

REVIEW OF ELECTION AND ELECTORAL REGISTRATION PROCESSES

1.0 Introduction

1.1 A review of the Council's election and electoral registration processes has been undertaken by the Council's Electoral Registration Officer following the Borough, County and Police & Crime Commissioner elections held in May 2021. Meetings were held with the Deputy Returning Officers to gain their feedback on the management of postal votes, the Election Day and the Count arrangements. Feedback was requested from staff involved in all aspects of the elections which was also considered as part of the review process. The review incorporates lessons learnt during the past year and the adoption of positive measures to ensure the integrity of the Council's processes and procedures going forward.

2.0 Postal Vote Registration

2.1 The outcome of the election petition in respect of the Borough Election in the Maybury and Sheerwater Ward in May 2012 identified Woking as an area where the risk of future allegations of electoral fraud arising was higher due to the previous confirmed case of proven fraud. To ensure the integrity of the electoral register and the postal vote process the Electoral Registration Officer had adopted the approach that those electors on the electoral register who would like to apply for a postal or proxy vote were requested to provide additional photographic identification to allow the Council to verify their identity. The following identification was requested;

- proof of identification such as passport or driving licence.
- proof of residency at the property such as utility bill and bank statement.

2.2 No further cases of alleged electoral fraud have been reported and the risk of electoral fraud occurring in the Borough is now considered to be much lower. Having carefully considered the matter, the Electoral Registration Officer shall no longer request that electors provide additional photographic identification. This change shall have immediate effect. The Council's website shall be updated to reflect this change and accord with the Electoral Commissions requirement as follows;

- Your date of birth and signature are needed on this application form, and again when you use your postal vote. This information is needed to prevent fraud. If you are unable to sign this form, please contact your local electoral registration office. Return your form to your local electoral registration.

2.3 The UK government is proposing changes to the UK electoral system. The proposed changes contained in the Elections Bill seek to improve the security, accessibility and transparency of elections and campaigning. There are several proposed changes to postal voting, which build on the current checks in place to confirm a voter's identity if they are voting by post:

- A maximum period of three years on voters' application to hold a postal vote. Voters would need to re-apply at the end of that time.
- Restricting those able to hand in a postal vote to the voter, their family member or a designated carer acting on their behalf.
- Preventing someone from handing in more than two postal ballot packs at polling stations, in addition to their own. The current rules do not specify who can hand in a postal vote or how many can be returned by one person.
- Banning parties and campaigners from handling completed postal votes and postal vote envelopes.

- 2.4 It is important that changes to the postal voting system should improve both its security and maintain its accessibility. Notably these changes do not propose a change to the voter identification procedures currently in place for voting by post but build upon them.

At present a notice in writing is sent to every absent voter (postal, proxy and postal proxy voters) whose signature on the personal identifiers record is more than five years old. This is known as the absent vote refresh exercise and it takes place in January each year for those absent voters whose signatures on the personal identifiers record became more than five years old in the 12 months since the last refresh.

The above approach would minimise the risk of fraud, while ensuring everyone who wants to vote by post is able to do so easily. These proposals are welcomed as they would strengthen the protections around postal voting, and shall improve voter trust and confidence in the system.

3.0 Modern Polling (iPads)

- 3.1 The Council trialled the use of Modern Polling across all 54 polling stations within the Borough at the May elections. The overall feedback received from staff and electors was positive, the iPad's were user friendly enabling voters to be processed quickly which minimised the risk of queues forming and therefore creating a better voter experience.
- 3.2 Issues however were experienced initially at the opening of polls with regards to the iPad's registering an elector having already voted in these elections. This was due to the sensitivity of the iPad's camera scanning the QR code on the poll card before it had been presented. This caused a slight delay whilst the matter was resolved.
- 3.3 At the close of the polls a further issue arose were Presiding Officers were unable to submit the ballot paper accounts online due to the software company having insufficient network capacity. The network capacity provided was not sufficient to accommodate all Modern Polling users across the country trying to submit the ballot paper account at the same time. This issue incurred a severe delay in the processing of polling station documentation. It is important to note that these issues did not impact upon or affect the integrity of the electoral process.
- 3.4 To continue the use of Modern Polling at future elections would require a three year commitment at a significant cost to the Council which is not recoverable. Despite the software company's assurance that the issues experienced on Polling Day have been resolved there is still uncertainty around the reoccurrence of these fundamental issues. The Electoral Registration Officer will therefore continue to monitor the development of elections software and undertake a review of the use of Modern Polling (or similar software) following the next election in May 2022.

4.0 Postal Votes Issuing Process

- 4.1 The management of the absent voting process at present is delivered in-house with the preparation and production of all associated documentation being undertaken and carried out by officers within Democratic and Legal Services. The demand on officer's time in administering the absent voting issuing process is significant.
- 4.2 Outsourcing the printing and production of the postal ballot packs to a commercial supplier would allow officers to focus on other aspects of the administration of the elections. This would ensure further resilience was available within the elections team and the potential for possible financial savings. This practice is commonplace with many other District and Borough Councils already outsourcing this element of the process. The Election Registration Officer shall investigate the outsourcing of the issuing of postal votes ahead of next year's election.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 As a matter of good practice and to improve and build upon existing processes and procedures, a thorough review of all processes and procedures in the preparation and undertaking of the Borough, County and Police & Crime Commissioner elections has been undertaken. As with every election, lessons have been learnt for future polls and minor administrative improvements shall be made prior to the next election. This was a very busy time for the Elections Team, with three separate elections falling at once and procedures having to be amended to incorporate Covid safety measures. It is pleasing to report that the election ran smoothly and no major changes need to be implemented.

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