

The Association of Electoral Administrators



REPORT ON THE PROVISION OF ELECTORAL SERVICES AT

**CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
C O U N C I L**

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Health check report into the provision of electoral services at City of Wolverhampton Council

Introduction

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) is a membership body for those involved in the delivery of electoral services. The City of Wolverhampton Council have asked that we conduct a health check on their electoral service. The health check was undertaken by Laura Lock, AEA Deputy Chief Executive and supported by the supported by the AEA's Policy Manager.

Background

The City of Wolverhampton has an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and Returning Officer (RO) with over ten years' experience delivering elections, with over three years as Returning Officer. The Council also have a very knowledgeable Electoral Services Manager who works with the ERO/RO.

For the purposes of City of Wolverhampton local government elections, Tim Johnson, the Chief Executive, has been appointed as the Proper Officer for electoral matters and acts as the Council's Returning Officer (RO) for local government, Combined Authority Mayor and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

He has also been appointed as the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) under section 8 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and accordingly acts as the Acting Returning Officer (ARO) for any UK Parliamentary elections held within the City of Wolverhampton Council area.

They requested the AEA undertake this health check to ensure the electoral services function is appropriately structured, resilient and sufficiently resourced to meet the statutory obligations and demands facing the service with the knowledge of forthcoming legislative change, such as the recently tabled Elections Bill. They also requested we specifically look at their processes for both postal vote opening and the receipting of ballot boxes.

Provision of electoral services at the City of Wolverhampton Council

Areas of excellence

Ensuring residents can register to vote and cast their ballot is a key priority for the Council. Having meet with officers at all levels of the organisation, resourcing democratic provision to meet the needs of the electorate is clearly of fundamental importance.

Electoral events are seen as the responsibility of the entire Council with buy-in across all service areas thanks to a top-down approach from senior managers.

There is a drive to continue to improve that leads to original thinking which supports the democratic process.

It is acknowledged that electoral services is a highly specialised area and as such needs skilled staff who can ensure legislation is followed. It is equally clear that senior officers appreciate that the election team, due to legal changes, no longer have the capacity to deliver an electoral event without council-wide support.

There are many areas of excellent practice imbedded into electoral provision in Wolverhampton including –

- Having an Election Board with a robust project management approach and reporting, chaired by the Council's Chief Executive.
- There being a comprehensive lessons learnt exercise after every election with clear mechanisms for reporting and implementing improvement including formally reporting to the Elections Board and Governance and Ethics Committee.
- The clear 'One Council' approach to service delivery with senior officers acutely aware of their role in delivering a major project with immovable deadlines.
- Wider legislation, including GDPR, employment law and information governance, is clearly understood and adhered to.

Areas for review

Postal Vote Opening

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council took a proactive approach to providing postal votes for residents ahead of the 2021 polls.

This was done to ensure no one was disenfranchised because they were nervous attending a polling station.

The promotion of postal votes saw the number of voters wanting their ballot papers sent to them at home grow from 23,000 to almost 37,000.

This increase undoubtedly supported Wolverhampton residents in engaging with the 2021 polls. However, an inevitable consequence was longer and more complicated postal vote opening sessions in the fortnight before polling day. The impact of the increase was compounded by the level of combination at the May polls where voters received three ballot papers.

The City of Wolverhampton Council will likely retain a high level of postal voters for the foreseeable future. This growth means a new approach to opening returned packs is required a review of the process should be undertaken with necessary corporate support and resource.

We feel the Elections Board should make postal vote opening a priority area for improvement in 2022 and ensure it provides necessary oversight and support.

Ballot Box Receipting

As a result of the vaccination rollout, the venue usually used for elections counts was unavailable. While the new venue worked well for the counting of votes, the receipting of ballot boxes did not go as smoothly as it had previously.

Having looked at the challenges that existed in May 2021, it does appear that these were largely due to the new venue and adjustments relating to Covid-19.

We were reassured that when returning to usual venue many of the issues will be resolved. However, we see merit in someone outside of the core election team being given overall responsibility for the receipting of ballot boxes and other equipment. We would also advise a review of close of poll procedures given to Presiding Officers, especially the completion of the ballot paper account.

Registration

There is an obvious drive to ensure Wolverhampton residents can register to vote easily and work being undertaken to explore further opportunities for joined up working.

There has been a drive to integrate registration into other Council services, such as council tax. Also, before the Covid-19 pandemic there

were some fantastic outreach work being undertaken which has understandably stopped.

We believe there is merit in the Elections Board reviewing the overarching framework for registration at the City of Wolverhampton Council. This strategic oversight would help ensure all opportunities to maintain a complete and accurate register while improving the residents experience and delivering financial savings.

Elections Bill

There is significant change on the horizon for elections and electoral registration. The core team are clearly sighted on the challenges ahead with a plan to keep all stakeholders informed.

While much of the detail is still to be laid out in secondary legislation, the RO/ERO and his senior leaders are acutely aware that there are resource and working practice implications. The Elections Board is committed to reviewing the Bill and devising an implementation plan as more detail is available.

We would signpost the need to ensure, as with other areas of election delivery, the 'One Council' approach is adopted for new burdens. We would also see merit in considering whether the current core team structure provides sufficient expert resilience.

Conclusions

The City of Wolverhampton Council has an Electoral Services Team it should be proud of. They are delivering an outstanding service to the residents of Wolverhampton and continue to look for improvements to the service. They understand the importance of customer service and have made continued personal sacrifice to ensure all electoral requirements are properly met. The May 2021 polls were a huge success despite having to contend with the complexities brought about by Covid and three-way combination.

While there are areas of challenge on the horizon, we believe the corporate oversight that is already in place means the Council is well prepared to meet future demands.

To supplement this report, we will send some detailed recommendations for minor service enhancements to the Electoral Services Manager to assist with their ongoing drive for continuous improvement.