

# Governance and Ethics Committee

16 March 2023

<b>Report title</b>	Update on preparations for Local Elections	
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<b>Accountable director</b>	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
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<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	Election Board	20 March 2023
	Cabinet Member Briefing – Governance and Ethics	8 March 2023

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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 local elections taking place on 4 May 2023.

## 2.0 Background

- 2.1 All 60 Councillor seats are up for election on Thursday 4 May 2023 on the new ward boundaries.
- 2.2 These are also the first elections to be held since the introduction of Voter ID and the new accessibility measures as a result of the Elections Act.
- 2.3 A detailed preparation report was presented at the last Governance and Ethics Committee in January 2023. This report provides some further updates on preparations that have taken place since.

## 3.0 Voter ID

- 3.1 As of 8 March, a total of 285 applications for a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) have been received by the Electoral Registration Officer. 219 of these have been processed and sent to print. 50 are on hold and the electors have been contacted to provide additional information such as new photographs that meet the criteria or verification of identity. The majority of electors have applied for a VAC online, but applications have also been received by post and in person.
- 3.2 It is anticipated that there will be a significant increase in applications for VAC's when the poll cards land on 24 March.
- 3.3 A dedicated team is in place to process Voter Authority Certificates and to hold drop-in sessions to support people who are not able to apply online. Every weekday, residents are able to come into the Civic Centre between 10am and 3pm until the VAC application deadline on Tuesday 25 April. Residents can get support with completing applications and have their photo taken if required.
- 3.4 There are also additional drop-in sessions taking place across the city to ensure that there is a consistent offer of support across the city for electors who may not be able to attend the Civic Centre during these times. The details of these drop-in sessions are as follows:

<b>Drop-in session</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Time</b>
Tuesday 7 March	WV Active Central	5pm – 8pm
Wednesday 15 March	WV Active Bilston	5pm – 8pm
Wednesday 22 March	WV Active Aldersley	5pm – 8pm
Wednesday 29 March	Civic Centre	4pm – 7pm
Monday 3 April	Tettenhall Library	2pm – 7pm

Tuesday 4 April	Finchfield Library	2pm – 7pm
Wednesday 5 April	Spring Vale Library	2pm – 6pm
Thursday 13 April	Penn Library	10am – 1pm
Thursday 13 April	East Park Library	2pm – 5pm
Friday 14 April	Low Hill Library	2pm – 5pm
Monday 17 April	Wednesfield Library	12pm – 7pm

3.5 These drop in sessions are advertised on the council’s website and anyone who needs support with applying for a VAC is invited to call electoral services (number on the poll card), who will be able to advise where the drop in sessions are taking place. We will, if there is the demand for it, consider whether any further drop in sessions are needed.

3.6 The starting point is that the Council wishes to ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is able to do so, which is why the Council is taking substantial steps to supplement the national Voter ID communication below. The Council continues to engage with other authorities to ensure that there is, as far as possible, a consistent approach across local authorities to Voter ID.

#### **4.0 Voter ID Communications**

4.1 In January 2023 the Electoral Commission launched a national awareness raising campaign for Voter ID. The ‘Bring ID to Vote’ campaign has featured on TV, radio, billboards, bus backs and print media across the country.

4.2 Funding was not made available to local authorities to support the campaign a local level, however communications toolkits were provided including templates for posters, booklets and social media. It is important to note that funding for communication of the Voter ID changes is with the Electoral Commission and they have responsibility for the national campaign currently underway.

4.3 Council communications activity is aimed at raising awareness of Voter ID requirements and urges action to get acceptable ID if you required. Key audiences are all voters, younger voters (18-30) and harder to reach communities.

4.4 The communications strategy is to amplify the national ‘Bring ID to Vote’ campaign primarily via digital channels in a direct and cost effective way, while supporting it with traditional communications channels and activities.

4.5 Webpages featuring information on all elements of the upcoming local elections – including voter ID – has been made available on the council website at [www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/elections](http://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/elections)

4.6 Local communications activity has centred around the following messaging:

- New requirement to have photo ID for local elections
- Details of acceptable ID for polling day

- How to apply for Voter Authority ID
- Council drop-in sessions – get your Voter Authority ID

4.7 Activity has been shared across the following channels:

- Media releases
- Social media posts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn accounts)
- Social media headers
- Residents e-newsletters
- Councillor updates
- All councillor briefing sessions
- MP communications
- Leaflets for all councillors and prospective candidates
- Display banners distributed to councillors
- Leaflets and banners displayed at council buildings across city
- Leaflet included in council tax booklet to all homes
- Leaflet included in Wolverhampton Homes rent letter
- Digital traffic signage across city
- Digital displays at Civic Centre
- Wolverhampton Chronicle wrap full back page advert
- All CWC internal communications channels

4.8 Further activity is planned in the coming weeks as the elections approach including translated materials, outdoor advertising and working with partners to extend the reach of the messaging. It is anticipated that the Government/Electoral Commission will ramp up national communications in the run up to the election on 4 May to raise awareness and ensure its new policy is communicated and everyone who intends to vote is able to do so.

## 5.0 Accessibility

- 5.1 The accessibility working group (made up of representations from Electoral Services, Equalities, Occupational Health, Zebra Access, Beacon Centre for the Blind and NHS Learning Disability) have signed off on the final accessibility improvements that will be implemented at the May elections:
- Polling Station Support Leaflet (including large print accessible version) to let people know support and equipment available in station, and to provide a tick list they can fill in before they arrive or at the polling station. This will be on the website, in polling stations and distributed across stakeholder network.
  - Electoral Services will record a Black Country talking news item for Beacon Centre to cover key info on Voter ID.
  - Accessible versions of statement of persons nominated will be included on website in addition to PDF.
  - Additional line on poll card: There are new support measures in place in the polling station to support people with disabilities. Including a QR code to take electors to move information.
  - Wolverhampton.gov.uk/elections updated with accessibility information and support people can expect in stations.
  - British Sign Language students from Wolverhampton University recruited to some polling stations across city.
  - Guidance shared with candidates on how to make their campaigns accessible.
  - Hazard tape provided in each ballot box to highlight any unlevel floor.
  - Additional accessible and easy ready guidance to be provided to each polling station with key information.
  - Meet and greet poll clerk to wear a hi-vis jacket and be first point of contact for people who may need support.
  - Bright yellow and black text lanyards for Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks.
  - White stickers on ballot box to highlight slot highlighter.
  - Large print Accessible ballot paper on yellow background, black text.
  - Front desk at polling station to have a laminated version of how to vote guidance and polling station support leaflet.
  - Desk next to polling staff to show all additional equipment (light, pencil grip, tactile voting device, large print ballot paper).

- Additional training to polling station staff on supporting people with disabilities, and an accessibility checklist for staff to check the station has been set up correctly to support people with disabilities.
- Pencil grips and lighting ordered as additional equipment.
- BSL videos put on website and distribute across stakeholder networks.

5.2 The accessibility working group will meet again after the election to review the implementation and to make further improvements for 2024 elections.

## **6.0 Candidates and agents**

6.1 The Returning Officer held a candidates and agents briefing on Monday 6 March. A second candidates and agents briefing will be held on Wednesday 12 April at 5.30pm.

6.2 The Notice of Election will be published at 9am on Thursday 23 March. The nomination period will run weekdays from 10am on Thursday 23 March 2023 until 4pm on Tuesday 4 April 2023.

6.3 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.

## **7.0 Poll cards and postal votes**

7.1 Poll cards will be dispatched on Thursday 23 March for those who were registered to vote by Wednesday 29 March. A second batch will be dispatched on Monday 24 April.

7.2 The poll card is now an A4 letter that is folded and sealed to include all of the new information relating to Voter ID. The front of the poll card still looks like a typical poll card, but all local authority areas will now have slightly different designs.

7.3 It is anticipated that Postal votes will be dispatched on Friday 14 April for those who had applied to vote by post by Wednesday 1 March, and that a second batch will be dispatched on Saturday 22 April.

## **8.0 Polling Stations**

8.1 Booking confirmation letters have been received for all polling stations. The location of one temporary station may need a slight change as it can no longer be delivered to the proposed site. It is proposed that it moves location over the road, the local councillors will be consulted with along with both groups before any decisions are made. Under the constitution any decision to change the designated polling station can be made by the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition.

8.2 As set out above detailed arrangements are in place for the implementation of Voter ID and accessibility changes and as detailed below there will be an additional poll clerk on “meeting and greeting” duty at each polling station to remind everyone of the new arrangements and to support them. It is important to note that only the Presiding Officer can make decisions in relation to Voter ID and additional support and training has been in place for Presiding Officers.

## **9.0 Recruitment and training**

9.1 A total of 865 job roles have been recruited to work election duties across polling stations, the count and postal vote opening.

9.2 As per the Electoral Commission ratios for the Elections Act, there will be an additional poll clerk in every polling station. They will be on meet and greet duties to ask electors to have their ID ready and to support any electors with disabilities who may require additional assistance.

9.3 Training for all roles will commence in April. Copies of training slides can be made available to candidates and agents on request.

## **10.0 Count arrangements**

10.1 Due to the all-out elections, double the number of attendees are anticipated at the count. Therefore, parking spaces at Aldersley will be limited. All count staff will be parking offsite at Dunstall racecourse and will be transported to Aldersley on coaches.

10.2 Car parking spaces at the venue will be for candidates, agents and guests but all attendees are strongly encouraged to car share.

10.3 All wards will start verification at the same time at 10am on Friday 5 May. Once verification is complete for each ward, that ward can start the count. It is estimated that all wards will be verified by 1pm and that all wards will be declared by 5pm.

10.4 The Returning Officer will make the declaration of result for each ward in turn. All three candidates will be asked to sign a declaration of acceptance of office and then they will be invited to attend the media zone for interviews and pictures.

## **11.0 Financial implications**

11.1 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.

11.2 The budget set aside to cover the cost of local elections each year has been £192,000. In the event of combined elections or fallow years significant underspends against the local elections budget have provided scope for contributions to the Elections Reserve.

Standalone election costs have conversely exceeded the local elections budget and these additional costs have been funded from the Elections Reserve.

- 11.3 The budget and funding strategy outlined above have worked effectively over the last few years, but a combination of current and future cost pressures recently reviewed indicated that a significant increase in the budget was required to fund elections moving forwards. These pressures 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 in line with national living wage rates.
- 11.4 The budget will now be increased to £277,000 in 2023-2024, as approved by Council on 1 March. The forthcoming standalone election is anticipated to cost in the region of £410,000, with the funding strategy of combining the local elections budget with use of an Elections Reserve set to continue. This excludes any costs associated with the implementation of the Elections Act. These are being closely monitored currently and are to be funded separately from the new burdens funding announced in December 2022. The Council was awarded a total of just under £104,000 spanning the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 financial years.

[GE/02032023/C]

## **12.0 Legal implications**

- 12.1 All preparations outlined in this report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of local elections. Compliance with electoral law is regularly reviewed and assessed.

[DP/08032023/B]

## **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 this report at the current time.

## **15.0 Schedule of background papers**

15.1 Preparations for May 2023 Local Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 12 January 2023.