

UK Parliamentary election: 7 May 2015

Guidance notes on the process for investigating services rendered by an (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) which may have been inadequately performed and the making of any recommendation to the Secretary of State that an (A)RO's fee should be withheld or reduced

April 2015

Purpose

1. In order to ensure consistency and fairness, the Commission has developed this note to set out the process we intend to follow when we become aware of a service rendered by an (Acting) Returning Officer ((A)RO) which may have been inadequately performed. It also establishes the process for making any subsequent recommendation as to the fees that the (A)RO should be entitled to.
2. While acknowledging that each case must be dealt with on its individual facts and circumstances, this paper aims to provide an indication of what factors and processes the Commission would expect to take into account and follow in determining whether a service has been inadequately performed and in forming a recommendation as to whether the fee should be withheld or reduced and, if so, by how much.

Background summary

3. (A)ROs are legally entitled to recover their charges in respect of services rendered, or expenses incurred, for, or in connection with, a UK Parliamentary election if:
 - the services were necessarily rendered, or the expenses were necessarily incurred, for the efficient and effective conduct of the election; and
 - the total of their charges does not exceed the overall maximum recoverable amount specified in, or determined in accordance with, an order made by the Secretary of State.
4. The order made by the Secretary of State may specify, or make provision for determining in accordance with the order, a maximum recoverable amount for services or expenses of any specified description and, generally, the (A)RO may not recover more than that amount in respect of any such services or expenses.¹
5. The Fees and Charges Order for the 2015 UK Parliamentary election was made on 26 February 2015, and is available at:
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/476/pdfs/uksi_20150476_en.pdf.
6. The Order specifies the overall maximum recoverable amount for each parliamentary constituency, which is comprised of two elements:
 - A maximum amount **recoverable** by an (A)RO in respect of specified services rendered (provided those services were necessarily rendered for the efficient and effective conduct of the election). The Order lists the specified services as:

¹ Section 29 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) (RPA 1983).

- Conducting the poll;
- Discharging the (A)RO duties at the election; and
- Making arrangements for the election

Additionally it is the (A)ROs general duty at a parliamentary election to do all such acts and things as may be necessary for effectually conducting the election in the manner provided by the parliamentary election rules.²

- A maximum amount recoverable by (A)ROs in respect of specified expenses incurred in connection with the election (provided those expenses were necessarily incurred for the efficient and effective conduct of the election).
7. This first element is commonly referred to as the (A)RO's 'personal fee' and is the subject of this guidance note.
 8. In 2013, the legislation was amended to introduce a new provision which applies to a service rendered by the (A)RO for or in connection with a parliamentary election which in the opinion of the Commission was inadequately performed.³
 9. In these circumstances the Commission **may** recommend to the Secretary of State that the (A)RO is entitled to no more than a specified amount (which may be nil) in respect of that service. Effectively, the Commission may make a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the (A)ROs personal fee should be reduced or withheld (and therefore be less than the maximum amount recoverable set out in the Order) where the Commission thinks that the (A)RO's performance has been inadequate.
 10. In making a recommendation, the Commission must have regard to:
 - Any report prepared under Section 5 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) on the administration of the parliamentary election concerned
 - Any assessment of the level of performance of the (A)RO in relation to that election under Section 9 of PERA
 - Any representations made to the Commission by the (A)RO in respect of the performance of the service
 - Any other information relating to the performance of the service by the (A)RO that has been provided to the Commission
 11. In cases where the Commission decides to make a recommendation, the (A)RO will be entitled to no more than the amount (which may be nil) determined by the Secretary of State (having regard to the recommendation by the Commission).

² Schedule 1 of the RPA1983.

³ Section 29A of the RPA 1983.

Process

12. The Commission could become aware of an issue regarding potential inadequate performance by an (A)RO through a variety of routes including, but not limited to, the following:
 - monitoring as part of the Commission's performance standards framework
 - observations by Commission representatives
 - enquiries or complaints made to the Commission
 - media reporting
13. Where the Commission becomes aware of an issue in the period before the conclusion of the election, the priority will be to take steps to ensure the successful delivery of the poll. In these cases, our teams across England, Scotland and Wales will contact the local authority in question as soon as practicable to discuss the issue and the potential courses of action to remedy the situation. The Commission will seek to provide support where needed to enable the provision of a high-quality service to voters and those standing for election. This does not, however, prevent the Commission subsequently investigating the matter and making a recommendation to the Secretary of State in connection with the (A)RO's personal fee. The Commission will record any such discussions and the support provided.
14. The Commission could also become aware of an issue in the period after the election.

Gateway assessment

15. Enquiries, complaints and performance monitoring information received by the Commission are routinely logged by our teams across England, Scotland and Wales and then reviewed by our Guidance and Performance team. In reviewing these logs or upon referral from our teams across England, Scotland and Wales, the Guidance and Performance team will refer any matter **which appears** to indicate that there may be a **significant** performance issue with regard to a particular (A)RO (having regard to the factors set out in Appendix 1 of this document) to the Head of Guidance and Performance.

Initial investigation and determination as to whether a formal investigation is required

16. In relation to those matters which are referred to the Head of Guidance and Performance, (s)he will determine whether, **on the face of the matter**, the service rendered by the (A)RO may have been inadequately performed and if so whether a formal investigation is required. To assist the Head of Guidance and Performance in making this determination an initial investigation co-ordinated by the Head of the Wales/Scotland/English teams will be carried out.

17. The initial investigation will involve the Commission:
 - contacting the (A)RO and/or their staff to discuss the matter and seeking an explanation as to what has happened (if contact has not already been made as part of providing support as per paragraph 13 or where further information is required). The (A)RO will not be required to make any formal representations at this time
 - identifying any other available information relating to the performance of the service by the (A)RO
18. In reaching a determination as to whether a formal investigation is required the Head of Guidance and Performance will:
 - consider the evidence gathered via the initial investigation
 - have regard to the factors set out in Appendix 1 and any other relevant matters
19. In particular where an (A)RO has managed to satisfactorily resolve an issue prior to the May polls (with the support of the Commission or otherwise) and where as a result there has been no or negligible impact on the May polls, the Head of Guidance and Performance may decide that a formal investigation is not required.
20. If the Head of Guidance and Performance determines that no formal investigation is required:
 - the (A)RO in question should still consider any issues as part of their post-election evaluation to identify what, if any, lessons can be learnt and reflected in their arrangements for future elections, and
 - the Commission may still provide suggestions as to how similar issues could be avoided in the future. In these circumstances, the (A)RO should address these suggestions as part of their post-election evaluation
21. The timing of any formal investigation will depend on when the issue arises during the election period. As set out in paragraph 13, the priority at all times will be to take steps to ensure the successful delivery of the poll and the Commission will seek to provide support to resolve any issues prior to the May polls, which may mean that the formal investigation is not initiated until after the election.

Formal investigation

22. Where the Head of Guidance and Performance determines that there is on the face of the matter apparent inadequate performance by an (A)RO and that a formal investigation is needed (s)he will notify the Director of Electoral Administration who will be responsible for conducting the formal investigation and preparing the preliminary report (see below).

23. The Director of Electoral Administration will:

- telephone the (A)RO in question to inform them that a formal investigation will be taking place and to discuss with them what this will involve.
- write to the (A)RO:
 - notifying them that a formal investigation will be taking place
 - summarising the process for that formal investigation
 - summarising the issues
 - requesting that the (A)RO provides any information, material or copy documentation that the Commission believes may be relevant to the investigation within 10 working days of receipt of the letter
 - inviting the (A)RO to provide written representations (which may include any explanation or mitigating factors) and to provide any relevant information, material or copy documentation in support of those representations within 10 working days of receipt of the letter
 - offering the (A)RO the opportunity to meet in person with a representative from the Commission to discuss the issues
- write to any other party or parties who may have relevant knowledge relating to the performance of the service by the (A)RO:
 - requesting that they provide any information, material or copy documentation that the Director of Electoral Administration believes may be relevant to the investigation within 10 working days of receipt of the letter
 - inviting them to provide written representations and to provide any relevant information, material or copy documentation in support of those representations within 10 working days of receipt of the letter

24. The Commission will notify the Cabinet Office whenever a formal investigation has been commenced given one potential outcome is that further to this they may make a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the (A)RO's personal fee should be reduced or withheld (and therefore be less than the maximum amount recoverable set out in the Fees and Charges Order for the 2015 UK Parliamentary election).

Preparation of the preliminary report

25. Once the Director of Electoral Administration considers that (s)he has all the information necessary to fairly and properly proceed, including having sought further clarification where necessary, (s)he will prepare a preliminary report.

26. The preliminary report will contain:

- a summary of the issues
- a summary of any representations and information, material or copy documentation provided by the (A)RO in respect of the performance of the service

- a summary of any representations and information, material or copy documentation provided by any other parties relating to the performance of the service
 - where available, a copy of any assessment that has been made as to the level of performance of the (A)RO in relation to that election under Section 9 of PPERA
 - where available, a copy of the relevant extracts of any report prepared under section 5 of PPERA 2000 on the administration of the parliamentary election concerned
 - a preliminary decision as to whether the service rendered by the (A)RO was inadequately performed and the reasons for that decision (with reference to the factors set out in Appendix 1 of this guidance note and anything else that is considered relevant)
 - if the conclusion is that the service was inadequately performed, a preliminary decision as to whether a recommendation should be made to the Secretary of State regarding the fee and the reasons for that decision (with reference to the factors set out in Appendix 2 of this guidance note and anything else that is considered relevant)
 - if the conclusion is that a recommendation should be made to the Secretary of State, a preliminary decision as to the fee that it is considered appropriate to recommend and the reasons for that assessment (with reference to the factors set out in Appendix 3 of this guidance note and anything else that is considered relevant)
27. The Director of Electoral Administration aims to complete the formal investigation and preparation of the preliminary report within 20 working days of notifying the (A)RO that a formal investigation is to be carried out.
28. Once the Director of Electoral Administration has prepared the preliminary report, (s)he will provide it to:
- the (A)RO and give the (A)RO the opportunity to make any further representations (including any representations that the Commission have failed to take into account all relevant factors) within 10 working days of receipt of the preliminary report
 - any other party the Director of Electoral Administration believes appropriate and give that party the opportunity to make any further representations within 10 working days of receipt of the preliminary report
29. The Director of Electoral Administration will provide a copy of the preliminary report and any further representations received from the (A)RO or other parties to the Chief Executive of the Commission in order that (s)he can prepare a final report.

Final recommendation/response

30. The final report will contain:

- A copy of the preliminary report
 - The Chief Executive's decision as to whether the services rendered by the (A)RO were inadequately performed and the reasons for that decision
 - The Chief Executive's decision on whether to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the (A)RO is entitled to no more than a specified amount of their personal fee (which may be nil) in respect of that service, and the reasons for that recommendation
 - If the Chief Executive has decided to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State, his/her recommendation as to the fee that (s)he considers appropriate in all the circumstances, and the reasons for that recommendation
31. The Chief Executive will provide a copy of the final report to the (A)RO.
32. The Chief Executive aims to make a final recommendation within 10 working days following receipt of the preliminary report and further representations.

Recommendation to the Secretary of State by the Commission

33. If the Chief Executive of the Commission decides that the services rendered by the (A)RO were inadequately performed and that it is appropriate to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State regarding the (A)RO's 'personal fee' the Chief Executive will write to the Secretary of State on behalf of the Commission with his/her recommendation as to the appropriate fee and the reasons for it. In such cases the (A)RO will be entitled to no more than the amount (which may be nil) determined by the Secretary of State (having regard to the recommendation by the Commission).

Reporting on the election

34. As part of our election reporting, we will continue to publish information about the performance of (A)ROs against our performance standards. This reporting may also make reference to any instances where the Commission has determined that an (A)RO's performance has been inadequate and has made a recommendation to the Secretary of State that the (A)ROs personal fee should be reduced or withheld.

Putting the process on hold

35. At any stage the Commission may put an investigation or the production of a preliminary or final report on hold pending the outcome of any criminal investigation or other legal proceedings (such as an election petition), in order to ensure that the criminal investigation / legal proceedings are not prejudiced.

Combined polls

36. There may be circumstances where the UK Parliamentary election is combined with other polls and the inadequate performance relates to one of the other polls but also has an impact on the UK Parliamentary election. For example, where it has been decided to combine the issue of postal votes for the UK Parliamentary and local elections, after the postal ballot packs have been

printed and distributed it comes to light that there are candidates missing from the local ballot paper due to inadequate proofing and all the packs need to be re-printed and re-issued resulting in them being received by electors only a few days before the election - in this type of situation, although the mistake was on the local ballot papers, the services rendered in respect of the UK Parliamentary election in relation to postal voting may be deemed to have been inadequately performed as the two are inextricably linked.

Voluntary reduction in claim

37. (A)ROs may opt to claim less than the maximum amount in circumstances where they consider that they have performed inadequately. Provided the Commission considers the amount of the voluntary reduction appropriate in all the circumstances, and the (A)RO has provided a written statement that a voluntary reduction in fees has been taken, we may decide that a recommendation to the Secretary of State is not required. In all cases, we will continue to work with (A)ROs to support them with their evaluation, providing them with feedback and support as appropriate, to ensure that lessons learnt can be identified and taken forward into the planning for future polls.

Appendix 1

Factors for consideration in determining whether a service rendered by an (A)RO was inadequately performed

Each case will need to be considered on its own merits taking into account the circumstances that existed at the time. However, in determining whether the service provided by the (A)RO was inadequately performed, the Commission expects to have regard to some or all of the following:

- Has the (A)RO:
 - inadequately performed in making arrangements for the election?
 - inadequately performed in conducting the poll?
 - failed to discharge the (A)RO's duties at the election?
- Has the (A)RO failed to do such acts and things as may be necessary for effectually conducting the election in the manner provided by the parliamentary election rules?
- Was the gravity, extent and impact of any act or omission so great as to suggest that the (A)RO must have performed inadequately? So for example:
 - How many people have been adversely affected by the act or omission?
 - Does the act or omission result in inconvenience to stakeholders or are the consequences more serious e.g. disenfranchising voters?
 - Does the act or omission affect the integrity of the whole election?
 - Is the act or omission likely to result in public confidence in the electoral process being undermined?
- Was the service rendered at a standard below that of a reasonably competent (A)RO (the Commission produces guidance, endorsed by the Electoral Advisory Board, which reflects what an (A)RO should do to deliver a well-run election)?
- Did the (A)RO fail to do what a reasonable (A)RO would have done in the same situation or do something that a reasonable (A)RO would not have done in the same situation?
- Were the consequences of any act or omission foreseeable by a reasonably competent (A)RO?
- Did the (A)RO take steps to remedy the situation such that the impact on the election was negligible?
- Did the (A)RO meet the objectives in the Commission's performance standards?

- Has the (A)RO failed to undertake one or more of the actions detailed in the performance standards which would have achieved the outcomes detailed in those standards?
- If the Commission have intervened as a result of performance standard monitoring what was the response to the Commission's advice / guidance (e.g. was that advice / guidance taken on board)?

Appendix 2

Factors for consideration in determining whether to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State as to whether the (A)RO's fee should be reduced or withheld

Each case will need to be considered on its own merits taking into account the circumstances that existed at the time. However, in determining whether to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State as to the (A)RO's fee, the Commission expects to have regard to some or all of the following:

- Has the Commission found that the services rendered by the (A)RO were inadequately performed?
- Was the gravity, extent and impact of the inadequate performance such to suggest that a recommendation to the Secretary of State should be made?
- Was the inadequate performance due to wilfulness or recklessness on behalf of the (A)RO, or were there any other aggravating factors?
- What mitigating factors exist (for example, was the (A)RO complying with common practice in rendering their service (unless the common practice is negligent))?

Appendix 3

Factors for consideration in determining what the appropriate fee should be

Each case will need to be considered on its own merits taking into account the circumstances that existed at the time. However, in determining how much to recommend the fee should be reduced by or if it should be withheld altogether, the Commission expects to have regard to some or all of the following:

- What was the gravity, extent and impact of the inadequate performance?
- Were there any aggravating factors, such as wilfulness or recklessness on behalf of the (A)RO?
- What mitigating factors exist?

Appendix 4

Process and timeframe for determining whether to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State that an (A)ROs fee should be withheld or reduced

