

## Manchester City Council Report for Information

**Report to:** Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee – 22 June 2023

**Subject:** Elections Act 2022 and the 4 May 2023 local election – progress report on its impacts

**Report of:** The Chief Executive

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### Summary

To provide figures and a full update on how the new duties of the Elections Act 2022 impacted on 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:

1. Progress and statistics of the changes passed in the Elections Act 2022 and how they impacted on the Local Elections held in Manchester on 4 May 2023; and
  2. Statistics with the implementation of 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 had a small, negative impact on achieving the zero-carbon target across the city. This included requiring a greater number of polling stations across the city to handle longer transaction times, more staff travelling across the city to work in stations, with some staff required to use their cars for the role they carry out on polling day. In addition, there was more paperwork required in stations to capture voter information and report back to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) and the Electoral Commission (EC). As much as possible, the Electoral Services Unit actively tried to reduce the carbon impact of the local election.

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

The Electoral Services Unit developed a Manchester Local Election Equality Impact Assessment, which was approved by the Council's Equalities Unit and fully

implemented. It focused on a wide range of actions in promoting photo ID and accessibility with all areas of the community, particularly groups that may be most affected by both duties. The assessment is now being reviewed and learning points will be brought into assessments for the elections planned and expected in 2024.

Voter Authority Certificates (free Voter ID requests) were processed via a new Government Portal and were not 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 places 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 received initial grant funding of **£79,496**.

- A further grant payment was timetabled to be provided to the Council in April 2023 with an indicative figure of **£127,431** but this was increased due to a further review of the financial challenges of implementing the new duties, as well as changes to inflation in March. The revised figure of **£158,908** (increase of £31,477) was made in April 2023.
- The final amount for 2024 has not yet been confirmed
- The JLB window for local authorities to retrospectively claim additional funding will be in Summer/Autumn 2023 and 2024.

### **Financial Consequences – Capital**

None

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**Background documents (available for public inspection):** None

**Appendices:** None

## **1.0 Introduction and Background**

1.1 The Elections Act 2022 was introduced by the UK Government to make new provision for and amendments to existing electoral law. The Government claimed that it would ensure that UK elections remain 'secure, fair, modern, inclusive, and transparent'.

1.2 Two significant legislative changes relating to the delivery of elections came into effect for the Local Elections in May 2023. Other duties will come into effect later this year, and in 2024, and will impact on the combined Local / Mayoral Election in May 2024 and a UK Parliamentary General Election that needs to take place no later than January 2025. These changes are placing 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 that came into effect 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 for the May 2023 local election were implemented, and it presents some statistics and initial 'lessons learned' from the local election. It may take a little longer to fully understand all the key issues from the local election, following the publication of wider research being undertaken by the Electoral Commission.

1.5 The report also includes information on the national, GM and Manchester approach to communications for the local election that sought to ensure that all residents were aware of the planned changes and were able to vote.

## **2.0 The Legal Duties implemented in May 2023**

### **2.1 Voter ID**

2.1.1 The Voter ID requirements were implemented for the May 2023 polls. This included a requirement for voters to show an approved form of photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued. Those who did not possess appropriate photo ID could apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) no later than 5pm on the 25 April to vote in the 4 May poll.

2.1.2 The new government portal went live on the 16 January 2023. As of the 25 April deadline for the May poll, Manchester received a total of 1,058 applications from local electors for a VAC. Of the 1,058 applications, 124 VAC applications did not meet the criteria for being processed due to a lack of appropriate detail or issues with the photo. The national level of VAC applications for the same date was around 86,000 applications. For both

figures, this is a small proportion of the population calculated to not possess photo ID. It needs to also be noted that there was only a short timeline to encourage VAC applications – from 16 January to 25 April 2023 for this election.

- 2.1.3 After the 25 April cut off, there was a provision in exceptional circumstances to enable the ERO to issue a temporary certificate up to 5pm on polling day, where an elector had applied by the deadline, but the VAC was issued after the deadline and the elector had not received it. There were no temporary VAC applications issued in Manchester between the 25 April deadline and polling day. Electors who reported their existing acceptable ID as lost, stolen, destroyed or damaged beyond use after the application date were able to appoint an emergency proxy up until 5pm on polling day. There was a request for 4 emergency proxies to appoint an emergency proxy using one of these reasons.
- 2.1.4 The Council's Contact Centre/Customer Service Centre assisted 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 had been very low prior to polling day. On polling day, the Customer Service Centre received 283 calls relating to the election. Of the 283 calls, 64 were around the issue of voter ID. The rest of the calls were around standard requests made at election time, such as whether a voter was registered on the electoral register.
- 2.1.5 Poll cards contained detailed information on the need for photo ID and the types of acceptable photo ID for electors who vote in polling stations. In addition, information on the need for photo ID when voting at a polling station went out with council tax bills sent to all householders. There was no significantly increased spike in applications for VACs or to register on the electoral register after these two postal deliveries.
- 2.1.6 Staff numbers were increased at each polling station to allow for the additional time required to check Voter ID and complete reporting documentation. An additional five stations were also added to polling places where historical information showed a larger turnout. There was a total of 242 polling stations at 200 polling places for this election.
- 2.1.7 All staff taking part in the local election receiving updated training packages that outlined the new duties relating to photo ID and increased accessibility requirements. A total of 12 online and 1 in-person briefings were held for staff. The briefings also provided 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. A detailed survey on the effectiveness of the briefings and training package, and issues on the day, is taking place with the 1,033 staff who took part in the election. Responses to the survey has been positive with a rate of 4.15 out of 5 from staff satisfied with the content of the training.
- 2.1.8 The Electoral Commission (EC) and the Department for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities (DLHUC) requested that all councils who held elections in

May should fill in paperwork on how many electors attended the polling station without photo ID, or the required photo ID and were refused a ballot paper. Staff were also asked to record electors who then returned to the polling station with the correct photo ID, and tally up electors that did not return with photo ID. The figures for Manchester City Council, which were published on its website on the 18 May, are as follows:

- Total number of electors who were eligible to vote in person at the polling stations – 313,519
- Total number of electors who voted at this election in a polling station – 60,742
- Total number of polling station electors who applied for, but initially were not issued with, a ballot paper – 1,649
- Total number of polling station electors who were not issued with a ballot paper and who later returned with accepted ID and were issued with a ballot paper – 1,060 (64.3% returned)
- Total number of polling station electors who applied for but were not issued with a ballot paper by close of poll – 589 (35.7% did not return). This is 0.9% of the total votes cast.

2.1.9 The BBC has undertaken analysis of the published figures from around 160 of the 230 councils that held elections on 4 May. This found that 26,165 voters were initially denied ballot papers at polling stations. Of these, 16,588 people (63.3%) came back with valid ID, whilst 9,577 (36.7%) did not return. The BBC calculate that those electors that did not return from the 160 councils is around 0.2% of the votes cast, and that the average between the councils that have published figures varied between 0.1% and 1%.

2.1.10 The EC are taking the data from all 230 councils who held elections in May to produce a report evaluating the full impact of the voter ID requirement. They stress that the impact can only be revealed through detailed data collection and analysis. In their May bulletin to councils, the EC commented that they already know from associated research that the ID requirement posed a greater challenge for some groups in society, and that some people were regrettably unable to vote as a result. The EC added that it will be essential to understand the extent of this impact, and the reasons behind it before a final view can be taken on how the policy has worked in practice and what can be learnt for future elections. An interim report is expected to be published sometime in June 2023, and the full report on the May elections will be published in September 2023. Officers will seek to report the key findings of the report to the Scrutiny Committee when it is published.

2.1.11 VAC applications and electoral registration will continue to be processed now for elections planned for 2024 and the UK Parliamentary General Election, which can be held at any point until January 2025.

## 2.2 Accessibility

2.2.1 The May local election also included new duties requiring 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 made 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, discussions and meetings were held with Manchester / GM Disabled persons groups and Manchester / GM Equality Panels. These meetings helped to disseminate the new duties on accessibility and how to communicate these provisions to disabled voters and other voters who could be affected by these changes.

2.3.2 Following suggestions on reasonable equipment provisions from the Electoral Commission (EC) and legislative provisions a considerable amount of equipment to support accessibility requirements was fully incorporated in Manchester for the 4 May local election. Much of this equipment had been in place in previous elections in Manchester. The full list included, with its use at the election in brackets, the following:

- A large sample copy of the ballot paper displayed in all polling stations and sample hand-held copies for voters to use (27 electors used this in the polling stations)
- Tactile Voting Devices to assist visually impaired voters to mark their vote on a ballot paper (5 electors used these in polling stations)
- A braille copy of the ballot paper (2 electors used these)
- Ramps to allow access and egress where required and relevant signage for access
- Appropriate lighting
- Chairs / seating for voters who could stand for long periods
- Magnifiers to increase the size of text on a document (26 electors used these)
- Polling booths which were at wheelchair level
- Name badges for polling station staff so voters were clear who are members of staff
- ‘Here to help’ signs
- Large chunky pencils and pencil grips (5 electors used each of these)
- 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 could use any specialist devices or Apps that required to assist them to cast their vote independently.

2.3.3 Other important considerations that were also implemented included:

- A consideration of what equipment could be provided in all stations in relation to more specialist equipment, and what could be provided on request
- A guide about voting and what assistance is available – including easy read / web versions / translations into a wide range of languages as noted in section 2.5.4 below
- A message on poll cards to request adaptations / equipment – some additional equipment was added following discussion with groups, such as an extra ruler to help dyslexic voters, and a mirror to assist people requesting a privacy check around their photo ID.

2.3.4 Detailed training took place for all staff working in polling stations to increase awareness and understanding of this new equipment, and how to use and promote it. The staff survey noted in section 2.1.7 above asked if any issues of concern took place around accessibility issues and none were reported. In addition, staff were asked to tally the use of such equipment on internal paperwork during polling day. This information from this is noted above in section 2.3.2.

## 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 were able to bring any person over the age of 18 as a companion to assist them to cast their vote. All staff were notified of this change in the training sessions delivered to them. There were no reported issues with this change in the local election. 50 electors required assistance from staff in the polling station to cast their vote.

## 2.5 Communications Campaign

2.5.1 To support the changes outlined for May 2023, a comprehensive local communications campaign began on 16 January 2023, following the launch of the VAC application portal, running through to polling day on 4 May 2023. At the national level, the EC ran a four-phase high-profile campaign focusing on raising awareness of the requirement for eligible 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 to vote.

2.5.2 The EC undertook research into the effectiveness of its national communications campaign. It noted that in its opinion surveys public knowledge of the need to bring photo ID in a polling station had grown from 22% in December 2022 to 87% the week before the poll.

2.5.3 To supplement the EC's national campaign, a four-phased campaign was delivered across Greater Manchester to ensure key messages were consistently disseminated and to maximise campaign budget and reach. A Manchester specific channel plan was delivered alongside this with a focus on



Manchester only advertising sites, digital and social channels, community networks and free and partner channels.

- 2.5.4 The Council's Strategic Communications Team co-ordinated the Voter ID campaign across Greater Manchester, booking advertising channels, creating campaign assets and producing four campaign toolkits for GM local authorities to use at a local level, one for each of the four phases of the 5-month campaign.
- 2.5.5 A full channel advertising campaign was run across Greater Manchester which included; TfGM tram and bus advertising; out of home adverts; radio, mobile and in-App adverts; digital screens; newspaper adverts and editorial; and a wide range of social media channels. In Manchester, the Council also put up 166 lamppost banners and 71 railing banners outside or close to polling stations across the city a week before polling day to remind people of the need to bring voter ID on 4 May. The Council also secured the opportunity to 'wrap' an advertising campaign around the MEN newspaper, with a circulation of c.16,700 and a readership of c.40,000, on the Friday before polling day.
- 2.5.6 Alongside the out-of-home advertising campaign, a voter ID leaflet was printed and included in approximately 235,000 mailed council tax bill and all e-bills, articles on voter ID were included in the Council's resident e-bulletins each month up to the election. Standalone e-bulletins detailing voter ID, eligible ID and how to apply for a VAC were also sent to residents each month. These generated a combined 617 click throughs to the voter ID links. Libraries promoted voter ID and the support to apply online via their social channels, blogs and newsletter and Premise and Taxi Licensing, Work & Skills and many other service areas shared information via their e-bulletins.
- 2.5.7 An animation to explain voter ID, types of eligible ID and how to apply for a VAC was created and posted on the Council's website and social media channels, a BSL version was also created. Social media posts displaying the voter ID animation generated 34k impressions, 377 click throughs and 211 likes and shares.
- 2.5.8 Posters and pull-up banners were produced and printed for libraries to raise awareness of the weekly voter ID support sessions available in libraries across the city. Leaflets and posters were sent to libraries, the Council's Customer Contact Centre, Neighbourhood teams, Age Friendly Manchester colleagues, Parks and leisure centres and digital versions were shared with key resident-facing services across the Council.
- 2.5.9 The EC's voter ID guide and other key documents and notices for electors were made available in 22 languages covering the most requested community languages in Manchester and Greater Manchester. The guide was also available in 'Easy Read', large print and Braille and four British Sign Language videos were available. It should be noted that the Electoral Commission initially only provided and recommended translated information in 5 languages, but the Council provided additional resources in 17 other languages to support all parts of the community. In Manchester, in polling

stations, 16 electors directly used the translated documents in assisting them to vote. A further 3 electors used the available translation services of Language Line to speak to a translator who could explain the process of voting to them in their own language.

2.5.10 Voter ID was added to the Council's website homepage and a suite of web pages was created 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 local support offer in libraries. A variety of voter ID information documents were made available online and information about how to access translated copies of the voter ID booklet was included.

2.5.11 Community toolkits were shared extensively with housing providers, VSCE organisations, food providers, schools, universities, colleges, NHS, community groups and support networks across the city to aid local awareness raising. The Council also presented at board meetings and spoke with 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 these May elections due to the tight timescales there is opportunity with proposed plans to co-produce information for future elections.

2.5.12 A full breakdown of the communication and reach for the paid GM campaign can be found in Appendix 1.

## 2.6 Engagement Campaign

2.6.1 Neighbourhood Teams were activated to engage with local groups and communities across the city to promote awareness of changes in relation to Voter ID and new requirements. This was heavily promoted through local libraries providing information and advice and also opportunities to apply online with support from staff through drop-in sessions. An extensive word of mouth approach was adopted with neighbourhood teams ensuring the issue was raised at all possible occasions of community engagement to ensure the message was communicated.

2.6.2 Extensive use of the Neighbourhood Teams social media channels to share messaging was applied also alongside other Directorate comms including Manchester Libraries blog, parks, leisure services also.

2.6.3 Neighbourhood Teams worked closely with groups, individuals, traders, community centres and businesses to ensure appropriate materials e.g., posters were available, and provided information in multiple languages where that was requested. A detailed spreadsheet of activity by the teams across north, central and south wards is available as required.

## 2.7 Governance and Capacity

2.7.1 A Strategic Elections function at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) continues to provide the 10 Greater Manchester districts and GMCA

with specialist knowledge and dedicated strategic resource for the elections in 2024/5.

- 2.7.2 A cross-departmental Manchester Elections Act Steering Group has been in place since June 2022, providing support to the Elections Team. From March 2023 until the May election the meeting was merged with the Elections Project Board, which kept 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 City Solicitor. It has met since the election to look at initial lessons learned, and it will continue to meet to consider further action and deal with the next tranche of duties within the Elections Act.
- 2.7.3 As part of the Equalities Impact Assessment undertaken for the election, the Elections Team worked closely with the Equalities Team to disseminate core information to relevant networks and provide advice where required. This 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. This engagement will continue to ensure key messages are transmitted over the next year to support the elections planned in 2024.
- 2.7.4 As a part of this assessment, privacy screens were 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, polling stations were provided with privacy screens. On polling day there were 88 requests for the use of a privacy screen in polling stations. A review is taking place of the use and type of privacy screens following feedback from staff in polling stations in the May poll and understanding what other councils with a similar sized electorate to Manchester used for their polls.
- 2.7.5 Elected members were regularly briefed on the changes that were being implemented as part of the Elections Act. The Member Working Group was also re-established, and the Elections Team provided it with regular and detailed updates from January up to the May poll.

### **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 UK 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 gradual move to online postal voting applications, which will require elector ID checks at the point of application, similar to when applying for Voter ID. This process will initially start with new voters.
- Changes to postal vote handling rules that are delivered on polling day.
- Changes to restrictions on overseas voters allowing them to participate in UK Parliamentary General Elections.
- 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, and so it looks unlikely to be in place for the May 2024 combined local and Mayoral elections. Such citizens are currently not allowed to vote in a UK Parliamentary General election.

3.3 Revised proposals for future parliamentary constituency boundaries have been published by the Boundary Commission for England and the final recommendations will be made to the government by the start of July 2023. The new constituencies are expected to come into place by the end of October 2023. The draft recommendations suggest significant change to a few Manchester constituencies and in creating more cross-council boundary constituencies.

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. Manchester City Council is commencing a public consultation on its polling districts over the summer. This will be followed up by a complimentary statutory review in 2024.

3.5 An update on these changes will be provided to a future meeting of the Council's Constitution and Nominations Committee.

#### **4.0 Recommendations**

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

#### **5.0 Appendices**

5.1 Appendix 1 - Breakdown of the communication and reach for the paid GM campaign