

<b>CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL</b>	<b>Governance and Ethics Committee</b> 10 December 2021
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<b>Report title</b>	Electoral Services – Outcomes from AEA health check and postal vote audit	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Paula Brookfield	
<b>Accountable director</b>	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
<b>Originating service</b>	Electoral Services	
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<b>Report has been considered by</b>	Election Board	4 November 2021

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### Recommendations for noting:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is asked to note:

1. The outcome of the external and internal review of Electoral Services functions.

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 To present the outcome of the external review of Electoral Services carried out by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), the internal audit carried out by the Audit Team of postal votes, and to provide an update on work underway to improve areas for improvement.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 The Returning Officer requested that the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) conduct a health check to provide an independent and confidential assessment of Electoral Services. The purpose of this was to help validate good practice and offer constructive and practical guidance to help the council to continue to improve the way we conduct our elections.
- 2.2 The audit of postal votes was scheduled as part of the Internal Audit Plan for 2021/2022 due to the fact that a combined poll and an increase in postal voters took place this year. The objective was to provide assurance that postal votes are administered and processed in accordance with the Electoral Commission's guidance.

## **3.0 Association of Electoral Administrators Report – Executive Summary**

- 3.1 Overall, the report is positive as the AEA recognised that electoral events are seen as the responsibility of the entire council with buy in from across all services areas to ensure they are run efficiently.
- 3.2 The AEA recognised that Wolverhampton has a strong Election Board and all legislation, employment law, GDPR and information governance is clearly understood and adhered to.
- 3.3 There is also an emphasis on the comprehensive lesson learnt exercises that are carried out after the elections, where the service is seen to gather feedback to improve and enhance service. Noting that this feedback is reported into the Governance and Ethics Committee, as measure of best practice by the service.
- 3.4 The AEA have recommended that Election Board should ensure there is a focus on postal vote opening for the 2022 election to provide the necessary oversight and support. Following this recommendation, a member of SEB has been appointed as the lead Deputy Returning Officer for postal vote opening, and employees from Finance and Audit will be supporting the review of paperwork and processes to improve efficiencies. Finance employees will also be recruited to work as postal vote opening assistants, due to their experience and skillset.
- 3.5 It was recommended that the role of receipting the ballot boxes is essential to the elections and therefore an experienced Officer will be given overall responsibility for this,

and to review the process. The Business Improvement Team are working with Electoral Services to review this process and make the necessary enhancements.

- 3.6 Another recommendation was to integrate electoral registration into other areas of the Council where possible. Electoral Services do work closely with council tax to keep the register of electors up to date, there is further work that could be done to improve this. The Business Improvement Team are working with Electoral Services to integrate electoral registration into Customer Services, Council Tax and Housing.
- 3.7 The final area of improvement raised was to ensure there is resilience across the council and in the core team to meet the demands that will be placed on Electoral Services when implementing the Elections Bill in 2023. They recommended that, in advance of the implementation, the one council approach is strengthened, and the core team structure is reviewed. The structure of the team is currently being reviewed and the one council approach is being strengthened with meetings already taking place with key services such as HR, Finance, and the Events Team to plan for the 2022 local elections.
- 3.8 For a copy of the full report please see **Appendix 1**.

#### **4.0 Postal Vote Audit – Executive Summary**

- 4.1 The overall outcome of the internal audit review on postal vote opening was that there is substantial assurance over the adequacy of the controls reviewed. A substantial outcome states there is 'A sound system of governance, risk management and control exists, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited'.

The scope of the audit included:

- Processing of postal vote applications
- Changes to postal vote applications
- Cancellation of postal vote applications
- Receipt and verification of returns

- 4.2 There were five actions identified to further strengthen processes, the actions were all given a green status which means 'action is advised to enhance risk control or operational efficiency'.

Work is already underway to address these actions, which are detailed below:

Action	Electoral Services Response
1. Review retention of postal vote cancellation forms.	Amendments have been made to the scanning system and associated procedure to retain cancellation forms in the system for one year.

2. Rectify one error where permanent postal vote was put in place instead of one off.	The elector has been informed, and all postal vote applications made this year are being re-checked.
3. Enquire whether system can automatically flag postal voters who have changed their name to send a new application.	Functionality does not currently exist within the system. Existing procedure improved to ensure that any postal voter who changes their name is informed of requirement to make a new application due to signature change.
4. To review whether system provider can improve reporting of reason for cancelled postal vote applications.	This will be raised with Civica. Up until the audit, there has been no use for this specific report.
5. Regularly review postal vote redirections and liaise with counter fraud team to seek advice.	This will be reviewed ahead of the May 2022 elections.

4.3 For a copy of the full report please see **Appendix 2**.

## 5.0 Financial implications

5.1 The improvements identified as part of these reviews will be pursued utilising existing resources. Any financial implications arising from the review of the core elections team structure will be assessed on completion of that work. [GE/09112021/V]

## 6.0 Legal implications

6.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report at the current time [DP/16112021/A].

## 7.0 Equalities implications

7.1 Whilst there are no direct equalities implications associated with this report, equalities considerations relating to electoral matters are taken into account when processes and procedures are looked at and the same will be done as the procedures are reviewed as a result of these reports.

## 8.0 All other Implications

8.1 There are no other implications associated with this report at the current time.

## **9.0 Apprentices**

9.1 Appendix 1: AEA Health Check Report

9.2 Appendix 2: Postal Vote Audit Report