

SCOTTISH ELECTIONS 2007

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS 2007: THE 2007 ELECTIONS STEERING GROUP NEWSLETTER

Issue 2

July 2005

This is the second in a series of quarterly newsletters designed to keep those involved directly with the elections up to date on what is happening with regard to preparations and planning for May 2007. If you have specific queries on issues connected with individual items in the newsletter, you may wish to raise these with your organisation's representative on the Group.

2007 ELECTIONS MEETINGS

Since the last newsletter was produced, the Steering Group has met on 17 May. Two sub-groups have also been set up: the Legislation Sub-Group which met on 20 April and the e-Counting Sub-Group which met on 16 June.

UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE STEERING GROUP

The Steering Group discussed the following issues at its meeting on 17 May

- the newsletter
- results of the first meeting of the legislation sub-group
- issues arising from the General Election
- Group members' observation of the Northern Ireland count
- e-counting issues

As the newsletter will provide details of the work of the Group and sub-Groups, minutes of meetings will not be circulated more widely although members are free to circulate the minutes within their organisations and the Executive will make them available on request. In addition to its wide circulation, the newsletter will be published on the Scottish Executive website and links to it provided on the Scotland Office and Electoral Commission websites.

Details of the meeting of the legislation sub-group are given on page 2 of the newsletter.

Following the General Election, David Cairns is now Minister of State at the Scotland Office with responsibility for elections. In addition to the post-General Election conference held in Edinburgh in June, the Electoral Commission will produce an official report on the conduct of the election later in the year. The Scotland Office will be writing to Returning Officers regarding Royal Mail performance.

The recently announced UK Electoral Administration Bill will extend to Scottish Parliament elections and Scottish Executive Ministers are currently considering whether and how its provisions should be replicated in respect of local government elections here. The Scotland Office will have a clearer idea as to whether the provisions of the Bill relating to the collection of personal identifiers for personal voters would affect this year's canvass following further discussions with DCA and will keep in touch with EROs on this. Whilst the Bill will not cover the issue of access to the full register for non-statutory referendums, a review of current regulations is currently being considered.

Several Group members had attended as observers at the Northern Ireland local government count on 9 and 10 May. The general view was that, whilst the count was still long and time-consuming, the

overall professionalism and the conduct of the count had improved. The levels of candidate/agent understanding of the STV system were, in the main, seen to be more apparent. From observation of the count, it appeared that a manual count in smaller council elections of 20 or so councillors could be fitted within a 9-5 working day. The Electoral Commission have collated views on the conduct of the count and have presented these to SOLACE, SOLAR, the AEA, SAA, COSLA, Leaders of Councils and the Scottish Political Parties Panel.

Scottish Executive Ministers have agreed that work should go forward on the possibility of introducing e-counting for the 2007 local government elections. Both SOLACE and SOLAR have confirmed that such tests, if successful, would be enough to convince Returning Officers that e-counting should be used for 2007 elections without further testing at interim FPTP by-elections. The Executive hope to secure funding to provide mock STV e-counts this winter.

LEGISLATION SUB-GROUP MEETING

The sub-group met on 20 April to discuss

- the main legislative tasks to be undertaken for May 2007
- the draft timetable for these tasks
- related legislative and non-legislative issues

The main legislative tasks will be to draft the Scottish Parliament Election Order, the Returning Officers' Accounts Regulations, the Regional Returning Officer's Order and revise the 2002 Local Government Rules and Regulations. The first draft of the local government rules will focus on non-count specific changes as final decisions on e-counting and the version of STV to be used have yet to be made.

Drafting of the Parliamentary legislation will start later this year but the level of changes to current local government legislation requires an immediate start to allow time for full consultation of interested parties. The revised rules and regulations will need to be in place by May 2006 to allow the Scottish Parliament order to be made before the summer recess. The first draft of the revised local government rules will be circulated for comment later in the summer.

There are a number of external factors which might impact on the preparation of legislation for 2007. The proposed Electoral Administration Bill will implement a range of Electoral Commission recommendations. The timing of the Bill has not yet been settled but the Department for Constitutional Affairs are aware that implementation of these changes in Scotland before May 2007 will be difficult because of the focus on preparing for the 2007 elections. The local government ward boundary review is due to be completed by September 2006 with orders being put in place by the end of 2006. Where the proposed changes are less contentious and have been agreed, the Executive will process the relevant orders well in advance of the December 2006 deadline to avoid a large number of orders being put before Parliament at the end of year.

The recommendations of the Arbutnott Commission and the proposed review of the regulations on registration may also have an effect on drafting legislation for 2007.

E-COUNTING SUB-GROUP

The e-counting group held its first meeting on 16 June and John Bennett from the Greater London Authority gave the Group an overview of the main issues and lessons learned from the London count in June 2004. Major issues were the complexity of the overall task, the need for good project management, the scope of the contract with suppliers and the need for good and regular communications with a wider audience (primarily candidates and agents), both to foster understanding of the system and underline its reliability.

The Group has identified a number of key issues involved in the introduction of e-counting:

- the tight timetable for introduction and whether this can be achieved in the time available;
- the commitment required of Group members, and of central and local government, to meet this timetable;
- how the success or otherwise of initial trials can be measured;
- the basis on which a decision to press ahead with e-counting in 2007 should be taken
- the identity of the main contractor and how the contractual process is to be carried out;
- whether a key player should act as project leader and take the project forward or a separate project development and management team set up and staffed or an alternative mechanism adopted;
- how formal these arrangements need to be; and
- how 'buy-in' in terms of time and resources will be ensured from all those involved.

Additional factors are whether the Scottish Parliament election will be e-counted and whether the small number of e-counting suppliers and the size of the firms involved might mean that a full e-count of all 32 local authority elections will not be possible because of the limited number of support staff available. 32 separate count centres across Scotland is not an option and 4/6 regional centres appears to be a more likely solution. A dedicated project management team will also be required as experience in both London and New Zealand has shown that good project management is vital. Issues for early resolution are the issue of a prior information notice (PIN), if appropriate, and resources for the development of a project initiation document.

MEETINGS OVER THE NEXT 3 MONTHS

The next meeting of the steering group will take place in September. The next meetings of the legislation sub-group and the e-counting sub-groups are also planned for September.

The next issue of the newsletter will appear in October.

Scottish Executive

On behalf of the Steering Group