

<b>CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL</b>	<b>Governance and Ethics Committee</b> 12 January 2022
--	---

<b>Report title</b>	Preparations for May 2023 Local Elections	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance and Ethics	
<b>Accountable director</b>	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
<b>Originating service</b>	Electoral Services	
<b>Accountable employee</b>	Laura Noonan	Electoral Services and Scrutiny Manager 01902 55 4939 Laura.Noonan@wolverhampton.gov.uk
<b>Report to be considered by</b>	Election Board	16 January 2022

---

**Recommendation for action:**

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Note and provide feedback on the preparations underway for the May 2023 elections.

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 To provide an update on preparations underway for the local elections taking place on 4 May 2023.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 On Thursday 4 May 2023, Local Elections are taking place in Wolverhampton, where all 60 Councillor seats are up for election following the Local Government Boundary Commission review. These elections will be conducted on the new ward boundaries which come in to force on 4 May 2023.

- 2.2 All out elections are where all councillors are elected to office once every four years. Election by thirds is the current system in place in Wolverhampton, where one third of the councillors are elected to office in three years out of four years. In the fourth year, there are no elections, which is known as a fallow year. The Department for Levelling Up Communities and Housing has now confirmed that following the all-out election in May 2023 the fallow year will remain in 2025 and will not be moved to 2024 as requested. This means that we will have an all-out election in 2023, election by thirds in 2024, fallow in 2025 and then election by thirds in 2026. The current electoral timetable is as follows

- 2023 – City Council Elections (all out elections)
- 2024 – City Council Elections, Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, West Midlands Combined Authority Mayoral Elections and UK Parliamentary Election
- 2025 – None (fallow year)
- 2026 – City Council Elections
- 2027 – City Council Elections
- 2028 – City council Elections, Police and Crime Commissioner Elections and Combined Authority Mayoral Elections

- 2.3 These are also the first elections to be held since the introduction of the Elections Act 2022. The measures that will be in force for the May 2023 elections are:

- Electors will be required to show Photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued.
- Electoral Registration Officers based in local authorities to issue free voter identification documents to those without a valid form of photo ID.
- Extend accessibility to elections including requiring Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations.

- 2.3 The local arrangements in place in relation to Voter ID and Accessibility have been provided below.

### 3.0 Voter ID

3.1 Voter ID regulations passed through both the House of Commons and House of Lords in mid-December 2022.

3.2 Acceptable forms of photographic identification will include:

- A passport issued by the UK, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, a British Overseas Territory, an EEA state or a Commonwealth country
- A driving licence issued by the UK, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or an EEA state
- A biometric immigration documents
- An identity card bearing the Proof of Age Standards Scheme hologram (a PASS card)
- Ministry of Defence Form 90 (Defence Identity Card)
- A Blue Badge
- A national identity card issued by an EEA state
- An Older Person's Bus Pass
- A Disabled Person's Bus Pass
- An Oyster 60+ Card
- A Freedom Pass
- A Scottish National Entitlement Card issued in Scotland
- A 60 and Over Welsh Concessionary Travel Card issued in Wales
- A Disabled Person's Welsh Concessionary Travel Card issued in Wales
- A Senior SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland
- A Registered Blind SmartPass or Blind Person's SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland
- A War Disablement SmartPass or War Disabled SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland
- A 60+ SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland
- A Half Fare SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland
- An Electoral Identity Card issued in Northern Ireland
- A Voter Authority Certificate or a temporary Voter Authority Certificate

3.3 If an electors photo ID has expired, it will still be accepted as long as the photo is still a good likeness of the elector.

3.4 With the final legislation now agreed, the Electoral Commission is now in the process of finalising the official guidance. The voter authority certificate design has not yet been shared with EROs

3.5 The free voter authority certificate application process is due to launch on 16 January 2023.

3.6 The Business Change Team at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUCH) delivered the first training session on the ERO portal for electoral services administrators on 14 December. The ERO portal is where Electoral Services will be able to download elector's voter authority certificate applications. This will not be fully integrated to the Electoral Services Management System by design.

- 3.7 The Government have agreed to review the effect of Voter ID on turnout at May 2023 polls. This review will be run by an independent organisation and published by November 2023, with results scrutinised by Select Committee.
- 3.8 The national campaign to promote Voter ID ('Note to Self') will launch in January 2023, and Local Authorities will be issued with a communications pack. Amongst other things it is proposed that a leaflet will be included in the council tax bills to all households to advise on the new requirements for photo ID in polling stations. The Communications Team will lead the communications for elections, including Voter ID. A Councillor Briefing is booked for the 19 January 2023 to update all Councillors on the proposed approach.

#### **4.0 Accessibility**

4.1 Returning Officers will have a general responsibility to take all reasonable steps to support voters with disabilities. The Electoral Commission will produce guidance (final version expected end of January 2023) to aid Returning Officers in providing reasonable support to aid disabled people to vote in polling stations. The Commission's guidance will recommend a range of support that should be made available to voters with disabilities, and this will be developed in conjunction with organisations representing disabled voters and those from the electoral sector. The draft guidance states that polling stations should provide the following as a minimum:

- Chair/seating – this provides a place to rest for voters who cannot stand for long periods and a seat for voters who would like to take some time to think before entering the polling booth
- Magnifiers – these increase the size of the text on a document providing support for voters who are visually impaired to vote independently
- Tactile voting device –this provides support for voters who are visually impaired to mark their vote on the ballot paper in the correct place.
- Polling booth at wheelchair level –helps to ensure that voters who use a wheelchair are able access a lower writing surface to ensure they can cast their vote in secret in a booth that is accessible
- Staff name badges – these help voters more easily identify that a person is a member of staff in the polling station and is someone they can approach for assistance
- Pencil grip – these can help voters with dexterity impairments to more easily hold and use a pencil independently
- Ramps (for buildings with steps) – these support access to a polling station for voters who use a wheelchair or have difficulty using steps
- Temporary alerters or doorbells for any doors that are required to remain shut during the day (for example, fire doors) – these provide a way for voters to let polling station staff know that they need assistance to open the door so they can access the polling station
- Appropriate lighting – some polling station venues have good lighting but others may need additional lighting at the desk; to ensure that voters can clearly see the faces of staff, and in the polling booths; to support voters with visual impairments to be able to read and complete the ballot paper.
- Reserved parking spaces reserved for voters with disabilities (where parking is available at the venue) – this ensures that disabled voters can park as close as possible to the polling station.

- 4.2 Wolverhampton aims to go further than the minimum and has set up a working group with representatives from Electoral Services, Equalities, Occupational Health, Zebra Access, Beacon Centre for Blind and NHS Learning Disability.
- 4.3 The working group is currently reviewing additional provision. One idea that is being implemented is a polling station support request where electors can hand over their request to polling station staff on arrival. A draft copy has been provided in Appendix 1.
- 4.4 An accessibility event is currently in the planning stages for early March where electors with disabilities will be invited to attend to experience a polling station ahead of polling day and receive information on the support available to them in the station.

## **5.0 Candidates and Agents**

- 5.1 The Returning Officer will be holding a candidates and agents briefing on Monday 6 March 2023 at 5.30pm for prospective candidates and agents. There will also be a candidates and agents briefing held after the nomination period on Wednesday 12 April 2023 at 5.30pm for all candidates standing for elections.
- 5.2 The Notice of Election will be published at 9am on Thursday 27 March. The nomination period will run weekdays from 10am on 27 March 2023 until 4pm on 4 April 2023.
- 5.3 Candidates will be required to book an appointment with Electoral Services to hand in their nomination papers in person. Candidates are strongly encouraged to also book an appointment for an informal check of the nomination paper before handing it in.

## **6.0 Registration**

- 6.1 A registration and postal vote campaign will take place ahead of the critical deadline dates for this election primarily using all available online communication channels:
- Deadline to register to vote: Monday 17 April 2023
  - Deadline to apply to vote by post: 5pm Tuesday 18 April 2023
  - Deadline to apply to vote by proxy: 5pm 25 April 2023

## **7.0 Polling stations**

- 7.1 The designated polling stations were agreed by Full Council in November 2022. There are a total of 125 polling stations, 106 venues, 19 double stations, 6 temporary stations and 15 schools. Any decision to change the designated polling station can be made by the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition.
- 7.2 Booking letters have been sent to all 106 polling station venues in December and 12% (12) of these venues have confirmed so far. All polling stations must be finalised by 1 March 2023 in readiness for poll cards to be prepared.

7.3 Polling Station Venues have been asked to provide the following further information this year to assist with preparations for checking Photo ID in polling stations including the size of the room to see if it could accommodate a privacy screen or whether they have a separate room that can be used to check Photo ID in private if required.

## **8.0 Postal Vote Opening**

8.1 There will be daily opening sessions in the City Suite, Civic Centre every weekday from Tuesday 25 April until election day.

8.2 The final opening session will take place from 8pm at Aldersley on Thursday 4 May in the fitness suite on the first floor.

8.3 Candidates and agents are required to notify Electoral Services of attendance at sessions at least 24 hours in advance.

8.4 Candidates and agents will be provided with the number of postal pack outer envelopes received for each ward on a daily basis, however they will be advised that this is only intended as an estimation. It will not directly translate to the number of votes at the count because some votes will not be taken forward if they do not pass the personal identifier verification.

8.5 One of the main areas for improvement identified at the May 2022 local election was the time taken to finalise postal vote opening (finished by 1am). Many count tables had finished verification at 11.30pm.

8.6 There has been a 60% increase in the number of postal voters since 2019 following the mail out to all non-postal voters offering them the opportunity to vote by post during the pandemic. This level has been sustained which has also contributed to the time it takes to process the postal votes.

8.7 The following improvements will be implemented in 2023 which will aim to significantly reduce the time it takes to process postal votes. As the count is taking place the next day, the final postal vote opening session will not impact the count start time, but the aim is to finish between midnight and 12.30am as a trial for when the count returns to an overnight count in future years:

- Change timing of the Royal Mail Sweep delivery to 8pm instead of 9.45pm so these postal votes can be processed well before the close of poll. This will enable the postal vote opening team to then just focus on the final postal votes handed in from the polling stations during the ballot box drop off.
- Hold an additional postal vote opening session between 10am – 12pm to deal with the postal votes received that morning. The usual afternoon session will start at 2pm until 5pm to process votes that have been handed in the Polling Station Inspectors and that have come in the earlier royal mail sweep and that day's post

- Start the final postal vote opening session an hour earlier - the session will start at 8pm to receive the royal mail sweep and postal votes that have been handed in by the Polling Station Inspectors.
- A new postal vote pack design will be implemented - this will be a one-piece mailer removing the additional envelopes and labels that elector would need to complete. This will help to reduce the number of mismatches that are returned that need to be matched up at the final opening sessions.

## **9.0 Verification and Count**

- 9.1 Presiding Officers will drop off ballot boxes at Aldersley after the close of poll on Thursday 4 May 2023. It is anticipated that this will be completed by 1am. The postal votes that have been handed in at the polling station will be processed during the final opening session.
- 9.2 All ballot boxes will be stored at each count table ready for counting the next day. Security will be employed to ensure the safety and security of the ballot boxes overnight.
- 9.3 The verification of all wards will start at 10am on Friday 5 May 2023. Once each ward is verified, the count will start for that ward.
- 9.4 Three candidates will be elected for each ward. This is a more complicated method of counting involving the following two stages:

### **Stage 1: Block Count**

There is often a pattern of voting along political party lines. Count Assistants will be provided with the combination of candidates in the counting trays in front of them. They will extract all votes in likely patterns for the main parties. For example, if an elector gives their three votes to candidates from the same party this will be counted as a vote for each candidate, so one batch of 20 votes will be counted as 20 for all three candidates. The other combinations will be dealt with on the counting board in stage 2.

### **Stage 2: Counting Board**

This involves placing the ballot papers in the counting board from left to right so that they overlap, leaving only the 'X's visible for each candidate. These rows of votes will be counted, and any unused votes also counted for reconciliation.

- 9.5 All count assistants and count supervisors will be trained with a mock count prior to polling day.
- 9.6 When each ward count has been finished, the provisional results will be shared with candidates and agents. Once agreed, the Returning Officer will announce the declaration of results for each ward. Candidates will be then invited to sign the declaration of office with Councillor Support and can then attend the media zone for pictures.

## **10.0 Financial implications**



- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 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.
- 10.3 The funding strategy outlined above has been very effective over the last few years, but a significant permanent increase in elections costs is now anticipated. This follows an analysis of elections spend in 2022 coupled with a review of estimated costs for the forthcoming 2023 elections. This exercise has highlighted a range of emerging cost pressures. These include increased polling station costs due to greater use of private venues and temporary polling stations in place of schools, increases in polling station hire against a background of rising energy prices, Royal Mail postage charge increases, higher poll letter costs compared to poll cards and increases in staffing fees in line with national living wage rates.
- 10.4 There are other cost pressures in addition to these associated with the all-out election in 2023 and the implementation of the Elections Act. The former costs relate to the additional count equipment and training required for an all-out election and are expected to be just in excess of £10,000. The latter include anticipated increases in polling staff fees for the additional responsibilities associated with the Elections Act, increases in the number of polling staff, privacy screens in polling stations and additional equipment to ensure compliance with accessibility requirements.
- 10.5 New burdens funding associated with the implementation of Election Act was announced in December 2022, with the Council awarded a total of just under £104,000 spanning the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 financial years.
- 10.6 Further work now needs to be undertaken as part of planning for the 2023 elections to determine how the new burdens funding will be allocated. When this review is completed a clearer view of future elections costs and funding will emerge. The funding strategy of combining a local elections budget with an Elections Reserve is set to continue, but the early indications are that the annual budget will have to be increased significantly. When this budget pressure is clearly established it will be incorporated in the preparation of 2023-2024 budgets and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

[GE/20122022/F]

## 11.0 Legal implications



11.1 All preparations outlined in this report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of local elections. [DP/0401203/A]

## **12.0 Equalities implications**

12.1 Planning for these elections complies with the Public-sector equality duty and the new accessibility arrangements set out in the Elections Act 2022. Reasonable adjustments to vote are made available for electors with disabilities in the polling stations, and staff working election duties receive substantial training on this.

12.2 A communications campaign will be launched in January up until May to continue to advise electors on the options that they have available to them to vote – either in the polling station, by post or by proxy.

## **13.0 All other Implications**

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

## **14.0 Schedule of background papers**

14.1 None listed.

## **15.0 Appendices**

15.1 Polling Station Support Request