expectation that they will arrive, but I have little confidence that if they do arrive, they will be right. I can remember writing poll cards by hand by the light of a candle during the coal mine

strikes in 1974. Never thought I would be doing something similar in 2007! All I need now is a power cut to put the PC's out.

Our problems are not in relation to the postal vote checking but are in relation to the fact that our contracted company M cannot get the postal ballot packs out in the time scale they agreed and promised. They were contracted to produce and fill the packs including the ballot papers. These packs should have been sent out either this Friday (20th) or next Monday (23rd) at the latest. I received a telephone call yesterday morning from ***** of M saying that one of their printing companies had let them down and offering us three choices.

1. We could have all the envelopes and security statements and put the packs together ourselves and then add the ballot paper;
2. They could fill all the packs together just leaving us to insert the ballot paper; or
3. We could let them do the whole job, as originally intended, but they could not guarantee getting the completed packs into the post until next Wednesday (25th) or Thursday (26th) April.

If we went for option two deliveries of the packs and ballot papers was promised by 10.00 a.m. Monday, 23rd April 2007. This date then got slightly better in that they were promising delivery on either Saturday (21st) or Sunday (22nd) After some deliberation we have accepted option two, which does put us to some considerable extra organisation i.e. having to organise teams to actually issue the ballot papers, change arrangements with the Royal Mail.

I have been working in elections for 33 years and have found that last four elections e.g. 2004 (combined European and Borough), 2005 (combined Parliamentary and County), 2006 (just Borough) and this one the most difficult and stressful in all those years. This situation has been brought about in the main by postal voting and the constant changes in electoral law most introduced in a hurry without any thought as to how they are actually going to be implemented

18 April

I'm using M for printing and they phoned me yesterday to say their ballot paper subcontractor couldn't print on time so postal votes will be delayed for a few days.

We are in a pilot with ***** , you have probably heard from them already!

We are using the A solution and we are still having problems loading the software and scanning the absent votes in.

We have received no ballot paper proofs from them; we have had an envelope proof on which we were told we could make no changes.

We have not yet seen the postal voting statements.

The company doing our pilot received test ballots from As printers which were frankly substandard.

23 April

***** Council has experienced a delay in supply of postal voting packs and ballot papers from our supplier (J). As a result we have had to put our first issuing session back from today to

tomorrow and I'm still waiting to hear when our second batch of packs will be available (they had been due by the end of the weekend).

26 April

A quick update on postal voting issues here to add to the wider picture of what has been happening. I'd already let you know our first issue was delayed a day (which is relatively minor in the overall scale of things). We were also getting our ballot papers from the same supplier and what we did finally receive was incomplete in that two sets of parish ballot papers had not be provided and there were some errors on other papers representing previous versions of the papers and not the final proofs which were signed off. As one of the missing papers was part of a combined issue it meant we were unable to issue that ward. By Tuesday we decided we had to issue the ward paper and have since run a separate set of stationery in house to do the parish issue. We are still waiting for our second batch of postal vote stationery, promised for tomorrow. There also appear to have been issues with waivers not having been correctly picked up so they received the full paperwork asking for a signature. Finally the quality of the barcode printing on the first batch of paperwork is so poor we have not been able to read them. As a result we reverted to a 20% check as it meant the barcode figures had to be manually typed in, but to add insult to injury many of the strings of letters and characters that make up the barcodes have been truncated so we are having to look up the details in order to input them.

We feel we are very much in the hands of our suppliers. It has been really hard work getting them to produce the paperwork from our final data download (which we are promised for late tonight/tomorrow). This is not somewhere we ever want to find ourselves again, but equally printing 10,000 plus sets in-house is not really an option either.

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- 3 Untested changes
 - 4 Fixes arriving daily
 - 5 No time to plan
 - 6 Lack of trained staff
 - 7 No coordination
 - 8 Late registration problems
 - 9 No confidence in Software company
 - 10 Very de-motivated staff
-

Things are pretty dismal at *****. M let us down on Tuesday, they were supposed to issue today, we are now having to issue 8000 avs in house.

The B Scanning system just does not work, and with every update we receive it seems to get worse. We have not yet managed to scan the final 250 application forms, and are nowhere near getting the comparison software to work. Did some sums yesterday and he has worked out that it will take one person 7 hours a day for 5 days to manually check 1200 postal votes (20%). We do not have any resources for this and certainly have no staff with any expertise in identifying genuine signatures.

At the moment we cannot see the B Software working at all by Election Day.

On a general note we had poll card delays with M and M have rung us to say they're having major problems with their ballot paper printers. We use our own printers so we're okay. M have quoted the new legislative requirements as a reason for delay without being specific.

We have been experiencing problems with the late delivery of ballot packs from M. We have used them for the past 3 years. We had a few late delivery problems last year. but this year I'm very disappointed with the service.

We arranged postal vote issue for the 19th and 20th April. M were well aware of this. They promised the postal vote packs (without ballot papers) on Tuesday 18th. They did not arrive. After numerous phone calls they arrived on Wednesday 18th at 3.30pm. We managed to get the packs sorted in time for the 1st issue on the 19th. The order was incomplete and did not include enough envelopes to finish the 2nd issue on 20th. After more calls, another delivery arrived on Thursday afternoon. However, this consisted of outer and B envelopes only - no PVS's or A envelopes.

The 2nd issue still couldn't be finished. After more very irate phone calls the balance is due on Monday 23rd. The upshot of all this is that some voters who are going on holiday on Saturday will not get their ballot papers in time. The original aim was to get all the ballot papers away before Saturday 21st. We've been left with odds and sods hanging around the office with not enough paperwork to complete them.

It seems clear to me that M have had printing problems. They seem to be delivering them as and when they have printed them. Sending 3 separate vans from London up to ***** on 3 separate occasions doesn't seem very cost effective to me. Happy days!

Our issue was scheduled for yesterday (Thursday). We should have received the ballot papers and envelopes on Mon 16th. We still have not received this. The printers rang me on Wednesday night to say that the ballot papers were printed but that they had had a problem with the data file I had sent (the week before!) and could not run the PVSs. I spent all day yesterday trying to resolve what the problem was, and established that it was a B problem. I then made frantic attempts to contact B, failed, and ended up speaking to a very helpful fellow B sufferer in ***** who talked me through what the problem could be and how to resolve it. The correct data file is now with N but I am still awaiting a call regarding when I can expect to receive these. Currently our Postal Vote issue has been put back until Monday but I have just called everyone and warned them that it will probably have to be Tuesday now. I am getting really worried as we only have one scanner and I don't think we will have time to scan all of the statements if we receive them all back at the last minute.

The scanner is really slow following the 'upgrade' to phase 2. We may have to go for less than the 100% check. We have installed the Phase 2 of A and it has also mucked up the scanning of the identifiers, so we have had to manually check everything we have scanned since we installed it as it has started making random mistakes when the data is transferred so we have only just finished scanning all of the identifiers. I have to use the scanning pc to do the tests but the temp has been scanning on it so I am only just about to start the testing process for the PVSs - if this doesn't go smoothly then I think we are just about screwed!

We started on our postal poll cards we were aiming to send out our postals this Thursday and Friday but we have only getting our one piece mailers tomorrow Am and I have not had the ballot papers yet! Hopeful of getting postal BPs Monday to start sending out then so hopeful of all sent out by Tuesday!! ***** in ***** are printing our BPs and A have done the one piece mailers. At least these one piece mailers are done and on route!

I only received the ballot paper proofs today, after they had the data on 5th April. The live data for the postal vote statements also came this morning and the barcode was incorrectly formatted so would not scan, haven't seen another proof of that yet. They had the initial data on Monday 16th and the extra data on Thursday morning. Originally the packs were supposed to be printed, with

the ballot papers inserted by the printers, under our supervision and out in the post today, but it looks like Tuesday or even Wednesday now.

We are also currently having signature matching software issues, but that has mainly related to our council's IT dept taking 6 weeks to obtain the additional hardware that I ordered on 9th March and then the IT bod installing it is rushing a bit, and has left a couple of bits out, because we are of course in a hurry. We haven't tested it yet but we have seen it working and have had training on it so fingers crossed when the full installation has been made and a couple of tweaks made on Monday we should be almost there.

More problems with the Printers are: I can't seem to get an answer as to when they took my poll cards to the royal mail for posting, they have kept saying this week they are in the post today or tomorrow but they still haven't hit the mats, so we are going to get stuck on that as the PV deadline has gone and we'll get accused of disenfranchising people that are going on holiday.

A promised me the postal packs Monday, 16 April. (This date was even confirmed to me as late as the afternoon of 13 April). We had approved the proofs at 9.00pm on Thursday, 12 April.

On Monday, 16 April, A rang me to advise there was a problem with the envelopes, and later in the day the excuse became there was a problem with the printers. They advised that our postal packs would now be arriving on Wednesday, 18 April. That would have been acceptable as our original issue was arranged for Thursday, 19 April. On the Wednesday, I was informed there was a problem (with the printers) and that my postal packs would now be arriving Friday, 20 April. I, therefore, cancelled the issue arranged for Thursday 19 April to Saturday 21 April.

Friday morning I received a telephone call from A to advise that there was a problem (with the printers). One of the machines had broken down. The problem had been fixed by the time I spoke with them at 9.15 am but they were up and running, ready to print. I was informed I would now receive my postal packs Saturday. I subsequently cancelled all the staff arranged for the issue on Saturday and rearranged for Monday.

On Friday, 20th April, I received a telephone call from a colleague in ***** to advise that she had received my data proofs on Wednesday 18 April. She didn't inform me until the Friday because she thought A might realise their error but as the week progressed and her postal votes were being delayed, she thought I had better be aware of this fact.

When I spoke to A about half an hour later, I asked why my proofs had been sent to ***** instead of to us and they were very apologetic (as they had been all week) but had not noticed this error. I was asked to sign off my proofs again which I did at 6.30pm, 20 April despite already having done this the previous Thursday night (12 April). This would indicate that our packs would never have been ready for printing at any stage up to now if the printers were waiting for proofs to be re-done.

I have come in today as I was promised a delivery today. I was advised that due to the inconvenience I have been caused, my delivery would be given priority. A could not confirm a time other than 'early afternoon' but the fact that I was a priority, they would try to get the delivery to me this morning. I asked them to call me at 8.00am to give me an update, ie confirm whether or not the packs had been printed and what time the delivery will be, but I had heard nothing by 8.25am so decided to give them a call. I have been informed that the packs have been printed and they will be with me approximately 5pm but they are not a priority service, as previously promised.

23 April

I thought that was the end of the saga, however, I was wrong. The postal packs arrived at 3.45pm and once off - loaded, I went home. At 6.15pm I received a telephone call to advise that the packs were not in the order specified and they had to collect them, amend this and return them. I suggested that they re-print rather than inconvenience me any further. They said they were unable to do this to which I replied I would like them to re-print. They advised they could not do this and the driver had only just left so if I returned to the Council Offices in 10 minutes, I could return the

postal vote packs to them and they would have them back to me by 11am the next morning. I said ok, went to get dressed and left my tea, rang the caretaker and as I was just about to leave they rang back and said they could not locate the driver and could I hold fire. I rang the caretaker to advise that the collection was delayed and I would phone him when they had located the driver. They rang back about 10 minutes later and said the driver would be back at the Council Offices at 8.00pm.

I returned to the offices, as did the caretaker, at 8.00pm and the packs were reloaded on to the van. I asked the driver what the problem was (as I realised they would possibly give me the version they had been told and I could compare it to what I had been told), and he advised that within my delivery I had packs relating to another Council and another council had my packs. He advised that all the packs that had been printed by this printer had been recalled as they had been mixed up. The driver said he was leaving ***** at 9.00am on Sunday morning so he would be with me about 10.30 - 11.00am. I gave the driver my number so that he could call me 20 minutes before he arrived the next morning so the caretaker and I could meet him there.

At 11.00am I had heard nothing so I rang the number I had been by the contact at A the day before. The mobile number was diverted to voicemail so I left a message. I had heard nothing by 11.30am so I rang again and left a message. Someone finally rang me at 12 noon to advise they were just packing up the van and the delivery would be with us at 3pm. I advised that I had made arrangements for 3.00pm so could they please make it earlier. They said they would try. A rang me back 10 minutes late to say they would try for around 2.45pm. I asked if they could call me 10 minutes before so that I could meet them there. They said they would.

At 3.00pm I had heard nothing so I went to collect my friend and drove to the council offices on the off-chance that they may have forgotten to call me. I found the driver waiting. I rang the caretaker who arrived 10 minutes later and the packs were unloaded.

This morning, we are issuing the postal packs and whilst the majority of the packs are ok, there are some packs missing. I will deal with these myself and produce the stationery. However, I have to say I am extremely disappointed.

The stress and inconvenience this company have put me through this week is quite unacceptable. I am glad this is now over so I do not have to deal with them again.

I have just spoken to A who are doing our postal ballot papers and postal vote statements.

I am not getting the ballot papers till the 24th and the statements on the 26th, I have over 17,000 of them to do and get out first class. I don't think I am going to get them out in time.

Just to let you know that us in ***** were meant to issue postal votes on the 19th April and it doesn't look like I am going to be issuing on the 23rd either which was the next date I scheduled I haven't got my ballot papers from A yet. I have all my envelopes printed but know ballot papers or postal vote statements. We did have a problem with getting the data to them because they wanted it from a certain menu and when I produced it nothing came out, it then took me a day to get hold of someone from L, when they told me the menu to use, that did not work either, so I made contact again and held on the telephone for someone to answer at L for over half an hour.

So I don't know when my postal votes will go out.

We chose the "fully managed" postal vote service provided by A which is the most comprehensive (and expensive) support they provide. It includes production and distribution of postal ballot packs, provision of scanning equipment to deal with the opening of postal votes and a project Manager on site during the week of the elections. We also chose A to produce our ballot papers.

By no means an exhaustive list, but the following is a list of some of the problems we have encountered:-

- Lack of support and guidance throughout the process. We were led to believe that we would know who our Project Manager was weeks ago so we could work through the process together and get advice from him throughout the process. Instead we have been dealing with a variety of different people at A and the Project Manager was only assigned to us at the end of last week.
- Concern that the form of Postal Voting Statement does not follow the wording prescribed in the Local Elections (Principal Areas) Regulations 2006 for combined elections. When we queried this with the company we were told there was nothing we could do about it as the Postal Voting Statements were already with the printers.
- Training provided at considerable cost to us has all been done on line whereas the impression was given that someone from the company would provide on site training.
- The company not meeting deadlines they had set. For example they had stated that all Ballot Paper proofs would be with us by 11 April and yet there are still some we are waiting for. We have been given various false promises during the last week or so as to when we would receive them.
- Where we have made amendments to proofs the company has not picked them up and have sent back to us proofs with the same errors not rectified.
- We have left numerous messages with one of our contacts at A and he has failed to respond at all.

You can imagine the frustration that we are feeling and the problems that this has caused us at what is obviously an already pressurised and critical time for us.

The problems have also been exacerbated by failures in software from L/B and delays caused by waiting for these issues to be resolved.

We are in a similar position we also decided to have the fully managed Postal Vote Service offered by A we were promised that our postal vote packs would be ready for us to check on Sunday 22/04/07 at *****in *****and then be returned to *****. On arriving in ***** I was told that there a nothing for me to see as they were behind schedule and hopefully they would be delivered back to me at ***** on Tuesday. Today I have been informed that they are now putting contingency plans into operation and they are sending the postal votes to***** to be packed and we should get them hopefully Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday morning more likely. I was intending to post them today but looks like it will be Wednesday at the earliest if I'm lucky.

24 April

I should also add that we had hoped that the postal votes would be sent out by A on Monday at the latest. Due to considerable problems with the quality of the printing this has been delayed and the pv's are now expected to be posted this evening.

The quality of the printing of the ballot papers has not been of the required quality which has resulted in many of the samples taken to be rejected by the scanner. This problem has taken almost one week to reach the position where we have now issued instructions for the postal papers to be printed. We dare not delay any further in case we are accused of disenfranchising any voter.

Further tests will be carried out on Thursday to check the quality of the papers to be issued to polling stations.

We went with M to print, make up and dispatch postal packs. They were due to be dispatched last Friday (20 April) from a sub contractor in *****. Unfortunately the sub contractor let M down

and consequently ***** packs were dealt with at ***** and dispatched from there on Monday 23 April, slightly later than planned.

1) With regard to security checking the returned Postal Votes, we have today decided to pull the plug on using the electronic option. We were going to use the B / A solution, but we cannot get it to work, and have no confidence in a fix being provided in time. We will now go for a 20% manual check.

2) Production of our Poll Cards was delayed, such that electors did not get them until long after the Postal Vote application deadline had passed. In fact, some people clearly only got them yesterday - the deadline for requesting a proxy!

3) Production of our Postal Vote packs has been delayed. As we speak, our Printers are advising that the packs may not be handed over to the Royal Mail until Monday! We are of course pressing them on this but, at this stage, the option of going with anyone else is not available.

4) The production of our Ballot Papers is similarly delayed.

For information, our Printers are O.

M were doing our ballot papers and were supposed to be doing the fill and despatch of the postal ballot packs on Saturday 21 April. We should be using the C verification system for the postal votes. The C system requires barcodes on the ballot papers and M were to do these. On Tuesday 17th, we were told initially that M could not do our fill, but this moved to a position the next day when they told us that they couldn't do our ballot papers with barcodes until 25th or 26th April. We were forced to drop the barcodes to get the papers printed by Friday 20th (M did them, but without barcodes), we had to do the fill ourselves but managed to meet our planned despatch date of Saturday 21st. We are still waiting for our polling station ballot papers, but they have been promised for tomorrow.

The postal ballot papers were printed on two different weights of paper – the green parish papers on 80 gsm and the white Districts on 100 gsm, despite our very clear instructions that we wanted both on 80 gsm. The white 100 gsm are difficult to count.

26 April

We are issuing today and it is going relatively smoothly and we hope to have them all in the post today or tomorrow.

However, I have another slight problem in that our outer envelopes all say second class on them (the printers produced these first and therefore we could not change these when we realised how delayed the ballot papers would be). The post office agreed to treat these as first class so long as we supply them with a first class docket and pay at this level. However I just spoke to our account manager there and he told me that although they would treat them this way when they sort them for delivery, he cannot guarantee that their individual delivery offices will treat them this way, and therefore there may be further delays in getting these out. He says he does not have the authority to contact other offices to do this.

To my mind, this is not good enough, as they can easily be identified as postal votes by the purple marks, and in my opinion all Royal Mail staff should be informed that these are to be prioritised.

Is there anything further you can do, via your Royal Mail contacts, to ensure that all of their staff are aware of this situation and this mail is prioritised?

Issue of postal votes – outsourced to C. Problems with adherence to deadlines for issue. Have delayed our second issue by 1 day. Packs that were redone (as folding machine ate them) did not have all the correct information on. Has highlighted that no-one understands complexity or importance of postal voting or deadlines.

Using the B system and C for processing personal identifiers. Have abandoned the project completely and I am doing a manual verification check. I have done everything they wanted – the support has been ok, but too little too late.

I am lucky – only 5000 postal voters and had a committed team in place. I am really concerned about my colleagues with larger amounts though – morale is at an all time low.

We are writing with regard to the problems we experienced with the Printing Company C. They were late in delivering the Poll cards, postal votes and we still have not received our Ballot papers etc.

Poll cards

The data for the Poll cards was sent to C on the 2nd April due to various software difficulties; however they did not dispatch the Poll cards until 19/20/21 April.

Postal Packs

The data for the Postal packs was sent to C on the 3rd April and the candidate's information was sent to them on the 11th April. We did not receive proofs until the 19th. The proofs had numerous errors like lowercase initials and the political party emblems were wrong for some wards.

We received the second proofs last Friday 20th April, they were sent via e-mail at about 4pm there were still errors. They re-proofed again, which we received at 7 p.m. I stayed late to read and check these proofs so they could be sent back that evening. As I was assured if they received the proofs by close of play Friday our packs would be printed over the weekend for dispatch on Monday.

On the Monday (23rd April) only 696 Postal Packs were sent out , on Tuesday 24th we rang C again they were still sending the Postal Packs out to Royal Mail, what we ascertain is that they were sending Royal Mail batches of Postal votes and not dispatching them all together as requested. We had a Postal docket stating that the final 11638 Postal Packs were put into Royal Mail on Tuesday 24th April.

Ballot Papers/Tendered Ballot Papers

We received proofs for our Ballot papers/tendered Wednesday 25th April which were correct and passed for approval, we have been informed the deliver date for these will be 10am Monday 30th April. (This is too close to the Polling day, but we are having to deal with this and make the necessary arrangements in our Office to accommodate this).

As of today we still have not received the re-issue Postal packs, or the proofs for the Corresponding Number Lists, large Ballot papers and counting sheets. All of which we are currently chasing.

I have been advised to email you about problems I have experienced in this election with my printers - M. I have suffered delay after delay with no explanation for the main issue of my postal vote packs (they were printing everything for me and issuing as well) initially I was advised that they would be going out on Friday 20th then told Sunday 22nd and they finally issued my City packs on Tuesday 24th with Royal Mail collecting them at 5.30 p.m.. They were being issued from ***** and I am glad they were as this was only tip of the iceberg for me.

My parish packs have been a disaster with them on Friday evening I got the client data report and they had mixed two parishes data which despite me identifying this they did not resolve before

printing my parish packs so all my numbers were wrong - the PVS has white ballot paper printed on it and there was no way of identifying the parish they were for on the return address despite being advised that it would definitely be printed for me.

When I arrived in ***** on Tuesday going earlier than asked by M I found that by parish packs had not even arrived but the ballot papers where there but on the wrong colour paper I had specifically requested Salmon and they were on lemon!

When the dry packs finally arrived at 4.30 on Tuesday we checked the ballot paper envelope on advice from a staff member and that said 'green ballot paper' I don't think they could have got this any more wrong if they had tried. They said that they would reprint everything and reissue from ***** but my RO said that I had to bring them back to ***** for our own staff to issue - so all day yesterday was spent sticking labels over all the errors putting us a full day behind.

My additions have yet to be delivered and despite numerous requests for information about their expected delivery time as we will have to issue these ourselves I got no response there is never anyone available to speak to you when you call and they don't return calls.

I have used M for a number of years and never experienced problems such as this although it was the first year we asked them to do everything for us as we had been recommended to by other colleagues who had used their full service previously. I'm not sure that my RO would ever want us to use them for anything again now!!!

All I can say is that this whole process is a disaster

Just to let you know that following problems at our first opening session yesterday we will from this morning abandon the A/B automated solution and will endeavour to verify signatures and dates of birth by manually pulling up the images in B. We will only do this for 20% but as we issued 42,000 this itself will be a huge task.

The automated system is far too slow and each batch had a significant number of issues that had to be checked by the clerks before any adjudication could be made. For the adjudicators the system failed to find some images.

We have yet to issue our postal votes. We are using C for the production of our postal ballot packs (and the balance of our ballot papers) in conjunction with their C software. We went for the option of the packs being delivered to us for issuing.

Having planned to issue the postal votes on Friday 20 April, we have had to push that back several times. C have committed to deliver the packs by the end of this afternoon. We are arranging to issue this evening if necessary, with hand delivery of the packs to addresses within the county on Saturday morning. I would be cautious about criticising C too much. We were rather late signing up with them and, no doubt, took a place towards the end of their list accordingly. Also, with a small number of postal votes, both in absolute terms and in view of the fact that we have a lot of uncontested seats, I imagine that we would not command C's attention in quite the same way as some other authorities.

Further, I would say that they have responded well generally to our chasing and other enquiries.

As you will appreciate, we do not wish to spend time analysing the saga in great detail now, but we would welcome participating in the inevitable review.

We have experienced problems with the C C system and some authorities have actually took the decision not to continue with the system and to revert to a semi manual 20% check.

The system did start to work this afternoon so we are now hopeful that we will be able to start scanning on Monday. We have opened today but were not in a position to scan. There was a large amount of work which we have had to input into the system to get it to work which we did not expect some authorities have had to work 24hour shifts to get the data imported into the system to enable us to scan the returns.

This is obviously a brief overview of the issues don't know how much information you want at this stage. Feeling very tired and looking forward to next Friday evening!!!

Delays and mass confusion with the printers (A) meant that the majority of Postal Votes didn't get handed over to Royal Mail until Thursday, despite them telling ***** that they left the distribution centre on Tuesday. The technology is so slow that after the first opening session a decision was made to aim for a 50% scanning of PVSs - I suspect this will end up being reduced to 20% after today.

Again poor quality and mistakes by the printers O led to ballot papers not being produced until Saturday (28th), some were given to Royal Mail, the majority were handed over to a private courier company. The B/A scanning solution does not work and a decision has been made to manually check 20% of PVSs

***** used K for the printing of one piece mailers for postal votes and ballot papers for both elections. A signed agreement was entered into between ***** and K for the key deadlines in the election timetable.

Issues with postal vote issue

We assumed the ballot paper template in E's system was legally compliant – it was not but we did not know this till after the artwork had been sent to K. The size of each candidate's box was too large – 30mm instead of 25mm

- K did delay in telling us there was a problem – templates sent on Thursday, 5 April (further corrections sent on Friday, 6 April) – we were not told till Thursday, 12 April when I rang to query where the proofs were
- K agreed to do further studio work at no cost in view of delay in advising
- Ballot paper proofs not finalised until the end of Wednesday, 18 April
- Agreed date for receipt of postal vote ballot papers and OPMs missed – deliveries from Friday, 20 April until Wednesday, 24 April
- Bulk of postal votes issued over 20, 21 and 23 April – late applications and cancellations issued on 25/26 April
- One Parish ward was issued incorrectly as K cut the ballots to the wrong size missing off the last candidate – we didn't realise until after issue so had to reissue. K unable to reproduce data on OPM and so had to manually prepare each OPM – this took equivalent of 20 'woman' hours to do

Issues with ballot paper production

- Large A3 size ballot papers proved difficult to produce – K raised issues with merging data for the reverse of the ballot paper for the UIM
- Ballot paper with 18 candidates proved major issue – for postal vote issue we had to add a label with the UIM. K reduced size of candidate box to 22mm for polling station ballots to fit this on
- As at 30 April, not all polling station ballot papers have been received

You may wish to know that we have had some issues with A and their printers (aside from papers arriving late, some missing and badly printed) :

1. I checked a sample of papers for accuracy and these were sent out but the printers decided to do duplicates and send these out too!

2. We found unspent postal votes within our spare postal ballot packs.

As above !!

Plus I have one whole District Ward and one Parish Council missing, plus every Ward has at least one book missing in total and one Ward I have only half the total needed.

I have no large ballot papers for the polling stations and haven't received my polling station CAL yet - so have now printed blank sheets up for the PO's to complete.

Have been too busy dealing with issues to log the catalogue of catastrophes.

We are having our ballot packs from A and are very concerned with the way things have gone and are going.

The issues are: the standard of work produced by the printing company, lack of communication from A with proofing and print delays.

Ballot paper proofs

I received 10 minutes on line webex training to send the candidates data file electronically via webex and when the first proofs arrived all of the address line information continued on even though I had selected the way I wished it to display the information, proofs arriving late, meaning endless late nights and wasted weekends when the promised proofs failed to arrive. I was informed that the printer only sent batches of proofs not individual ones. Missing logo on a parish ballot paper (this belonged to the current leader of our council).

Envelope proofs

We were advised by Royal Mail that local Operations would check and agree the specification to see it matched RM requirements. In the end all proofs were sent to ***** up in the ***** for proofing, ***** was virtually on her own so this built in delays. Any feedback from Royal Mail on the specification was duly passed on to A who then came up with the response that they have been approved.

Postal Vote Inner Proofs with security statements

When I questioned that the print company had used the wrong regulation on the security statements for a combined election but a single issue, I was informed by A that I was in pack one and could not change. This involved all the postal votes coming back to my office and a leaflet inserted explaining that there were two elections taking place and informing of the different colours of the ballot papers.

Postal vote packs

These arrived late and today, the day before polling, I have still not received spare packs for any voter who may wish a replacement for lost or spoilt postal votes. I am still missing spares for 2 District and 4 Parish wards. For my second postal vote issue on Monday we had to manually amend to do a combination issue where we had still not received spares. I am hoping that no one applies for a replacement for this area.

Ballot Papers

These did not arrive until Sunday afternoon and the ballot papers for one of my Parishes was missing. I e-mailed A immediately. On 1st May when I still had not been informed when my outstanding printing would arrive and calls were not returned I e-mailed the MD. The Operations Manager telephoned me and said he would personally ensure that I received my outstanding

printing by 9 a.m. this morning (2nd May). When the delivery arrived my Parish ballot papers are still missing and they had reprinted ballot papers where I had asked for my spare postal vote packs. I understand that a neighboring authority has the same problem and when their printing arrived this morning it went straight into the skip as it was not what they asked for either

Just to bring to your attention that yesterday we received 6,500 Poll card > yesterday at our Office at 15:00 hours for distribution in *****. The items missed the latest acceptance time of 12:00. The items were from M, *****.

What this means is, the items will be in transit today and will arrive later on for delivery tomorrow morning. Our Customer Operations Manager has been in touch with ***** and they are aware of this late arrival and the fact that it was not to our doing. We will, of course, ensure that all these items are delivered tomorrow, but just wanted to bring it to your attention ahead of any enquiries that may come from the public. Our PR team has also been made aware

M printed our postal vote packs. We had a separate issue for Borough and Parish elections. The instructions to postal voters for the parish packs were fine but the instructions as to the number of candidates to vote for on the postal voting instructions was meant to say ..."vote for the number of candidates on the ballot paper, as we have 5 single-member wards and 20 multi-member wards. The initial proof was checked completely and went back and forth a few times for amendments to other areas of the instructions. At no time was any amendment made to the paragraph relating to the number of candidates to vote for. The amendments made on subsequent proofs were checked and either approved or further amendments made. Somehow, between the first and last proof, the instructions to the number of candidates to vote for was changed to..."vote for one candidate.." on all the Borough election instructions. The error was discovered the day after the postal votes were sent out.

N printed the ballot papers. They were sent a PDF file of each ballot paper which they "snapshot" to place the image on the printer so that it is an exact copy of what has been supplied. One ward, ***** , ***** and ***** was printed with a labour logo next to a liberal democrat candidates name. The proof was correct yet they had somehow managed to place the labour logo next to the liberal democrat candidate's name.

After seeking advice from ***** QC, we sent a letter to all postal voters in the 20 multi-member wards affected (11,092) advising them that the instructions to postal voters was incorrect and to vote for the number of candidates as indicated on the ballot paper. The letter to postal voters in ***** , ***** and ***** also advised them that the logo against the liberal democrat candidate was incorrect.

In the meantime, we had to get the instructions amended to the postal voters for the supplementary issue to postal voters that had been added to the register in April and for any lost or spoilt replacements in the run up to the election. M re-printed the whole order (including envelopes) instead of the amount needed to replace the incorrect spare packs.

N re-printed the ballot papers for ***** , ***** and ***** in time but printed the tendered ballot papers with the incorrect logo. These were re-printed again in time to be picked up by the presiding officers.

Our software supplier is B and we signed a three year contract to use the A scanning/comparison module that they offered as we felt that there was more chance of getting support for their product rather than using a third party company. I do feel that the three year contract is a long commitment (12k in year 1 and 7.5k in year 2 and year 3) as we had no previous experience of the product and also, we have no planned elections in 2008. but what choice did we have in the time allowed?

I can safely say that in the weeks leading up to the election the majority of my time was spent on postal votes and the A software and on the phone to B attempting to get support for various

problems that arose. I did have 2 visits from a L software rep to assist in getting the solution to work once Phase 2 was installed (this is the comparison part of the software). The delay in getting it up and running did severely affect us as we did not start scanning the statements until Friday 25th April. The software is still not working properly as I cannot produce a marked list of postal voters as only approx 60% of the elector records have been marked as returned postal voters on B.

Each election we say it can't get any worse and each election it seems to.

We experienced many problems in trying to achieve the scanning of PVS returned. Our supplier B (L) despite promises at Conference at the end of the day did not supply the goods. We are unable at this stage to provide specific problems only to say that despite the goodwill of the B staff, we were unable to scan 100% of the PVS, and the 20% we did scan took forever. We met all the criteria requested in that we purchased a new Server, updated our scanning PC memory, purchased a new scanner, and in fact had all our licenses including SQL in place well before the deadline dates. We are at the present documenting all the issues.

I've finally come up for air! We were badly let down by A and their printers. We had ballot books missing, missing papers in books, you name it they did it. They printed our postal packs with ballot paper numbering and then did not provide the corresponding ballot papers until after we had sent our packs out. We used the ballot papers allocated to stations and staff had to manually change the numbers on the statements, this also messed up our ballot paper accounts and box paperwork and corresponding number lists. Because of their failure to deliver ballot papers our issues were delayed for four days which then gave us 2 days to stuff and post out some 13,000 postal votes. We had to get a local printer to do a reprint for us so we could run the election for that ward on 3rd May. It was a nightmare.

Signature verification was slow, although we had purchased an automated system. To do 100% checking we would need more hardware and staff, we currently have two scanners.

The only problems we had this year were with the printers we used. Everything was behind schedule, ballot books extremely late. Not perforated properly, numbers missed. Poll cards – have to assume some not printed as Royal Mail stated they had delivered all our cards yet most of one ward didn't get them. Poll cards –stated they couldn't find some of the required data – it was at the end of the file – but didn't advise me for a week. That meant postal vote applicants had very little time to apply as the cards didn't arrive until the Saturday before the deadline. Late with ballot paper proofs – nearly gave us heart attacks. Colleague had to proof them on a neighbours PC over the weekend to ensure the postals could go out on time.

All in all, they caused us a lot of stress and we will not be using them again for ANYTHING! I chose the biggest and the cheapest – following advice from finance and will never do that again. I will go back to the printer I used to use for sure!

PV Issue:

As below, with M not able to do the issue as we had arranged. We had to do the issue ourselves at very short notice. Royal Mail were excellent in helping us get the pvs sorted on Saturday 21st April for delivery on Monday 23rd. Much angst about getting the pv ballot papers in time for issue on 21st.

Ballot Papers:

Our polling station ballot papers did not arrive on Friday 27 April as M originally promised, nor on Saturday as they subsequently said. We sat at ***** all day on Saturday waiting for them (of course we had loads to do but won't volunteer that to M) – an out of hours contact number that

we were given in case of problems was unanswered. The ballot papers arrived late pm on Monday 30 April, in time for us to get them out to POs as planned on Tuesday 1 May. They were still on 100 gsm paper despite us asking repeatedly for them to be on 80 gsm (after the District pv papers had been delivered on 100gsm), and were not held together in books of any sort (again despite us asking for this). They were loose, packed (very well I must say) in envelopes of 100, very clearly labelled, and didn't present any problems, but we didn't get what we asked for.

However, all things considered, having heard some others' horror stories about ballot papers, it seems that we were not too badly off, but it certainly didn't feel like it.

C signature verification software:

This just did not work. The data matching exercise just went on and on and on and on, with C sending through patch after patch. We finally abandoned any hope of using it on Monday 30th, by which time we had already received 50% of the pvs back, so did visual checks on just 20%, with the exception of the first day when we did 100% (in the much misguided hope that C would work). We rejected surprisingly few pvs because of signature and dob irregularities (all dobs were looked at to make sure there were no 2007s); we rejected just 1.2% of those returned. As our rejection rate under the old DOI system was around 1%, this was not a big increase. Of course, I don't know what would have happened if the verification software had worked

One of the candidates died the week before the election (that wasn't any supplier's fault but I felt like blaming it on them anyway!) and we had to countermand one District and one Parish ward election.

Polling day and the count went relatively smoothly, but given all the problems in the run-up, we deserved something to go reasonably well. The Presiding Officers seemed to struggle with the CNLs, especially as we had combined elections, but that seemed to be the worst hurdle. We had no emergency proxy votes; no additions/corrections to the register because of clerical errors; and no observers. There were the normal complaints about tellers, with one party alleging they didn't know about tellers being able to ask for numbers on the way in (of course they did as they had been at your briefing in Southampton and I had also been to meetings of both the Tories and the LDs' party workers – and of course they had the candidates' and agents' guide), but nothing out of the ordinary.

I found the count extremely hectic with 34 district wards and 34 parish/parish wards to count, total 68 separate counts, in one venue (first time we had brought all the district and parish counts together in one place) but it seemed to go well. We checked the pvs handed in at the polling stations on Thursday night (finished at about 12.30 a.m. on Friday morning) and then the count proper started at 9.00 a.m. on Friday. Most counts were finished by 3.30 p.m. but we had one devil of a recount, or should I say recounts as there were 5, in ***** Town Ward which we got sorted only at 4.45 p.m. I am very glad we did not count on Thursday night as we would have found it difficult to do anything meaningful before we had finished with the pvs at 12.30 a.m. which would have meant that we wouldn't have finished the count before about 8 a.m. on the Friday morning, or later given that everyone would have been exhausted.

In short, this was the very worst election that I have had to deal with and I really, really feel I couldn't face another one like this – but I am sure you have heard this from many others and probably feel the same yourself. The huge frustration is being totally let down by others over whom we have no control, and not being able to put things right ourselves - what can you do without ballot papers??? No matter what sort of contracts we have in place and what sort of compensation (if any) we might get, at the end of the day we need the contractors to deliver. My perception is that the suppliers just couldn't cope, probably from as far back as doing the PVI collection exercise. I know that you and our AEA officers are putting all these points to the Govt, I just hope they listen. And now we have anonymous registration looming

Printing

M were doing our ballot papers and were supposed to be doing the fill and dispatch of the postal ballot packs on Saturday 21 April. We should be using the C verification system for the postal votes. The C system requires barcodes on the ballot papers and M were to do these. On Tuesday 17th, we were told initially that M could not do our fill, but this moved to a position the next

day when they told us that they couldn't do our ballot papers with barcodes until 25th or 26th April. We were forced to drop the barcodes to get the papers printed by Friday 20th (M did them, but without barcodes), we had to do the fill ourselves but managed to meet our planned dispatch date of Saturday 21st. We are still waiting for our polling station ballot papers, but they have been promised for tomorrow.

The postal ballot papers were printed on two different weights of paper – the green parish papers on 80 gsm and the white Districts on 100 gsm, despite our very clear instructions that we wanted both on 80 gsm. The white 100 gsm are difficult to count.

Signature checking system

We are still unable to use our signature checking system. There were many delays with loading the software (C kept doing patches and telling us not to load data until they had done the patches – they say they had to keep responding to B patches). We were eventually in a position to start loading data on Tuesday morning, 21st, but the data loading is an extremely lengthy process and is throwing up many mismatches and “orphans” (lack of barcodes, slightly dodgy writing on dates of birth and so on) and even as I write the data matching process is still going on. We will be abandoning trying to sort out the mismatches. Given that we started opening our pvs on Tuesday, and are having daily openings, this has been a major problem. We have resorted to checking only 20% through the semi-automated B system (which actually has worked very well – except of course that we are visually adjudicating on them without the benefit of technology and without any expertise). We might have the C system up and running tomorrow but who knows

Our large ballot papers where we had more than 9 candidates were put into 2 columns onto A3 sheets. There was no indication of this in advance of the spare postal ones arriving back at the office along with the polling station ones. This was 27th April.

Our PVS's were also an issue with the scanning and reading of the barcodes - a warning don't go for cheaper recycled paper as it is more porous and the barcodes did not read as well as they could have done. We had to input the codes by hand for a great many of these before the matching process could start.

I am sorry that this is rather late but we've been rather shell-shocked this year and are just coming round!

Joking aside, this has been the worst election we have ever encountered. We thought the all postal pilot for the Europeans in 2004 were bad, but that was because we had not done anything like that before and it was so concentrated. With hindsight, it was wonderful!

Even the Parliamentary in 2005 pales into insignificance!

Staffing wise, there is myself and another full time member of staff and a part-time member (4 days a week) who worked full weeks leading up to the election. We can also have help from another member of staff in the legal section but, at present, she is not fully trained on our system but is a great help with general admin work when required.

However, from day one the organisation for this election did not run smoothly with problems with polling stations, staff, postal voters etc. etc. Although, considering the problems others have faced, I think we were fairly lucky overall. T

The main problems were:-

1 One of the main problems to start with was the collection of personal identifiers at a time when, normally, we are getting things organised for the election, getting paperwork ready etc. January and February disappeared behind signatures and dates of birth. The collection of info from proxies

was not necessary and our servicemen with postal votes or proxies were at a definite disadvantage.

2 Although we used H in ***** for our poll cards, as usual, they were a few days late in being despatched. Not a great problem in itself but shortens the time for applying for postal votes.

3 The acquisition and use of software and hardware to check postal vote statements at this year's election proved almost impossible in the timescale and must have caused tremendous problems for all software providers. Pilots would have been sensible before rolling it out across the country. Delays crept in for us at all angles in the acquisition of the software (we decided to go for the 100% auto check) which resulted in no time to test the system and I could not risk testing it 'on the day' and as everything was so busy and rushed there was no time to test it in between opening sessions. Therefore, we did a 20% check using hand held bar code readers to bring up the scanned image on screen. We have a parish election shortly where we will use the system fully - hopefully!

4 We used M for our postal vote packs as we have done for a number of years. I had asked if they could also issue the postal votes as a trial (we luckily only had a third of our district up for election) in the hope that they could undertake a full postal vote issue next year (we have all out elections as a result of boundary changes or shadow elections for a new unitary authority). However, they were due to be issued on Friday, 20 April but on the Wednesday (I think) before that they rang to say they would be unable to issue them until Thursday, 26 April which was too late. They had had problems with one of their printers apparently.

Therefore, we then organised issuing sessions for 24 April and the ballot papers were to arrive either the Saturday or Monday prior to that day - luckily they arrived on the Saturday.

The main problems with the printing from M were with the ballot papers - the packs were fine on the whole. Although we always expect a few errors with ballot papers they were quite numerous this year. Many duplicate nos., no printing on the reverse, nos. in the wrong order and some books stapled on the wrong side. This was difficult to rectify as the staples were industrial ones and we needed a screwdriver to get them out.

5 Postal votes being handed in to polling stations and the subsequent checking of the statements is causing delays, and therefore complaints, at the count. Why oh why, when it is a 'postal' vote are they allowed to do this?!

6 Although our Returning Officer increased the fees for POs and PCs, we are receiving more and more complaints about the long hours without suitable breaks and many mention of 'minimum wage'! The days have gone when people were more than happy to work for us for virtually nothing! It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit staff these days and we are really worried about the all out elections or a Parliamentary.

7 The late registrations also caused a problem and although I'm sure everything will work smoothly in future, the number of applications at all out elections could be horrendous and many apply for postal votes. I really think that this is not a good idea.

8 The corresponding numbers list did not cause as much of a problem as we first envisaged and many POs thought it was quite good. However, we and many of our staff feel that it is far from being environmentally friendly and if signatures have to be obtained it will be even worse. The amount of paper used now is huge and we must have devastated forests this year.

9 Clerical errors until 9pm on polling day are also difficult to manage. We were in the office from virtually dawn until 9pm with only a short break for each of us. Normally we would just have our mobiles on but, of course, we need the system to check info etc. We understand the reasoning behind this but resources just don't facilitate this easily.

I have to say that I have never been as shattered as I have been this year and really do not want to go through this again and the thought of a snap Parliamentary being called truly fills me with dread. We just could not manage to do it now. We are now running two different elections in tandem and

we are looking to splitting staff and duties to cope in future. However, with all the cut backs we do not have 'spare' staff these days and none that have some experience of elections as we did in years gone by. We also don't have the financial resources - elections and electoral registration are the forgotten section of local authorities in many cases. They are important when an election is looming but once it's over we're forgotten again. God forbid if anything went seriously wrong which is always in the back of my mind now.

We did experience a few problems this year and I have listed them below for your information.

Polling Cards - We use J to print our cards for us but unfortunately some areas were not printed (however, J were sure they were all printed as requested) and some areas were duplicated. We asked for the missing areas to be reprinted but unfortunately the wrong ones were printed so we ended up sending out a letter style poll card using 1st class post. This was very close to the postal vote deadline which caused a few phone calls and emails from some voters.

Postal voting packs - Again we use J to print our postal voting packs and we insert the ballot papers, which they also printed for us. Unfortunately, the Borough ballot papers had not incorporated our final draft amendments at postal vote stage but they were correct for the polling station. It came to light in a significant number of cases after sending out the postal votes that the ballot paper number given on the statement "I am the person the ballot paper number 0000000 was sent to" was different to the number in the address field and below the perforated line. We asked the people issuing the postal votes to check the ballot paper number was the same as that in the address field (so that they don't have to take the envelopes etc out of the outer envelope, they just check through the window and insert the ballot paper) - therefore, the ballot paper number was not the same as the "I am the person" statement. This problem was quite random and only happened to some in each ward, however, we didn't know which ones it had happened to! This also caused the postal voter to ring up and wonder why the ballot paper number was not the same. I believe that at the printers, their machine had slipped and the numbering/barcode would then be out by 1 or 2. They apparently print in blocks of say 300 and so if one was wrong, they were all wrong in that block. Also which didn't help was the helpline number was printed incorrectly and voters were phoning our Revenues and Benefits section!

Scanning in Personal Identifiers - due to the postal voting pack problem, it also gave us a problem when opening the postal votes and scanning them in to the E system. This was because the barcode didn't match the elector. A different elector and their signature would appear instead of the correct postal voter. E had to do a "fix" which meant that we then had to check that each and every postal voter identifier returned matched up correctly to the elector. This slowed the process down considerably.
Still, we survived!!

My Returning Officer would like the issue of external printers raised as an issue relating to the local elections. ***** used O and I have never come across a company so bad at producing either poll cards or postal votes (I know A still hold the number 1 spot). The postal vote mailers were supplied almost a week late with mistakes all over them. They did not mention that the elections in some areas were combined as on the proofs and it took almost a week for them to get the barcode on the security statement scanning.

In relation to the Poll Cards they printed the electors place number in the database rather than the elector number which saw many people have duplicate numbers and the elector numbers went from 1 to 89,000! They were also a week late being issued and contained so many mistakes that we are currently in the process of considering legal action.

I know that ***** used them for the postal votes and poll cards and had some major problems but different to mine. They are also considering legal action against the company.

Both Councils did get all the postal votes out in enough time and neither Council is expecting to be challenged on the issue of postal votes! Although I do have a small list of complaints!

The ***** Election Officer group met yesterday to discuss this year's election. It was mentioned that you had a meeting soon with the Ministry of Justice and it might be a good idea to share our concerns/thoughts with you. I doubt they differ from the concerns of most people but at least you have them. I will be putting together a letter to the Ministry regarding our group's concerns.

Capacity – while most of ***** managed a 100% check there is a sense that this was achieved by working at full capacity. If several 1000 more postal votes were involved (either due to higher turnout at a Parliamentary election or more take up of postal voting) there is a serious concern that the task could not be completed in time or may cost considerably extra in terms of more hardware (scanner, PCs etc) and staff.

Tolerance Levels – each software package had a “tolerance level” for the checking of signatures. If the software was set at a lower tolerance level, more signatures would be automatically passed. There needs to be some statutory tolerance level. Without this there is no level playing field and some Returning Officers who set tolerance levels lower than others will have a much easier time of the automated checking. Also, there is the more serious issue of a low tolerance level not being able to detect signature fraud.

Software functionality – different software packages had different levels of functionality. Some packages had the ability to compare signatures in the whole household or street as a way of detecting fraud or resolving issues where electors in the same house had mixed up Security Statements. We felt there should be some consistency between software packages. Without this there is a risk that the signature checking process and the number of votes rejected may differ considerably from one authority to another. This may become more of a problem as time goes on due to some software packages being refined more than others.

Purpose of Signature Checking – there was some discussion as to the actual purpose of the check. More detailed and clearer guidance is needed here. The spirit of the legislation is to detect and deter postal vote fraud but there seems to be a danger that the process simply becomes a bureaucratic process whereby a number of postal voters are disenfranchised because signatures or dates of birth are judged to not match rather than any sense that fraud has taken place.

Costs – there was concern that the grants given to cover the cost of the signature collection and verification process may not be adequate. There was also a concern over the long term cost implications. PCs, scanners and stand-alone servers will in time need to be renewed and the costs of this will have to be found from Council budgets. This problem ties into the earlier one of capacity – if postal vote applications or postal voter turnout increased significantly there would be the extra costs in terms of staffing etc of the signature verification process. Also, there is the issue of training fees for polling station staff. Changes to legislation require more detailed training which takes time. Many people are reluctant to put themselves forward for polling station staffing duties if this requires a significant training session in their own time for which they are not paid. However, payment for training on a local election means more cost to Councils.

Printers – there were mixed experiences with regard to the printing of postal vote packs but all members of the group felt that printers had struggled to meet deadlines. It is fair to say that this is the most serious concern of the group in that the fulfilment of printing is largely out of Returning Officers' hands. Again, if postal voter take up increases significantly how will the printing industry cope? Also, given that printers struggled even though they had planned for the May elections how would printers cope with a sudden Parliamentary election? Or more accurately how would Returning Officers find printers in the event of such a sudden and significant election? One part solution to these problems is that of Returning Officers' contracts with printers but it is felt that many contracts still place the burden of responsibility on the Returning Officer. The group felt that there should be more regulation in terms of printers of postal vote packs perhaps in the form of statutory conditions of contract for such specialist electoral printing. The problem of printers meeting deadlines and that of there perhaps being more to print begs questions about the election

timetable which has remained the same throughout significant changes to electoral processes over the years.

That pretty much sums it up. We had the obvious difficulties with the legislation being late, software being untested etc but I suppose this is less of a concern now and we have tried to focus on future/long term problems. I think what is very telling about all this is that the emphasis of the whole election is on postal votes and there is a danger that this takes over the wider electoral process.

The Borough Council has been a B user since the mid 1990's. Although based on an antiquated platform it generally works well.

In November 2006, prior to the introduction of the regulations that require Electoral Registration Officers to gather new personal identifiers from existing absent voters we received an email and enclosure from ***** advising of that companies approach to personal identifiers and signature image comparison. The communication was designed to reassure users of the system and steps the company had taken to ensure that its customers would have the best possible solution to the proposed legislative changes.

The enclosure went on to say that L/ B was in negotiation with a specialist software supplier with the intention of importing that company's product into their system so that its system would have a fully automated signature and date of birth comparison capability by the end of the year. The existing capability within the B system of a semi automated process whereby signatures contained on application forms could be retrieved for visual comparison was explained but, went on to say that this was not recommended if users were going to undertake a 100% check of personal identifiers and that the fully automated comparison capability was the preferred solution.

The update also contained a caution in that it advised that L /B were aware that several third party suppliers had claimed to offer facilities to carry out the canvass of postal voters to collect personal identifiers. In addition some were apparently offering to capture the original signatures and dates of birth images and to be able to carry out comparisons at election time. Our attention was also drawn to claims by those offering this service that those systems would integrate with the electoral software supplied by L/ B but that to date no supplier had been in touch with them to confirm how that might operate. L/ B therefore advised its users to wait until it could confirm the cost of an integrated scanning and comparison solution. They also advised waiting until they could confirm that any third party supplier offering solutions had spoken to them and that they had confirmed the practicalities and costs of any integration to whatever solution they were proposing.

Subsequent to the above details of the merger of the A solution with B was released on the 20th December. Attachments included:-

- "PI Solution implementation information" – this listed details of the costs both initial and subsequent licensing, support and maintenance, ordering, implementation and training;
- Advice on the minimum specification for a proposed users existing system which would be required to enable the option to be downloaded and to operate satisfactorily.
- Advice on the PI Solution form design.
- A series of FAQ's, one of which advised as follows –

"If I use a third party to capture my PI information, do I still have to pay the full price for the new module if I want to use the comparison module?"

Yes, you will. The system can import third party PI data provided it is in the required format, but as the module is a complete solution you will have to pay the full price in order to use the comparison functionality at election time.

You will also need to satisfy yourself as to the quality of images captured. A had offered to provide a bureau service for the collection and scanning of identifiers to ensure quality of captured image.

On the basis of this advice and **on the promise of a fully automated, integrated, tried and tested and supportable option** the Borough Council placed an order for the enhancement to our system which was to be available in early January 2007. As a prerequisite to the download I arranged for the IT department to load SEQ2005 onto the B server as this was 'essential'. This decision was also based on the fact that L B was not recommending the services of any other supplier for the provision of a PI capture solution. Following the Christmas recess I chased L B for the date that the download would be available. A variety of dates were given but the download did not arrive until the 31st January 2007.

However, by the time it had arrived events had overtaken its delivery as I had taken the decision during mid January to outsource the collection of PI's to A, after checking with L B that there were no compatibility issues. My main reason for going down this route was that I considered we were in danger of missing the deadline for the collection of PI's if we did not commence work on this soon. I found the uncertainty concerning the availability date of the download to be most frustrating because when working to a 49 day programme the loss of 31 days before the software was available is a very long time.

However, following its release the software was downloaded onto the electoral services server and scanners. Obviously, the outsourced PI capture would only deal with the refresh of our absent voters list in existence at the time of downloading the data to A. All new requests for absent votes would need to be dealt with by ourselves.

Initial attempts to scan images were fraught with difficulties. In fact we only managed to scan 20 forms in the eight day period between the 12th and the 20th February although we had attempted to scan application forms daily for several hours on each occasion.

Due to the apparent inability of the system to operate we were in contact with B several times daily. Ultimately it was determined that the initial problems seemed to have arisen as we were attempting to scan forms with a scanner set on 'auto detect'. This was in accordance with the instruction manual which was downloaded at the time this system was supplied. We were subsequently informed, however, that this was an error and that it had to be set for each type of form being scanned. This in turn seemed to go against the automated claims of the system as this now required users to pre-sort all forms into batches of like forms before scanning could commence.

During that time we were constantly emailing for advice, which was frequently not forthcoming, and receiving patches to amend our system due to problems others had been reporting.

On the 20th February we noticed, quite by accident, that one postal voter had been granted a waiver who had not requested one. Additionally, a member of the electoral services staff noticed while checking the accuracy of scanned images against the original forms that her husband's date of birth details had been misread although the batch report showed that the form had been processed satisfactorily with no issues. In fact the B system recorded his date of birth as 1931 instead of 1951. This date was corrected but following the next download from L B the system changed the date back to 1931. In all this and other changes required to the data stored within the system was changed on four separate occasions due to the delivery of patches from L B which kept changing the information back to how the system believed it should be.

A date which sticks in our collective memory is the 26th March, because following an upgrade from L B in an attempt to overcome the persistent problems with scanning, all of the 657 images that we had scanned (an average of less than 50 a day during a 10 – 12 hour day) and all dates of birth that had been uploaded from A as a result of the PI capture disappeared from the system.

Following the dispatch of the polling station and postal vote poll cards we were alarmed to receive a complaint from an elector that they had not requested a postal vote but had received a postal vote poll card. On checking it was clear that this was indeed the case as the system seems to have misread a bar code which applied a refresh form from a different elector to the complainant. The bar code for the two electors was different by a single digit.

The image attached to the complainant's details on the electoral registration system belonged to a different elector. This was attached during the first phase of the refresh. However, due to this the system believed that the elector who had been requested to supply new information had not responded and therefore generated a reminder form which was duly sent and subsequently returned as the image of the electors reminder form was attached to his details within the system. We cannot understand how this could have occurred as the bar codes on these two forms were identical. They were clearly printed with all numbers being readable.

Additionally it was realised, after the event that the postal voters who wanted postal votes sent to an away address had not been flagged up in the absent voting list that was downloaded to A for them to send the initial refresh forms to postal voters. As a result the forms for these people were sent to them at their registered address rather than at their away address and that many recipients who received those forms had no connection what-so-ever with the absent voters concerned.

In addition to the above, at a time when we were struggling to process forms and as so few had been processed we almost knew the identity of the electors whose forms had been successfully scanned. As a result of that knowledge we knew that we had only process five applications for a waiver. However, upon running a waiver report we were surprised to see that nineteen waivers had been granted. A check against the scanned images of these applicants showed that their forms were standard postal vote application forms with both signatures and dates of birth.

All of these errors were corrected by staff physically going into the system and amending the records. However, you can imagine our dismay when a further patch arrived and all the amendments were changed to how the system had recorded the details originally.

Throughout the period between the 12th February and the 2nd May we attempted to make daily contact with either B or A or both. We, like a lot of others were often unsuccessful. A senior member of staff was engaged in attempting to get the system operating satisfactory over that period for between 10 and 12 hours a day. As you can imagine this was very disruptive to the normal work that was being undertaken during this time; i.e. setting up 109 different elections and following the close of nominations – going on to run 50 – due to the number of uncontested parish elections this year.

In the period following the initial installation I was so concerned at the systems inability to function at all or without the need for daily adjustments, downloads or technical support from either L B, A or our own IT department that I decided that I was not prepared to use this service for the PI checking at the opening of postal votes. I believed this to be the safest option as the system we were trying to operate was an A system.

I was assured that their system was a stand alone system and that it did not need a link to the L B system. This was very important to me as I did not want to embark on the opening of postal votes for fear of the system pulling in corrupted data or for the system to mislead operators during the opening process.

In spite of these arrangements I was still concerned at the prospect of problems occurring at the opening of postal votes thereby requiring the examination of the original forms which were all in batches. As there would not be a link to the L B system we would not know which batch to look at for any particular form. I therefore arranged to engage the services of additional staff to re-order all of our hard copy refresh forms into strict alphabetical order by surname. This was a time consuming and costly exercise but as events unfolded it was a wise decision.

A were due to commence the signature and date of birth checking on Monday 30th April 2007. I attended the office on Sunday 29th April 2007 to enable them to set up their equipment etc ready for a start at 10 am on the Monday. I wondered at the time if it was a bad omen when after 2 hours of attempting to set up their own equipment which had been delivered the week before, I became involved in running around the office to find spare computer and printer cables etc as these had not been delivered, only for the A staff to realise that their server had not been delivered. This contained all of the images from the PI capture A had undertaken for the Borough Council that they had been downloaded from their hard drive together with additional images we had sent them.

A staff chased this up on the Sunday evening and again on the Monday morning. The server arrived during that afternoon but there were problems in setting it up i.e. the staff did not know how to address the scanners and PC's to the server (our IT department did this for them).

It was during this time that we realised that the A personnel in attendance didn't seem to know about the need to scan in a template form or of how to zone the form to enable a satisfactory reading to be taken. A member of the electoral services staff undertook the initial set up and then helped with the management issues so that the A staff could speak to their contacts in *****.

During the initial phase there were a very high percentage of management issues, some batches requiring as many as 80% of forms to be management issued.

There were also very high adjudication levels.

Following a conversation between the A staff on site and their office concerning the high level of management issues something was done to improve the system but this made matters worse as from that time 100% of forms required management issues to be resolved.

The senior member of staff who had been attempting to get the L B and A system to operate over the previous three months spent a lot of time on the phone to A staff in ***** as their staff claimed not to be able to get through to them.

An issue of concern was that our member of staff was told that there was a problem with the scanned template (A5) as it wasn't reading the bottom two corner stones. We had to point out to the A personnel on site and also in Ireland that they had produced our postal vote packs and that if the form that they produced wasn't to the correct size that was hardly our error.

The A personnel also claimed that there was a problem reading the date of birth as the lines for the boxes were too thick and that this was having an adverse effect upon the systems ability to read the dates of birth. Again they were advised that A had either printed the forms themselves or had arranged for our postal vote forms to be printed to which they advised that the printers had not always adhered to their guidelines.

Another issue of concern was that the system could not cope with A5 and A4 statements. A5 forms had been produced by A as part of the single PV packs whereas; the forms produced by ourselves from the L B system (for late additions) had A4 size statements. The result of this was that all A4 forms had to be scanned as separate batches and manually extracted each time for verification.

The original intention had been for A to produce packs for a combined issue. Due, however, to problems experienced at the printers commissioned by A to produce our PV packs this had proven not to be possible. I had therefore agreed to the production of single issue packs for all elections. Where, however, we had produced postal vote packs for late additions we had produced combined statements for both elections. However, where the borough ward and parish council areas were coterminous we were obviously using the same ballot paper numbers for each elector and details from the single application forms. This caused an additional problem as when the borough council ward statements were scanned no issues, apart from the sorts of things referred to above, were raised by the system. However, when running the statements again for the parish election every form had to be extracted as they were identified as a duplicate form even though they were for a different election. These were not duplicates and were accepted by the Returning Officer and myself. However, the system never did accept them and the printed list of returned postal votes shows all of these returned and valid postal vote packs as being rejected, even though they were not as it was not possible to override the system.

Another error within the system was that when staff were adjudicating, the system would quite frequently display a message of "no image found". The adjudicator would therefore defer consideration of the adjudication to enable a manual check against the original application form to be made. It then transpired that the next image to be adjudicated would be for the same person, but on this occasion there would be an image that was displayed. This would have to be rejected

as the first image had already been deferred. When the adjudicator then went back to the original form the image appeared. This anomaly was never explained or corrected.

A number of extractions were made on the basis that there were “mismatched signatures” but when a physical check of the forms was undertaken by election staff there was absolutely nothing wrong with the signatures. This was not, however, the case on all occasions.

Due to the problems encountered with the L B and the A solution I am very disappointed that the system we were encouraged to purchase was not sufficiently developed nor integrated with our existing system for it to have been sold on the basis that it was **a fully automated, integrated, tried and tested and supportable option**, as it clearly was not. I am firmly of the opinion that it never will be unless a significant amount of work is undertaken to develop it further, no matter what assurances the supplier may have given to the Minister or the Electoral Commission. As for the claims that it was “supportable” I find this comment to be quite laughable following the experience we had.

I believe that in common with other authorities that were unfortunate enough to experience the trials we endured as users of this particular combination i.e. L B and A the system should have been developed and operated prior to it being rolled out for general use. However, any assurances given by L B and A as to the robustness of their solution was probably based upon false expectations of their combined ability to develop the system. I hope most sincerely that the Government, the Electoral Commission, software houses and anybody else that has a say in developments within the electoral registration and elections field will think twice in future before embarking upon such a exercise again, unless the systems to be used have been properly developed, trailed and tested in adequately funded and monitored Elections Pilots.

I understand that other software houses were able to deal with the issues but this was certainly not the case from our experience and it is difficult when confronted with the original information as supplied by our systems supplier, to seriously examine any other options that may be available, especially within the time frame with which the work had to be performed.

I therefore request you to use whatever points in this email you may consider appropriate in presenting a case to the Minister or indeed the Electoral Commission of why the Government and the Electoral Commission should never again take chances with the democratic processes within the country in the absence of tried and tested procedures and robust computer software. I believe that what happened during the elections of 2007 was a disgrace as it is not possible to run modern elections without good and reliable computer software.

For any reader of this email please be assured that staff and elected members at ***** Borough Council are not against improving the integrity of the elections process and are firmly of the view that people who attempt to cheat the system deserve to be prevented from doing so or punished accordingly. Our original reaction when we were made aware of these new provisions was to applaud their introduction, as something had to be done to stop the abuses we have seen in some areas of the country. What has annoyed us is the amount of time and energy we have had to devote to get the system we bought into, to operate effectively. In reality, far from improving the situation it made matters worse due to the disproportionate effort and staff time required to make the system work at all, often at the expense of other issues associated with the elections that should have been dealt with.

PPI – took up all the election planning as it was not just getting them back and recording them it was all the phone calls, dead people and people that had moved – it was a mini canvass!

Printing – I lost my local printer so got on board last autumn with a national company, who assured me everything I wanted was ‘fine’ and they would be able to do the enlarged ballot paper as well. I was also told they would not sub-contract (having fell foul of this at the European).

They had test data really early and the proper data in the week of close of nominations.

I was told every day that the proofs were coming – that lasted a week – I had to stay in for the weekend to await a courier, who came Sunday lunchtime. I returned the proofed proofs the next day.

From then on all I got was ‘they are being proofed in IT’ or ‘on their way today’, They eventually arrived late on the day before postals were due to go out (19th) then there were 2 wards missing which I had to wait in at the weekend for so they went out on 23rd.

Then came the wait for the rest, these went right up to the wire again with many excuses, they arrived Monday 30th and we had to check every book carefully, there was print slippage in the middle of books, pages missing, numbering going awry in the middle of books and blanks. I pleaded every day for the tendered which arrived at ten past seven in the evening before polling day, even then some were printed on the wrong colour and some, including a whole ward were missing.

They told me, in polling week, that they could not now do the enlarged, I had envisaged this and done them in-house BUT they then arrived in 2 May!

They also decided I was missing some parishes, which I was not, and one lot ended up in ***** and another arrived at 4pm on 2 May!!

Their reason was that they had had so many different sorts of data from various systems.

I realise that I was luckier than some but I still got my blood pressure boosted beyond its normal high and my hair started to fall out!!

As to the scanning I can only again say I was lucky, I could see B was going downhill so bought D in December and their scanning system worked perfectly. Nor did I have any problems with postal printing as I used my normal printer for these and the poll cards.

If I was still going to be in this job in future years (which I won't as I retire next year) I would be dreading the PPI reminders clashing again with a major election.

Could I also plead for national elections never to be combined again with any other as the County and Parly are at the moment - I cannot see how authorities would cope now.

SOFTWARE PROBLEMS

At ***** we have not been in a position to test our verification software yet as we're waiting to receive the pv packs from our supplier J. Samples were requested weeks ago. That company is also supplying our ballot papers, but to date only proofs of the District papers have been received, nothing from them for the twenty four parishes that we have which are contested.

The software updates have been coming at regular intervals and the demand for PVs has never been greater - we've increased for 7500 pvs at the end of the PVPI collection exercise to around 13000 now.

- System not as demonstrated - To coin a phrase from another user about the software supplier ' They are making it up as they go along' despite input from users
- System not installed until 14 February
- At this point it came as a shock that it was to be internet based i.e. no local scanned images
- New scanner delivered - 16 February - sourced through software company - broken! They would not believe it to be broken - So requested an engineer to confirm
- Replacement scanner provided - jammed after every 1/2 scans. Software company suggested it needed 'wearing' in - after 10,000 scans it would be okay' - then said ' 20,000'!
- Not happy software company send a representative down for almost three days to scan our forms - on day three confirmed that something must be wrong with the scanner.
- Engineer calls - yes the sensor is broken.
- We struggled through and scanned in all our forms
- In between all this - the company could not process our scanned images so we had to use a hand held bar code reader to scan forms into notepad for processing at the company.
- A data file was returned to update our system - to enable us to post out reminders. Came in over a weekend to undertake this task- scanning in 19,000 forms!
- No real written instructions provided from the company or updates as to progress. Difficult getting replies to emails, requests and messages left at the company.
- The company managed eventually to process our forms - well so they say.
- Getting updated data from the company for the cancellations was like getting blood out of a stone.
- Consequently reminders were late - affecting the candidate/agent printing of AV lists and posting of poll cards etc.
- Still waiting for the company to provide information on scanning/linking in non bar-coded forms! Postal verification starts next Tuesday!
- Apparently for processing the voting statements we will be provided with passwords and log in information to enable the system to work. We have also been promised 'INSTRUCTIONS' wow.
- Suffice to say we have back up plans - albeit of a manual nature. There are a number of issues relating to software that the company cannot provide and they 'may be able to provide next year'

- Other problems - will be of the same nature as other G
 - Signatures out of box or not provided
 - More than 1 signature provided
 - Damaged bar codes
 - Waiver requests
 - Service Personnel - away on duty

I believe John Turner was correct when he said that the whole process should be delayed and 'piloted' before implementation. The software companies are clearly not ready. From reading this you will see that I am not a happy bunny as they say. Although I do have some sympathy for the time frame given to the software companies to come up with the goods.

We have not received our checking software yet, never mind tested it. I am VERY concerned that we will not be able to check signatures, other than manually checking against paper application forms which are currently only arranged in the order in which they were scanned in.

17 April

We still haven't received our software, though we are told to expect it today!!

Has the minister given any idea what should happen if the software doesn't work (or if it doesn't appear at all)?

We are in a situation where our software company has not yet supplied the necessary systems to enable us to scan in the PV statements and electronically check signatures and dates of birth. We signed up before last Christmas for the system and have had nothing but problems with it. We had delays and difficulties in scanning in the returned PV identifiers and, indeed, at one time the company came and collected our forms to take to their office for scanning. We have been unable to get any sort of timescale or implementation plan from them - they consistently ignore telephone calls and e-mails.

We have now made arrangements to manually check 20% of PV statements against our original forms and are also having to devise some manual means of producing a marked list of postal voters .

I understand that you may also have received an e-mail from ***** of ***** . He is with the same software supplier and I support the views which he has expressed. We understand that there are only about 9 or 10 users of this software now, and problems are being experienced with all those that we have managed to contact

30 April

Just to update you further to my original message.

The e-mail containing the link for the software to be installed was received on Friday, 20th April - the day we issued postal votes. We were told that "A User Guide will be coming soon" - no other information. The User Guide was received by e-mail on Tuesday, 24th April - the day our postal votes were delivered to electors and started to be returned. The software was installed, but on the advice of our IT department we did not attempt to use it as they recommend that all new systems are thoroughly tested before use. Apart from that, neither myself nor my staff had the time to devote to learning how to operate it and having a practice at that busy stage in the election timetable. We started opening postal votes on Thursday, 26th April with a team of 13 people plus 2 supervisors, with a manual procedure and 20% checking of signatures and dates of birth. We are doing daily openings using the same team (largely retired members of staff) and they are managing to clear each day's returned postal votes. (We issued 13,500 and have had 7,688 back so far.)

The procedure appears to be working well, we have noticed a marked decrease in rejected postal votes this year, and there has been no adverse comment from candidates and agents. Although it is not what we intended to be doing, after the months of hassle I have had trying to get the software up and running, it is a considerable relief that we are managing to open the postal votes and comply with the new legislation.

We ran a test of our postal vote checking system yesterday. We have G from F as our main software and are using their ***** semi-automatic PV checking software.

The checking of signatures went okay on the whole, with a couple of minor glitches but nothing too serious, but we're unable to copy the details of what we've checked back to the main system, so we can't produce a marked register of postal votes.

F are looking into this and may be able to send a patch to fix it, but our first PV opening is on Tuesday so there isn't long. Apparently we're the first of their customers to run a test.

3rd May

We finally got the system working yesterday morning - we had to copy in a file to correct a problem caused by the lines forming the boxes for the date of birth being too thick. It is an A system and we went for their mailers because we assumed they would be more readily compatible – no fool like an old fool I suppose. It worked well yesterday afternoon, though it does not print the one really useful piece of paper I need, and this morning I was able to show it off to a couple of agents at our morning opening. Shortly after they left, with only about 100 left of today's papers to scan, it crashed. It may be a scanner fault that has given it a head ache (Yes. I know I am anthropomorphising it, but I have spent more time with this equipment over the last month than with all of my close family put together) I switched it off to let it rest in a darkened room, whilst I finished them off manually. I plan to use the semi automatic system to verify ballots from the stations this evening.

I have verified 95% of my 1st opening, 30% of the second and 100% of the third and that will have to do. We can log in the ones not verified at all manually - the typists will make short work of it - so I can publish a more or less accurate marked register. Thankfully no one phoned to ask if their vote had been received.

Just a few bullet points for you to add to you list!

Background – Mayoral/full District Council and one Parish Council election

Software – B

Signature checking software company – C (C) Required the ballot papers to have a barcode on.

Postal voters pack supplier – K (Very good service)

Ballot paper supplier – As above, just a few needing to be reprinted due to the guillotining chopping off the bottom description of the candidate – this was spotted when checking the postal voters' ballot papers) That was a very stressful time, wondering if we'd missed any more.

Main problems – virtually non-existent service from B as they were (unsuccessfully) trying to sort out their signature checking solution, disproportionate amount of time spent on the preparation of the C software project (which was abandoned at the first opening of postal votes session), just starting legal investigation into whether we have to pay for a service which was “not fit for purpose”. Even if it had worked (and only 2 or 3 sites had a functioning service, even then, it wasn't easy, apparently) I could not justify the time we have to spend on the training/installation/data cleansing/checking etc in future.) Mayoral election – very late guidance to candidates and agents (it was one of the last pieces of legislation updates to go through Parliament),

Quite a few people disenfranchised at the postal votes openings not due to fraud but just ignorance in the new requirements. (i.e. Not filling in the Postal voters statement properly). Surprisingly we didn't get many agents at the postal votes openings. We did apply the 20% checks in the end, because of the failure of the software. At least three District wards on the Council had very close results (3 recounts) and there were just a handful of votes in it. Am I being naïve in hoping that the DCA will listen to sense and change the rules on postal voting personal identifiers? It has been a nightmare.

We also had a District nomination paper challenged due to alleged forged signatures of assentors, with a big media coverage about this. In the end the Labour Party issued a statement asking people not to vote for this person, he didn't get in, but he did on an uncontested Parish ward, so we may have a bi election there!

Also, there were a lot of spoilt votes at the Mayoral election (not as bad as in Scotland!) because of confusion with the supplementary voting system. E.g. Some people did not place their cross in the first preference voting column and their papers were spoilt. The ballot paper tells people to "Vote once in column one for your First Choice, Vote Once in column two for you Second Choice" and yet they don't have to vote twice. I know this probably isn't your problem, but I'm sure the other Mayoral authorities have had problems with this; it's time the rules were changed.

I could go on forever!

We were to be using the B/A scanning software, however, that turned out not to be the case. We had our IT support team virtually camped out with us from the beginning of April, and a L engineer on site, but they were unable to get the system operational. We had to revert to carrying our manual checks using the control images on the screen.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

My name is ***** and I work for *****. I think an additional piece of information to gather and take to the DCA is how many people working in elections are reconsidering their job. I have wanted to work in elections for years and just over a year ago I secured a job here doing just that. I couldn't have been happier. I am now thinking it was the wrong thing to do, and I simply cannot be alone. My manager left this council in mid march for reasons unconnected to this debacle, but if it were not an outstanding AEA consultant I don't see how we could be running an election. I know of two other people who have already resigned. One friend simply walked out of the council building as he couldn't take it anymore. He was persuaded to return. We are going to be left in a situation where the politicians want elections, but do not have enough people to do it. This is a highly skilled job and when experienced electoral administrators begin leaving the profession as they simply cannot take it anymore people like me left behind will have no one to learn from.

The elections minister, the DCA, and the electoral commission seem to be completely out of touch with the people who are doing the work for them. You have much more experience than I but I really do wonder what has got to happen to make them wake up to what is going on. The obvious answer is a major disaster but that only makes me feel for the electoral administrators who will be on the receiving end. Right. Better go and open some ***** postal votes and stare at signatures. We decided on A signature recognition but of course it doesn't work so we have to do it all manually.

I'm not sure what the solution is to these problems, but I think many ROs will be looking for local suppliers next time. It would be useful for all concerned if the suppliers who had difficulties could be "brought to book" by AEA/Electoral Commission to find out what the problems were and if they can be addressed.

All in all, this was a really bad experience, but having made the decision to leave the contract; all went well under our control - a lesson learned!

I can honestly say that I have never known anything like it. I have a very small team of but currently have had to draft in 2 extra staff full time to assist us. Whilst we all recognise that long hours are part of the job, the hours my team have had to work to make sure this elections happens at all have been excessive. And, the stress of nothing working quite as it should has taxed everyone's sense of humour to the limit. Everything is being triple checked in the hope that we can get through this without a major cock up!

Our current problems, if you could call them problems, relate to the variety of forms being used by the electorate. They come from the EC website, our own forms, the main political parties who although locally agreed to use our form, then had a printer that printed them crooked, of electors printer setting give a bigger margin than ours, therefore making numerous templates

Mind you after using the software for the first year we will know how crucial the templates are and how easy it is to work around the poor returns.

The other issue is that the electorate in some cases just can't follow instructions and complete a simple form, either missing the date of birth, putting in the date of signing the forms and some have signed anywhere but the box.

All in all as we enter the final stage of the elections I feel somewhat out of control - waiting for the supplier to provide against a backdrop where he has clearly been caught out by the extent and complexity of our requirements, and with staff being almost totally tied up with postal voting and registration enquiries and applications leading to a situation where are behind in preparations for the poll and counts.

After 33 years in the trade I've have to admit that I've never felt so uneasy about an election as I do about this one. If only the government had done the wise thing and piloted these new provisions!!

I'm aware that lots of people are having problems and we are not excluded. However, if you have to respond to any press enquiries we should be very clear where the blame lies.

If you recall I stood up at last years AEA Conference in September and made the case for this signature and date of birth verification to be piloted. This was met with spontaneous applause from the floor. THE DCA representative responded with "prove to me it won't work". Difficult when we didn't have a system so what had the DCA officials been looking at?

I believe following the Newham pilot that E pushed for this very hard thinking they had cornered the market.

Yes we have had problems and have a backup plan ready if the technology fails. We are on B with the A scanning solution. I have to say that we have had tremendous support from them all the way through. Yes I have put pressure on them at times but they have so far done everything asked of them. They have also made sure that other facilities on new legislation are covered by their software. My view is that we and our software supplier were thrown into this by the Government without sufficient time to prepare.

The blame falls entirely on the DCA officials who have practiced selective listening and the Minister. After all they could remove the need for signatures in polling stations without difficulty.

Bottom line; if this goes wrong the DCA and the Minister were warned.

I have been working in elections for 33 years and have found that last four elections e.g. 2004 (combined European and Borough), 2005 (combined Parliamentary and County), 2006 (just Borough) and this one the most difficult and stressful in all those years. This situation has been brought about in the main by postal voting and the constant changes in electoral law most introduced in a hurry without any thought as to how they are actually going to be implemented.

We are experiencing a horrendous amount of work - just on a par with Parliamentary elections. We have 29 District Wards (28 Contested) and 59 Parish Areas (14 Contested) This equated to 539 Parish Vacancies and 48 District Vacancies (single, double and treble on the district and unto 11 on the Parishes

We have, as have many others, bought into a system from our computer software suppliers and attended training sessions in November. However, all that was learnt on training sessions is now well and truly forgotten! There has been no opportunity to carry out testing, though our suppliers say "trust the system". The challenge letters and reminders and cancellations caused masses amounts of work and this has been non stop since January! The signature cropping and verification of dates of births has added hours of work to the masses already being done and since poll cards were dispatched the telephones have been none stop. With Candidates, agents and the public calls there has been no time to really see our system in action. We have provided a fallback position i.e. manually checking the forms but this won't provide us with information as to whose postal vote we have received back (as the public can now call and ask for that information) and wouldn't provide a marked register which the politicians are now keen to have (for what ever reason).

The postal vote checking is turning us into IT experts. We are almost in the position of requiring an IT member of staff as Electoral Administrators are not employed or qualified as IT.... the speak of

ports, data key, OBDS is all over my head and quite frankly I am lost as is the rest of the elections team!

As these complications have been brought about by the introduction of legislation without allowing sufficient time to implement them.

I think this should clearly be explained to the powers that be.

Just a quick note re the collection and checking of these PI's. My biggest concern has been software suppliers assurances that their systems would work and quite clearly this has not been the case despite glossy presentations etc

I'm getting really ***** with DCA and the EC thinking that this can be handled like this when the authorities I am dealing with as F Chair are really stressed and I fear for people's health given the lack of appreciation of the practicalities of all of this. I wonder how many people actually tip over the edge and it would be an interesting survey that identified the scale of this.

Significant criticism of the Electoral Commission - failure to provide good timely advice, not being sufficiently strong enough to challenge DCA on this process without piloting

In support of the IT companies, the printers and the rest of us trying our best to cope with the ever increasing pressure put on us by these bright ideas dreamt up every year to keep us on our toes, of course there are problems nationally. The sheer number of patches being issued - at one point almost on a daily basis - from what I regard as a thoroughly reliable and reputable IT provider (B) indicates, even to an innocent bystander like myself, that all is not well - have you asked them, or is anyone interested in their point of view? As a consequence of those lads and lasses trying to cope, pressure is therefore placed on the printers and subsequently us at the (extremely) sharp end! The situation was not helped by someone from the D C A being quoted as saying they "didn't know what the problem was, after all the Councils had been given sufficient funds and the legislation to cope". What was not mentioned was that we hadn't been given the time! What the ones drawing up the legislation don't seem to realise, or be willing to accept, is that the reason the Elections go ahead on the due date is down to the stubbornness, cussedness and sheer bloody-mindedness of the staff and companies involved to see the thing through.

23 April

I thought I should let you know that all our parish postal packs will be leaving the printers a day late ie. Tomorrow instead of today. I have absolutely no issue with the company - ***** - who are unbelievably good to deal with and have kept me informed throughout. However, I think it is important that the AEA collate all problems because something has to be done about the impossible timetables now which mean that one small hiccough with one authority can impact on all other authorities down the line, regardless of how good the printer is. The timetable coupled with the significant changes in printing requirements in relation to barcodes, UIMs etc. are having a massive impact on all stakeholders - software companies, printers, Royal Mail, and not least us in the frontline.

I know you know all this but Electoral Services Managers are dealing with issues way beyond their real role and it is becoming impossible. This year I have become a Forensic Scientist!!

What worries me most of all is that I used to love this job - but this year I have not had a day's holiday since Christmas and am beginning to resent the world in which I work. I work for a good Council and my line manager and the Returning Officer do not interfere - they respect my

knowledge and experience. Unfortunately this profession is going to lose some really good officers if things don't change and quickly. You will remember ***** speech at Conference - I suspect much of what she said will be shown to be very true. We continue to feel very vulnerable; we still have signature checking to come.

***** has asked me to supply time wasted trying to get the scanning system sorted, ***** and myself have discussed this and we feel that a conservative estimate is 10 working days. It does sound a lot, but when we have had one member of staff occupied for a full day and a half day on a regular basis (and at the end of it achieved nothing) and we have been unable to process certain B items while this has been going on, then we feel it is justified.

Think that we need to give consideration to:

- The impact of the eleven day registration option. Manageable [but farcical] this year, but in my view will be impossible in a parliamentary year. And it is not at all clear [to me at least] what should be happening to removals as part of this process
- The fact that there are a number of forms etc in the appendix of forms which are either wrong or inappropriate. For example, I am supposed to send a poll card to those registered wef today, and the official poll card refers to the deadlines for absent voting etc, and the postal poll card to a deadline for changing or cancelling the absent vote by a date that has long passed. Obviously we work around these, but it is illustrative of the difficulties involved

It appears that postal voters with waivers have been sent normal postal voting statements.

I am concerned that this has happened and would like to know the reason why.

We are currently telling people to write (or get someone to write) waiver in the box and then there vote will be counted.

We had a couple of problems mainly related to the postal vote checking software - which meant we reverted to 20% manual checking. We use F and whilst I know that some authorities got it up and running we did not. I think that the suppliers and administrators need more time to carry out robust checking of any new software systems that are introduced. Whilst we managed to do the minimum under the legislation I dread to think what would have happened if we had to do 100% checks this time around. I am also glad that electors were not clued up that they could ring in to see if we had received their postal vote back as we did not start wading in pv packs until the 25/26 April and it took us several days to catch up. With regard to the checking of identifiers I think that there should be a consistent standard across software packages. some systems operate on 55% threshold of checking others higher. I think it is wrong that a vote in one part of the country may not be counted as the checking software rejects it when in another part of the country it may get through. My Returning Officer was very reluctant to disenfranchise people due to differences in signatures. It was bad enough that many old people got their date of birth wrong and put the year instead of year they were born. However I must admit that I do not think we had more rejections this year compared to previous years when people had to get their statements witnessed. The closing date for postal votes still causes problems in that people expect to apply for a postal vote and get it straight away. We had another 1000+ new applications between the 15 and 18 April and a handful of people who applied wanted them as they were going on holiday on the 20 April. We had several phones calls to make to advise them that their postal vote would not be available in time and that they should appoint a proxy. Gone are the days when you could simply add them to the end of your list and issue them.

I also had a problem with late delivery of ballot papers albeit I did get them in the end. The last of my parish papers arrived on the Wednesday morning (2nd May). I think strong representations should be made to Government that administrators should be given time to fully test new software etc. I also think that the timetable needs to be lengthened so we have more time to professionally deal with postal votes and ensure that people are not disenfranchised due the lateness of their application. We also need a period of stability in the run up to the election. We all know that we plan at least 6 months in advance and this is very difficult to do if you do not know what the regulations are going to say, how the software is going to deal with changes.

F had to issue several patches during the election timetable and it was inevitable that there would be some bugs in the system – more headaches when we are all very fraught.

As you know whilst many administrators experienced problems we have all managed to pull the rabbits out of the hat and will continue to do so as we do not want to be seen as letting the system down. I am sure until Returning Officers collectively advise government that enough is enough and that their staff cannot and will not continue to be magicians no one will listen and it will be the same again next time around.

I am sure you have had many similar comments to mine and hope your dossier will help in getting the Government to listen.

Struggled here with the Regional and Constituency elections to the Welsh Assembly. Very briefly, the problems are those no doubt as experienced by all others.

Printing contractors are unable to match the demand for postal vote mailers, ballot papers and poll cards within the required timelines. This lead to the greatest public complaint because of late delivery of postal votes.

Once again the passing of the secondary legislation was too late to adequately prepare for the elections. It always feels as if the DCA now MOJ, is completely unaware that Electoral Administrators succeed only by judicious planning, ensuring that as much work as possible is completed well before the actual election period begins. Much of that didn't happen this time, largely due to the almost impossible tasks for the Computer companies to prepare programs within the timetable.

It is noticeable that public expectations are (quite rightly) rising in all areas of government administration. We have to match that expectation, but Government departments, and employing Councils need to recognise that there has to be financial investment in staff and accommodation to produce the required level of performance.

I would like to make a couple of comments about the late registration deadline for your consideration. I am sure I am not alone in suggesting that the deadline is simply far too late.

At ***** we had 1500 rolling registration applications to deal with (plus 1000 duplicates from the EC campaign) and the process simply took over the work in the office. Elections work had to be halted whilst registration was dealt with. We have already started to talk about next year and how we will have to get some non-elections staff to do registration to allow us to get on with the work we should be doing. This, of course, has inherent problems because we will get different staff on different days and I do not have the budget to employ agency staff so inexperienced staff will be carrying out this work.

I am hugely concerned that at local council elections, where we had a 31% turnout, we had as many registrations as we did. My mind moves forward to thoughts of how many applications we might get at a Parliamentary election when interest will be more acute and how we will cope with the numbers involved. The thought of having to cope with cancelling postal votes already sent out and reissuing them to another address fills me with absolute dread. It is a recipe for disaster.

The other point I would like to make is that the register simply needs to be static once the election process starts proper. I had 2 nomination papers which could have been rejected because when I checked them assentors who had signed the paper were no longer on the register at their stated address. One such paper was brought in at about 5pm on the day before nominations closed and I rang the agent to discuss the matter and he said "I'll have to leave it because I can't get to the candidate tonight" so as of that evening that paper fell. The agent came in to the office the following morning to say that he had checked with the candidate and that the person had definitely been on the register when the paper was subscribed. Between us we managed to find out where the person had moved to and she was indeed registered there. This candidates paper could easily have been rejected. The agent was furious and asked "how the hell can we keep abreast of changes in the register at such a late stage". He said he would be writing to DCA and EC but I don't know if that has happened.

I raised both of these matters at the EC post election review in ***** yesterday but ***** was less than enthusiastic about any forthcoming changes in legislation around the late deadlines because of the "customer service" aspect. But as I said to**** "in an ideal world we are more than happy to accommodate as many initiatives as possible but there comes a point whereby the system is unmanageable". I really believe that this measure is a step too far but ***** sort of shrugged this off so I finished off by saying that if there was to be no change to the regulations then something should be in place to allow us to declare results up to a week late.

I am raising these matters now in the hope that they can be looked at before a General election which may just be the straw that breaks the camels back.

Finally, I am sure you have been advised of the many problems with rejected postal vote statements but I would like to add my comments to those you may already have. The regulations have targeted the wrong people - the victims of the system have been the elderly and the less bright, the very people who should be able to vote by post. The numbers of rejected statements because dates of birth were wrong were huge. Perhaps the dates of birth should only be used as a "back up" so that if the signature doesn't match the dob is checked as a safeguard. The number of elderly people disenfranchised this year is shocking.

In short, this was the very worst election that I have had to deal with and I really, really feel I couldn't face another one like this – but I am sure you have heard this from many others and probably feel the same yourself. The huge frustration is being totally let down by others over whom we have no control, and not being able to put things right ourselves - what can you do without ballot papers??? No matter what sort of contracts we have in place and what sort of compensation (if any) we might get, at the end of the day we need the contractors to deliver. My perception is that the suppliers just couldn't cope, probably from as far back as doing the PVI collection exercise. I know that you and our AEA officers are putting all these points to the Govt, I just hope they listen. And now we have anonymous registration looming.

I'm sure there are more points that we haven't written down and now can't remember but hope these help. I feel that, in summary, the following could be considered:-

- (a) The election timetable should be lengthened - there is now too much in too short a time
- (b) Any new procedure should be tested before being 'rolled out'
- (c) A national scale of fees and charges should be considered - the variations are vast in all aspects
- (d) No postal votes should be handed in to polling stations on the day
- (e) The amount of paperwork should be reviewed - please consider the environment!
- (f) Making elections either all postal or just polling stations
- (g) Helping selected/approved printers by the Government retaining their services, whether required or not in the end, for a month or so before an election so that they do not lose financially if they don't have as much work for elections as anticipated and have put off other jobs because of the elections. It would be a clear month purely for elections.

I realise that you are going to discuss these issues with Bridget Prentice MP and that the Government will hopefully take note in view of the problems experienced with software. What concerns me is that any response to this will be a knee jerk reaction aimed merely at the software problems. To my mind one of the intrinsic problems with running an election is the now almost unworkable timetable. The pressure which electoral administrators and printers are under to supply accurate postal vote packs in time for an election is becoming impossible. Recent failure of printers, who were unable to deliver, must surely give weight to a change in the legislative timetable. At a recent Electoral Commission seminar, the matter of the election timetable was raised. It was suggested that there should be an earlier close of applications for postal votes to allow more time for postal packs to be produced. However changes to the timetable were merely dismissed by ***** as being unrealistic as they require primary legislation. An email which ***** sent to EC on this subject is attached (not included) As ***** (EC) says in the email, things only seem to be addressed when something goes drastically wrong * as is now the case with the performance of A.

The added pressure of an 11 working day deadline for applications to register to vote puts incredible pressure on electoral administrators to publish an accurate monthly addition list for the election. We have always prided ourselves at ***** in the checking process that we carry out when publishing the register. However the pressure of 1700 amendments to the register meant that errors were made and we had to amend clerical errors that would not normally have arisen. The pressure which we will be under at a parliamentary election, where interest is heightened, doesn't bear thinking about.

I am also concerned that software suppliers were allowed to attend the meeting as this does not provide a relaxed forum for administrators to discuss supplier performance. I do, however, appreciate that frank discussions took place during the meeting.

I do appreciate the work that you have done in making the Minister aware of the risks involved in the new legislative processes which were introduced and understand that you will be reinforcing these views when you speak to her.

I attended an Electoral Commission post-election seminar last week and it would be true to say that the mood of those in attendance reflected the bullet points John made.

I would also like to let you know that I had a visit from ***** in the afternoon of polling day and in between telephone calls, queries etc. we had a discussion about the issues affecting both the election and how administrators were coping (or not). In summary, the following points were raised:

- That the PVI exercise had been the dominant factor in complicating things.
- The unreliability of outsourcing, in many cases, had exacerbated the problems. Causing great stress and anxiety.
- Late legislation was causing significant difficulty in preparing for elections.
- A period of stability was required.
- Administrators were under significant stress; we shared a concern that there could be a fall out of experienced staff and a poor image of the job not attracting new people.

Personally, I am concerned about how much more is to be expected of us and how much more can be absorbed before the system breaks down. It is almost as if electoral administration is being tested to destruction. The thought of a Parliamentary on a 17 day timetable fills me with dread. We are now being expected to do vast amounts of additional work in a shorter space of time (Maundy Thursday at least brought a brief respite).

Throwing money at the problem is not necessarily the whole answer. In my view, a sense of order needs to be restored in place of the chaos that currently prevails. Additionally, some sort of recognition and increased profile of the national importance of electoral administrators (not generally creatures given to blowing their own trumpets it has to be said). My perception is, that we are not given anywhere enough status and are generally thought of as faceless and expendable bureaucrats. Poorly paid and overworked. It is not just the factors of ever changing electoral matters that affect us. We are also embroiled in the day to day rigours of local authority matters such as; job evaluations, re-organisations, green travel plans, best value, corporate plans, call centres, document management schemes, audits, data protection, freedom of information blah, blah etc. etc. It is no wonder that many have left the profession or harbour a great desire to do so.

In short, I think it is important that the AEA continues to make clear the increasing difficulties we face in implementing electoral policy and that it must be remembered that at the sharp end of all this, there is someone trying to make it work, against mounting odds.

We are having a ***** Group meeting and a Branch meeting next month plus, hopefully, a B User Group meeting. No doubt we will chew this all over again; I'll let you know if anything else comes to light.

I was pleased to see the comments about extending the election timetable as I believe that is at the heart of our issues. It is all too easy to blame suppliers. Sometimes it is fully justified but I find I am increasingly of the view that the complexities of what printers are now being asked to do is not compatible with a timetable, shall I say, largely from another era.

Some of my difficulties arose because printers decided they wouldn't work the weekend of 21/22 April. A real nuisance, but taking a step back perhaps their stance is not unreasonable. Why should the electoral community expect them to? Realistically the 19th April was the first chance to print the last batch of postal votes but with pressures at the printer they did not go out until 25 April. Already by 19/20 April I was receiving abuse from electors who were off on two weeks holiday and their expectation was that postal votes should be with them no later than 19th April so they could vote before departing. My view is the timetable does not allow sufficient time for a printer to deliver and meet the increasing demands from electors - and it will only be worse at the next Parliamentary. What would I do? - I think I would allow 7 days for a printer to deliver from close of postal vote applications and also ensure that the target delivery date from the printer is then at least two weeks before Polling Day.

The second aspect of the timetable is the time between publishing the notice of election and delivery of nominations. The 27th March to 4th April is simply not compatible with today's lifestyles. We published our Notice of Election on Monday 19 March and I still received lots of complaints that the timescales were "ridiculous". I tried to tell prospective candidates that we had given them more time than the legal minimum but that fell on 'stony ground'. Those individuals operating within a party political framework were better placed than people standing for Parish Councils. I had 606 parish nominations so I can say for sure that it was not one or two difficult people who complained.

Other aspects:

There is too little time between withdrawal of a candidate and the first occasion for sending out postal votes. Printers seem unable to produce ballot papers and postal vote stationery in those timescales. Yes, I can take a chance with my District elections and print earlier, as history suggests the chances of a candidate withdrawing are very low. That is not, however, the case with Parishes.

- At the post election seminars I have attended there was a lot of negative feedback about software suppliers. I would caution a degree of balance, if possible, as D users like us seem to have been ok. Indeed, what D achieved/delivered within the timescales was frankly damn good.
- The Postal Vote Identifier checking worked well here in *****. Largely because of our software although the process was a significant burden on scarce resources.

Fundamentally, I believe the growth in postal votes over the last few years and the additional printing complexities arising from the latest legislation have made the current timetable virtually impossible.

I know that, with Malcolm and Bill, you are currently reviewing the problems that occurred on and before 3 May and have invited members to participate in the collection of information. At its last meeting, the ***** Branch took the opportunity to take a collective view about these somewhat chaotic events and I have been asked to write to you with a number of observations made at that meeting.

In many respects, of course, these comments replicate those made at the seminar in Coventry on 18 May and summarised in your message of 23 May on the website. But it is hoped that any further representations will strengthen your hand in discussions about where we go from here. Anything that can be done to consolidate the position of electoral administrators will be appreciated by the AEA membership.

There is a feeling of immense frustration, even anger, at the present time, more so than I can recall in many years of involvement in electoral administration, and certainly during my period of office as Chairman of this Branch. Members simply feel ignored, ill-used and under valued.

Members of the AEA have, in my judgement, a feeling of huge professional pride in the job they do. Electoral officers are used to working long and often thankless hours in keeping the wheels of democracy turning. It is regarded as part of the job. And yet the relentless surge of new and often poorly drafted legislation has stretched that professionalism and goodwill close to breaking point.

There are a number of reasons for this but principally, of course, it revolves around the new provision in the 2006 Act to undertake personal identifier checking. I will not add at this stage to the catalogue of particular difficulties suffered by individual authorities, other than to stress that the new requirement further damaged the ability of electoral officers to manage elections safely, properly and securely.

The feeling persists that there is an unrealistic expectation in Government and Electoral Commission circles alike about what can be reasonably achieved given the available time scales and resources.

As an example, it seems to me, and to other members, almost beyond belief that the PVI requirements had to be implemented at a live election using technology that was still in the process of being developed during the election period.

Another matter of major concern to members is the lack of adequate market capacity available to deal with a major election. There is a strong feeling that, unless this problem is addressed urgently, the ability to administer a major national election would be severely compromised.

All of these matters must be reviewed urgently on a national basis. Members in the ***** Branch look forward to progress being made in all of these areas with a view to finding a satisfactory resolution at the earliest opportunity.

Nomination Stationery

Delay in nomination stationery arriving from *****. When it did arrive, we were told that it was wrong and the whole lot would have to be reprinted. By this time agents were starting to get irritated about the wait. District nomination packs duly arrived, but the parish stationery was still wrong so had to photocopy a load ourselves.

Poll-cards

Late in arriving from our printers (J). We had asked for them to be here by 23rd March so we could start delivering. Proofs faxed to me on 28th March, and the cards themselves arrived at the offices on the pm of Sat 31st. Deadline for delivery was Tues 10th April so staff not happy at all.

One entire box missing. Member of staff advised us of this, and we assumed it had been taken by someone else mistake. Unfortunately with everything else that was going on, we forgot about it and it wasn't until the Monday before polling day that an agent pointed out that one entire area hadn't had poll-cards. We therefore had to write to all households to inform them of their polling station and times of poll.

Postal votes

A complete nightmare. Normally have pre-printed postal vote kits delivered to us early, so we can do manual issue. This year, decided to go for external printing of ballot papers and automatic loading into postal vote envelopes on proviso from printer that I go and watch the process and do a quality check.

Many delays with processing postal vote data. Original intention to send first data beginning of April, then "sweep-up" on 19th after close of app for new postal votes. Despite data being re-run and sent several times, still not suitable for printer (claims incompatible with his software). Eventually sent whole lot together on 19th April.

Had to cancel 30 staff who had planned to come in for manual issue of combined wards/parishes.

No idea when I was to be called to watch the printing and ballot paper insertion process until Friday 20th when advised I needed to go to printers in ***** next day (Sat). Told I should be finished by lunchtime.

Watched several wards come off (not printed in ward order however – seemed totally random). Checked first and last postal vote in each box and all seemed to be OK. Boxes not sealed however – just thrown on top of each other. I packaged them up myself to ensure security but factory was in a mess with boxes everywhere. 2.30pm I was told to go home as they'd printed all of mine for the day and were starting on another authority's. Nowhere near finished ours but was told they would finish the next day. I asked whether I needed to come in but was told no, they'd carry out the checks themselves.

Asked what was happening to the parish stationery and was told it hadn't been printed. Therefore we could have a load of district envelopes but would have to do everything manually. Not happy as this meant there would be no barcodes on the return envelopes and so automatic signature/d.o.b checking impossible.

Monday 23rd - 7800 postal vote envelopes arrived by courier. Those where parish ballot paper to be inserted and put in post.

Tues 24th. Remaining postal votes arrived from printer. However we discovered that not all wards had as many as we'd expected ie I hadn't estimated / ordered enough kits, and therefore when the printer ran out of stationery, he just stopped printing. The ends of some wards therefore had to have manual postal vote stationery written out and sent out. Approx 350 in total.

Phone calls started coming in from some people who'd had two identical sets of postal votes. All were in the same ward and we couldn't work out why.

On the postal vote opening, having cancelled at least two of the planned daily opening sessions to start with, it all went reasonably well, although I would revert to one or two openings next time around. The staff were simply opening and sorting quicker than I could get them through the scanner/automatic checking system.

In the final week, it became clear that there was a pattern to the complaints we were receiving about postal votes in the ward where duplicates had been sent out. Several roads had not received any at all, and we did not think it was Royal Mail. It subsequently transpired that it was a printer error, in that the first few electors of this ward all had duplicates, and the last few didn't get a postal vote at all. We therefore had to try and get written statements from those concerned, and issue replacements, delivering by hand as late as the day of poll.

Ballot papers

Another nightmare. Usually use in-house printers, but thought we might have to go elsewhere this year because of the UIM and watermark. Spoke to our usual printer who said he was prepared to print them for us, but laid down certain conditions e.g. must send data-file to him in excel spreadsheet (would not accept draft paper copy of ballot paper as most printers do).

No proofs received on ballot papers for a long time after data-file of candidates' details had been sent. Mistakes on proofs not corrected straight away, and no response when I tried to ring and push for re-proofs.

Parish postal ballot papers printed without me ever being able to recheck the re-proofs.

Began to worry that the main lot of ballot papers would not arrive in time so decided to ask our own in-house printer if he could step in at last minute. Had a row with our external printer about this, but finally he conceded it would relieve the load on him, and make me feel better. He promised that the next day he'd send us the watermarked paper he'd already got in stock for us. It never arrived.

Frantic work from our own print-unit to get supplies of paper in, and then try and get our logo printed in the top corner to be the security mark, but light enough for it not to be photocopyable. Also had to try and find some way of getting the UIM in the same format as that on the postal ballot papers which of course had already been printed by external printer and gone out in post. They managed this eventually, and printed us 40% ballot papers (based on previous turnouts) so that we could start to prepare ballot boxes. Then they printed us some more to keep as reserves in the office.

Corresponding lists had to be done by hand using excel rather than the system, as we'd had to use the UIM numbering system put in place by external printer.

Began to panic about whether I'd printed enough ballot papers, so had even more done, but it still looked as though we would run out on polling day. Two members of staff driving out to some polling stations which started to run low in the evening. Fortunately no polling station actually ran out of ballot papers but it was close, and I would never run the risk again.

On the day

Apart from the usual problems, we found that on one set of ballot papers, where there were two candidates of the same name, the names had been printed in the wrong order. We'd got the party etc correct for each candidate, but the candidates just appeared the wrong way round (software error in production of proof). However both the Conservative and Lib Dem parties had printed leaflets telling people to vote for candidates nos X X and X, based on the Statement of Persons Nominated (which was in the right order) and of course this meant they were effectively telling the electorate to vote for one candidate of the opposition.

Our opinions on what worked and what didn't

- Replacement of stamping instruments with watermarked (or otherwise pre-printed) ballot papers
- Replacement of counterfoils with CNLs (although it's a big job to produce the CNLs manually)
- Software for checking of signatures and dates of birth on postal votes returned – generally it worked fine, albeit slow, and we hardly had time to install and check before going live
- Timetable is far too short
- Volume of nominations when district and parish combined
- Postal vote stationery a disaster
- Ballot paper printing also a disaster
- May have to send out poll-cards by Royal Mail in future, as not enough time between close of nominations and close of applications for postal vote to deliver by hand

All in all, the worst election I have ever been a part of!

NOTE – the identity of suppliers, Councils and individuals have been annotated to respect the confidentiality of this research.