



CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE
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John Bennett
Head of Special Projects and Elections
Greater London Returning Officer
Greater London Authority
City Hall
Queen's Walk
London SE1A 2AA

REF:GD/MP
8th May 2012

Dear John,

MAYOR OF LONDON AND LONDON ASSEMBLY ELECTION COUNT – FRIDAY 4TH MAY 2012

I am writing to protest in the strongest possible terms about the tone and content of the various press statements made by your office during the course of last Friday's count. The statements that I have seen failed to give an accurate picture of the real situation on the ground, minimised or ignored the major technical challenges with which Constituency Returning Officers (CROs) and their staff were dealing and gave the entirely erroneous impression that the evident delay in finishing the count process at the end of the day was largely due to the failings of local staff in local counting centres. This is an absolute travesty of the truth.

I have asked my electoral services colleagues in Brent and Harrow to compile a detailed assessment and chronology of events leading up to and during the count process at Alexandra Palace on Friday 4th May. I will of course forward this to you as soon as it is available. However, I already know from exchanges I have had with other London CROs that the problems we encountered were not unique to the Brent and Harrow count and I am sure that they will want to make their own representations to you in due course. Some CROs have said to me that they only got through the count 'by the skin of their teeth' and I know for certain that other CROs share my profound concern about the general finger-pointing and responsibility-evading tone of your office's press statements on the day.

Feedback from Brent and Harrow will reveal a number of serious systemic flaws and mishaps which compromised the count process at Alexandra Palace from the very outset. Although your morning press statement referred to a power outage that lasted for approximately one hour, your statement failed to identify that the cause of the problem (which was common knowledge to those of us at the count) was a contractor working for a burglar alarm/fire sprinkler company cutting off the centre's electricity supply for test purposes. In the process, power to all election PCs and scanners was pulled and as a result a lengthy process of re-setting and re-booting was required before counting machines could be re-set at zero. This produced an entirely unacceptable three hour delay before the system was up and running and meant that, in Brent and Harrow's case, we were unable to even start our count proper until 11.10am – some three hours after the official start time. As we were the last constituency to have our power re-connected, it is hardly surprising that we were the last to declare a final result.

Had the local power outage been avoided, Brent and Harrow would certainly have declared its result by 20.00 at the latest, the Mayoral and London Assembly results would have been announced by the GLRO around 21.00 and the outcome of the whole electoral process could have been confidently



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reported by the media on their 22.00 news bulletins. Notwithstanding this reality, your press statements implied quite misleadingly that you were just experiencing a little local difficulty due to failings in one count and that you were pressing the relevant CRO for clarification. One could almost be forgiven for not realising that this was a GLA process conducted to rules set by the GLA and working with a GLA appointed contractor! You will also be aware that you had your own GLA representative at the count itself with whom I was in constant contact and who well understood the difficulties that we were grappling with on the night.

If there are any local issues regarding the rest of the count process, I will ensure that these are identified and addressed. This is our normal practice after any major election and we will always seek to learn from any problems that are thrown up by what was undoubtedly a technically very complex counting process with effectively three separate counts running simultaneously side by side. Indeed, in Brent's case, we had the added complication of a local ward by-election thrown into the mix for good measure. However, my electoral staff and I are absolutely clear that there are other issues for which the GLA must accept responsibility and which severely impeded our ability to conduct an efficient and timely count. From early soundings, I can advise you that these included the following:

- Poor quality briefing of election staff at Alexandra Palace when staff arrived the day before the count to oversee the count set-up
- I understand there were problems with water penetration at Alexandra Palace which forced the contractors to acquire a portable gazebo to protect some of the on-site electronic equipment
- Delays in admitting and receiving my electoral staff at Alexandra Palace which meant that the count start would almost certainly have been delayed even without the power outage
- Several scanners at the count failed to work at all, broke down during the count itself and/or produced inconsistent results when running the same batch of ballot papers
- Although supposedly an electronic count, a huge number of the 450,000 ballots in play at the Brent and Harrow count had to be manually entered by my staff and I understand that this may have been the case elsewhere
- We experienced particular difficulties with postal votes where scanning machines consistently rejected entirely legitimate ballots where even miniscule amounts of the ballot paper had been shaved off during the envelope opening process
- As this was an electronic count using new and unfamiliar software, council staff at all counts were heavily reliant on the technical and problem-solving skills of IntElect, the chosen contractor for the count – this diluted the ability of CROs to effectively manage the process and take any necessary remedial action.
- It was quite clear from my observations that the contractor was working hard to deal with the issues that arose at our count but it was also clear that they were bewildered by the numerical inconsistencies that were being produced – despite everyone's best efforts, it took several hours before the problems we encountered were properly diagnosed and rectified

As CRO, I take my electoral duties very seriously and I am fully committed to establishing a productive and harmonious working relationship with the GLA/GLRO when running London-wide elections. As you more than anyone will appreciate, it is also my responsibility to ensure that the count is as accurate as it is humanly possible for it to be. Sometimes the need for speed of completion can be at odds with ensuring that every voter's ballot is accurately recorded and counted. Electoral staff from Brent and Harrow worked their socks off last Friday and many had gone from presiding duties on Thursday to counting duties on Friday with barely a few hours sleep in between. On the day of the count, my staff

worked pretty well continuously from 06.00 when the coach picked them up at Brent Town Hall to 23.00 when we finally announced our local result.

You will understand that we are to put it mildly pretty peeved to be portrayed as being somehow negligent or poorly performing when there were several varied reasons why the Brent and Harrow count did not proceed as expeditiously as we would all have wished. I hope these points and those that I know will be made by electoral staff across London can be taken on board as you conduct your post-election review of how things went on the day. If it would be helpful, I would be more than happy to welcome you to Brent and Harrow to discuss in more detail how the day went from the point of view of local staff in local counting centres.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gareth Daniel', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gareth Daniel
Chief Executive
Brent Council
Brent and Harrow CRO

