

**Sent on behalf of Mr William Benson, Chief Executive and Returning Officer, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council**

Dear candidate and/or agent

I would like to invite you to a Candidates and Agents Briefing for the May 2021 Elections as follows:

- Parish Candidates and Agents, Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> March, 6.30pm-8pm
- KCC and Borough Candidates and Agents, Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> March, 6.30pm-8pm

It is especially important to attend these briefings this year, given the very different way in which the elections will be run due to the pandemic.

Please let Jane Clarke, Head of Policy and Governance, [jane.clarke@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:jane.clarke@tunbridgewells.gov.uk) know if you are attending. The meetings will be held via Zoom, and the link to the meeting will be sent to you once you confirm your attendance.

I have tried to schedule the briefings so that they coincide with the release of expected government guidance on campaigning in a Covid-safe way, and I hope to be able to talk this guidance through with you. However, if the guidance is unavailable by the time of the briefings they will still go ahead as the following Friday will be publication of the Notices of Election. In any event, I will share with you as much as I know at that point, and provide you with some assumptions and best guesses if necessary.

I thought it would be useful to provide you with some key information and dates about this year's elections in advance of the briefings, and some details about what we know so far.

**Nominations**

- Notice of Election – Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March
- Nominations open – Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> March to Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> April

This year, it is likely that the government will pass legislation to reduce the number of subscribers from 10 down to 2. Hopefully this will be done by the time we have our briefings and I can confirm this then.

The Elections Team will be offering a 'digital check' of nomination papers this year. Once you have completed your papers, you can scan them in and email them to [nominations@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:nominations@tunbridgewells.gov.uk). One of the team will check their accuracy for you, and if they are valid, will contact you to book a time to bring the hard copy into the Town Hall. The Town Hall is not regularly staffed at the moment, so it is imperative that you book with the team before dropping your nomination papers off. Our team will be wearing gloves, and are still able to provide you with a receipt if you wish.

If the digital check shows that your nomination papers are not valid, one of the team will contact you to discuss the necessary corrections, and if necessary send you out a clean nominations pack.

If you are uncomfortable with coming into the town to deliver your nomination papers, you can courier them to us instead.

*Please allow plenty of time this year to complete your nomination papers as the process is likely to be more complicated, and the deadline cannot be moved, changed or waived.*

### **Campaigning**

As I have said previously, the government is producing detailed guidance on campaigning in a Covid-safe way, which I will share with you as soon as it is available. What I do know is that currently campaigning is not one of the legal reasons to leave your home, so you cannot door knock for any reason. This restriction may be lifted as we get nearer to the election. At the moment, the government has advised that campaigning should be done digitally, via telephone or leafleting through a paid for postal service (i.e. not leaflet dropping via volunteers).

The most recent update from the government on 22<sup>nd</sup> February is as follows:

*Safe and secure elections are the cornerstone of the UK's democracy and the Government has confirmed that COVID-Secure council, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections will go ahead on 6 May in England and Wales. The Government has published a delivery plan for the May elections setting out how local elections teams will be supported to deliver effective polls that are COVID-Secure for voters and staff. The Government will amend the regulations to enable a broader range of campaign-related activity from 8 March, but it is essential that this still takes place in a COVID-Secure way, in line with guidance and the law. The Government will be publishing further guidance for candidates, their agents and political parties on campaigning in the elections in due course, and will be engaging with the Parliamentary Parties Panel on this guidance shortly to ensure the views of political parties are taken into account. Elections are also taking place in Scotland and Wales. The Scottish and Welsh Governments are responsible for their elections with the exception of the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in Wales. The Government is working closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to support the delivery of these elections.*

### **Elections Expenses**

Election expenses have been updated for these elections, taking into account the increased costs of campaigning in a Covid-safe way. Further guidance on expenses will be issued by the Electoral Commission in February.

### **Polling Day**

We are working incredibly hard to ensure that our polling stations are safe and accessible, and that the secrecy of the ballot is maintained on polling day. We will be enforcing the social distancing measures in place at the time of the poll, both inside *and outside* the station, and this means that we will not be allowing tellers, candidates or agents to congregate around entrances or exits to the stations. If we become aware of any illegal gatherings at any of our stations, we will telephone the Police. Please think carefully about how you will approach campaigning on polling day, and help us to keep our stations as safe as possible for electors.

It is likely that at some stations, during busy periods, voters may need to queue to cast their vote. We may need to ask others to move entirely away from the station area, to ensure social distancing can be maintained for queuing voters.

Inside the station, all of the things you would expect to see, such as screens, PPE, hand sanitisers and signage will be present.

## Count

Due to the need for social distancing, and the complexity of the Elections the Count will be very different this year. We will need to count four different types of election: County Council, Borough Council, Parish and Town Councils, and Police and Crime Commissioner. This will need to be done with significantly less staff than normal, and like the polling stations, there will be Covid-safe measures in place. Because of all of this, the four counts will be run over three, or possibly four, days and from different venues:

- Friday 7<sup>th</sup> May, Verification and KCC Count, Assembly Hall Theatre and Council Chamber
- Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> May, Borough and Parish and Town Count, Assembly Hall Theatre and Council Chamber
- Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> May, Potentially remaining Parish and Town areas if needed
- Monday 10<sup>th</sup> May, PCC, Assembly Hall Theatre and Council Chamber

We are also exploring whether to use Committee Rooms A and B as well to ensure that we get through all of the ballot papers in time. Further information will be circulated nearer the time regarding count arrangements, including which wards/divisions/areas will be counted in which rooms, and an estimation of timings.

Best wishes



Ms Jane Clarke