

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Constitutional and Nomination Committee – 29 March 2023

Subject: Elections Act 2022 changes and the 4 May 2023 local election – progress report

Report of: The Chief Executive

Summary

To provide progress with the implementation of the Elections Act 2022 in Manchester in reference to the 4 May 2023 local election, with specific focus on voter registrations, polling station accessibility, voter ID requirements and the local GM / Manchester communications campaign to raise awareness of these changes.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to note:

- Progress with the changes passed in the Elections Act 2022 and progress in its implementation in Manchester for the Local Elections 4 May 2023.
 - Progress with the communication plan for local residents in Manchester and Greater Manchester regarding the changes for the May 2023 polls.
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Wards Affected: All

Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city

The legislative changes brought about by the Elections Act, will have a small, negative impact on achieving the zero-carbon target across the city. To date the changes will require a greater number of polling stations across the city to handle longer transaction times, as a result more staff will be travelling across the city to work in stations, some staff are required to use their cars for the role they carry out on polling day. In addition, it is understood that more paperwork will be required in stations to capture voter information to report back to Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC). The Electoral Services Unit are aware of the impacts the Elections Act changes will bring and will actively try to reduce the impact wherever possible.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed by DLUHC for the changes brought about by the Elections Act 2022. The Elections Unit have used it to develop a Manchester Equality Impact Assessment for the 4 May local election, which has been approved by the Council's Equalities Unit and is being fully implemented. This focuses

on a wide range of actions in promoting photo ID and accessibility with all areas of the community, particularly groups that may be particularly affected by both duties.

Voter Authority Certificates (free Voter ID requests) will be completed via a new Government Portal and has not been included as part of the Equality Impact Assessment as this is not a site or process that the Electoral Services Unit have control over.

Alignment to the Our Manchester Strategy Outcomes (if applicable)

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	<p>The Our Manchester Strategy sets out the vision for the city to 2025.</p> <p>Local elections provide the opportunity for eligible Manchester residents to elect councillors to represent them and therefore to influence how the strategy is delivered.</p>
A highly skilled city: world class and home-grown talent sustaining the city’s economic success	
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	

Full details are in the body of the report, along with any implications for:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Risk Management
- Legal Considerations

Financial Consequences – Revenue

The introduction of the Electoral Integrity Programme will place a burden on the local authority in various ways, including:

- the time administrative staff will need to process applications for Voter Authority Certificates,
- additional equipment that may be required for some offices or polling stations, and additional poll clerks that will need to be hired for polling day.

DLUHC are responsible for providing funding for this additional burden.

- Manchester has received initial grant funding of **£79,496**.

- A further grant payment will be provided in April 2023 of **£127,431** and again in April 2024 – this amount is still to be confirmed.
- A **£200k** underspend in the Elections budget in 2021/22 has been carried forward to provide cashflow support until the funding is received.
- After representations from a number of local authorities over wider resource pressures and concerns around their potential impact on, and mitigations for, conducting elections in May, the Government have decided to offer additional grant funding. This will be a one-off implementation grant for local authorities with polls in May. It is a non-ringfenced grant paid alongside the wider 'New Burdens' grant in April, which Returning Officers may use at their discretion. It is not yet known how much additional resource will be provided to the Council in this one-off grant.

Financial Consequences – Capital

None

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

None

Appendices:

None

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Elections Act 2022 has been introduced to make new provision for and amendments to existing electoral law, which claims to ensure that UK elections remain 'secure, fair, modern, inclusive, and transparent'.
- 1.2 A significant number of different legislative changes relating to both electoral registration and the delivery of elections will come into effect over the next two years. This will impact on the delivery of the Local Elections in 2023. These changes will place significant additional responsibilities and resourcing pressures on Electoral Registration Officers (ERO) and Returning Officers (RO), and the local authority in the widest sense.
- 1.3 The changes planned for the May 2023 local election include:
 - Voter ID – Requirement for voters to show an approved form of photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued.
 - Accessibility Provisions – These relate to the requirement to provide reasonable equipment to assist voters with disabilities in polling stations.
- 1.4 This report outlines progress on how the required changes are being implemented, focussing on Voter ID requirements and Accessibility provisions.
- 1.5 The report also includes detailed progress with the planned national, GM and Manchester approach to communications and ensuring that all residents are aware of the planned changes, so that they are able to vote.

2.0 The Planned Changes for May 2023

2.1 Voter ID

- 2.1.1 The Voter ID requirements will be implemented for the May 2023 polls. This includes a requirement for voters to show an approved form of photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued. Those who do not possess appropriate photo ID can apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate (VAC).
- 2.1.2 The new government portal went live on the 16 January 2023. As of 20 March 2023, Manchester has received a relatively low number of just 399 applications from local electors for a VAC. Of the 399, 56 VAC applications are currently on hold awaiting supporting documentation. Similar low numbers of VAC applications are evident across England – as of 19 March 2023 there had been just 32,522 applications in England for a VAC. (source: https://voter-authority-certificate.service.gov.uk/performance/applications_breakdown). It is calculated by the Electoral Commission that as many as 4 – 6% of the electorate may not have the requisite photo ID.
- 2.1.3 The deadline for applications to be made by electors will be 6 working days ahead of polling day. After this cut off, there will also be a provision in exceptional circumstances to enable the ERO to issue a temporary certificate up to 5pm on polling day, where an elector has not received their Voter ID. Electors who report their existing acceptable ID as lost, stolen, destroyed or

damaged beyond use after the application date will be able to appoint an emergency proxy up until 5pm on polling day.

- 2.1.4 The Council's Contact Centre/Customer Service Centre is assisting the public with any enquiry over the new election duties and in applying for a VAC. Calls with queries from the public on photo ID have to date been at a very low rate.
- 2.1.5 Poll cards have been updated to contain detailed information on the need for photo ID and the types of acceptable photo ID for electors who vote in polling stations.
- 2.1.6 Information on the need for photo ID when voting at a polling station has gone out with council tax bills sent to all householders.
- 2.1.7 Staff numbers have been increased at each polling station to allow for the additional time required to check Voter ID and complete reporting documentation. An additional five stations have been added to polling places where historical information shows a larger turnout.
- 2.1.8 All staff taking part in the local election are receiving updated training packages that outlines the new duties relating to photo ID and increased accessibility requirements. It also provides scenario planning on dealing with difficult situations from electors that arrive at a polling station without photo ID, or who do not possess the correct photo ID.

2.2 Accessibility

- 2.2.1 The Assistance with Voting for Persons with Disabilities (Principal Area, Parish and Greater London Authority Elections) (Amendments) Rules 2022 came into force on 29 December 2022 and will apply to elections held after 3 May 2023. These rules introduce a requirement of Returning Officers to provide "equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, relevant persons to vote independently". These rules also make changes to who will be allowed to be a companion of a disabled voter.

2.3 Reasonable equipment and processes at Polling Stations

- 2.3.1 With assistance from the Elections Strategic Lead for Greater Manchester, officers from the Manchester Elections Unit and an Equalities Specialist Officer from Policy, Performance and Reform have been involved in discussions and meetings with Manchester / GM Disabled persons groups and Manchester / GM Equality Panels to disseminate the new duties and how to communicate these provisions to disabled voters and other voters who could be affected by these changes.
- 2.3.2 Draft reasonable equipment provisions suggested by the Electoral Commission (EC) and legislative provisions have been fully incorporated in Manchester for the 4 May local election. These include:

- Large sample copy of ballot paper displayed in polling station and sample hand-held copies for voters to use
- Tactile Voting Device to assist visually impaired voters to mark their vote on a ballot paper
- Braille copy of ballot paper
- Ramps to allow access and egress where required and relevant signage for access
- Appropriate lighting
- Chairs / seating for voters who cannot stand for long periods
- Magnifiers to increase the size of text on a document
- Polling booths which are at wheelchair level
- Name badges for polling station staff so voters are clear who are members of staff
- 'Here to help' signs
- Large chunky pencils
- Pencil grips
- Where available, parking spaces for disabled voters
- Temporary doorbells where doors are closed and where it may be difficult to get assistance from staff – or a workable alternative
- Access to audio versions of ballot papers
- Hearing loops where available / temporary provision to be considered
- Electors may use any specialist devices or Apps that electors may bring with them require to assist them to cast their vote independently.

2.3.3 Other important considerations being implemented include:

- What can be provided in all stations in relation to more specialist equipment, and what can be provided on request
- A guide about voting and what assistance is available – including easy read / web versions / translated into a wide range of languages
- A message on poll cards to request adaptations / equipment.

2.3.4 Training for all staff working in Polling Stations to increase awareness and understanding, and the purpose of equipment, begins from late March onwards.

2.4 Companions of disabled voters

2.4.1 From the local elections taking place on 4 May 2023 onwards, disabled voters who make a declaration in the polling station that they require assistance will be able to bring any person over the age of 18 as a companion to assist them to cast their vote. All staff will be notified to be aware of this change in the training packages being delivered from late March onwards.

2.5 Community Engagement and Communications

2.5.1 To support the changes outlined for May 2023, a comprehensive national and local communications and engagement campaign began in January 2023, following the launch of the VAC application portal (which went live on 16 January 2023) through to polling day on 4 May 2023. At the national level, the

EC is running a four-phase high-profile campaign focusing on raising awareness of the requirement for Voter ID, targeting those who may not already have the required photographic ID, so they understand how/where to apply, and ensuring electors know they need to take Voter ID with them in order to vote.

- 2.5.2 The EC have undertaken research into the effectiveness of the first phase of their national communications campaign (9 January – 9 March), and they have sent the core findings to the Elections Team. Key findings from it include:
- 63% of people now know that they need to bring photo ID to vote in a polling station, compared to 22% when the question was first asked in December. The EC note that awareness of the need to register sits at around 85%.
 - 30% of all voting-age adults say they know about the VAC option, up from 10% when asked in December. Those who agree that they have a good understanding of how to apply for a free voter ID has increased from 9% in December to 24% at the end of February.
 - During this first phase of the communications campaign, digital advertising has had 67.8 million impressions – the number of times seen – which has led to 473,000 clicks to the Commission’s website for further information.
 - Over 3,000 panels across England including print and digital billboards, bus rears and bus stops are advertising the photo ID change.
 - For the period between 9 January – 9 March, a total of 447 newspaper articles were published referencing the May elections, of which 423 specifically referenced Voter ID or the Voter Authority Certificate.
- 2.5.3 To complement the EC’s national campaign, a four-phased GM wide approach to ensure that the key messages are consistently disseminated widely across Greater Manchester is in place.
- 2.5.4 The local voter ID campaign launched on 16 January in line with the opening of the VAC Portal. During January and February, Manchester City Council's communications team worked to create, translate and design a suite of materials for use in local engagement and create toolkits for the other nine local authorities.
- 2.5.5 The voter ID guide for electors is now available in 20 languages, with an additional two to follow, to cover those most requested in Manchester and Greater Manchester. It is also in ‘EasyRead’, large print, British Sign Language and Braille. The 20 languages include - Arabic, Bengali, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Czech, Farsi, French, Kurdish (to follow), Mandarin, Panjabi, Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya, Urdu, Yiddish, Hebrew (to follow) and Gujarati. It should be noted that the Electoral Commission only provided and recommended for translations to take place in 5 languages, but the Council has resourced for an additional 17 languages to support all parts of the community.

- 2.5.6 New website pages were created on the Council's website informing people of the need to bring eligible photo ID to polling stations on 4 May, how to apply for a VAC and to highlight the support sessions for residents. These include:
- A new 'slug' on the MCC homepage for voter ID to give it prominence and linking to information about voter ID, types of eligible ID and how to apply for a VAC (<https://www.manchester.gov.uk/voterid>)
 - The local support offer in libraries (<https://www.manchester.gov.uk/voterIDsupport>)
 - Downloads of a range of voter ID booklets for key target groups (<https://www.manchester.gov.uk/voterIDguides>)
 - Information about how to access translated copies of the voter ID booklet (<https://www.manchester.gov.uk/voterIDguides>).
- 2.5.7 The local advertising campaign is being rolled-out in a phased approach in line with the four phases of the national campaign:
- Phase 1 - Voter ID: 16 January – 19 February 2023
 - Phase 2 - Register to vote, how to vote and voter ID: 6 March -17 April 2023
 - Phase 3 - Logistics of voting and voter ID: 18 April – 23 April 2023
 - Phase 4 - Voter ID reminder and accessibility: 24 April – 4 May 2023
- 2.5.8 The campaign has been running on social media channels since its launch on 16 January. The TfGM advertising campaign launched on 13 February along with the digital screens and adverts in the Manchester Evening News. A digital campaign and a mobile phone App ad campaign went live in February and the bus advertising campaign across Greater Manchester goes live in late March. DAX radio adverts are also now live.
- 2.5.9 Articles on voter ID have been included in the Council's January, and February resident e-bulletin and messages will continue to be issued each month up to the election. A standalone e-bulletin detailing voter ID, eligible ID and how to apply for a VAC has also been sent to residents. Libraries have been promoting voter ID and the support to apply online via their social channels, blogs and newsletter and a voter ID leaflet has been printed and included in every mailed council tax bill and all e-bills.
- 2.5.10 An animation to explain voter ID, how it works and what people need to do is in production for use on the Council's website and social media channels, and there will also be a BSL version. Posters and pull-up banners have been produced and printed for libraries to raise awareness of the weekly voter ID support sessions available in libraries across the city. Leaflets and posters have been sent to libraries, the Council's Customer Contact Centre, Neighbourhood teams and Age Friendly Manchester colleagues and digital assets shared with many resident-facing services across the Council.
- 2.5.11 The Council is co-ordinating the Greater Manchester voter ID campaign, booking advertising channels and creating assets and toolkits for GM local authorities. Two toolkits have been shared to date, including full social media plans, image assets and literature for print. Two further toolkits will follow for phase three and phase four.

2.5.12 Community toolkits have been shared with housing providers, VSCE organisations, community groups and support networks across the city to aid local awareness raising. The Council is speaking to equality and disability panels to reach key audiences and build relationships to enable further engagement. Although the co-design of communications information with key groups and organisations was not possible for the May elections due to the tight timescales there is opportunity to co-produce information for future elections. To give an example of dissemination, the community toolkit has been sent to the following housing providers - Great Places Housing, Irwell Valley Housing, Jigsaw Homes, MSV Housing, Manchester City Council Housing Operations, One Manchester, Onward, PFHA, Places for People, Southway Housing, WCHG and Your Housing Group encouraging dissemination to their tenants of information on photo ID and accessibility issues. In addition, Manchester City Council Housing Operations are sharing messages on Voter ID on their social media and placing posters, leaflets and guides in their public facing offices. They are also liaising with Cheetham Hill Advice Service to provide them with posters and leaflets on Voter ID.

2.5.13 A GM wide channel plan has been drafted to ensure consistent coverage across local channels in all 10 local authority areas. A Manchester specific channel plan sits alongside this with a focus on Manchester only advertising sites, digital channels, community networks, free and partner channels.

2.6 Governance and Capacity

2.6.1 A Strategic Elections function has been established, based at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to provide the 10 Greater Manchester districts and GMCA with specialist knowledge and dedicated strategic resource for the next 2 years.

2.6.2 A cross-departmental Manchester Elections Act Steering Group has been in place since June 2022 and continues to provide support to the Elections Team. From March 2023 until the May election the meeting is being merged with the Elections Project Board, which keeps a close overview of core activities required to be delivered for polling day. This joint group is alternately chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive & City Treasurer, and the Chief Solicitor.

2.6.2 As part of the Equalities Impact Assessment undertaken for the election, the Elections Team have worked with the Equalities Team to disseminate this information to relevant networks and provide advice where required. This has included discussion between the Equalities Team and Equalities Panels from across Manchester and GM to pro-actively disseminate information on Voter ID and accessibility issues to parts of the community which the Electoral Commission have identified as potentially negatively affected by these new duties. The local communications plan has disseminated key messages through these networks as well.

2.6.3 As part of this assessment, privacy screens and / or a separate room at the polling station have been identified as essential to allow for sensitive checks

of people who are wearing face masks or coverings, or where additional checks on identity are required. As a result, every polling station will be provided with privacy screens.

- 2.6.4 Additional staffing requirements for the May 2023 poll have been determined and almost all staff required for the poll are now in place. HROD are finalising the small number of staff required for the election with a staff broadcast and discussion with Strategic Directors.
- 2.6.5 Elected members were briefed at the start of the year on the changes that are being implemented as part of the Elections Act. The Member Working Group has also been re-established to provide regular updates as more information becomes available.
- 2.6.6 At a Greater Manchester level, concern has been raised of the short lead-in time to implement these changes and the financial costs to the councils in delivering them. It has been agreed that a joint letter from the 10 Greater Manchester Local Authority Chief Executives raising concerns over this matter will be sent shortly.

3.0 **Changes after July 2023**

- 3.1 A second tranche of legislation arising out of the Elections Act will start to come into effect from July 2023 onwards, ahead of the combined Local and Combined Authority Mayoral Elections in May 2024, and the next Parliamentary general election, which must take place no later than January 2025. The Council's Elections Team are closely engaging with the GM Strategic Lead for Elections to be fully prepared for these changes and in directly engaging with the Government.
- 3.2 These changes include:
 - A move to online postal voting applications, which will require elector ID checks at point of application, similar to when applying for Voter ID.
 - Changes to postal vote handling rules.
 - Changes to allow overseas voters to participate in Parliamentary general elections indefinitely (these areas are currently expected to be in force from August 2023 onwards).
 - It should be noted that the timescales for the start of the review of entitlement for some EU citizens to remain on the electoral register has been moved from summer 2023 to summer 2024.
- 3.3 Revised proposals for future parliamentary constituency boundaries have been published by the Boundary Commission for England. The final recommendations are made to the government by the start of July 2023, and the new constituencies expected to come into place by October 2023.
- 3.4 Local authorities will be required to undertake a polling district and polling place review to make the new boundaries work and to publish a revised electoral register to reflect the new scheme.

3.5 An update on these changes can be provided to a future meeting of the Constitution and Nominations Committee.

4.0 **Recommendations**

4.1 The recommendations are set out on page 1 above of this report.