

CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL

Governance and Ethics Committee

7 September 2023

Report title	Evaluation of May 2023 Local Elections	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
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Report has been considered by	Election Board	20 June 2023

Recommendation for action:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the May 2023 local elections.

The Governance and Ethics Committee is asked to note:

1. The timeline for the next changes to be implemented in the Elections Act.
2. The date for the next statutory review of polling districts and polling stations.
3. The final parliamentary boundary proposals must be reported to the House of Commons by 1 July 2023. An update report will be brought to Governance and Ethics Committee with further detail.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide a summary of the areas of success and areas for improvement following the evaluation exercise undertaken on the local elections that took place on 4 May 2023.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the further legislation changes to be introduced under the Elections Act.
- 1.3 To provide an update on the next statutory review of polling districts and polling places.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Following each election, a comprehensive evaluation exercise is undertaken to ensure that lessons are learned to continue to improve on the conduct of elections. Feedback has been captured from the following stakeholders:
 - Returning Officer and Deputy Returning Officers
 - Candidates and Agents
 - Electoral Services Team
 - Voter ID Team
 - Internal teams that support elections – ICT, Customer Services, Communications, Events, Audit
 - Polling Station Staff
 - Count Staff
- 2.2 This was a particularly considerable election to conduct because all 60 Councillor seats were up for election on the new ward boundaries. As a result of the new ward boundaries there was also a significant number of changes to polling station venues.
- 2.3 These were also the first elections to be held since the introduction of Voter ID and the new accessibility requirements for polling stations.
- 2.4 Due to the complexity of these elections, a decision was taken by the Returning Officer to count the votes the next day on Friday 5 May.
- 2.5 There were 185,122 electors eligible to vote at this election, and a total of 48,206 votes were cast. The overall turnout was 26%.
- 2.6 There were 34,061 postal voters, which is 18% of the electorate. 19,063 postal ballot papers were included in the count, which equates to 40% of the total votes.
- 2.7 There were 168 electors who were initially turned away on Voter ID grounds – 113 of these returned with an acceptable form of ID. There were 55 electors who were refused a ballot paper on Voter ID grounds.
- 2.8 There were 65 proxy voters and one emergency proxy appointed.

- 2.9 There were 126 polling stations. A total of 15 schools were used as polling stations, which is a reduction of 9 from the 24 used as the 2022 local elections. There were 6 temporary polling stations, an increase of 3 since the 2022 local elections.
- 2.10 A total of 840 roles were recruited to work on the elections across polling stations, the count and postal vote opening.
- 2.11 There were 153 candidates and 29 election agents.
- 2.12 Wolverhampton received £113,342 Election Act grant funding.
- 2.13 A total of 813 Voter Authority Certificates were issued by the deadline of 25 April.

3.0 Evaluation summary

- 3.1 A total of 222 surveys were completed from key stakeholders. Election Board and key internal services also contributed to evaluation feedback meetings.
- 3.2 Overall, the local election was considered to have been conducted well. The two key areas for improvement identified in the evaluation of the May 2022 elections relating to postal vote opening time and the challenge of recruiting Presiding Officers were very much improved for this election. Overall, there was very positive feedback received on the implementation of the new Election Act measures - Voter ID and Accessibility.
- 3.3 The evaluation is presented below against the following eight key areas to summarise the key successes and areas for improvement:
 - Candidates and Agents
 - Staffing and training
 - Postal vote opening
 - Election printing
 - Polling Stations
 - Verification and Count
 - Voter ID
 - Accessibility

4.0 Candidates and Agents

4.1 Success:

Candidates continue to be happy with the information provided by the Returning Officer throughout the election period with 100% of Candidates and Agents who responded to the survey either very satisfied or satisfied with the information provided through the

candidates and agents briefings, guidance and weekly emails, including the new information on Voter ID and accessibility. 100% of candidates and agents found the nomination process either excellent, good or very good.

4.2 Area for improvement:

Just 9 out of 183 candidates and agents responded to the evaluation survey. It is recommended that candidates and agents will be reminded of the post-election survey in the candidates and agents briefings to ensure that as many candidates and agents have the opportunity to have their say and contribute to the evaluation exercise.

Councillors were provided with leaflets and Voter ID banners early in the year to assist with raising awareness of the new requirement. A small number of councillors collected their pack. Therefore in future, councillors who wish to use their communication packs will be able to request them rather than being provided upfront.

The nomination period was an intense period for Electoral Services. The vast majority of nominations were not completed accurately first time and many nomination papers were handed in towards the end of the nomination period. Electoral Services will consider producing a video guide to assist candidates with completing their nomination packs as many candidates reported that the video on the count methods was useful.

5.0 Staffing and Training

5.1 Success:

One of the recommendations made last year was that more senior managers across the council should be recruited to work election duties to assist with the complexity of this election and to train up a pool of employees as Presiding Officers for future elections. A total of 46 heads of service/Directors worked election duties with 19 of these working in polling stations and the rest at the count.

Following the elections last year, over 60 poll clerks were recommended as Presiding Officers by Presiding Officers and Polling Station Inspectors, but some of them needed further encouragement to feel confident to step up to the role. An additional support session was held in December 2022 ahead of appointment letters going out to encourage them to apply. There were 8 poll clerks who stepped up to work as Presiding Officers this year as a result of this support session. Another session will be arranged for this year for the 60 poll clerks who were recommended as Presiding Officers to continue to develop this pool of staff.

A number of Presiding Officers were recruited from authorities that did not have elections this year. However these volunteers will not be available next year where they will be required at their substantive authority.

A total of 23 training sessions were delivered to staff including 8 mock count sessions. 100% of staff who responded to the surveys says that they received sufficient training to carry out their role and there was a lot of positive feedback from staff on the training they received. A video was also produced for candidates and agents to demonstrate the multi-member count.

5.2 Area for improvement:

There were over 150 people who had been recruited to work at the election early in January who dropped out, with many of these dropping out in the week of the election. The reasons for drop out have been reviewed and those without a suitable reason will not be recruited in future. The difficulty to recruit and retain staff to work election duties is experienced nationally and has been reported in the Electoral Commission and Association of Electoral Administrators evaluation reports as it is becoming increasingly apparent fewer people are willing to take on evermore complex polling station roles.

6.0 Postal Vote Opening

6.1 Success:

The improvements implemented this year helped to speed up the postal vote opening process on election day. There was an earlier collection made from the Royal Mail sweep and an earlier opening session on polling day. The count taking place the next day helped to ease pressure on the postal vote opening team.

6.2 Area for improvement:

The postal vote opening process takes time to complete and it's important that accuracy comes before speed. Further process improvements will be made to continue to drive efficiency.

7.0 Election Printing

7.1 Success:

The postal vote pack design was much improved as a one-piece mailer. There was less confusion from electors. A video guide on how to complete was also created and a link included in the postal vote pack.

7.2 Area for improvement:

The new requirement to list all of the acceptable forms of ID required a new design of the poll card. Many councils changed their poll cards to enveloped letters. Our brief to the printer was for the poll card to still look like the poll cards electors are used to. This did require electors to open the seal. The quality of the paper and sealing was poor and easily ripped. This has been fed back to the print supplier and this will be improved for the next elections.

8.0 Polling Stations

8.1 Success:

96% (155) of polling station staff who responded to the survey said that the polling stations were very good or good. Staff found the information providing in the Presiding Officer folders very useful to carry out their duties on the day.

Every station was provided with Voter ID requirement information in the top 10 languages spoken in the city, produced in conjunction with the equalities team. Polling station staff found this very useful and provided positive feedback.

8.2 Area for improvement:

There were a high number of complaints on temporary polling stations from electors and staff. These will be reviewed as part of the next statutory review. The Electoral Commission staffing ratio guidance increased the number of poll clerks by one to assist with Voter ID. There was feedback from staff that they felt like there were too many members of staff in some of the polling stations. The numbers of poll clerks will be reviewed for some stations for standalone local elections.

9.0 Verification and Count

9.1 Success:

100% (60) of staff who responded to the survey said that they found the count very good or good, and that they had enough information to carry out their role.

Counting the next day was much better and led to more accurate results – there were only a small number of recounts required after verification of each box. 89% of candidates and agents and 87% of staff were very satisfied or satisfied with the count taking place the next day.

The sound and the AV equipment was much improved from last year with the new supplier based in Wolverhampton.

10.0 Voter ID

10.1 Success:

The statutory instrument for Voter ID and supplementary Electoral Commission guidance was published at a very late stage, and access to the ERO portal to process applications for Voter Authority Certificates was granted at the same time as being launched publicly in January, with many of the necessary processing functionality features not ready at launch and continually amended up until close to the VAC deadline day. All of this

created a lot of risk for Returning Officers. The One Council approach to elections was a huge success in implementing Voter ID safely.

A dedicated Voter ID team was established as Improvement Managers and Graduates were deployed to support processing applications for voter authority certificates (VAC) and running drop-in sessions.

Daily drop in sessions were held in the Civic Centre from March up until the deadline, as well as 10 drop in sessions across the city in libraries and leisure centres. A total of 134 electors applied for a VAC at a drop-in session and hundreds of electors were engaged with as part of the awareness raising contact during these sessions.

Internal Audit closely monitored the roll-out of Voter ID and their report concluded that there is substantial assurance over the adequacy of the controls reviewed.

The key aspects that support this conclusion are:

- Appropriate governance and decision making processes for the acceptance and rejection of photos for VACs. There was some ambiguity around the initial requirements i.e. clear plain background. This was later relaxed to allowing photos as long as there was a clear full face image. Regularly meetings were held with the Monitoring Officer, in his capacity as Deputy Returning Officer (DRO), to discuss any images that did not strictly meet the Electoral Commission's original guidance. The Monitoring Officer had the final decision on whether a photo was accepted or not. This was further supported by advice given by the Council's Equalities team. This was also supported by a record of this decision.
- A clear audit trail was maintained in respect of cases where the initial photo was rejected, where there was no national insurance number match, where the applicant was not on the electoral register, duplicate applications, and those cases where an application was received after the VAC deadline.
- Appropriate internal processes and procedures which set out the checks to be undertaken for new VAC applications.
- At the time of this email there were appropriate arrangements in place for the processing, printing and issuing of temporary VACs.
- There were two cases where the Elections Team identified a potential fraudulent application, both these cases were reported to the Police for further investigation. To date neither case has resulted in a prosecution, however both applications were rejected.
- In terms of the checking of voter IDs at polling stations detailed guidance has been produced for the presiding officers and poll clerks on the types of ID that will be accepted, examples of what each type of VAC looks like (including temporary and anonymous ones). The training also covers the various

scenarios that could arise if the elector cannot provide the required ID at the polling station, such as applying for proxy vote up to 5pm on the day of the election.

- There is a provision at each station whereby ID checks that require the removal of a religious face covering can be performed in private.

Please see Appendix 1 for more information.

A comprehensive local communications campaign was launched 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 communication channels and activities. Activity was 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 communication
- 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
- Community radio
- Leaflets distributed to all care homes
- All CWC internal communications channels

There was a lot of feedback from staff in the survey that the majority of electors voting on the day were aware of the requirement as electors brought their ID.

10.2 Area for improvement:

The take up of daily drop-in sessions at the Civic Centre low. Future drop-in sessions would be focused more around libraries where there was higher demand.

11.0 Accessibility

11.1 Success:

Despite the challenges of late legislation on accessibility being made on 29 December 2022, and Returning Officer guidance being issued in February 2023, a working group was established in Wolverhampton well ahead of schedule in September 2022. The working group represented the views of people with hearing loss, sight loss and learning disabilities and they co-produced the local improvements that were made in addition to the Electoral Commission guidance. One of the most useful introductions was the development of an accessible signage pack on yellow background for people with sight loss and the recruitment of 10 British Sign Language students from the university who were recruited to work in polling stations. This has been shared with the AEA and Electoral Commission as good practice and the working group fed back that they were very impressed with the work that had been undertaken in the short timescales.

11.2 Area for improvement:

An accessibility event was booked for March to invite people with disabilities to the Civic Centre to find out more about voting and to walk through a polling station to experience the voting procedure. There was little interest in this event and the feedback was that we need to offer smaller more targeted sessions with various disability groups.

12.0 Business Continuity

12.1 This year a detailed review and plan was produced to ensure that from the period December to May we have appropriate contingency in place should anything occur.

12.2 The plan this year also reviewed the electronic system used in the electoral services team, and further work is planned to review this.

13.0 Elections Act – Next Steps

13.1 The Combined Authority Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections taking place in May 2024 will now be on the first past the post system, not the Supplementary vote.

13.2 Draft postal and proxy voting legislation has been published which seeks to:

- Limit the total number of electors for whom a person may act as a proxy to four, of which no more than two can be for 'domestic' electors for all electoral areas.

- Political parties and campaigners will be banned from handling postal votes
- An identity check will be introduced for all applications for a postal or proxy vote. This will bring the absent vote application process in line with the individual electoral registration process.
- Postal votes will need to reapply for a postal vote every three years replacing the current five-year signature refresh.
- Electors will be able to apply for a postal or proxy vote online.

13.3 The 15-year limit on voting rights for British citizens living overseas will be removed and the registration period will be increased to 3 years instead of one year.

13.4 Automatic candidacy and voting rights will cease for EU citizens. Two groups of EU citizens will retain their rights – qualifying EU citizens and EU citizens with retained rights.

14.0 Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Polling Stations

14.1 The next compulsory statutory review of polling districts and polling stations must take place between October 2023 and January 2025. The last polling district review took place in 2022 following the local government boundary review, where substantial changes were made. Therefore, It is expected that this review will see fewer changes.

14.2 It is proposed that it will be conducted in October 2023 so that changes are in place for the May 2024 elections. The proposed timetable has been presented below:

Activity	Month
Conduct preliminary review inviting feedback from councillors and prepare schedule of polling districts and places for consultation	August - September
Publish a notice of the holding of the review	2 October 2023
Publish ARO representation	2 October 2023
Public consultation period	2 October 2023– 13 October 2023
Analyse responses and prepare recommendations	16 – 18 October
Governance and Ethics Committee to consider representations and make recommendations to Full Council	26 October 2023
Full Council to consider recommendations from Governance and Ethics Committee	8 November 2023

Amend the electoral software to reflect new polling district and place scheme	November 2023
Publish revised register with new polling districts	1 December 2023

15.0 Financial implications

- 15.1 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.
- 15.2 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 which can be drawn upon in years with increased costs.
- 15.3 The budget for local elections in 2023-2024 is £277,000. As a standalone election, additional funding will also be drawn from reserves as appropriate. This election was forecast to be higher than usual due to the implementation of Voter ID and that it was an all out election. The Council was awarded £113,342 Election Grant funding spanning the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 financial years. The full cost of the implementation of Voter ID and Accessibility is still being assessed and there is scope to apply for additional funding relating to Voter ID.

[LD/27062023/W]

16.0 Legal Implications

- 16.1 All recommendations arising from the report are in line with the statutory provisions covering the delivery of electoral registration and delivering elections activity.

[SZ/20062023/P]

17.0 Equalities implications

- 17.1 The elections complied with the public sector equality duty. Reasonable adjustments to voter were made for electors with disabilities in the polling stations and the Returning Officer went above and beyond the Electoral Commission guidance on the Accessibility measures within the Election Act. Polling staff received adequate training on Accessibility.

18.0 All other Implications

- 18.1 There are no other implications arising from this report at the current time.

19.0 Schedule of background papers

- 19.1 Evaluation of May 2022 Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 7 July 2022

- 19.2 Preparations for May 2023 Local Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 12 July 2023
- 19.3 Update on Preparations for Local Elections, Governance and Ethics Committee, 16 March 2023
- 19.4 The Representation of the People (Postal and Proxy Voting etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2003. Available at: [Draft Statutory Instrument: The Representation of The People \(Postal And Proxy Voting Etc.\)\(Amendment\) Regulations 2023 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- 19.5 Voter ID at the May 2023 local elections in England: interim analysis, Electoral Commission, 19 June 2023: [Voter ID at the May 2023 local elections in England: interim analysis | Electoral Commission](#)
- 19.6 AEA 2023 Post Polls Review. Under pressure: increased demand on the UK electoral system, Association of Electoral Administrators, June 2023: [AEA-2023-Post-Polls-Report-27-June-2023.pdf \(aea-elections.co.uk\)](#)

20.0 Appendices

- 20.1 Appendix 1: Audit Report on Implementation of Voter ID