

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL	Governance and Ethics Committee 7 July 2022
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Report title	Evaluation of May 2022 Local Elections	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
Accountable employee(s)	Laura Noonan	Electoral Services Manager
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Report to be/has been considered by	Election Board	23 June 2022

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the May 2022 local elections.

Recommendations for noting:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is asked to note:

1. The timetable for the 2022 Annual Canvass

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update on good practice and areas for improvement following the evaluation exercise undertaken on the May 2022 local elections.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the scheduled communications and key dates for the 2022 Annual Canvass.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 On Thursday 7 April 2022 a by-election was held in the East Park ward. On Thursday 5 May 2022 local elections were held, with a third of Councillor seats up for election. It was challenging to have two election timetables running so close together, but overall, both elections went well, and the by-election enabled Electoral Services to trial improvements ahead of the local elections.
- 2.2 In the East Park by-election, there were 9,107 electors eligible to vote, and a total of 1,200 votes were cast. The turnout was 13%.
- 2.3 In the local elections, there were 183, 936 electors eligible to vote, and a total of 50,395 votes were cast. The overall turnout was 27%. There were 35, 824 postal voters, which was around 2,000 less than 2021 but still a significant sustained increase with 19% of the total electorate being permanent postal voters.
- 2.4 There were 77 proxy voters including two emergency proxy votes, of which one of these was for coronavirus reasons.
- 2.5 There are 123 polling districts in Wolverhampton. A total of 24 schools were used as polling stations because there were no other suitable alternatives.
- 2.6 A total of 57 staff were recruited to work on the by-election, and 674 staff were recruited to work on the local elections across polling stations, the count and postal vote opening.
- 2.7 An evaluation report was brought to Governance and Ethics Committee following the 2021 combined elections. The two biggest areas for improvement identified in 2021 were ballot box receipt processes at the count and postal vote opening processes. Over the last year, these processes have been reviewed and redesigned. This year, ballot box receipt was a very efficient and slick process. Postal vote opening processes were much improved and the time taken to verify was significantly reduced but there is still a slight delay which is discussed later in the report.

3.0 Evaluation Approach

- 3.1 The Returning Officer and Electoral Services, with the support of the Business Improvement Team, have undertaken a thorough evaluation exercise to ensure that lessons are learned to continue to build on good practice and identify areas for improvement for the May 2023 local elections, where all councillor seats are up for election following the ward boundary review.

3.2 A mixture of virtual meetings and surveys have taken place with the following groups to capture feedback:

- Returning Officer, Deputy Returning Officers and Assistant Deputy Returning Officers
- Candidates and Agents
- Electoral Services
- Customer Services
- ICT
- Communications
- HR
- Reception at the count
- Ballot box receipt team
- Postal vote opening team
- Presiding Officers
- Poll Clerks
- Polling Station Inspectors
- Count Supervisors
- Count Assistants

3.3 A total of 303 surveys were completed. The evaluation is presented below against six key themes.

4.0 Prior to polling day

Good practice

4.1 Two candidate and agent briefings were held, and weekly email updates were sent to all candidates and agents. 100% of Candidates and Agents who responded to the survey were satisfied or very satisfied with the information provided by the Returning Officer prior to the election.

Area for Improvement

4.2 There was still a considerable number of changes to polling stations in the lead up to polling day very close to the deadline to print poll cards. Going forward, where there are any changes to designated polling stations due to them becoming unavailable, consultation will take place with the Leader, Leader of the Opposition and relevant ward councillors by January at the latest of each election year. In December 2022, the designated polling stations for each polling district will be set by Full Council. If the Returning Officer proposes to make a change to any of the designated polling stations, this will require consultation.

5.0 Postal votes

Good practice

- 5.1 There was very positive feedback received from staff on the location of postal vote opening in the City Suite.
- 5.2 The processes and paperwork were streamlined and simplified taking learning from other councils. The postal vote managers were happy with how the preparation went. The opening sessions in the days prior to polling day ran very smoothly.

Area for Improvement

- 5.3 Although the final opening session was much improved, and in line with the time that other councils in the region finished their final opening session, the processes and resources will be reviewed to speed up the time between finishing polling station verification and the final postal vote opening session.
- 5.4 There was still a large number of postal votes that were processed during the final opening session. There were almost 400 postal votes in the royal mail sweep at 9.45pm, and there were still a large number being handed in by Presiding Officers at the close of poll despite three collections throughout the day from Polling Station Inspectors. In 2023, Polling Station Inspectors will be required to do a later collection of postal votes at 8pm to bring to the count and an additional Royal Mail sweep will be requested earlier in the day to reduce the number that have to be opened and processed after 10pm. An additional morning session will be held on election day and the afternoon session on election day will be longer to accommodate this.

6.0 Polling stations

Good practice

- 6.1 100% of Candidates and Agents who responded to the survey found the conduct of poll in polling stations on election day good or very good.
- 6.2 One of the areas for improvement identified last year was the quality of ballot paper accounts that were completed. This year Polling Station Inspectors were asked to sit with each Presiding Officer and complete a mock ballot paper account during the day. This significantly improved the accuracy of the ballot paper accounts making it easier to check them on arrival at the count.

Area for Improvement

- 6.3 There were a number of reports from polling station staff that polling stations did not have adequate facilities or the expected standards of cleanliness. This will be reviewed as part of the polling station review. When booking polling stations for next year, more information will be included in the booking letter to cover the expected standards and to request a list of the facilities they have on site.

7.0 Ballot box receipt

Good practice

- 7.1 The ballot paper account was attached to the top of the ballot box this year which saved a lot of time checking for key documents. Ballot box drop off was very well organised with each member of the team clear on their role.

Area for Improvement

- 7.2 There was some congestion on the Aldersley Road for 20 minutes as there was just one lane of cars waiting for ballot box drop off. Next year WV Active will implement a three-lane system to hold 12 cars at a time.

8.0 Verification and count

Good practice

- 8.1 The count layout worked well with postal vote opening based upstairs which gave more space near the stage and for candidates and agents. Count assistants counted into piles of 10 first instead of the usual 20 which led to more accurate counts first time.

Area for Improvement

- 8.2 The most notable area for improvement at the count was the delay between the verification and the count, and in turn the count and the declaration of results. In part, this was due to a very efficient verification as there was a high accuracy of ballot paper accounts, the count was staffed to accommodate a higher turnout and the counters were very efficient. This made the wait for the final postal votes more pronounced. The Returning Officer will be exploring options to address this in the future which will include collecting more postal votes throughout the day and reviewing the final postal vote opening processes to ensure that not all postal votes come out at the same time. This will lead to the verification and count being more staggered across all wards to keep the count and declaration of results flowing.

9.0 Staffing and training

Good practice

- 9.1 Each year it is getting increasingly difficult to recruit enough Presiding Officers to cover having some reserves too, which is an experience shared across all West Midlands Councils. South Staffordshire and Shropshire Councils did not have elections this year so some of their experienced Presiding Officers were recruited to assist Wolverhampton.

Area for improvement

- 9.2 Given the shortage of experienced Presiding Officers, more work will be done in the Autumn to encourage more poll clerks to take on Presiding Officer duties with the offer of more in depth and practical training to provide assurance. More senior managers across the council will be recruited to work election duties to assist with the additional demands that will be placed on Presiding Officers due to the introduction of Voter ID.

10.0 2023 Local Elections

- 10.1 All 60 Councillor seats will be up for election next year on the new ward boundaries following the Local Government Boundary Commission Review. Electors will vote for three councillors per ward. Therefore, this will be a complicated count as block count and counting boards methods will be used.
- 10.2 On 28 April 2022, The Elections Act received Royal Assent. One of the significant changes being brought in for the 2023 local elections is that voters will be required to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued and the Electoral Registration Officer will be required to issue free voter ID to those without a valid form of photo ID. A briefing for all Councillors will be held in October to provide a further update on the preparations underway to implement the Elections Act once more detail has been announced by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the Electoral Commission.
- 10.3 The Returning Officer is strongly recommending that the count should take place the following day on Friday 5 May to allow more time to undertake the complex method of counting for all out elections and to ensure that there are adequate resources deployed to implement Voter ID in polling stations successfully. Counting the next day will enable 40 Count Supervisors to work as Presiding Officers as they would not normally be allowed to work the day and night. It will ensure that staff are rested which will also reduce the risk of mistakes. Postal vote opening would be undertaken on Thursday night which would also remove the delay whilst waiting for the final postal votes to finish verification. Verification and the Count would take place on Friday.

11.0 The Annual Canvass

- 11.1 The annual canvass will commence in July 2022. The electoral register will be data matched against DWP records to categories households as either:
- Matched – Route 1 (CCA notification to say no action needed unless there is a change)
 - Not matched - Route 2 (CCB letter to say they need to respond even if there is no change)
- 11.2 The timetable is set out below:

Communication	Date	Detail
Route 1 CCA Email	11 July	To matched households where an email address is held. They must respond to this.
Route 1 CCA Letter	18 July	To matched households where an email address is not held or where a response was not received

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		to the email. They only need to respond if there is a change. Printed on green paper.
Route 2 CCB Letter	8 August	To not matched households. Response required. No pre-paid envelope – encourage response online. Printed on blue paper.
Route 2 Canvass form	7 September	To not matched households who have not responded to canvass form. Response required. Pre-paid envelope provided
Route 2 CCB Telephone canvassing	5 - 16 September	To not matched households where a telephone number is held.
Route 2 Door Knock	19 September – 11 November	20 canvassers will be employed to carry this out.

12.0 Financial implications

- 12.1 The proposed actions under areas for improvement will be undertaken by existing staffing resources and budget.
- 12.2 The table below shows the expenditure incurred on elections and associated funding over the last seven years, from 2015-2016 to 2021-2022.

	2015-2016 £000	2016-2017 £000	2017-2018 £000	2018-2019 £000	2019-2020 £000	2020-2021 £000	2021-2022 £000	Total £000
Total Net Expenditure Excl Specific Funding	365	639	638	275	893	44	560	3,414
Specific Election Funding:								
2015 – General Election	(228)	-	-	-	-	-	-	(228)
2016 – PCC Election	-	(189)	-	-	-	-	-	(189)
2016 – EU Referendum	-	(315)	-	-	-	-	-	(315)
2017 – Combined Authority Mayor	-	-	(283)	-	-	-	-	(283)
2017 – General Election	-	-	(318)	-	-	-	-	(318)
2019 – European Parliamentary Election	-	-	-	-	(273)	-	-	(273)
2019 – General Election	-	-	-	-	(334)	-	-	(334)
2021 – PCC Election	-	-	-	-	-	-	(191)	(191)
2021 – Combined Authority Mayor	-	-	-	-	-	-	(195)	(195)
2021 – Local Election Covid Grant Funding	-	-	-	-	-	-	(36)	(36)
Total Specific Election Funding	(228)	(504)	(601)	-	(607)	-	(422)	(2,362)
Final Net Cost	137	135	37	275	286	44	138	1,052

- 12.3 The cost of running local elections to the Council in any year is dependent on whether they are standalone or combined with Parliamentary, Police and Crime Commissioner or Combined Authority Mayoral elections. Combined elections costs are effectively shared, part funded by Government or the Combined Authority. European elections also attracted Government funding and, in 2021, specific grant funding was awarded to deliver local elections in a Covid secure way.

- 12.4 The pattern of elections over the last seven years is clearly visible from the final net cost to the Council figures illustrated in the table. In 2017-2018 there was a scheduled fallow election year, and no elections were held in the first year of the pandemic in 2020-2021. In the three combined election years, 2015-2016, 2016-2017 and 2021-2022, the net cost ranged from £135,000 to £138,000. In 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 standalone local elections were held and costs were in the region of £280,000 on both occasions. At first glance 2019-2020 does not appear to have been a standalone local election year as European and UK Parliamentary Elections were held in the same year. These were both conducted separately to the local elections however, the former being held in June and the latter in December.
- 12.5 There is a £192,000 budget currently set aside to cover the cost of local elections each year. In the event of combined elections or fallow years significant underspends against the local elections budget are expected and provide scope for contributions to the Elections Reserve. Standalone election costs are conversely expected to exceed the local elections budget. In these years the additional costs are to be funded from the Elections Reserve.
- 12.6 The Elections Reserve currently stands at just over £183,000. It is anticipated that part of this funding will be utilised in 2022-2023, another standalone local election year. Reserve transfers are excluded from the figures in the table as these would distort the actual net cost of elections picture. [SR/29062022/A]

13.0 Legal implications

All recommendations arising from the report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of electoral registration and delivering elections activity.
[SZ/01072022/P]

14.0 Equalities implications

- 14.1 The elections complied with the public-sector equality duty. Reasonable adjustments to vote were made for electors with disabilities in the polling stations and staff working election duties received adequate training on this.
- 14.2 All Returning Officers will be required to improve accessibility arrangements for voters with disabilities as part of the Elections Act which will come in to force later this year.

15.0 All other Implications

- 15.1 There are no other implications arising from this report at the current time.

16.0 Schedule of background papers

- 16.1 Preparations for May 2022 Local Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 14 January 2022: [Preparations for May 2022 Local Elections.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

- 16.2 Preparations for Local Elections and East Park By-Election, Governance and Ethics Committee, 25 March 2022: [Preparations for Local Elections and East Park By-Election.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)
- 16.3 Elections Act 2022: [Elections Act 2022 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)