

Cabinet Meeting

8 June 2016

Report title	Electoral registration and participation scrutiny review	
Decision designation	AMBER	
Cabinet member to give management response	Cllr Andrew Johnson Cabinet Member for Resources	
Key decision	No	
In forward plan	Yes	
Wards affected	All	
Review Chair	Cllr Paul Singh (Con)	
Review Members	Labour Cllr Harman Banger Cllr Bishan Dass Cllr Keith Inston Cllr Linda Leach Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman Cllr Daniel Warren	Conservative Cllr Wendy Thompson Cllr Jonathan Yardley Liberal Democrat Cllr Richard Whitehouse
Lead Scrutiny Review Officer	Aaron Toussaint Tel. Office: 01902 550101 E-mail: Aaron.Toussaint@wolverhampton.gov.uk	
Link Officer	Martyn Sargeant Group Manager – Corporate Administration Tel. Office: 01902 555045 E-mail: Martyn.Sargeant@wolverhampton.gov.uk	
Report to be/has been considered by	Strategic Executive Team Executive Team Cabinet	5 April 2016 29 February 2016 23 March 2016

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Receive the Electoral registration and participation scrutiny report attached in Appendix 1, and consider the following recommendations from the review.
 - **Recommendation 1:** All electors be sent a personalised letter about voting upon reaching the age of 18.

This report is PUBLIC
[NOT PROTECTIVELY MARKED]

- **Recommendation 2:** Elections / Council should review how we engage with different groups to undertake statutory and non-statutory functions to identify opportunities to promote registration, particularly among those currently under-represented.
 - **Recommendation 3:** Work with organisations to encourage clients to register to vote while in triage and/or waiting for a meeting with an adviser.
 - **Recommendation 4:** Engage younger people with elections – different job opportunities (e.g. at the count or in polling stations).
 - **Recommendation 5:** Undertake scoping work to determine the feasibility of requiring organisations bidding for council contracts to aid work to increase registration in Wolverhampton as part of the Social Value test, in a way that is not burdensome for organisations.
 - **Recommendation 6:** Work with local organisations to develop an engagement programme targeting different demographic groups and communities.
 - **Recommendation 7:** Develop a programme of engagement with schools, colleges and universities.
 - **Recommendation 8:** Provide information about the importance of registering to vote, and how to vote at the citizenship ceremony.
 - **Recommendation 9:** Make it clear who is eligible to register and vote at particular elections.
 - **Recommendation 10:** Provide information (signpost) to where residents can find out more about the UK political system.
 - **Recommendation 11:** Make all information as accessible as possible, such as visually (e.g. infographics) for those that struggle to read/write.
 - **Recommendation 12:** Erect posters providing basic information – how to vote, who to contact for more information etc.
 - **Recommendation 13:** Actively encourage those producing documents to make the language used (such as manifestos) easy to understand and available in different languages.
 - **Recommendation 14:** The council should review the range of communication methods currently used with a view to produce documents for those unable to read/write (such as videos detailing how to vote).
2. Approve the Executive response to the review recommendations set out in Appendix 2.
 3. Refer the Cabinet response to Scrutiny Board for them to monitor the implementation of the agreed recommendations.

Executive summary

Low registration rates and election turnout is a national issue, and is more prevalent among specific groups, including private and social renters, young people and students, some ethnic minority groups and those with a disability.

Voter registration:

As of 1 February 2016 there are 177,580 on the electoral register in Wolverhampton – a reduction of 1854 residents from the previously published version. The latest population statistics state that the 16 and over population is currently 201,729 (Office of National Statistics annual mid-year population estimates, 2014), which represents an 88% registration completion rate (estimate as not all eligible residents are registered to vote).

Although anecdotal, feedback presented to the review group outlined that some residents are disengaged or self-disenfranchise to avoid being identified by central or local government. Further, some residents merely have no intention of voting – for reasons unknown to the Council – and therefore fail to register. Conversely, it should be noted that voter turnout figures show that many residents are registered yet do not vote.

The motivations for registering to vote are varied, but there are additional benefits such as improving credit scores. Respondents to the survey indicated that their main motivation for registering to vote was due to the importance of having a say (78.6%), followed by 66% stating that it was important to exercise their democratic right. The survey respondents are not, however, representative of Wolverhampton as a whole and therefore the results cannot be considered representative.

Concern that some residents have never registered individually but have always voted was raised. Although one of the aims of Individual Elector Registration (IER) is to make the Electoral Register more accurate, it is likely that some residents are unaware of the change of process and are now no longer eligible to vote.

Electoral participation:

There has been a decline in voter turnout at both local and national elections over the last decade (the period in which this review considered). In Wolverhampton, voter turnout has been particularly low at local elections, and tends to be lower than the national average. For parliamentary elections, voter turnout in Wolverhampton North East and South East are consistently below the national average. Wolverhampton South West, however, offers a contrasting view as voter turnout since 1997 has consistently been above the national average.¹

At local elections voter turnout in nine out of the 20 wards that make up Wolverhampton are consistently below the city average. Turnout at other electoral events, such as the 2011 referendum (38.3%) and the 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections (10.2%) were lower than the national average. Turnout in these elections are, however, comparable to other Black Country local authorities.

¹ Voter turnout rates do not take into account the number of residents eligible to vote but not registered to do so. It is therefore not possible to give a completely accurate picture of the number of non-voters in Wolverhampton.

Recommendations

The issues identified during the review broadly fall into the following three themes, with some cutting across all themes: Engagement, Information and Communication.

The review group were aware of the need to suggest proposals that are proportionate and not overly burdensome in terms of internal resource, specifically staff time and cost. The cost, if any, of each recommendation will depend on how it is implemented if accepted.

Engagement:

A consistent theme from witnesses relates to how the council and councillors engage with residents. Witnesses commented on the need to diversify the platforms and methods used to engage with residents, and the need for tailored approaches to target specific groups. For example, the voluntary and community organisations that presented evidence to the review welcomed the opportunity to work with the Council to facilitate registration among their clients.

Information:

Witnesses provided detail about the lack of information available on certain issues. The issues raised range from lack of information about politics and the council and little understanding of the UK political system, to those new to voting, such as 18 year olds. Recommendations relating to information aim to address very specific issues identified.

With regard to registration, witnesses and responses to the survey indicate that there is a lack of understanding of IER. IER changed the process of registering to vote: moving from household registration to a system where every individual of voting age (and 16 and 17 year olds) is required to register. The need to make information available in different formats, such as infographics, was also raised.

With regard to voting, 41% of responses to the survey stated that receiving a leaflet/information about a candidate/party would possibly persuade them to vote at future elections.²

Communication:

Witnesses commented that there was a lack of understanding among residents around issues such as the eligibility to register and vote, what terms in manifestos (and other documents) mean and what the council and councillors actually do.

As an example, approximately half of the clients The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) see are from the EU; some are therefore entitled to vote, but many fail to understand communication from the council and require the RMC to explain the content of documents. Conversely, Bite the Ballot, who have a very different target audience – young people - outlined the need to diversify how we communicate with residents, and make use of the different platforms available, such as social media. How we communicate with each group will need to be tailored to their needs.

² This refers to elections generally and is not specific about voting intentions at either a local or national level

Progress to date:

Throughout the course of the review, the Elections team have taken the opportunity to engage with witnesses and implement potential recommendations that would improve the mechanics of how the council engages with residents. For example, work with the University of Wolverhampton began in 2015 to encourage students to work at the count (recommendation 4), as has work with the team responsible for Looked After Children (LAC) to identify how we could encourage and enable them to take part at the count/on polling stations for 2016 (recommendation 2 and 4).

Further, as noted in the Executive Response, all accepted recommendations are due to be implemented no later than January 2017. This will allow for the recruitment of an Electoral Services Manager, who will be responsible for implementing some of the recommendations, and for changes to be embedded well in advance of the local elections due to take place in May 2017.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To bring to the attention of Cabinet the findings of the Electoral registration scrutiny review in Appendix 1, and the recommendations in Appendix 2.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Scrutiny Board agreed on 30 June 2015 to undertake a review of electoral registration and participation. A review of registration rates and participation levels in the City was considered to be timely and appropriate, with low voter turnout, changes to the registration process and importance of greater local democracy and accountability.
- 2.2 It was agreed that the review should focus on issues that fall within the City of Wolverhampton Council's remit: identifying the barriers to increasing voter registration and participation and building intelligence for our on-going democratic services work.
- 2.3 The review could not, therefore, consider the wide range of sometimes complex reasons why residents do not register to vote and/or vote. The review also did not consider issues related to understanding the influence of local or national politics and how this might impact on the motivation of residents to register and or vote.
- 2.4 To identify and understand the barriers preventing residents from registering to vote and/or voting, councillors wanted to hear from local organisations with knowledge of the subject. Councillors also wanted to hear from those with no direct experience of electoral issues but through the course of their work regularly communicate and engage with our target group - those that are traditionally under-represented. Witnesses were invited to suggest solutions to the barriers, and how the City of Wolverhampton Council could improve how it communicates and engages with residents.

3.0 Financial implications

- 3.1 It is anticipated that any costs incurred in pursuit of the report recommendations can be contained within the existing £330,000 electoral registration revenue expenditure budget. [GE/27052016/X]

4.0 Legal implications

- 4.1 Section 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 gives Electoral Registration Officers a duty to take such steps as they think appropriate to encourage the participation of electors in their area in the electoral process.
- 4.2 The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) has a legal duty to compile and maintain the Register of Electors for the area. Individual voter registration was introduced under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2009 with further detailed provisions set out in the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2013. Local authorities also have a legal duty to provide the ERO with the necessary resources to enable him to discharge his legal functions. [RB/26052016/K]

5.0 Equalities implications

- 5.1 Equalities implications are dependent on whether the recommendations are accepted, and if accepted, how they are implemented. The review recognises that there are different registration and participation rates for different groups in Wolverhampton. These have been teased out during the review as far as possible, and recommendations drafted in a way that allows for the targeting of certain groups as appropriate. For example, recommendation 6 (Work with local organisations to develop an engagement programme targeting different demographic groups and communities) allows for the focus on different groups, such as certain BME groups, those with a disability and students.

6.0 Environmental implications

- 6.1 There are no environmental implications

7.0 Human resources implications

- 7.1 Human resource implications are dependent on whether the recommendations are accepted, and if accepted how they are implemented.

8.0 Corporate landlord implications

- 8.1 There are no corporate landlord implications.

9.0 Schedule of background papers

- 9.1 Background papers for the review group meetings as follows:
29 September 2015
16 November 2015
9 December 2015
19 January 2016