

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL	Governance and Ethics Committee 1 September 2022
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Report title	Democratic Engagement Update	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet member for Governance and Equalities	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
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Report to be considered by	Election Board	22 September 2022

Recommendation for action:

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the 'Be A Councillor' event and registration initiatives.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update on the democratic engagement activities for 2022-2023.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Wolverhampton has supported the Local Government Associations (LGA) 'Be a Councillor' campaign for three years (2018, 2020 and 2021) – holding local events in Wolverhampton. This will be an annual campaign and event.
- 2.2 The Electoral Registration Officer has a duty to maintain the electoral register and to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that all those eligible – and no others – are registered in it. A proactive approach is required throughout the year to identify people who are not registered and encourage them to register.
- 2.3 As is the case nationally, in Wolverhampton the under registered groups have been identified as young people, recent home movers and people where English is not a first language, so the public engagement strategy has been targeted towards these groups.

3.0 Be a Councillor event

- 3.1 Wolverhampton is one of 12 councils that take part in the LGA 'Be a Councillor' campaign, and Wolverhampton has a dedicated microsite on the LGA website which can also be accessed via the main council website: [City of Wolverhampton Council | Local Government Association](#).
- 3.2 The website includes information about the city, information on the process of standing to be a councillor, the role of a councillor and it also includes videos from existing councillors. There is also a whole range of LGA resources that people can access such as e-learning modules on becoming a councillor to give an insight in to how they would handle some real situations as a councillor.
- 3.3 The Council will be hosting the annual 'Be A Councillor' event on Wednesday 23 November at 5.30pm – 7.30pm in the City Suite. The event will be publicised on all of the council communication channels, and people will be able to book on to the event via Eventbrite.
- 3.4 The event will include a presentation from the Chief Operating Officer, Head of Governance and Electoral Services Manager on the structure of the council, the role of a councillor and the process of standing for election. There will then be a question-and-answer session with councillors from both parties. The Leader and Leader of the Opposition will each nominate three councillors from their party to be on the councillor panel.
- 3.5 There are typically between 20 – 30 attendees at each event, and the feedback has been positive. Following the 2021 event, one attendee subsequently stood as a candidate in the 2022 local elections.

4.0 Youth Elections

- 4.1 Electoral Services and the Youth Engagement and Co-Production team ran two national youth elections in Wolverhampton in February – March 2022, which was the first time these elections have been conducted in person with every secondary school in the city taking part. Young people voted for two Youth MP's and the 'Make your Mark' campaign which gives young people a chance to have a say on the biggest issues facing them.
- 4.2 Over 10,000 votes were cast for each ballot, with a turnout of 47%, which is a record high for these elections in Wolverhampton.
- 4.3 Young people were encouraged to register to vote at the same time as attainers so that they will be automatically added to the register as soon as they turn 18. There are currently 591 attainers on the electoral register as of the 1 July 2022, compared to 389 on 1 December 2021.
- 4.4 These elections will take place once every two years and Electoral Services will continue to support with the delivery of them to make them look and feel like a real election to give young people the experience of voting in a polling station.
- 4.5 From 1 September 2022, Electoral Services will write out to all 16-year-olds to inform them that they can be added to the register at this age which means that they will be able to vote when they are 18. A copy of the letter can be found in **Appendix 1**.
- 4.6 Under a data sharing agreement made with Education and Skills, Electoral Services now have access to education data for all 16- and 17-year-olds. The number of attainers on the register will be monitored to assess the effectiveness of this approach.

5.0 Electoral registration integration into other council services

- 5.1 As is also the case nationally, many people believe that they are automatically registered to vote when they pay council tax or inform the council that they have moved into a property in the area. However, electoral registration is an entirely separate function and individuals must register to vote separately and provide their date of birth and national insurance number so that their details can be verified against Department for Work and Pensions records.
- 5.2 Electoral Services have been working to integrate electoral registration into other services communication with electors to at least sign post electors to the register to vote website.
- 5.3 Electoral Services already receive a weekly list from Council Tax of new liabilities. These are added to the register as pending electors and invitation to register letters are posted out to them to encourage them to register to vote.

- 5.4 From 1 August 2022, Council Tax have a new online service for change of address which provides the ability to email other service areas details of the change. Electoral Services have signed up to this information to ensure that the electoral register is kept up to date
- 5.5 Since 1 April 2022, Electoral Services have included a leaflet in all new council tax bills to target register to vote messages to those who have just moved into a new property. The leaflet can be found in **Appendix 2**.
- 5.6 Customer Services have updated the information on the IVR line when people call the council regarding council tax queries to include: "Moving house...don't forget to update the electoral register, you can do this online by visiting www.registertovote.gov.uk". Customer services also encourage customers to register to vote if they have not already done so at the end of calls.
- 5.7 Wolverhampton Homes also include regular register to vote information in their newsletters and on the new occupier's website.
- 5.8 Electoral Services continue to receive a weekly list from registrars and download data from tell us once to remove deceased from the electoral register.
- 5.9 All of these activities assist with maintaining an accurate and up to date register. As of 1 July 2022 there are 184,044 registered electors, compared to 183, 823 on 1 July 2021.

6.0 Registration campaign in multiple languages

- 6.1 Ahead of an election the council regularly communicates the registration deadline dates. This year for the May 2022 elections, leaflets were designed to communicate this message in the top 6 spoken languages in Wolverhampton – English, Punjabi, Polish, Kurdish, Gujrati and Urdu. A copy of the leaflet can be found in **Appendix 3**.
- 6.2 These leaflets were shared with key stakeholder groups, and they will be updated ahead of each election with the relevant and shared across all available platforms.

7.0 Elections Act

- 7.1 On 28 April, the Elections Act received Royal Assent. The Act seeks to:
- Require voters to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued.
 - Require Electoral Registration Officers based in local authorities to issue free voter identification documents to those without a valid form of photo ID.
 - Require postal voters to reapply for a postal vote every three years, replacing current rules of refreshing their signature every five years.
 - Restrict the handling of postal votes, including limiting the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station.
 - Further limit the number of people someone may act as proxy for.

- Extend accessibility to elections including requiring Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations.
- Simplify and clarify the offence of undue influence.
- Change the voting and candidacy arrangements for EU voters.
- Allow all British citizens living overseas to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK.
- First past the post system introduced for Police and Crime Commission and Combined Authority Mayoral Elections.

7.2 Not all measures will be introduced next year. The voter card application process will commence in January 2023 and voter ID will be in place for the May 2023 local elections, as will the accessibility requirements. The new rules relating to overseas electors and changes to EU citizens and candidacy rights are expected to take place from May 2024. The rules on postal vote handling and secrecy measures will now be implemented after the May 2023 polls.

7.3 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUCH) are still developing the policy and secondary legislation. The Electoral Commission will be able to develop their guidance once the secondary legislation is in place.

7.4 When the secondary legislation and information regarding additional funding is received, a local implementation and communications plan can be further developed. A councillor briefing session has been arranged for 28 September to update members on the Elections Act in more detail, and our local implementation plan.

8.0 Financial implications

8.1 The work on the democratic engagement activities outlined in this report has been undertaken utilising existing staffing resources. Some additional costs are associated with the initiatives. The leaflets included in council tax bills targeting residents who have moved properties cost just over £1,000 and the letters to be sent to 16-year-olds informing them of their right to register are anticipated to cost around £3,000. These additional costs are to be accommodated within overall Governance Services budgets.

8.2 The Government has indicated that additional new burdens funding will be provided to support the implementation of the Elections Act, though the level of funding is yet to be confirmed. The costs of compliance, such as the production of free voter identification documents, cannot be quantified at this stage. Future reports will incorporate details of costs and funding as they emerge. [GE/12082022/T].

9.0 Legal implications

9.1 All preparations outlined in this report are in line with the Electoral Registration Officer's duty under Section 9A of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to take all necessary steps to comply with the duty to maintain the electoral register. Steps have been taken to

identify and target any unregistered registrations through these initiatives.
[SZ/08082022/P]

10.0 Equalities implications

- 10.1 The Electoral Registration Officer produced registration reminders in different languages which is above and beyond the Electoral Commission recommended communications.
- 10.2 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. A working group will be set up with representatives from adult social care, equalities and ICT to develop a local approach to improving the experience of voting for people with a range of disabilities.

11.0 All other Implications

- 11.1 There no other implications arising from the report at the current time.

12.0 Appendices

- 12.1 Appendix 1: Letter to 16-year-olds
- 12.2 Appendix 2: New movers council tax leaflet
- 12.3 Appendix 3: Register to vote leaflet in multiple languages