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Electoral Services Update

Date: 20 September 2021

Report of: Head of Electoral Services

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 behaviour May 2021 – postal/polling station voting/turnout
    - The Elections Bill - Voter ID

- Implementation of the measures outlined in the Elections Bill will need to be managed carefully to ensure the needs of the electorate are at the forefront of what we do. This will support the ambitions and priorities for the City set out in the Best Council Plan, including continuation of a high-quality Electoral Service, strong engagement with communities and making the best of the Council's resources.

- The timeframe for Voter ID has not yet been outlined by Government.

- 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

b) Head of Electoral Services to provide a further update to Scrutiny Board once a timeline for implementation of the Elections Bill has been published.

c) All implementation of measures will be the responsibility of the Head of Electoral Services, on behalf of the Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

1   This report is for information only. No proposals are being put forward at this time.

2   A request was made for a report to inform on changes in voter behaviour in May 2021 and the implications of the inclusion of a provision for Voter ID in the Elections Bill.

3   **Changes in voter behaviour – voting by post / voting in person / voter turnout**

3.1   As a result of the requirement to hold elections under Covid-19 restrictions, the Electoral Registration Officer wrote to all electors who did not have a postal voting arrangement in place. This was approximately 500k electors. The letters were issued in early February 2021.

3.2   A pre-populated postal vote application form was enclosed for each non-postal voting member of the household, together with a reply envelope.

3.3   This write-out resulted in an increase of postal voters in the City from 88k (15% of the electorate) in February, to 205k (35%) by the time of the elections on 6 May. This is the largest number of postal votes in a single local authority in England.

3.4   Following the May elections, the number of postal voters reduced due to the removal of applications made for those elections specifically, and a small number of cancellation requests, and now stands at 195k (33%).

3.5   For information, the number of rejected postal votes at the elections in May was as follows:

Official rejection reason	Quantity
Missing signature	881
Missing DOB	949
Missing signature & DOB	565
Incorrect signature	456
Incorrect DOB	871
Incorrect signature & DOB	325
Statement only returned	544
Ballot paper only returned	114
Total rejected	4705
Total PVs returned	**146,142**
% Rejected	**3.22%**
Average rejected per ward	**143**

3.6   The higher number of registered postal voters meant 63.75% of electors who voted in May voted by post, with 36.25% voting in a polling station.

3.7   This is comparable with the local elections in 2019, where 34.8% of electors who voted did so by postal vote, and 65.2% in the polling station. A near identical swap of percentages for the two methods.

3.8   Overall, the turnout at the May elections increased by around 5%, with the usual turnout for local elections being anywhere between 31 – 33%. In May this was 37.5%. This was expected as more people return postal votes having specifically requested them and is a positive outcome in that respect.

3.9   It is anticipated that this high number of postal voters will now remain, as a legacy of the pandemic. Electors were made aware of the facility and found it to be a convenient and safe way of casting their vote. Cancellations (excluding those applications for May only)

have been in the low hundreds. Such retention of high numbers was also the case in 2004 when the Government selected Leeds as part of an all-postal election pilot. Since this time, Leeds have consistently had the largest number of postal voters in England.

3.10   This change in voter behaviour was managed successfully in May, with increased numbers of postal vote opening sessions and a dedicated postal vote manager. Consideration is being given to whether a postal vote management role should now be part of a permanent post within the Service.

3.11   The number of polling stations required, and the location of such, will also be a factor. This year the high number of postal voters allowed for the merging of some premises, and the relocation of others with no adverse reaction from the electorate or candidates/election agents.

3.12   The delay to verification until the daytime on Friday 7 May, caused by Covid-19 restrictions, allowed the Returning Officers' staff to process every returned postal vote without delay to the verification process.

3.13   It will be necessary at future local elections to delay verification and counting of the votes until the Friday morning. This will allow for the now thousands of postal votes that reach the Returning Officer late on polling day to be processed (counted, opened, electronically verified and ballot papers boxed for inclusion in the count) before the verification commences.

3.14   Attempting to continue to commence verification immediately after close of poll at 10pm would see a long delay in the process, with results not being returned until mid-morning on Friday and Returning Officers staff working a 30+ hours shift, which would compromise the accuracy of processes.

3.15   The exception to this will be in the event of a UK Parliamentary Election, as the (Acting) Returning Officer (ARO) must take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes within four hours of the close of poll at 10pm.

3.16   In such cases, local ballot papers would be verified with Parliamentary ballot papers to comply with regulations, but the counting of the votes would take place at another time.

3.17   The requirement for ARO's to commence the counting of the votes no later than 2pm is an antiquated measure that does not support the quantity of postal votes local authorities have to deal with or the processes to be followed before returned postal votes can be included in the verification after close of poll.

3.18   Along with many other elements of electoral legislation which is no longer fit for purpose, electoral administrators, the Association of Electoral Administrators, and the Electoral Commission continue to highlight this issue and the need for reform.

4   **The Elections Bill**

4.1   The Elections Bill (the Bill) was introduced on 5 July 2021. The Bill in full can be viewed [here](#).

4.2   The biggest change to the electoral system proposed in the Bill is the introduction of Voter ID, namely the requirement for electors to show a form of photographic identification in the polling station before they are issued their ballot paper(s).

4.3   It is widely speculated that the Governments' intention is for this provision to be in place prior to the next scheduled UK Parliamentary Election in 2024.

4.4   A summary of the measures for Voter ID are as follows:

- Voters will be required to show an approved form of photographic identification before collecting their ballot paper to vote at a polling station for UK Parliamentary Elections, at local elections and at Police and Crime Commissioner elections.
- A broad range of documents will be accepted including passports, driving licences, various concessionary travel passes and photocard parking permits issued as part of the Blue Badge scheme.
- Any voter who does not have an approved form of identification will be able to apply for a free, local voter card from their local authority.

4.5 It is not currently proposed that electors voting by post will be required to provide any form of Voter ID.

4.6 In May 2021, the Cabinet Office published the results of a representative survey of residents eligible to vote in Great Britain, to understand the levels of photographic identification ownership and to inform planning for the implementation of voter identification nationwide.

4.7 The results suggest that 97% of those surveyed in the Yorkshire & the Humber Region held photographic ID and 3% did not hold any photographic ID.

4.8 In Leeds, there are currently 394,693 electors registered to vote in person. Using the figures in 4.7 above as an example, this could mean just under 12k electors in Leeds would require a local authority produced voter ID card should they choose to vote.

4.9 At present, the full detail is not known, nor has a timeframe for implementation been published by Government.

4.10 The Cabinet Office have indicated that they will meet the cost of the new voter card process and its' implementation at each local authority. This is crucial, and must be in full, as no additional cost burden should be pushed onto the Council.

4.11 A comprehensive, targeted communications campaign and detailed guidance by the Electoral Commission have been factored into the implementation to raise awareness of Voter ID at the appropriate time. This would be supported by local comms such as social media posts and information videos.

4.12 From an electoral administrators' perspective, it is vital that Voter ID is deliverable and does not lead to disenfranchisement, particularly for voters from already underrepresented groups. It should not negatively impact on people who wish to vote and must avoid unnecessarily adding to election bureaucracy, costs, and risk.

4.13 Sufficient lead-in time for legislation, administrative planning, delivery, and voter education is vital to ensure successful implementation and this is something electoral administrators continue to push for, along with the support of the AEA and the EC.

4.14 It is unfortunate that national provision has not been secured for voter cards, meaning the responsibility for production will fall to the Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer. Electoral Services Staff are already stretched to their limit in pre-election periods, and a team Leeds approach to this will be vital.

4.15 A more detailed report into the planning and implementation will be possible when more information has been provided by Government.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected:		
Have ward members been consulted?	☐Yes	☒No

5   Voter ID will affect all wards when implemented. There is no impact at present.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

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

7   In respect of Voter ID, and the Elections Bill, more information on consultation and impact assessments undertaken by the Government can be found [here](#).

What are the resource implications?

8   No proposal is being made at this time. However, any resource implications because of the implementation of provisions in the Elections Bill will be considered and reported on as necessary when more information has been made available.

What are the legal implications?

9   Not applicable - no proposal is being made at this time.

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

10 Not applicable - no proposal is being made at this time.

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

☐Inclusive Growth   ☐Health and Wellbeing   ☐Climate Emergency

11 Not applicable - no proposal is being made at this time.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

12 Not applicable.

b) How will success be measured?

13 Not applicable.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

14 Voter ID – speculation of introduction prior to the scheduled May 2024 UK Parliamentary Election.

Appendices

15 None.

Background papers

16 None.