

# Governance and Ethics Committee

14 March 2024

<b>Report title</b>	Update on preparations for May 2024 Combined Authority Mayoral and Local Elections	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance and Equalities	
<b>Accountable director</b>	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
<b>Originating service</b>	Electoral Services	
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<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	Election Board Cabinet Member Briefing – Governance and Ethics	14 February 2024 6 March 2024

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## Recommendation for action

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

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

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 To provide an update on preparations underway for the elections taking place on Thursday 2 May 2024, at present the elections confirmed as taking place are 20 City Council seats, the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority. The issue regarding the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) is covered in paragraph 2.2

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 A detailed preparation report was presented at the Governance and Ethics Committee on 11 January 2024. This report provides some further updates on preparations that have taken place since.
- 2.2 Subject to Parliamentary procedures, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner functions are due to transfer to the Mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority, therefore the scheduled West Midlands PCC election will not take place. However, contingency arrangements are still planned for in case a PCC election does need to take place.

## **3.0 Implementation of Election Act measures**

- 3.1 Since the launch of the online absent vote service on 31 October 2023, 331 postal vote applications and 30 proxy vote applications have been received online. Candidates, agents and political parties are strongly advised to encourage electors to apply online for their absent vote as this is the quickest way to ensuring their absent vote is put in place. Uploading paper applications to the online portal is a cumbersome process and Electoral Services are keen to reduce the number of paper applications received for this reason.
- 3.2 Since the new rules relating to overseas electors came in to force in January 2024, 41 overseas applications have been made, with the majority of these being electors who left the UK more than 15 years ago, requiring a check of historic registers at the archives. It is expected that the most significant rise in applications for overseas electors will be made when a general election is called.
- 3.3 Since January 2024, 64 Voter Authority Certificate applications have been made. A voter ID leaflet will be included with the council tax bills in March and information will be provided on the poll cards. Therefore it is expected that the number of applications for VAC's will increase from the end of March. Electors are encouraged to apply online but if they need support they can visit the Civic Centre between 10am and 3pm on weekdays or attend one of the drop in sessions taking place across the city:
- Monday 25 March, 10am – 1pm, Ashmore Park Library
  - Tuesday 26 March, 12pm – 3pm, Bilston Library
  - Wednesday 27 March, 10am-1pm, Blakenhall Library
  - Thursday 28 March 10am – 1pm, Finchfield Library

- Tuesday 2 April, 10am – 1pm, Collingwood Library
- Wednesday 3 April, 12pm-3pm, Pendeford Library
- Thursday 4 April, 10am – 1pm, Low Hill Library
- Thursday 4 April, 4pm – 7pm, Bert Williams Leisure Centre
- Monday 8 April, 10am – 1pm, Long Knowls Library
- Tuesday 9 April, 10am – 1pm, Spring Vale Library
- Wednesday 10 April, 10am – 1pm, Tettenhall Library
- Friday 12 April, 10am – 1pm, Penn Library
- Monday 15 April, 10am – 1pm, East Park Library
- Monday 15 April, 4pm – 7pm, Central Library
- Tuesday 16 April, 10am – 1pm, Whitmore Reans Library
- Wednesday 17 April, 10am – 1pm, Warstones Library
- Thursday 18 April, 10am – 1pm, Wednesfield Library
- Thursday 18 April, 4pm – 7pm, Aldersley Leisure Centre

#### **4.0 EU Citizens**

- 4.1 There are no changes to EU citizens voting and candidacy rights for the May elections, but changes will be coming in to force immediately after from 7 May 2024.
- 4.2 The majority of EU citizens already registered will remain eligible to vote and stand in local government elections. However a number of EU citizens will become ineligible and will need to be removed from the register.
- 4.3 Those EU citizens who will no longer be eligible will be those who took up residence in the UK after the UK left the EU (31/12/2020) and who are not citizens of one of the 5 EU member states that the UK has a bilateral voting and candidacy rights agreement with (Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Luxembourg and Poland), or Ireland, Cyprus and Malta.
- 4.4 A one-time review of the register will be carried out to determine the eligible of EU citizens already on the register from June 2024, and the process must be completed by 31 January 2025.
- 4.5 It is estimated that 9318 EU citizens on the register in Wolverhampton will have their eligibility confirmed via a data-based review, and 3803 EU citizens will require a correspondence-based review which will involve sending them a review notice to establish their eligibility. If they do not respond, they will be sent another reminder and a personal visit to their address before being send a notification of removal.

## **5.0 Candidates and Agents**

- 5.1 The Returning Officer held a candidates and agents briefing on Thursday 29 February. A second candidates and agents briefing will be held on Wednesday 17 April at 5.30pm.
- 5.2 The Notice of Election will be published at 9am on Thursday 21 March. The nomination period will run weekdays from 10am on Thursday 21 March 2024 until 4pm on Friday 5 April 2024.
- 5.3 All information for candidates and agents has been uploaded on the election's website. The candidates and agents' guidance contains all of the information about polling stations, postal vote opening and the verification and count.

## **6.0 Poll cards and postal votes**

- 6.1 Poll cards will be dispatched on Thursday 21 March. A second batch will be dispatched on Wednesday 24 April for people who registered after 1 March up to 16 April.
- 6.2 The poll card is now an oversized poll card to include all of the new information relating to Voter ID.
- 6.3 Currently there are 32,909 postal voters in Wolverhampton. Postal Votes will be dispatched on Wednesday 17 April for those who had applied to vote by post by 25 March, and a second batch will be dispatched on Monday 22 April.
- 6.4 Postal votes will have additional wording on the front of envelopes to encourage electors to post them in a red royal mail post-box to reduce numbers that are handed in due to the new postal vote handling roles.

## **7.0 Recruitment and training**

- 7.1 A total of 1,115 job roles have been recruited to work election duties across polling stations, the count and postal vote opening.
- 7.2 Training for all roles will commence in April.

## **8.0 Polling Stations**

- 8.1 All 127 polling stations have been booked and there have been no further changes to polling station venues.

## **9.0 Postal Vote Opening**

- 9.1 Postal Vote Opening will take place daily from 10am – 5pm weekdays in the City Suite, Civic Centre from Tuesday 23 April – Wednesday 1 May.
- 9.2 On polling day, postal vote opening will take place at WV Active Aldersley from 2pm – 6pm and a final opening session will start at 8pm.

9.3 The postal packs are combined so there will be two ballot papers to sort in each postal vote pack (one for local election and one for combined authority mayoral election). There are currently 32,909 postal voters in Wolverhampton.

## **10.0 Verification and Count**

10.1 The verification and count will be held at WV Active Aldersley Leisure Centre, Aldersley Road, Wolverhampton, WV6 9NW

10.2 Receipt of ballot boxes and final postal vote opening session take place on Thursday 2 May 2024 from 10pm until midnight.

10.3 Count venue will open to candidates and agents from 9.30am on Friday 3 May 2024. The verification will commence from 10am. It is anticipated that verification for all wards will be finished by 1.30pm. The count for the city council 20 seats will commence straight after the verification on Friday. It is anticipated that all wards will be declared by 7pm at the very latest.

10.4 The count for the Combined Authority Mayoral election will take place from 10am on Saturday 4 May. The Count venue will open to candidates and agents from 9.30am on Saturday 3 May 2024.

## **11.0 Financial implications**

11.1 The total cost of the all-out standalone election in May 2023 spanning 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 was just over £495,000. This includes expenditure incurred in introducing Voter ID and ensuring compliance with accessibility requirements under the Elections Act. The initial implementation of the Act has been supported by grant funding. A bid for additional funds has only just been accepted and the total grant now awarded over the two financial years is £137,306. In addition to this a by-election was also held in September 2023 at a cost of just over £20,000.

11.2 Elections costs have significantly increased recently under a range of 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 with the introduction of holiday pay and in line with national living wage rates. Early preparations for the May 2024 election indicate that further cost increases in some areas, polling station hire for example, are anticipated.

11.3 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. In the event of combined elections or fallow years, significant underspends against the local elections budget will

provide scope for contributions to the Elections Reserve which can be drawn upon in years of increased cost.

- 11.4 The budget set aside for elections in 2024-2025 is £277,000. A grant of £48,943 has also been awarded to support with ongoing costs associated with Voter ID and accessibility improvements, as well as new measures around online absent voting, overseas electors and changes to EU Citizens. It is difficult to forecast the Council share of the cost of the forthcoming combined election given uncertainties around electoral arrangements for the Police and Crime Commissioner role. Previous experience of combined elections suggests that in any event, costs will easily be accommodated within the budget and allow for a contribution to the Elections Reserve.

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## **12.0 Legal implications**

- 12.1 All preparations outlined in this report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of local and combined authority mayoral elections, and the implementation of the Election Act 2022.

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## **13.0 Equalities implications**

- 13.1 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.

## **14.0 All other Implications**

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

## **15.0 Schedule of background papers**

- 15.1 Preparations for May 2024 Combined Authority Mayoral and Local Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 11 January 2024.