

TOWER HAMLETS:

A REPORT ON THE CONDUCT OF THE 2018 LOCAL ELECTIONS



Cllr Andrew Wood
June 2018
Version 4, DRAFT

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Glossary

TH = Tower Hamlets
 LBTH = London Borough of Tower Hamlets
 Excel = Excel centre Newham
 PV = postal vote
 SET = Special Elections Team, Metropolitan Police

Executive Summary

This report looks at issues regarding the election process from when campaigning started in late 2017, to the 'purdah' or election expenses period starting, election day itself and at the count.

It has been compiled by Cllr Andrew Wood, Canary Wharf ward with the help of those people listed in the contributor's section. This main report is a summary and will be supplemented by a series of appendices. In addition, a description of where additional evidence can be found can be provided if requested. This report (version 3) is not final as we are still gathering evidence and verifying some of the facts, but we believe that this version is solid enough to be more widely shared for comment.

This report though cannot be considered as a complete record of issues. We are aware that the Police are investigating several issues and the results of those investigations need to be considered with this report.

The basic premise of this report is that while the overall results reflected the will of the electorate there were nonetheless several serious issues which may have affected some ward results but more seriously the perception of these elections as free and fair. Consequently, the overall results may still be viewed by some as suspicious or unfair. Therefore, we believe lessons continue to need to be learnt to ensure that local elections in 2022 are better run and that the stigma of 2014 is permanently put behind us.

Cllr Andrew Wood

June, 2018

Pre-election campaign to formal start of campaign 28th March 2018

The 2015 election court had to consider when a candidate is formally recognised as a candidate. There remains a “grey” area as to when this is, particularly with regard to the long campaign. Candidates in Tower Hamlets were campaigning for the election during 2017; well in advance of the short campaign and nomination process.

#1 – Personal allegations against candidates made

Allegations of Islamophobia were made on social media against candidates, however, the candidates had no protection in law as nobody could decide as to when a candidate was a candidate. This is despite those described as such being identified as candidates.

Evidence: Email exchange with SET

Recommendations:

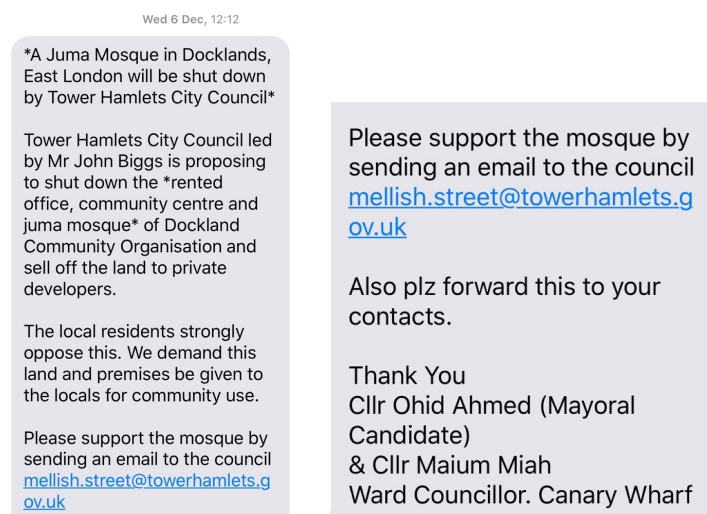
1. Consideration needs to be given to issue stronger guidelines as to when a candidate in a local election is effectively a candidate and importantly what legal protection can be extended to candidates during the “long campaign.”

#2 – Incorrect information being circulated

Text or WhatsApp messages were being circulated by candidates making allegations against the Council & Mayor John Biggs with regards to the future of Mellish street (see point later). These allegations were factually incorrect as Councillors would have known from briefings provided by the Council.

By using WhatsApp or texts these messages become invisible to the wider public or those scrutinising elections (unless somebody screenshots them)

Therefore, any strategy of reviewing social media use by parties must somehow find a way of reviewing such messages. The date of 6th December 2017 also indicates how soon campaigning was underway.



Evidence: Screenshot above

Recommendations:

1. Authorities find a way of accessing the larger WhatsApp groups in the same way they would access Twitter or Facebook.

#3 – Attempts to intimidate candidates

SET will be aware of several issues in 2017 which are not appropriate for a public report.

Evidence: held by SET

#4 – Mis-use of Council resources

There appear to be several examples of mis-use of Council resources. The first example is the use of a picture of Mayor John Biggs on the front cover of the last three 'Our East End' editions before the election covering three core election issues: housing, policing and rubbish. Our East End is the Council's quarterly magazine that replaced the weekly East End Life. The March 2018 edition was still on display in at least one Council library after Council purdah started.



Pictures of Mayor John Biggs were also used on eight LBTH refuse trucks and this is another example of where Council resources appear to have been mis-used. The pictures were placed on the side of trucks between 2 and 2 ½ months before Council purdah started at a cost of £2,500.

Although these pictures were removed when Council purdah started why did the Mayor's picture have to be used in the last few months before scheduled elections?

It implies that LBTH officers were actively supporting the re-election of Mayor Biggs. Mayor Biggs at the Housing hustling event in April said that he did not approve of the use of his pictures in this way when asked about this. But that does not mean that Council officers did not choose to support his candidacy.



Finally, a ward candidate used Council equipment to clean graffiti off a wall which he had reported. It gave him an unfair advantage of over candidates who had also reported graffiti but who did not get to use Council equipment. When approached about this misuse, council officers claimed the candidate was not a candidate, despite his being described as such an material being circulated.

The Council also accidentally retweeted candidates tweets during Council “purdah.”



Recommendations:

1. Stronger guidelines need to be issued to prevent this in the future.

Evidence:

Previous “Our East End” editions can be accessed here

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/Our_East_End/Our_East_End.aspx

Evidence of Mayor John Biggs pictures on the side of refuse trucks – pictures and emails exchange with LBTH is available

Graffiti cleaning – Twitter posts and email exchange with LBTH is available

Campaign 28th March to 3rd May

#5 – Postal vote issues

These issues have been reported to the Police and we await news of their investigations. Tower Hamlets was part of the pilot scheme with increased security with regard to postal voting.

However, as a summary, candidates were alleged to have entered people's homes to 'pick up and take away' postal votes. The households were generally those with large numbers of voters, with low levels of English and in accessible buildings. In some cases, voters were badgered continuously until candidates were allowed in. In other cases, candidates were alleged to have marked ballot papers themselves before getting residents to sign the ballot papers. We are aware of at least four homes in Canary Wharf ward where this was alleged to have happened.

No security measure can prevent candidates from entering homes and then cajoling or intimidating residents into giving them access to postal votes. However, there needs to be a campaign to raise awareness about the negative impact this type of behaviour can have on the elections. On this occasion warnings about cajoling and intimidation appear to only have been written in English. Tower Hamlets is a diverse borough where English might not always be the first language for several residents and this needs to be considered when raising awareness about such issues.

Even if the envelopes are sealed does Returning Officers appear not to have any mechanism for checking whether corrections were made if candidates took away sealed envelopes i.e. could they be steamed open?

Question: what actions did Electoral officials undertake to preserve the evidence i.e. fingerprints of these alleged postal votes

Evidence: Emails to SET plus two videos, English language transcripts of video's

Recommendations:

1. To clearly mark on postal ballot papers in English and other appropriate languages that for others to complete or take away unsealed ballot papers is an offence punishable by up to 6 months in jail.
2. To amend statute to add an offence for handing over unsealed postal ballot papers to 3rd parties.
3. To end the use of postal votes except in a few clearly identifiable cases on medical grounds.

#6 – Arrest & Assault?

A candidate was allegedly arrested for assaulting security staff inside a building or was assaulted by security staff inside a building depending on which rumour or report you believe. This 'arrest' was widely known and circulated but nobody knows what actually happened.

An Aspire candidate was also attacked as well in Wapping and rumours circulated suggesting that the attacker was linked to another candidate.

Some method must be found to correct reporting errors as they may have had an impact on the election.

Evidence: Evening Standard story, East London Advertiser story + personal comments & text messages

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/tower-hamlets-council-candidate-beaten-with-iron-bar-i-thought-my-head-had-split-in-two-a3811091.html>

<http://www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/politics/elections-tower-hamlets-council-candidate-in-assault-incident-in-canary-wharf-1-5483854>

#7 – Social media activism by those not of voting age

During the election campaign a 16-year-old youth (possibly 15 years of age when the campaign started) became the main social media activist for one party.

It was extremely difficult for other parties to respond as the safeguarding responsibilities of adults towards those legally defined as children take precedence over electoral considerations. Given that this document will be in the public domain we are even limited in the detail we can write in this report.

Nevertheless, it meant that the party had an electoral advantage campaigning on social media as they had an activist whom other parties' activists were advised not to respond to in order to avoid being stigmatised for attacking a 'child'. It meant that this activist usually had the last or only word on a subject with no effective means on rebuttal. As the age of the youth was not widely known (but not hidden) that made it very difficult to deal with.

Question

Is there any guidance or statute that covers this issue?

If children are not covered by the Representation of the Peoples Act that would suggest to parties that by using those under 18 years of age that this would give them an electoral advantage.

Evidence: social media posts can be made available but for obvious reasons the name of the youth won't be made publicly available

Recommendations:

1. Clear guidance be issued to parties as to the roles and responsibilities that underage people can perform during elections.
2. That parties make clear their responsibilities towards those under age but involved in campaigning.

Election Day Thursday 3rd May 7am to 10pm

This section covers issues which occurred on election day itself

#8 – Postal Vote opening

Although these took place before the 3rd May this seems the appropriate place to report issues.

In previous elections the numbers of postal votes opened, rejected, etc was reported at the end of each postal vote opening session. That was not the case this time apparently despite Tower Hamlets being part of a pilot scheme to improve the postal vote process.

It would also help to get more information about how the new security procedures worked as we know attempts were made to interfere with postal votes before they left people's homes. Where there any attempts to interfere with the rest of the postal vote process? How many postal votes were rejected?

Recommendations:

1. A public report issued by Tower Hamlets on what election officials undertook with regards to postal votes and the results of the new security measures.

#9 – Location & advertisement of new polling stations

On Election Day, voters went automatically to their normal polling station not realising they had moved (including a Labour party agent). This affected Canary Wharf ward where two of three polling stations changed.

1. Tiller road leisure centre moved to Mellish street portacabins, one street over
2. London Docklands Museum moved to Marriott Hotel West India Quay

Two other polling stations changed location in other wards in the borough.

There was no information made available publicly notifying voters of the change, nor was there anything on the Council website or social media channels advertising any changes (a local candidate in Canary Wharf undertook this). The new locations were on the poll cards but unless you specifically looked at the card it would have taken some time to realise that the station had changed.

When people arrived at the former location there was nothing to indicate a change in location or that the location was no longer being used as a polling station.

Staff inside (including Council employees) were not told about the change or where the new station was located. The replacement stations were not visible nor were there signs visible from the old polling station.

At Tiller road leisure centre staff inside (employed on a Council contract) where not briefed. This was the same at the London Docklands Museum. Both were asked by Cllr Andrew Wood to tell people where to go.

At both locations between 7am and 8am Cllr Andrew Wood anticipating this lack of communication placed his own signs indicating a change of location with a map of where to go.

When this was raised with election staff there was a positive response at Tiller road. They put up their own sign at Tiller road leisure centre and moved a street sign to Millharbour indicating where to turn.

The response by election staff at the Marriott Hotel was dismissive and no changes were made. The signs placed at the Dockland Museum by Cllr Wood blew away or were removed so it is likely that when the Museum was closed that voters would have not known where to go if they did not have a polling card.

As a result, we believe that the results of Canary Wharf ward elections were materially affected. As a reminder these were the results in the ward of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th placed candidates.

2nd 760 elected

3rd 758 not elected

4th 754 not elected

Evidence: LBTH website, pictures and email exchanges

Recommendations:

1. Consult local Councillors and political parties about any change of polling station (as was done in 2015).
2. Advertise on social media that there is a change.
3. Add letters to the poll cards indicating that there is a change.
4. Place signs & maps at the 'former' locations about where the new location is.
5. This should continue for 2 elections as turnout rates can vary so much.

#10 – Choice of polling stations

Mellish Street was chosen apparently in December 2017 as a new polling station. Many voters were not aware of the change until poll cards arrived and even then many voters still went to the wrong location.

At the time its main use was as a Muslim prayer space 'mosque', it had gender segregated main entrance doors, its future was a campaigning issue (see earlier page 3), it had been used as an advice surgery location by one candidate, members of other political parties were 'discouraged' from visiting and the interior layout could have resulted in people entering from the mosque or hearing prayers while voting.

Despite many of these facts being known to LBTH, this location was still chosen as a polling station without consultation or advance notice. The argument was that if the lift at Tiller road leisure centre failed then disabled voters could not access the polling station (the lift was working on the 3rd May)

In the end the Council was forced into an expensive compromise of installing temporary portacabins in the car park of the portacabin facility. This resulted in considerable disturbance to residents as two roads had to have all cars removed to allow the portacabins to be installed.

Evidence: pictures, email exchanges

Recommendations:

1. Consult with local Councillors and parties before any change in polling station (as was done in 2015).
2. Make clear the reasons for any change.

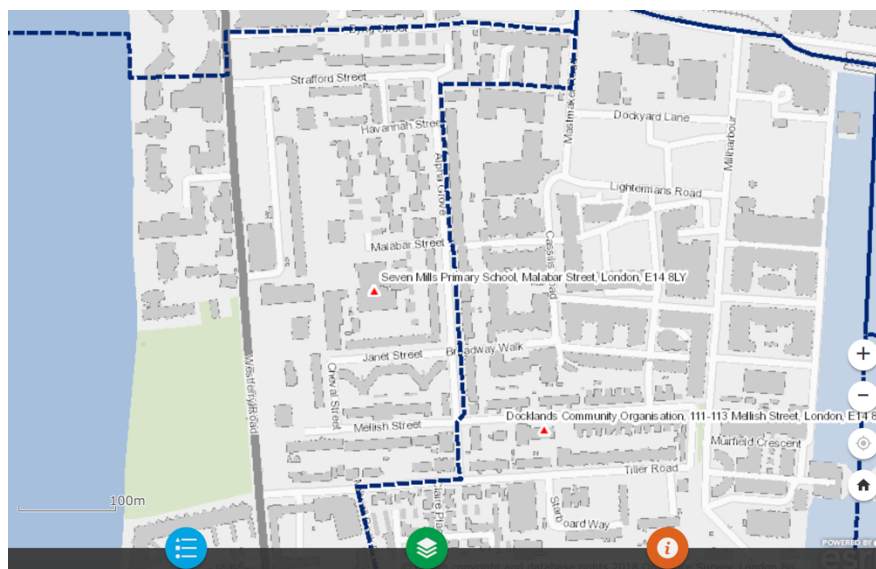
#11 – Incorrect boundaries on LBTH online map

Despite this issue being raised at the time, LBTH continued to draw the boundary lines incorrectly between two different polling districts in Canary Wharf ward.

Odd numbered houses on Alpha Grove (on the east side) according to the map were supposed to vote in CW3 polling district (Mellish Street). They were actually in CW2 polling district at Seven Mills.

This was pointed out to LBTH during the election after candidates realised they had provided voters with incorrect information about where to vote. But LBTH disputed that the map was wrong.

This is an important matter particularly when the difference in votes between the 2nd, 3rd and 4th placed candidates in Canary Wharf is so small as illustrated in point #9.



Evidence: LBTH online map and register

Recommendations:

1. That the map boundaries be reviewed again for all wards as soon as possible.

#12 – Behaviour outside polling stations

Several people said they had not or would not vote because of issues outside polling stations. There were large crowds of different party's observers/supporters/hangers on whom could have been perceived as threatening, intimidating or unsettling depending on your point of view.

Suggestions were made that voters perceived risk where there was none. That may be true, however, what may be perceived as low risk by a young fit man may be perceived differently by an elderly person. Parts of the community find elections to be genuinely interesting and exciting and it becomes almost a spectator sport where people want to be involved and to watch what happens. Another part of the community does not have the same level of interest and who feel the process should be more private. They therefore are more likely to dissuaded from voting by the presence of large groups of people outside polling stations even if those groups are entirely harmless. However, it is clear that in many cases the behaviour of party representatives trying to influence votes at the approaches to polling stations was unsettling i.e. pushing people to take party literature and telling them who to vote for as they are approaching polling stations.

Although in some cases it may have been more serious as illustrated by the fact that one Police Officer told candidates he had received reports of intimidation.

It is important to acknowledge that the democratic process does not work if voters have any concerns about accessing polling stations. This is therefore a point that needs careful consideration going forward.

This text message is a good example of people's thoughts.

told me they didn't want to go down to vote has they felt intimidated with all the Asians people standing in gangs. And approaching them to ask who they was voting and all the good things they can do for them. I must say I felt the same they was blocking the paths so I had to walk in the road to get to vote.

Evidence: text message, other social media, private discussions.

Also reported by Democracy Volunteers report

<https://democracyvolunteers.org/2018/05/16/final-report-tower-hamlets-mayoral-and-council-elections-03-05-18/>

Recommendations:

1. Enlarge the yellow marked areas where nobody is allowed in except voters and official polling agents.
2. Set aside marked areas i.e. using blue tape, where party supporters etc are allowed or encouraged to stand. Typically, this should be on the other side of the street from the entrance to the polling

station. They should be able to view what is happening and for voters to be able to see them but in a way that cannot be perceived as intimidating nor creating a blockage.

3. Issue guidelines or change the legislation to ensure that electors can enter a polling station in peace and unobstructed. It should not be permitted that large groups congregate on the approach routes to polling stations where it is not easy to avoid them. Currently this should be treated as a Public Order issue.
4. Amend Policing Plan to ensure officers available to roam areas near high risk polling stations.
5. More security/police to be present at the polling stations.

#13 – Advice given to voters by staff – EU voters

Some EU voters were refused ballot papers. This happened on several occasions and was reported in the national press as well on social media in at least two different polling stations. In the cases reported the EU citizens stood their ground and were eventually allowed to vote but it is unclear whether any EU citizens were unable to vote because of incorrect advice.

However, this raises wider issues – if people were able to vote and no official complaints were made how does LBTH know whether they happened or not?

Evidence: Social media, newspaper reports

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/03/local-election-officials-wrongly-turn-away-eu-citizens-in-tower-hamlets>

Recommendations:

1. Reporting back – we understand that nobody told LBTH that this had happened as no formal report happened.
2. Training to be provided to polling station staff.
3. Complaints Register (if one exists) should be easy to identify and access to voters at the polling station.

#14 – Advice given to voters by staff – number of votes

A persistent problem in wards with 2 (or 3) Councillors is that voters were told by the staff inside the polling stations that they could only vote once.

Perhaps voters misheard advice related to the Mayoral ballot paper. Nevertheless, we witnessed in the count several single vote ward ballot papers (in wards with 2 or 3 Councillors), in some cases this would have been deliberate but in other cases, this may be an error.

Whether or not polling station staff provided incorrect advice is not clear but that many people confused the ballot papers i.e. 1 vote for Mayor, 1 vote for Councillors is obvious. Similar patterns were observed in 2014.

This results in wasted votes and more needs to be done to make this clear to voters.

Evidence: Number of single votes cast in 2 or 3-member wards

Recommendations:

1. Clearer signage inside polling stations as to the number of votes expected on each ballot paper.
2. Otherwise in 2022 we will have party representatives outside shouting 1 vote for Mayor, 2 votes for Council etc

#15 – Party literature in ballot stations

As reported by Democracy Volunteers a large amount of party literature was found inside polling stations. One from the Aspire party was similar to a real ballot paper. If this is allowed to continue it is likely to further encourage poor behaviour outside polling stations i.e. forcing literature into voters' hands on their way into stations.

Evidence:

<https://democracyvolunteers.org/2018/05/16/final-report-tower-hamlets-mayoral-and-council-elections-03-05-18/>

Recommendations:

1. Half hourly sweeps of all ballot stations by Police Officers to remove literature. Station staff may simply be too busy to do this even though they have a responsibility to do it.

#16 – Family members voting together

As reported by Democracy Volunteers report.

<https://democracyvolunteers.org/2018/05/16/final-report-tower-hamlets-mayoral-and-council-elections-03-05-18/>

Recommendations:

1. Introduce a queue system at the entrance to the booths and place staff at the queue to ensure only one voter at the time as access to each booth
2. Physical changes to booths to make it harder for more than 1 person to enter (perhaps with one exception in each station for disabled access)
3. In any case this is a corrupt practice. Police officers have the power to arrest anybody influencing or intimidating a voter. This power should be used. If secrecy of the ballot is destroyed, where is democracy?

#17 – Dogs

A couple tried to take 2 small dogs inside a polling station but were not allowed. They did not vote. We believe this is because dogs are not permitted on school premises. There should be signage and publicity regarding this. At St Edmunds school (Isle of Dogs) a candidate actually looked after dogs outside of the polling station to enable electors to vote.

Recommendations:

1. Provide better guidance and more clarity to the polling station officers and ensure uniformity of treatment across all polling stations.

Count Thursday 3rd May 10pm to Saturday 5th May early morning

The count commenced at 10pm on Thursday 3rd May. Verification finished approximately 5am Friday when the Mayoral count started which finished late morning Friday. The ward counts started at 2.30pm Friday and finished in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Tower Hamlets was the last London authority to conclude. The dual election of Mayor and councillors causes delay. We understand that another reason is the exceptional number of split votes in the borough. It would be useful for the council to publish a report on the time of each stage and the numbers of split votes per ward.

While clearly the 2018 Local Elections better than Elections in 2014 there were still several issues, many of which can be easily resolved in May 2022 (when there will be a General Election, Mayor election and local ward elections)

#18 – Verification

Verification took longer to do than planned. It should be established what the original timetable had been, and a review carried out to identify lessons that can be learned to improve the performance of future elections.

It would be useful to get a report comparing the performance of Tower Hamlets against the other “Mayoral” Boroughs. Please refer to comments that follow regarding the use of the venue and the space available.

Recommendations:

1. There needs to be a report identifying lessons learned, comparing the performance of Tower Hamlets with other comparable Boroughs and proposing measures to improve the performance during future elections.

#19 – Staff Training and preparation during the count

This was clearly inadequate again, in both 2014 and 2018 count agents had to explain to count staff what to do at the table as counting started.

On at least two tables LBTH staff had to be told which wire basket to place single splits in by experienced candidates/count agents watching. Had they not intervened immediately single splits would have been placed in party bundles overstating party results

Grass skirts had to be explained to staff on the night, they did not appear to have seen them before.

LBTH staff learnt how to place ballot papers on the grass skirts on the night. But as a result, in some cases they got 21 or 19 rather than 20 ballot papers on the grass skirts.

The processes adopted by each count team at staff level seemed to vary between teams with noticeable differences between the performance of each individual count team.

Evidence: Personal observation

Recommendations:

1. Staff be given training in advance of sitting at tables perhaps through YouTube videos
2. Aide memoire given to all staff as to what goes where
3. Practise placing ballot papers on grass skirts
4. In 2022 consider totally separate teams to count each election
5. A clear established process prepared and practiced in advance should be followed by all teams

#20 – Layout of count tables

Several issues were noted on the day:

- On at least two tables ballot papers from other wards appeared in the count.
- Ballots from different wards were being counted a hands breadth apart on tables with no barriers or separation between the wards.
- Not enough space on table for both count staff to work, lots of baskets required, staff looked constrained and untidy, should have been spaced wider apart for greater visibility.
- Wire baskets placed on alphabetical basis rather than what is the most efficient layout i.e. main parties in middle of table, flanked by split baskets with smaller parties on the extreme ends.
- Limited number of count agents allowed to sit at tables due to table length
- Barrier too far back for people to see – only people with chairs were allowed to get close to the table but in wards like Canary Wharf that meant candidates from some parties did not get seats in time and had to stand behind the barrier.

Recommendations:

1. Tables should have table dividers physically separating tables i.e. some kind of vertical divider between tables
2. Tables should have been longer especially for 3-member wards so that more space was available
3. Wire baskets should have been placed based on an efficient use of space and visual rather than alphabetically

#21 – Summing Issues

Most serious issues appear to have taken place in Island Gardens and Whitechapel but it's unclear if other wards were also affected.

Count staff were seen to be adding manually in their heads long strings of numbers. Even when they used calculators they were seen to input numbers incorrectly. While the reconciliation process may correct the total votes error on pages that does not correct any errors where rows are adding up incorrectly.

The issues reported included the first results being materially wrong as was the case with Island Gardens. Here is a summary of the issue from a letter by Cllr Peter Golds to Will Tuckley.

“At the end of this process, my two main scrutineers compared notes and gave me their predicted results.

The tallies and sheets were taken away and after a break you [Returning Officer] appeared with figures which indicated that I was in fourth place. I immediately queried this as it was in complete variance to the figures that I had been given. I was, as you know, supported by the Labour Party Agent who was concerned.

Eventually the 'grass-skirts' were checked and a number of people kept running tallies and figures that were handed to me and added to the 690 block votes that I had received were in variance to what had been shown.

Once again, the sheets were taken away and after a break I was shown the result that was declared. This result was within three votes the same as that given to me by my two key scrutineers.

*There has to be a serious question as to what happened between the sheets being completed and tallied elsewhere, **far away from any scrutineer? ***

In 2014 my vote changed by 21%. In 2018 I moved from fourth to second place."

Evidence: See exchange of letters in the Appendix

It is clear that manually adding together numbers will lead to errors and that the final checking of numbers being undertaken in the middle of the room far away from observers means nobody can check the final results. And once the declaration is made it is final with no easy ability to re-check.

Recommendations:

1. Have a process for double-checking results by a separate team. Who can verify no errors made. They should use a different process or mechanism for doing so
2. That every stage of the counting process is overlooked by people checking not just what happens at the count tables but in the back as well
3. Optical Character Recognition
 - a. Either to check the results as a parallel process
 - b. Or as in GLA elections no longer count manually
4. Use of calculators – training needed

#22 – Issues with declaration of results online

The declaration of results online caused significant confusion in the days following the result. Broadly there were two main issues

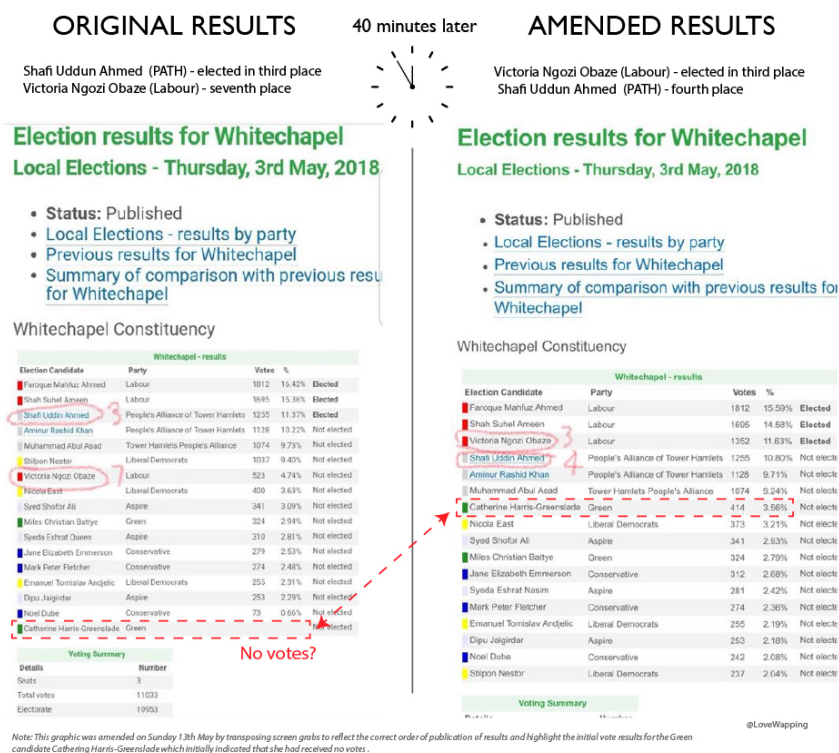
1. Different results released online at different times for Whitechapel & Shadwell
2. Different names for one party used online either:
 - a. Tower Hamlets Peoples Alliance
 - b. People's Alliance Tower Hamlets (the correct name)These were used together in the same ward i.e. Mile End

The results online were deeply confusing as we had understood that results should not be declared before final.

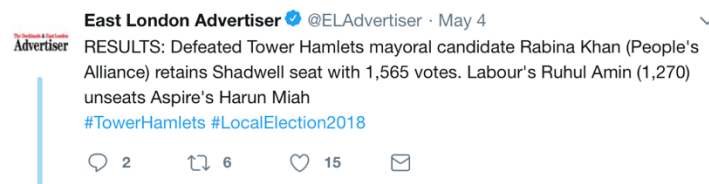
The Wikipedia link is especially interesting.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tower_Hamlets_London_Borough_Council_election,_2018&action=history

It shows that the people updating Wikipedia were making corrections to Whitechapel with the comment “when the “official” result keep changing” Below is a picture of the two different results posted online (with comments added by Love Wapping)



This is also interesting as suggests wider issues with website postings being incorrect (the screenshot in this Twitter is from the Councils website)



Replying to @ELAdvertiser

Oh @TowerHamletsNow 🙄

(Yes, I see that it's been fixed in the last few seconds.)

Shadwell Constituency

Shadwell - results					
Election Candidate	Party	Votes	%		
Rabina Khan	People's Alliance of Tower Hamlets	1565	21.18%	Not elected	➡
Ruhul Amin	Labour	1270	17.19%	Elected	
Charlotte Norton	Labour	1157	15.66%	Not elected	
Harun Miah	Aspire	993	13.44%	Not elected	
Ana Miah	People's Alliance of Tower Hamlets	765	10.35%	Not elected	
Bodruzzaman Shamim	Aspire	439	5.94%	Not elected	
Kazi Mohammad Gous-Miah	Independent	244	3.30%	Not elected	
Ben Nicholas Thomas Hyde-Hart	Green	201	2.72%	Elected	➡
Des Ellerbeck	Conservative	179	2.42%	Not elected	
Dominic Robert Buxton	Liberal Democrats	165	2.23%	Not elected	
Daryl Martin Stafford	Conservative	146	1.98%	Not elected	
Graf Freda	Liberal Democrats	143	1.94%	Not elected	
Jonathan Richard Page	Green	121	1.64%	Not elected	

4:35 PM - 4 May 2018

This may be only a reporting issue (although posting results before declared is contrary to election law), however it has raised wider concerns:

1. Why results posted online before announcement
2. Why did published results change so much for some candidates but not move for others?

Recommendations:

1. Investigation into software used and its level of security
2. No results announced online until after the declaration
3. Make available more information about what went wrong here otherwise an urban myth will form that the election results were hacked (given stories about Russian penetration of American and other voting systems how soon will people in TH allege the same here?)

#23 – Visibility of where wards were being counted

The layout of the tables was extremely confusing, it was not clear which wards and boxes were going where to be counted. For example, the Conservatives lost track of where one box was being counted and as a result it is likely that nobody from the party checked the results of one box in a key ward.

Different boxes from the same ward were being counted at the same time in different parts of the hall making it almost impossible for candidates and agents to view count.

Recommendations:

1. Tables should have been numbered 1 to 12 for example
2. A schedule should have been publicly available of which tables would count which wards
3. Announcements should have been made i.e. Canary Wharf box 58 going to table 8 in 5 minutes
4. Or tables allocated to specific wards (& only those wards) until all boxes counted and results announced before table changing

#24 – Room layout

There was excess space in the hall at the Excel centre that could have been used to solve some of the issues highlighted in this report. It is likely that the layout could have been improved to allow all 20 wards to be counted simultaneously and this would have greatly improved the performance of LBTH.

Recommendations:

1. Several of the recommendations highlighted in this report apply.
2. Develop a layout that is suitable to the size of LBTH and helps to reduce the amount of time it takes to count the votes in LBTH by for example reducing the amount of ‘dead space’ inside the venue, introducing more tables and staff, following an irregular layout to maximize the space available.

#25 – Access to the Venue and facilities for Candidates, Counting Agents & Guests

There were delays on entering the venue as letters had to be checked. More staff should have been assigned to check the letters.

Hot drinks, etc, were not allowed into the secure area. However, water was allowed to be drunk at the count tables (from a water dispenser inside the secure area).

Recommendations:

1. Set aside comfort tables for count staff and agents where they can drink safely away from the count tables but close enough for them to see what is happening and to be able to re-join the count quickly if necessary.

#26 – Tiredness

We understood that different teams were to be used for different stages of the count, but we saw some of the same people reappear later. This fact needs to be confirmed. However, this clearly did not apply to senior staff, we believe that the Head of Democratic Services was up from 4.30am Thursday morning until Saturday early morning. Can it be established how much sleep senior staff got in this period?

Recommendations:

1. Tired people make mistakes. There are hotels close to the Excel centre where senior staff could have got some sleep. Better use of deputies etc need to be made as there were long periods where senior staff were not required and could have got some rest.
2. LBTH should put in place a sleep plan to rotate their staff during the count.

#27 – Last to Finish

As in 2014 Tower Hamlets was again the last Council to finish counting by some margin. While the speed of count should not be a formal objective and some factors were beyond the Councils control some Councils do take pride in their record of declaring quickly.

It would help build staff morale, help restore the reputation of Tower Hamlets and reduce the tiredness issue if Tower Hamlets has concrete plans in 2022 to beat its neighbouring Boroughs to a result.

Recommendations:

1. It would be useful though to get a better understanding of our performance relative to other Boroughs. It may be that when the following is compared to similar Boroughs that our performance was good on a like for like basis. We would therefore recommend comparing the following for the four London Boroughs with Mayors at a minimum as well as those outside London.
 - a. Number of votes in total
 - b. Mayoral 2nd preference counted or not?
 - c. Number of wards/boxes
 - d. Number of parties standing
 - e. Number of candidates – total & average per ward
 - f. Relative size of wards i.e. single member wards quicker to count than 3-member wards
 - g. Closeness of result
 - h. Number of recounts
 - i. % of votes in party bundles versus % of votes split – we suspect this is much higher than comparable Boroughs

Providing this evidence would allow a proper analysis of our respective performance

Evidence

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/live/2018/may/03/local-elections-council-england-2018-tories-labour-corbyn-may>

#28 – Electoral Commission Presence?

An Electoral Commission spokesman said (according to the Order-Order website):

“While it took time for Tower Hamlets to complete its count and declare results for all 20 wards, the processes and procedures that were put in place to address past issues were well managed. Representatives from the Electoral Commission were present throughout the Tower Hamlets count, no issues were raised with them. Anyone who does have concerns should contact the Returning Officer for Tower Hamlets.”

Nobody at the Count seemed to be aware of their presence nor how to find them. We only found out they had attended several weeks later through reading the Order-Order website. Two men in suits wearing unusual ID's had been noticed and that they entered the staff entrance, but they were not seen close to the count tables.

Recommendations:

1. If present again, that should be announced, and their location advertised so that issues can be raised directly with them on the night.
2. That the press release be amended to make clear that their presence was not widely known

Education

As a general point it is clear that awareness amongst the wider public to many of these issues is poor. While issues related to the removal of Lutfur Rahman were known locally and that there would be more attention paid to some issues awareness was still low.

Greater use has to be made of social media to educate people especially through YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat etc.

Although an old report related to the London Mayoral elections this is still a valid comment.

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/mayor/we-dont-understand-how-to-vote-for-mayor-6614023.html>

Summary

Tower Hamlets has since 2014 undertaken the following elections:

- Mayor of TH – June 2015 – when Lutfur Rahman was removed from office
- GLA & Mayor of London – May 2016
- EU referendum – June 2016
- General election – May 2015 & June 2017
- Ward by-elections in Whitechapel 2016 & Stepney Green 2015

However, it is clear that only local elections generate the passion, excitement and interest that create issues that require special measures at election time. This is in part because of how close the results can be between different parties; the results can be unpredictable, and many parties believe they can win. While this period may be coming to an end it is worth noting that in some wards the results were extremely close.

In addition, any elections with multiple ballot papers continues to create issues for Tower Hamlets. Once again, the borough was the last Council to finish counting in the UK.

We therefore believe that 2022 will be an even greater test than 2018 as it (in theory) will include a general election, Mayoral and ward elections on the same day and may better reflect what happened in 2014 which also combined 3 elections on one day. LBTH should therefore not be complacent and assume that because 2020 goes well that we can relax in 2022.

Main recommendations for future elections:

1. Special efforts should be made in local elections or those involving multiple ballot papers
2. Counts should be automated, ideally through OCR, failing that use more staff
3. Police officers will continue to be required outside every ballot station in local elections.
4. Provide more and better training to the staff at polling stations as well as to the count staff.

5. Consult in advance on any changes in process, locations or rules.
6. Excel centre – should remain the count centre for local or multiple elections on the same day – nowhere in TH has the appropriate combination of space and security.
7. To end the use of postal votes except in a few clearly identifiable cases on medical grounds.

Contributors to this report

Conservative Party

Andrew Wood - Candidate, Conservative Party

Peter Golds – Candidate, Conservative Party

Mr A was an experienced count observer for the Conservative party

Ms B & Mr C were candidates at the election for the Conservative party

Other contributors providing evidence

APPENDIX

Letters between Cllr Peter Golds & Will Tuckley, CEO LBTH

- Cllr Peter Golds to Will Tuckley 9th May 2018
- Will Tuckley Response to Cllr Peter Golds 11th May 2018
- Cllr Peter Golds response 23rd May 2018

Mr A report from the Count

- One counting agent per party per ward – I am surprised this is legal, given that candidates of the same party are often competing for the same seat. The lack of counting agents makes it impossible for any one party to fully scrutinise the count. I think the council assumes all counting agents, regardless of party, are equally experienced and have the same role i.e. spot errors.
- I am appalled that candidates, or indeed counting agents without a chair, were expected to stand behind the rope with candidates etc from other wards. Again, I am surprised this is legal. The barriers were too far away to be able to scrutinise effectively.
- The ERO, in his capacity as DRO, was inconsistent in his application of a standard for uncertainty. I appreciate that there is an element of subjectivity, but a consistent interpretation is essential to avoid accusations of bias.
- This count took far too long – 12 hours just on counting! Indeed, the total amount of time here is comparable to 2014. (10pm Thurs to 2am Friday = 28 hours. 2014: 10am Friday to noon on Saturday = 26 hours, plus a few more on the Sunday). Admittedly this included a c. 3-hour break between counts this time, but still, TH was the last council to declare by about 6 hours.
- The room was underutilised. I have no idea if it was much busier for the Mayoral count; but even if so there was time to adapt the layout. One of the main reasons it took so long is that they were only set up to count 10 wards at a time. I don't think I have ever been to a count before that didn't have space to run all the wards simultaneously – certainly in Thurrock we manage to count 17/18 wards at once in a significantly smaller space.
- There was no indication for those wards which were in the second set where they were to be counted. This meant every time a ward finished I had to keep half an eye out to see if SKW was appearing
- There was a distinct lack of common sense – there were trays on the table for Independent block votes and Green block votes in wards where such a block vote was impossible!
- Last time, the council correctly identified that one of the reasons the count took so long was the large number of recounts (11 out of 20 if I remember correctly). They therefore decided to introduce the “grass skirt” system that is quicker to recount. This seems sensible. However, the grass skirt system is only quicker on recounts because it takes so long to do in the first place. This led to a protracted count again – and this time there were only 2 recounts. I suspect the council is between a rock and a hard place here. On the one hand, 2 out of 20 recounts is much more typical, and the council should have anticipated this. On the other hand, if there had been a load of recounts, the council could have been accused of not learning the lessons of 2014.
- The fact the grass skirt system was new to the counting staff meant there were many errors. The first three skirts I saw written up for Canary Wharf had 19 ballot papers, 21 ballot papers, and 20 ballot papers but one included 5 ballots. Stamping a ballot paper on a grass skirt as rejected didn't really help as lots of the marks were a long way from the stamp, and it took a long time to get the count correct.

- In advance, we were promised a completely fresh set of counting staff. In reality, several had done the Mayoral count as well.
- I am far from impressed with how close the council allowed photographers and media to get to ballot papers, and the reassurance that people have signed a code of conduct is laughable.
- The events of the Island Gardens constitute an event that requires a full investigation, the results of which must be published. The returning officer was prepared to declare a result when one candidate's vote (Strawson) was wrong to the tune of 400 votes. This is beyond unacceptable, especially when it could be proven wrong within 5 minutes. And the only reason we were in a position to object strongly was we'd paid probably too much attention to the count!
- Following the identification of this error, rectification was very slow. It was clear that the error was not made at the counting table, but with how the information from the counting table was then used to calculate a result. The counting staff started to recount the grass skirts unnecessarily and the RO took about half an hour to bring a revised set of figures.
- A table supervisor made a mark on a ballot paper

Ms B report of election day and count

- The counting staff did not know the difference between block votes and splits - on the Bromley South table this had to be pointed out to them to ensure no single votes were put on the block vote pile.
- The count was slowed because they had only one basket for each party for the block votes. What I have seen at other counts is that you would have baskets for the main parties at each end of the table and the smaller parties in the middle, so less moving around the table and quicker
- Counters did not realise the ballot papers had to be visible at all times to the scrutineers, so had to be trained how to carry the ballot papers when moving them around the table. Initially kept putting batches of block votes in the baskets and we had to ask them to put them in singly. Had they have gone the multiple basket route (above) they would not have had to do this.
- the baskets on Bromley South were initially laid out with labels and then gathered up and laid out again with different labels
- I asked Will Tuckley why the counting agents hadn't been trained beforehand and he said, 'they have had training, it's just a long time since the last election' and then suggested I concentrated on scrutineering. The Counting agents should have had training immediately previous to this Count. I would like to know what training they did receive immediately prior to this Count.
- Total confusion over how the grass skirts operated, the supervisors and counting agents had plainly had no training and were being taught on the job.
- There was loads of downtime with no ballot papers on the counting tables
- Mr x was on the Canary Wharf recount the whole time and I was standing watching. A vital recount and no electoral commission rep came anywhere near the table to check how the recount was being administered.
- I never saw an electoral commission rep looking at any of the counting tables.
- There appeared to be a blockage between the supervisors reporting their figures to the central table and then coming back to start the next process or count. That seemed to take forever. This was the case on Thursday evening during the Mayoral as well.
- The Head of electoral services at the CW (Friday evening) recount said he'd been up since 4:30am on Thursday - that can't be viable? He was a nice guy btw, but just not sure one person can be fully functional not having slept since Wednesday night.
- I recognised many counting agents from Thursday (Left at 3am) that were on the count on Friday.

- I also noted that whilst the room for the Count was huge that there was vast area that was empty and perhaps there could have been more tables and more counters, so the Council Count didn't go through till 1am on Saturday so basically 23 hours and that excludes the verification which was meant to have been completed straight after the polls closed. When we left at 3am on Friday morning approximately half of the wards had not been verified.

Mr C report on election day

1. Being so old and involved since arriving in TH in 1988 I have seen quite a few TH elections. 2018 was not the worst. 2010 and 2014 were shocking. There has long been belief in the corruption of the voter registration system which you may be comfortable is improving. I remember Liberal Democrats railing about it in 1990.
2. My concern has long been conduct of the whole electoral system in Tower Hamlets which is very open to fraud and abuse. It is likely that there has been criminal activity such as intimidation and postal vote farming during some at least of the elections. 2010 and 2014 certainly and probably before. As your report says, conduct is worst at local elections. I gave evidence at the Electoral Court after 2014 election as I had seen activity in Stepney which was utterly disgraceful.
3. My feeling is that 2018 was better. I visited 7 polling stations, most twice. Turnout was lower which may have helped, indeed, one of my Labour opponents in Stepney Green, Motin, who was outside polling station SG1 Smithy Street Primary School at 19.15 said, "it's quiet and has been a low turnout". Comments follow:
4. Behaviour outside polling stations. Your page 10. I noted: SG2 Exmouth Hall 11.00 12-15 people milling around outside pressing leaflets and seeking to talk to people. Must have been intimidating. Your comments about cordoning off away from voters is spot on. Ditto SG1 at 11.30 and 19.15 but worse with 20-25 people outside trying to pressure voters. Need more than one policeman on duty at these stations. Ditto at SG3, Marion Richardson School on Senrab Street at 12.30. 100 yard gauntlet to run with about 20-25 people outside. No voters in polling station.
5. Note two cases of good behaviour. SD2 Alice Model School, Beaumont Grove at 13.00. Very quiet, no voters. 3 non-aggressive ladies outside but "control?" cars parked some yards away. WH2 John Smith Early Learning Centre, Stepney Way 18.45. Very quiet, very few outside. Rather small anteroom for the staff and separate from polling booths. Presiding Officer, who I had met at the 2017 GE said, "We are civilised". He did say that he had heard that a knife was pulled at another polling station and that the police had restrained the perpetrator with CS gas. I was told this had been overheard by someone hearing it on a police radio.
6. Your page 11. Family members voting together. I saw many examples of this and it is clear that this is commonplace as I saw this so often in short periods of time at polling stations. SD1 was bad but I also saw this at SG2. The presiding officers did try to stop this, but it is impossible when they are busy. In my view, each busy polling station should have at least 4 members of staff per table on duty at all times. There are usually 3 seated at the table where one goes on coming in then to put the vote in the black box. The 4th staffer should be patrolling the voting booths to a) stop family members voting together and b) picking up literature which was frequently left. At least 4 times after I made myself known one of the staff would quickly collect literature from voting booths. I recall SG1 twice, SG3 and I think SG2. Note SG2 set up a dividing line of chairs during the day between the two tables/voting boxes to help ensure voters voted in the right box.
7. Your page 11. Party literature in polling stations and booths. I feel that this is probably a serious problem which needs full time checking. See my 6) above

8. Your page 12. Staff training and numbers. I mentioned the need for more people in the polling stations. I think that staff in polling stations need thorough training and to be told in detail what their duties are and why it is critical that they do their jobs well i.e. preserving the integrity of democracy. They do a very long day and they need to be well supported, well trained and have an incentive to do a very good job – the incentive is to protect democracy with a clean poll. Some of the staff members clearly had this sense of duty to the poll but it was not apparent that all did. It is a long and fairly thankless task and people need to be well trained and well supported by good management. You know much more than I on the conduct of the count. On training I would suggest that TH plan properly for its elections and train people properly. Suggestions, get funding from government under the apprenticeship scheme specifically for training. Develop a cadre of experience and send staff members to other good local authorities to learn how to run the count properly – possibly help in those counts