

CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL

Governance and Ethics Committee

14 January 2022

Report title	Preparations for May 2022 Local Elections	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance and Equalities	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
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Report has been considered by	Election Board	11 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 2022 elections.

1.0 Purpose

1.1 To provide an update on preparations underway for the local elections taking place on 5 May 2022.

2.0 Background

2.1 On Thursday 5 May 2022, Local Elections are taking place in Wolverhampton, where a third of Councillor seats are up for election.

2.2 These will be the second set of polls to be held in Wolverhampton during the pandemic. The Electoral Commission have confirmed that their supplementary guidance relating to preparing for the polls against the background of the pandemic will still stand. They will not be issuing any further guidance unless the position changes.

2.3 The elections that took place in 2021 met the requirements set out in the Government's delivery plan. The Government has not yet issued any further guidance on the May 2022 polls.

2.4 Following the lessons learned exercise that was carried out after the May 2021 elections, including the recommendations made in the Association of Electoral Administrators health check report, a number of changes will be brought in for 2022 elections. The most notable changes will be to improve postal vote opening outlined in section 8 of this report, and to improve ballot box receipt processes, outlined in paragraph 9.4.

3.0 Risk management

3.1 The Election Board, chaired by the Returning Officer, now meets on a monthly basis all year round. From January – May, the membership of this Board includes all of Strategic Executive Board in addition to all of the Deputy Returning Officers and members of Electoral Services.

3.2 A detailed risk register is reviewed at each board meeting. The key risk relating to this election continues to be operating in a covid secure environment, which is particularly challenging at the Count Venue due to the number of staff, candidates and agents in attendance.

4.0 Covid measures

4.1 Local Public Health Guidance has been sought and the planning for these elections will be based on the same principles for the 2021 elections in particular:

- Inform voters that they have a choice between in person and absent voting
- Voters may bring their own pen or pencil
- Maximum ventilation in polling stations and count venue
- Social distancing

- Perspex screens (where appropriate)
- Hand sanitiser
- Regular cleaning
- Mandatory lateral flow tests for staff
- Face coverings worn by staff
- Encouraged use of face coverings for electors

4.2 Since 10 December 2021, everyone entering a polling station and count venue is legally required to wear a face covering, unless they are exempt.

4.3 Everyone appointed to work election duties will be required to undertake two lateral flow tests prior to working - one two days before and one on the day they are working. Standby staff will be recruited to mitigate against short notice staff drop-outs.

4.4 Candidates and agents are strongly encouraged to undertake a lateral flow test prior to attending the count.

4.5 The risk assessments from 2021 are currently being reviewed and updated by Electoral Services in conjunction with Public Health and Health and Safety. Public health arrangements will be shared in more detail in March.

5.0 Nominations

5.1 The Returning Officer will be holding a candidates and agents briefing on Monday 7 March 2022 for prospective candidates and agents. There will be also be a candidates and agents briefing held after the nomination period on Friday 8 April 2022 for all candidates standing for elections.

5.2 Last year, candidates were encouraged to submit scanned copies of nomination forms in advance for checking. This process worked well, and this option will be available for candidates to do this year before formally submitting their nomination papers.

5.3 The nomination process will remain the same as last year, with candidates and agents required to book an appointment, and there will be a Perspex screen in the room used to receive nominations.

5.4 The Notice of Election will be published at 9am on 24 March 2022. The nomination period will run from 10am on 24 March – 4pm on 5 April 2022.

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: 14 April 2022

- Deadline to apply to vote by post: 5pm 19 April 2022
- Deadline to apply to vote by proxy: 5pm 25 April 2022

7.0 Polling stations

- 7.1 The draft schedule of polling stations has been shared with both groups for comments. This can be found in Appendix 1. Any decision to change the designated polling station will 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 polling stations in December, and 28% of these venues have confirmed so far. All polling stations must be finalised by 1 March 2022 in readiness for poll cards to be prepared.
- 7.3 The following nine polling stations will be returning to their usual designated polling station:

Ward	District/Station	Polling Station – May 2021	Polling station – May 2022
Bilston East	BEA/BE1	Loxdale Primary School	Bert Williams
Bilston East	BEB/BE2	Holy Trinity Catholic School	Bilston Seventh Day Adventist Church
Blakenhall	BOA/BO1	St Lukes Primary School	Bob Jones Community Hub
Bushbury South And Low Hill	BUE/BU5	Northwood Park Primary School	Collingwood Library
St Peters	SPF/SP6	Art Gallery	University Chaplaincy Building
Oxley	OXD/OX4	Priory Green Building	Pendeford Community Hub
Oxley	OXE/OX5	Priory Green Building	Pendeford Community Hub
Wednesfield South	WSF/WS6	Perry Hall Primary School	Wednesfield Christian Ce
Wednesfield North	WNC/WN3	Corpus Christi Social Centre	Ashmore Park Baptist Chu

7.4 It is proposed that the following nine stations that were used as polling stations in 2021 remain at this venue as a permanent change, primarily to reduce the use of schools as polling stations:

Ward	District/ Station	Designated polling station	Polling station used in 2021 and proposed for May 2022	Polling district
Bushbury North	BUC/ BU3	Fordhouses Methodist Church (this building is no longer in use)	Baptist Church, Winchester Road	Same polling district
Fallings Park	FPD/FP4	St Gregory the Great Church (they are not willing to be a polling station going forward)	Long Knowle Community Hub	In adjacent polling district – FPE.
Graiseley	GRB/GR2	Bantock Primary School	Bingley Strengthening Families Hub	Same polling district
Merry Hill	MHE/MH5	Springdale Primary School	Warstones Library	Adjacent polling district - MHD
Oxley	OXA/OX1	Dovecotes Primary School	Pendeford Seventh-Day Adventist Church	Same polling district
Penn	PNA/PN1	Warstones Primary School	Warstones Library	In Merry Hill ward - MHD, but 0.2 miles from Warstones Primary.
St Peters	SPG/SP7	Civic Centre	Art Gallery	In same polling district
Spring Vale	SVF/SV6	Manor Primary School	Hurst Hill Methodist Church	Adjacent polling district - SVE
Wednesfield South	WSB/WS2	St Thomas's CE Primary School	Wednesfield Methodist Church	In Wednesfield North ward – WNA- – 0.4 miles away.

- 7.5 If all of the polling station proposals are accepted, 22 schools across the city would be used as polling stations, which is a reduction of a further 6 schools since May 2021.
- 7.6 All schools that have been booked as polling stations for May 2022 have been written to advising that they consider planning to use 5 May 2022 as an inset day or remote learning day if the school is not able to stay open on polling day.
- 7.7 Following the 2022 local elections, a full review of all polling districts and polling stations will be conducted following the boundary review, which will further try to reduce the number of schools that are used as polling stations.
- 7.8 Individual risk assessments for polling stations are in place. Any new venues will undertake a risk assessment prior to finalising.

8.0 Postal vote opening

- 8.1 There will be daily opening sessions in the City Suite, Civic Centre every weekday from Tuesday 26 April until election day.
- 8.2 Candidates and agents are required to notify Electoral Services of attendance at sessions at least 24 hours in advance.
- 8.3 The final postal vote opening session at the count will be scaled up so that there are more postal vote opening assistants working on opening and verifying the final postal votes that have been handed in to the polling station on the day, which will speed up this process.
- 8.4 More internal employees from Finance will be employed to work on postal vote opening sessions and they will be assisting with making recommendations to process and paperwork to provide further efficiencies to this process.

9.0 Verification and Count

- 9.1 The count will be taking place at Aldersley. The verification will take place on Thursday 5 May 2022 after close of poll, and this is anticipated to be completed by 2.30am. The counting of votes will commence after verification, and it is anticipated that this will be completed by 5am.
- 9.2 Instead of the usual mini horseshoe layout by ward, there will be four long rows of count tables to enable people to move around the count venue more safely. The Postal Vote Opening team will be based outside of the main hall to create more space in the count venue.
- 9.3 All wards will start verification at the same time. Once each ward is verified, the count will start for that ward.
- 9.4 Changes have been made to the ballot box receipt process to improve the accuracy of Presiding Officers correctly returning and completing ballot paper accounts. Instead of the drive through and drop off process, Presiding Officers will now park in the car park

and bring all of their equipment to a check in desk for checking. There will be ten check in desks to replicate the number of drop-off bays. Finance Officers will be based at check in desks to check in equipment and check that the ballot paper account has been correctly completed prior to the Presiding Officer leaving so that the Presiding Officer is able to answer any queries and learn from any mistakes.

- 9.5 Social distancing measures will be implemented at the count so that candidates and agents and staff are distanced with Perspex screens, and staff will also be sat with a Perspex screen in between each other. Due to limited number of count staff, the count will take longer than for previous standalone local elections.

10.0 Financial implications

- 10.1 There is a £192,000 budget currently set aside to cover the cost of local elections each year. 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 these circumstances significant underspends against the local elections budget are expected. The forthcoming standalone election is, however, estimated to cost in the region of £260,000 at this stage. The anticipated cost in excess of the budget will be funded from the Elections Reserve established specifically for this purpose.
- 10.2 A risk assessment of the election process is currently being undertaken in conjunction with Public Health. Any costs associated with emerging recommendations will be reviewed and incorporated in future update reports.
[GE/15122021/X]

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/20122021/B]

12.0 Equalities implications

- 12.1 Planning for these elections complies with the Public-sector equality duty. 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. 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 Appendix 1: Proposed polling stations for May 2022