

Governance and Ethics Committee

9 July 2021

Report title	Evaluation of 2021 Elections	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance and Equalities	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Director of Governance	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
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Report to be/has been considered by	N/A	

Recommendation for action:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the May 2021 elections.

Recommendations for noting:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is asked to note:

1. The evaluation on the 2021 elections.
2. The plan for the 2021 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 2021 elections.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the scheduled communications and key dates for the 2021 Annual Canvass.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 On Thursday 6 May 2021, Local elections, Police and Crime Commissioner and West Midlands Combined Authority Mayoral elections took place in Wolverhampton. This was the first combined triple poll the council has administered in over 20 years. These elections also took place in a covid secure context to meet the commitments set out in the Government [delivery plan](#).
- 2.2 As the Committee will be aware the implications of Covid meant that there were a number of changes from the usual way the election would have been run including:
 - a change of Count venue from the usual venue at Aldersley to the GTG Conference centre
 - a number of changes to polling stations as a result of a) seeking to reduce the impact on schools and b) some venues not being prepared to be used as a result of the impact of the pandemic
 - Additional Covid secure precautions that needed to be taken.
- 2.3 There were 183,928 electors eligible to vote, and a total of 179,454 votes were cast across all three elections. There was an overall turnout of 33%. There were 37, 535 postal voters, which was an increase of 62% in a 6-week period from 1 March. There were 97 proxy votes including 14 emergency proxy votes, of which 10 of these were for coronavirus reasons.
- 2.4 There are 123 polling districts/stations in Wolverhampton over 102 venues; of which 21 venues are double polling stations. There were changes made to 15 polling stations; 9 of these were as a result of them not being available due to being used for other covid-19 purposes or the venue was not willing to host a polling station in the current climate. The other 6 were alternatives to schools to reduce the number of schools used as polling stations. A total of 28 schools were used as polling stations because there were no other alternatives.
- 2.5 475 staff were recruited to work in the polling stations, including 102 covid marshals. 60 staff worked over 9 postal vote opening sessions. There were 540 roles recruited to work the verification and counts taking place over the three-day period in a new count venue at GTG Conference Centre.
- 2.6 There were 22 vacancies for the local election and 81 candidates stood for election.

- 2.7 Over 15,000 face coverings, 200 litres of hand sanitiser and 700 perspex screens were purchased to ensure the safe conduct of the poll and the count.
- 2.8 Despite the challenge of running a combined poll with the introduction of new safety measures in many new polling stations and a new count venue, overall the elections ran smoothly and the Returning Officer delivered all statutory responsibilities and is able to demonstrate that all [Electoral Commission Performance Standards](#) have been met.
- 2.9 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 streamlining for the May 2022 local elections. It is important to note that overall, amongst very challenging conditions the elections were conducted safely, efficiently and most importantly lawfully.
- 2.10 We are keen however to receive feedback from those involved in the processes and as such a mixture of group virtual meetings and surveys have taken place with the following groups to capture feedback:
- Strategic Executive Board (including Returning Officer, Deputy Returning Officers and Assistant Deputy Returning Officers)
 - Candidates and Agents
 - Electoral Services
 - Customer Services
 - ICT
 - Communications
 - HR
 - Reception Team
 - Ballot box receipt team
 - Postal vote opening team
 - Presiding Officers
 - Poll Clerks
 - Polling Station Inspectors
 - Verification and Count Supervisors
 - Verification and Count Assistants
- 2.11 A total of 16 candidates and agents and 265 staff responded to the surveys. The evaluation is presented below against 11 key themes.

3.0 Nominations

Best Practice

- 3.1 Candidates and agents were encouraged to submit scanned copies of their nomination forms in advance. This made the nomination process much more efficient and reduce the number of times candidates and agents needed to visit the Civic Centre. This option will continue to be made available for future elections.

Area for Improvement

- 3.2 There is not a space for candidate email addresses on the Electoral Commission nomination form. For future years this will be added on to local forms as well as providing information that this will be used for emailing valid nomination letters and sending the weekly updates.

4.0 Registration and absent vote applications

Best Practice

- 4.1 The Household Notification Letter helped to keep the register of electors up to date, and the postal vote application forms sent to every elector without one led to a 62% increase since 1 March, which helped to reduce the number of people visiting polling stations making them safer and reduce potential queuing. The majority of electors who applied for a postal vote opted for a permanent postal vote. There are now 36, 847 postal voters in Wolverhampton (20% of electorate)

5.0 Postal votes

Best Practice

- 5.1 Step by step pictorial instructions were included in each postal pack which included a link to a video guide to assist electors in completing their combined postal pack, which helped to reduce the number of queries to customer services on how to complete the packs. We recognise that for some voters the different forms needed were confusing, part of this was due to the election being a triple election.

Area for Improvement

- 5.2 The postal vote statement font size was too small for many and there was no barcode on the back of postal ballot papers which can help to speed up the matching process of the postal voting statement and the ballot paper. This was the first time working with a new printer, and a meeting has been arranged to rework the artwork to improve this process for future elections.

6.0 Polling Stations

Best Practice

- 6.1 A comprehensive review of all schools used as polling stations was taken early in Autumn 2020 in recognition of the need to avoid further disruption to education. A total of 6 schools were stood down as polling stations. 28 schools were used because there were no other suitable or available venues in the relevant polling districts.
- 6.2 A briefing with these school headteachers was held with the elections team, education, public health and health and safety representatives to explain why their school was being used and to discuss how all teams could work together to put mitigations in place.

- 6.3 Headteachers provided positive feedback on this session as it helped them understand how polling districts and polling stations are designated. Electoral Services will continue to engage with headteachers in this way for future polling district and station reviews to again seek to reduce the number of schools used.
- 6.4 The events team delivered and collected the polling booths, barriers and Perspex screens from every station which was a seamless operation. Presiding Officers appreciated not having to carry this additional equipment.
- 6.5 Over 95% of staff working in a polling stations found them covid-secure. There were lots of comments to say that everything was well organised and they felt safe carrying out the role. 100% of candidates and agents who responded to the survey found that conduct of the poll in polling stations either excellent, very good or good.
- 6.6 Where polling stations were moved, as a result of Covid reasons or reducing the use of schools, signs were put up at the previous station to remind voters of the new polling station in addition to postal communications with them.

Area for Improvement

- 6.7 A handful of complaints were received on the location of polling stations in Wednesfield North and Bushbury North. In Wednesfield, there are a few polling stations in close proximity to each other which caused confusion for elections – Ashmore Park and Corpus Christi. In Bushbury North, historically the polling station has been at the Methodist Church, however as a result of the 2019 polling district review this was moved to Fordhouses Baptist Church which is further down the same road.
- 6.8 These stations will be reviewed ahead of the next local elections as part of a polling district and station review following the local government boundary review.

7.0 Ballot box receipt

Best Practice

- 7.1 Finance colleagues from the result co-ordination team checked ballot paper accounts which saved time for supervisors and meant that errors on ballot paper accounts were quickly spotted and rectified.

Area for Improvement

- 7.2 There were some logistical challenges with being in a new venue, and there were a number of comments from Presiding Officers that there was a longer wait to drop off boxes than in previous years. This process will be improved by returning to the usual venue, and it will also be reviewed as part of the AEA health check to see where it can be further refined.

8.0 Verification and count

Best Practice

- 8.1 The result co-ordination team being based in a separate room worked well and helped to create a quiet space to carefully check results before they were provisionally shared with candidates and agents.
- 8.2 The layout of rows worked well from a transparency point of view. The configuration of the layout at Alderley will be re-evaluated to assess whether rows would work better than the mini horseshoe layout.

Area for Improvement

- 8.3 Counting ten wards at a time significantly delayed the time it took to verify a triple election. This decision was taken from a safety perspective as a result of the Covid restrictions and was based on detailed Public health/Health and Safety advice. For future election count taking place at Aldersley, there will be space to ensure that all wards can be counted at the same time. A number of candidates and agents also reported that there should be better labelling of ward locations. This will be put in place for the next election count.
- 8.4 Postal vote opening for a triple election took longer than expected due to the complexity of dealing with a triple election, the number of ballot papers and an increase in postal votes. There were also 3901 postal ballot packs returned on polling day before 10pm, with over 450 returned by the Royal Mail sweep which is the highest Wolverhampton has ever received from the sweep, which further impacted on the time it took to complete the final postal vote opening session. For future elections, more staff will be recruited to work at the final postal vote opening session.
- 8.5 Uploading the data and setting the equipment up for the count passes is very cumbersome. There were also numerous reports of passes not arriving in the post. Other systems will be explored for future elections.
- 8.6 Additional food/refreshments will be available for purchase at future Counts and there will be a cashless method of payment put in place.

9.0 Customer Services

Best Practice

- 9.1 Electoral Services and Customer Services had regular meetings which helped them to prepare and add additional resource to team. There was a 99% answer rate during April – May.

Area for Improvement

- 9.2 A number of different staff answered election calls. In future, the elections team will request a core team of staff to handle calls at this critical period and will arrange to train them directly.

10.0 Staffing

Best Practice

- 10.1 The call for internal staff to sign up to work election duties from the Chief Executive and Leadership Team was successful and led to a good number of reserve staff which has never been achieved before.
- 10.2 Delivering these elections was a one council approach. Multiple teams supported the process. A new operational working group was set up with the elections team, HR, health and safety and public health to develop covid risk assessments which helped to ease pressure on Electoral Services.
- 10.3 Over 91% of staff who worked the elections said that they intend to carry out election duties next year.

11.0 Training

Best Practice

- 11.1 It was the first time that separate briefing sessions were held for polling station inspectors and count assistants which provided them with more direction for their roles. All training for the election was delivered on Microsoft Teams. Lots of staff found this useful especially external staff. In future, online sessions will be offered in addition to face to face.

12.0 Communications and Stakeholder Engagement

Best Practice

- 12.1 The weekly candidate and agent updates kept candidate and agents informed of next steps. Proactively providing candidates and agents with reports on postal vote return figures also reduced the number of requests. 100% of candidates and agents who responded to the survey said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the information provided by the Returning Officer prior to the election.
- 12.2 This was the first time a post nomination candidate and agent briefing was held. This helped to keep candidates and agents better informed of the next steps. This is something that the Returning Officer will continue to host for future elections.

Area for Improvement

- 12.3 A number of candidates and agents reported issues with communication prior to the election which included a lack of understanding that the candidates home address would appear on the notification of election agents if they were their own agent, asking for the nomination process to be earlier, simplifying the nomination forms, being entitled to only one format of the register and candidates having to request register and absent voters lists, However, these issues are outside of local remit and are laid down in the legislation. Feedback will be passed on to the Electoral Commission. This will be communicated

more clearly in candidates and agents' briefings going forward to explain the legislative reasons for certain restrictions, timings and inclusion of information.

13.0 Regional Work

Best Practice

- 13.1 Electoral Services Managers and Returning Officers regularly met in their respective meetings which was a good support network and forum to share good practice. There were also regular meetings with the single point of contact at the police.

Area for Improvement

- 13.2 There was a lack of consistency in the region in relation to public health and communications. Each area took similar but slightly different approaches to covid measures in the region. In future regional elections, there could be an opportunity to jointly procure communications videos which could be shared with electors on what to expect in a polling station and how to vote at these elections.

14.0 Peer review

- 14.1 The Returning Officer has requested that the Association of Electoral Administrators conduct a review of verification and count processes (including postal vote receipts). The AEA offer a health check service to Returning Officers who want an independent and confidential assessment of their verification and count. This review will help to validate good practice and offer constructive challenge which will help the council to continue to improve the conduct of elections.

15.0 Annual Canvass

- 15.1 The annual canvass will commence in July 2021. This will be the second canvass held under the reformed canvass as per The Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019.
- 15.2 The electoral register will be data matched against DWP records to categorise 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)
 - There will also be a route 3 for care homes who will be contacted via a senior responsible officer by a dedicated canvasser to update the details in care homes.
- 15.3 The timetable is set out below:

Communication	Date	Detail
Route 1 CCA Email	w/c 12 July	To matched households where an email address is held. They must respond to this.
Route 1 CCA Letter	5 – 16 August (10,000 letters a day)	To matched households where an email address is not held or where a response was not received to the email. They only need to respond if there is a change. Printed on green paper.
Route 2 CCB Letter	26 July	To not matched households. Response required. No pre-paid envelope – encourage response online. Printed on blue paper.
Route 2 Canvass form	8 September	To not matched households who have not responded to canvass form. Response required. Pre-paid envelope provided
Route 2 CCB Telephone canvassing	6 September – 1 October	To not matched households where a telephone number is held. Employ customer services staff to assist with this
Route 2 Door Knock	7 October – 31 October 2021	10 canvassers will be employed to carry this out. A risk assessment will be undertaken.

16.0 Financial implications

- 16.1 The cost of the review by the Association of Electoral Administrators is just over £3,000 and will be funded from the £192,000 budget set aside for local elections in 2021-2022. The proposed actions under areas for improvement will be undertaken by existing staffing resources. No financial implications are anticipated at this stage, but if any emerge they will be evaluated and detailed in future reports to Governance and Ethics Committee. [GE/29062021/V]

17.0 Legal implications

- 17.1 All recommendations arising from the report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of electoral registration and delivering elections activity.
[DP/28062021/A]

18.0 Equalities implications

- 18.1 Equalities considerations have been heavily embedded into the approach taken by the Council, including detailed work with relevant charities/associations concerning ensuring that there is efficient and comprehensive access to the democratic process for all residents. This has included specific training on relevant assessments of polling stations and how those with visual impairment can exercise their democratic right.

19.0 All other Implications

- 19.1 There are no other implications arising from the recommendation in this report.

20.0 Schedule of background papers

- 20.1 [Update on 2021 Elections – preparations for covid secure elections, 12 March 2021, Governance Committee](#)
- 20.2 [Evaluation of 2020 Annual Canvass, 12 February 2021, Governance Committee](#)
- 20.3 May 2021 polls delivery plan: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/may-2021-polls-delivery-plan/may-2021-polls-delivery-plan>
- 20.4 Electoral Commission Performance Standards (see Appendix A):
https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/LGEW-MAY-RO-Part-A-role-and-responsibilities.pdf