

Electoral Services Update

Date: 18 September 2023

Report of: Director of Communities, Housing and Environment

Report to: Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the City's and council's ambitions

- To update and inform the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board on:
 - Voter participation May 2023
 - Voter ID
 - Changes to the postal and proxy voting application process
 - Parliamentary boundary review

- The information in this report is for information only, no proposals are being made.

Recommendations

- a) Members of Scrutiny Board should note the content of the report.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 This report is for information only. No proposals are being made.
- 2 A request was made for a report to inform on changes in voter behaviour in relation to the May 2023 elections, to provide an update on Voter ID at those elections and to explain the upcoming changes to the postal and proxy vote application process.
- 3 An update on the Parliamentary Boundary Review is also included in this report.
- 4 **Voter participation**
 - 4.1 Leeds continues to have the largest number of electors registered for postal votes in a single local authority in England.
 - 4.2 At the time of the May 2023 elections, the number of postal voters in Leeds stood at 177,807 (30.5% of the electorate).
 - 4.3 Of those electors registered for a postal vote, 111,242 returned them which is 62.56%
 - 4.4 Some returned postal votes were rejected by the Returning Officer in accordance with regulations. Rejection typically occurs when a postal vote is returned without the ballot paper or security statement and where the date of birth and/or signature is incorrect, missing, or unreadable.
 - 4.5 The number of rejected postal votes at the elections in May 2023 compared to May 2022 and 2021 was as follows:

Postal Votes	2021	2022	2023
Total Issued	204779	186367	177807
Total Rejected	4705	2569	2770
Total PVs returned	146142	121912	107356
% PVs returned	71.37%	65.41%	60.37%
% of PVs rejected from the overall number returned	3.22%	2.11%	2.6%
% of PVs issued from the overall number issued	2.30%	1.38%	1.56%
Average number of PVs rejected in a ward	143	78	84

- 4.6 A table showing the number of rejected postal votes by ward for the years 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023 is attached at Appendix A.
- 4.7 Postal vote rejection rates slightly increased in 2023, but some fluctuation is expected. There is still a significant improvement compared to other years. The measures introduced by Electoral Services to reduce the number of rejected postal votes are set out in a [previous report](#) to the Board dated 22 September 2022.
- 4.8 A further reduction in rejection rates is anticipated when new signatures are obtained from electors under the changes to absent voting applications mentioned in 6. below.
- 4.9 The higher number of registered postal voters means more electors vote by post in the Leeds City Council area than at a polling station. This has been the case since the Covid elections in 2021. The table below shows how voter behaviour has changed in this respect over the past 7 years.

Year	Type	By post	In person
2018	LCC (all out)	33.44%	66.56%
2019	LCC & Parish	34.04%	65.96%
2020	No elections	--	--
2021	LCC & Mayoral	63.75%	36.25%
2022	LCC	62.27%	37.73%
2023	LCC & Parish	58.19%	41.81%

4.10 The overall turnout at the May 2023 elections was 31.49% This fell by 2.21% compared to May 2022 elections which saw a turnout of 33.7%. The drop in turnout was replicated nationally and was largely attributed to voter apathy resulting from national issues, and the possibility of some electors without ID not going to the polling station at all, rather than being turned away.

5 Voter ID

- 5.1 On 4 May, electors were required to show a form of photographic ID from an [approved list](#) before they could be issued a ballot paper.
- 5.2 The Head of Electoral Services [Report to the Board in March 2023](#) outlined the reason for this requirement.
- 5.3 The Electoral Registration Officer received 1,864 applications for Voter Authority Certificates to be used as an approved form of ID in the polling station.
- 5.4 The number of electors who voted using a Voter Authority Certificate as their ID was 588, 31.54% of those who applied for one.
- 5.5 In total, 77,152 electors voted in a polling station in Leeds. Of that number, 601 electors were initially refused a ballot paper either because they had no ID or had brought ID that was not on the approved list.
- 5.6 Of the 601 initially refused, 376 returned to the polling station with approved ID and were issued with a ballot paper.
- 5.7 This meant 225 electors applied for a ballot paper in a polling station and were not able to vote on 4 May, 0.29% of the overall number of electors who attended a polling station.
- 5.8 A breakdown of this number by ward can be found [here](#).
- 5.9 The ward average is 7 refusals. The ward with the lowest number of refusals was Farnley & Wortley, where no electors were refused a ballot paper. The ward with the highest number was Gipton & Harehills where 45 electors were refused a ballot paper.
- 5.10 A total of 31 electors asked for their identification to be checked in the privacy area each polling station must now have. The reason for such requests were not recorded, as the electors were not required to provide a reason.
- 5.11 Electoral Services are using this data to assist with planning for future elections, to provide additional resources, communications, and support in areas where refusals were

higher, or privacy requests were more common. This is still in very early planning stages and we are unable to provide further information at this time.

- 5.12 A comparison with neighbouring authorities and core cities where elections were held shows Leeds favourably in terms of the % of electors who attempted to vote but were refused, as the table below demonstrates.

Local Authority	%
Bradford	0.76%
Calderdale	0.52%
Kirklees	0.49%
Leeds	0.29%
Leicester	0.24%
Liverpool	0.38%
Manchester	0.96%
Nottingham	0.49%
Sheffield	0.28%

- 5.13 The low refusal rate in Leeds can largely be attributed to the extensive local communications campaign which was wide reaching and targeted to individual areas and needs.
- 5.14 Electoral Services also provided comprehensive additional polling station staff training which ensured the volunteers running polling stations understood the rules and could provide the right information to those without ID to enable them to return and be issued a ballot paper.

6 Changes to the postal and proxy vote application and signature renewal process

- 6.1 An online absent vote application service will be introduced to allow electors to apply for a postal or proxy vote online.
- 6.2 The proposed implementation date of this service is 31 October 2023, although this has not yet been confirmed by the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and at the time of writing the date of a go-live decision is not known.
- 6.3 There will still be the option for individuals to apply for an absent vote via the existing paper-based journey, however under both methods, additional information will be required.
- 6.4 Identity checking will be introduced for all absent vote applications, except for emergency proxy arrangements.
- 6.5 The identity checking requirements will mirror those for registration applications; an elector will have to provide their National Insurance Number (NINo) during the application process or give a reason if this cannot be provided. Like the register to vote process, there will be an exceptions process in place.
- 6.6 Those eligible will be able to apply for the following absent vote arrangements using the online service:
- A postal vote;
 - A proxy for a particular election/referendum; and
 - A proxy for a definite/indefinite period for:

- Overseas electors
- Armed forces voters
- Crown servants
- British council employees

- 6.7 The following arrangements will not be available for electors to apply for via the online service, and will remain offline:
- A postal vote applied for by a proxy voter
 - A proxy for a definite or indefinite period due to disability, employment, occupation, or service
 - An emergency proxy
 - Postal and proxy applications by anonymous electors
 - A signature waiver or refresh (although a partial journey will be enabled)
- 6.8 Currently absent voters must refresh their signature at five yearly intervals. The Elections Act 2022 introduces a restriction on the maximum time a person can hold their absent vote for.
- 6.9 For postal voters, their postal vote entitlement will now end on the third 31 January after their postal vote was granted. Put simply, a postal voting arrangement will last for a maximum of 3 years only.
- 6.10 There will be a transitional process for those electors with existing postal vote arrangements in place before the commencement of the new measures.
- 6.11 These electors, around 175,000 in total, will be required to complete a new application, either online or on paper, under the new system.
- 6.12 Existing postal voters will continue to be able to vote by post for relevant polls until the third 31 January following the commencement of the new measures. This will likely be 31 January 2026.
- 6.13 Detail of the transitional process for existing postal voters is not yet known. Anyone who applies under the new arrangements (from the proposed date of 31 October 2023 onwards), will automatically enter the new cycle and will be contacted to make a new application before the third 31 January after their application was made.
- 6.14 The five yearly signature refresh provisions will remain for proxy voters. However, proxy voters who have an arrangement in place prior to 31 October 2023 will need to reapply for their proxy vote before 31 January 2024.
- 6.15 This will affect just over 300 electors in the Leeds area.

7 Parliamentary Boundary Review

- 7.1 The Boundary Commission for England published their final recommendations for Parliamentary constituencies on 28 June 2023.
- 7.2 The table at Appendix B shows which constituency wards will be in at the next General Election, which must take place before 24 January 2025.
- 7.3 The Leeds Acting Returning Officer currently has responsibility for 8 parliamentary constituencies. Elmet & Rothwell, Leeds Central, Leeds East, Leeds North East, Leeds North West, Leeds West, Morley & Outwood (taking in part of Wakefield MBC), and Pudsey.

- 7.4 Under the new arrangements, the Leeds ARO will have responsibility for 7 parliamentary constituencies. Leeds Central & Headingley, Leeds East, Leeds North East, Leeds North West, Leeds South, Leeds South West & Morley, and Leeds West & Pudsey.
- 7.5 The Leeds ARO will 'give away' the responsibility for wards contained within the Selby (Kippax & Methley), Wakefield & Rothwell (Rothwell) and Wetherby & Easingwold (Harewood & Wetherby) constituencies to the ARO's from North Yorkshire and Wakefield Councils.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected:

Have ward members been consulted? Yes No

- 8 Various wards will be affected by the changes to Parliamentary boundaries. There is no impact until the new boundaries are implemented when a General Election is called.
- 9 The changes to the absent voting application process will impact all applicants from the date of implementation, and all existing postal voters who must reapply under the new system by the end of January 2026.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

- 10 This report is for information only. No local consultation has taken place.

What are the resource implications?

- 11 There are expected to be resource implications for Electoral Services during the transition to online absent voting and the new application cycle.
- 12 Funding will be available from DLUHC by way of both up front grants and justification led bids. Full details are yet to be provided.

What are the legal implications?

- 13 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 14 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

Does this proposal support the council's 3 Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

- 15 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

- 16 Not applicable.

b) How will success be measured?

- 17 Not applicable.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

18 Not applicable.

Appendices

19 Appendix A – Postal Voting Statistics

20 Appendix B – Wards ~ New Parliamentary Constituencies

Background papers

21 None.