

c/o 31 Graham Mansions
Graham Road,
London
E8 1EY

Dear Sir,

Re: Arrangements for the elections on May 6th 2010 in Hackney

I write with reference to the elections in the London Borough of Hackney on May 6th 2010 for which I was the agent for the Liberal Democrats. There were a number of issues and inconsistencies throughout the process which I and my colleagues within the party feel will need to be addressed with urgency. I would also like to convey my thanks to the returning officer and his staff within the elections team for all their hard work during polling day and the count, but would request that the experience as a whole is regarded as one from which a lot can be learned.

1. Behaviour of the Hackney Service Centre in regards to elections:

- a) We are aware of the allegations that callers were wrongly informed that the Conservative Party were not running a candidate in the Mayoral election. Having heard the recording this is of obvious concern. I appreciate the confusion relates to the non publication of Mr Boff's election address in the Mayoral Booklet (a decision which we support) but feel that better training could have been provided to call centre staff.
- b) On a number of occasions I received reports from electors who were wrongly informed that if they had not received their postal vote they would not be able to receive a replacement. On contacting the elections office at the Council I was able to get the first of these enquiries sorted within minutes and so I referred the others directly to the elections office. However, I must question how many electors who were given this erroneous information by the Service Centre just accepted it and did not make further enquiries and were thus disenfranchised.

2. Inability of electors to vote on polling day and other issues at polling stations:

- a) On May 6th it was very clear by lunch time that the turnout was going to be significantly higher than at previous elections. To a certain extent this could have been predicted from the increase in voter registration in the Borough, particularly in the month leading up to the election. However, we do accept that the particularly high turnout could not have been predicted in full.
- b) By 8pm it was clear that there were going to be issues at various polling stations in making sure that everyone would get to vote. At this point, the council should have ensured more clerks were sent to the stations affected. I was in Hoxton at the time and there were long queues at Provost Estate, Napier Grove and St John's and it was clear that many voters were walking away from the stations rather than joining the queues.
- c) By 9:30pm it was clear that there was going to be a major problem at several stations. As agent I was requested by electors to attend the polling station at the Children's Centre on Triangle Road in Queensbridge Ward. The queue was at this point several hundred yards long including the part inside the curtilage of the polling station (some three rooms) and it was evident that not all electors were going to be able to vote. There were only two clerks and the presiding officer at the station which had clearly been insufficient for the demand throughout the day.
- d) At 10pm the station staff refused to allow any more electors to vote including those within the building. At this point around 160 people of the 220 odd who were waiting (of whom I would estimate 100 had been inside at 10pm) sat down and the police were called. On attending the police handled the matter in a very professional manner and I am pleased to say the obvious threat of extreme unrest that would clearly have

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manifested itself if they had been heavy handed did not happen. Our estimate is that 220 electors were in the queue at 10pm and another 150 did not join the queue in the last 20 minutes of polling as it was clear that they would not be able to vote.

- e) Similar reports were received from Clissold, Brownswood, Hoxton, De Beauvoir and Victoria wards though I was not able to see first-hand what happened.
- f) I have received word that, faced with a similar situation at a station in Haggerston Ward, the presiding officer allowed those in the queue to vote. This is a worrying inconsistency as it will have influenced the make-up of those who did vote, though the commitment to duty was admirable and I wish all stations had done this.
- g) I have further received a report that those attending another station were told that only those with polling cards were able to vote in the last half hour to get as many electors as possible through. Whilst I appreciate the ingenuity of the presiding officer at that station and their commitment to ensure that as many electors as possible could exercise their franchise, this decision was clearly not in keeping with the spirit or letter of the law and I do feel that this decision will have disadvantaged the Liberal Democrats as we had repeatedly reminded electors that they did not need their polling cards to vote.
- h) I have also received a report that at 10pm a voter at Napier Grove had been handed their papers when the clerk decided it was now 10pm, took them back and erased the mark from the register. This is one of the most appalling pieces of behaviour I have ever heard of at an election.
- i) I am informed that the presiding officer of the station off Green Lanes in Brownswood did not have the key to the lift and hence disabled voters had to be carried up the stairs.
- j) Two of my staff were reprimanded by presiding officers for asking for polling numbers on the way in to stations despite clear advice from the elections office that this was acceptable.
- k) No notice was displayed at Stamford Hill library to the effect that the library was closed which created considerable confusion.
- l) Maps on polling cards and the website of stations at Pembury Senior Citizens' Centre and Belsham Street were incorrect and no signage was initially provided to indicate the actual position of the polling station.
- m) Whilst I am not convinced that any ward or parliamentary elections would have returned a different result had all electors been able to vote, I note that the number disenfranchised in De Beauvoir ward is dangerously close to the difference in votes between the third placed Labour candidate and the fourth placed Liberal Democrat.

3. Conduct of the count

- a) Again I stress that all the elections staff, particularly the returning officer and the interim head of Election Services worked exceptionally hard in difficult circumstances.
- b) The verification of the votes was, with hindsight, appallingly executed. Whilst nobody had tried verifying the parliamentary, mayoral and council elections of a borough the size of Hackney previously, the initial number of people verifying was clearly extremely inadequate.
- c) I support the decision of the returning office to not break during the count due to the unique circumstances concerning the necessity to finish counting the predominantly Jewish wards before the onset of the Sabbath. This did however place an extraordinary strain on the senior council staff and the agents from the political parties who in effect had to work 48 hours straight.

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- d) When extra staff were brought in to the verification and later counting of the votes it was abundantly clear that many did not know what they were doing and were in effect being trained “on the job”. Concerns were raised a number of times about the accuracy of some of the counting staff including two who were wearing headphones.
- e) The placement of these extra staff between the counting desks meant that there was insufficient room for proper scrutiny of the count and also meant that the desks were so crowded that ballots fell on the floor several times. This was exacerbated by the fact that the individual tables were not fixed together so gaps kept appearing between them.
- f) There was little consistency of behaviour towards the counting agents in the room. One of my most senior members was told off twice for being talked to by one of the counters whereas one of the Labour council candidates in Cazenove ward consistently talked to and distracted one of the counters working out the splits to the detriment of her performance, placed papers on the counting table and even at one point tried to touch a ballot yet received only one warning.
- g) We were concerned that the bundled votes in Hackney North were initially placed directly next to one and other regardless of party and hence could easily have become muddled. Those for the Conservatives were then placed on a table of a different height than those used for the other parties’ votes, making it impossible to ensure the bundles of 1000 were of the same height.
- h) We were very concerned that the bundled votes in Hackney South were placed so far from the counting agents (and those for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were placed in boxes which we could not see in to) that it was impossible for us to check they were going in the right piles. We are also concerned that the second and third placed candidates’ totals were such round numbers when the piles did not appear as such – there was a one in 10,000 chance of this happening and we are concerned that this stage of the count was rushed due to the over-eagerness to declare the result.
- i) When the result for New River ward was read out, it was before the agents had been shown or had time to ask for a recount. The returning officer then said it was still possible to ask for a recount which was at best a bizarre decision.
- j) I was pleased to note, however, that the process whereby the agents are initially shown the result before it is announced was otherwise carried out in a much more satisfactory manner than at previous elections.
- k) Whilst I do not believe that the inconsistencies affected the parliamentary results, I am concerned that they have seriously compromised the integrity of the process.

I look forward to your early response as to what action is being taken to prevent a reoccurrence of the above issues.

Best regards,

Reuben Thompson
Agent Hackney Lib Dems

Cc: Electoral Commission, Hackney Citizen, Hackney Gazette, Evening Standard.