
Report by the Returning Officer

Committee considering report:	Council
Date of Committee:	05 October 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Jeff Brooks
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	07 September 2023
Report Author:	Clare Ockwell
Forward Plan Ref:	C4411

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To inform Council of the results of the Local Elections held in May 2023 and any issues concerning the conduct of the elections.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 For Council to note the attached report.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	Budgetary provision of £60K per annum is currently transferred into the budget to fund the cost of District Council elections, which would include any by-election mid-term. The cost of the town and parish elections will be recovered from the individual councils.
Human Resource:	N/A
Legal:	Ensuring that elections are run in accordance with legislation
Risk Management:	N/A
Property:	N/A

Policy:	N/A			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		N		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		N		
Environmental Impact:		N		
Health Impact:		N		
ICT Impact:		N		
Digital Services Impact:		N		
Council Strategy Priorities:		N		
Core Business:		N		
Data Impact:		N		

Consultation and Engagement:	N/A
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4 Executive Summary

Not applicable

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

5.1 The local elections were held on Thursday 4th May 2023 for West Berkshire Council and all parish and town councils across the district.

Background

District Council:

5.2 125 candidates contested 43 seats on the district council in 24 wards.

43 Liberal Democrats
43 Conservatives
18 Greens
15 Labour
1 UKIP
2 Reform UK
1 Heritage Party – Traditional Family Values
2 Independent

The 24 wards are:

10 Single member
9 Two member
5 Three member

Parishes and Towns:

5.3 492 seats in total

90 seats were contested, 330 uncontested seats, the remaining 72 seats subsequently available for co-option.

5.4 Elections were held in 11 parishes/wards (Thatcham, Newbury, East Ilsley and Stanford Dingley)

Report by the Returning Officer

- 5.5 No candidates stood in Wokefield parish, therefore the election was re-run on the 22nd of June, whereby four candidates were successfully elected.

The Election Process

- 5.6 Polling stations opened at 7am on Thursday 4th May, closing at 10 pm on the same day. A total of 120,384 electors had the opportunity to vote.
- 5.7 A total of 30,362 ballot papers were issued for the District Council Election. These were supplemented by 15,383 valid postal votes. This resulted in a turnout of 38%, a 2% increase on the same elections held in 2019.
- 5.8 Verification of ballot papers took place on Friday 5th May and was followed by the counts for District seats and Town/parish council seats on the same day. Due to the Coronation of King Charles III taking place on Saturday 6th May, the count was completed in one day, rather than the more usual two days. Verification commenced at 9.30am and was complete by 6.20pm, shortly followed by the announcement of the final results. The Returning Officer employed 130 counters in six teams to mitigate against any delays and make sure the event was concluded in a timely manner.
- 5.9 There were no particular issues at the count and both elements progressed as I anticipated. The Returning Officer would like to express thanks to all those staff who supported the event at Newbury Racecourse. Thanks is also offered to all the candidates, agents, and party activists who assisted with making the event a success.

Voter ID and accessibility

- 5.10 The Elections Act 2022 introduced the first tranche of changes from the act in time for the Local Elections, requiring electors to provide Voter ID in the polling station and for Returning Officers to make sure that the voting process was accessible to all.
- 5.11 Many of the new provisions were supported by New Burdens funding from central government, allocated by size of authority and the likely cost of additional equipment required to fulfil the requirements.
- 5.12 The team created a communication plan to make sure that the new requirements were translated to our electorate, encouraging participation and engaging with those less likely to have one of the approved Voter ID documents in their possession. This supported the national campaign run by the Electoral Commission.
- 5.13 The team at West Berkshire have been applauded nationally for their TikTok campaign. Four videos, specifically about Voter ID, were produced to remind people of the need to take identification and how to get some if they hadn't got anything suitable. It was aimed at young voters, using graphics that were trending at the time, and all four videos had a total of 3810 views.
- 5.14 The accessibility of all 96 polling places used was accessed prior to election-day and Electoral Commission guidance followed, introducing further aids for disabled voters and training staff to be aware of those in need of particular help in casting their vote.

Report by the Returning Officer

- 5.15 The Electoral Commission have since issued an interim analysis of Voter ID pending a final report due in September 2023.
- 5.16 Data showed that 99.8% of electors voting in West Berkshire brought ID to the polling station. Figures reveal that 101 electors were initially turned away, but of those, 67 returned with acceptable ID and were able to cast their vote. This was officially recorded using a form supplied by the Electoral Commission for their research. No account was taken of the number of voters who reached the polling place, but did not enter the building having realised that they had forgotten to bring identification. The number of voters without ID upon arrival was therefore greater than officially recorded. The Returning Officer employed additional staff at stations to greet electors where possible to make sure they had brought valid ID before they entered the building. Additional work will now commence to build on this work so electors are prepared for the next national polls.
- 5.17 A new portal was introduced, allowing electors to apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate online, should they not have one of the 23 approved items of photographic identification. The Electoral team received 192 applications via the portal and in person requests. Take up of the Voter Authority Certificate was much lower than expected. Nationally 89,500 people applied, but of those only 25,000 certificates were used on polling day. Take up is likely to increase amongst the less habitual voters when the national polls occur next year.

Staffing

- 5.18 The new requirements meant that staffing levels had to be increased to help voters and meet electors at the polling stations. Staffing polling stations is now recognised as a rising problem, partly caused by the responsibility of new requirements, the amount paid for undertaking the role and elections often happening near bank holidays. The Returning Officer would like to thank everyone for their hard work and particularly the additional help given by those employed by West Berkshire Council alongside their normal role. Thanks is also given to many volunteers from outside the organisation who offered to assist, many in the last few days prior to the polls. The elections team is already preparing to address this situation for future elections as recruitment and retention will continue to cause problems.

Royal Mail performance

- 5.19 Across the country, the service provided by Royal Mail has been called into question. We have made a written complaint to Royal Mail who have responded, sharing the knowledge that operational problems exist locally. Staffing is an ongoing issue within their sorting and delivery offices.
- 5.20 Royal Mail have assured the Returning Officer that first class postal packs should be delivery next day, though they are aware that their performance is below target. As an authority we only re-issued 65 postal packs prior to election-day as many were slow to arrive, taking far longer than usual.

Report by the Returning Officer

- 5.21 In total 31227 postal votes were issued across the two sets of polls. The number of District postal votes rejected for incomplete postal voting statements, incorrect signatures and dates of birth, or the lack of a statement or ballot paper was 327. All those electors who did not submit their vote correctly received a letter informing them of their error to make sure this is not replicated at future polls. There were also a number of rejected parish/town council votes. Virtually all 144 incomplete parish packs were from the same electors, meaning votes were lost at both polls.
- 5.22 Following the close of poll, between the 5th May and the 28th June 2023, 212 completed postal voting packs were delivered to the Returning Officer and marked as received, but too late to be taken into account.
- 5.23 The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, along with the Association of Electoral Administrators, print providers and other stakeholders are now engaging with Royal Mail to address the problems ahead of a UK Parliamentary General election.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Overall, the Local Elections were delivered as planned with few issues. Staffing shortages was the greatest problem faced by the core team, along with the additional burden of voter identification being introduced by Government at such speed. We now prepare for the next tranche of changes, relating to absent voting applications and handling, the rights of EU citizens to vote in elections, along with the introduction of 'votes for life' for those British citizens living overseas.

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Summary of results

Background Papers:

None

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: No:

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months	<input type="checkbox"/>
Item is Urgent Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Report is to note only	<input type="checkbox"/>

Wards affected: all

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Appendix

See attached