

Manchester City Council Report for Information

Report to: Constitution and Nomination Committee – 31 January 2024
Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee –8 February 2024

Subject: Elections Act Duties Progress Report

Report of: The Chief Executive

Summary

To outline the planning, and governance arrangements for the implementation of existing and new duties within the Elections Act 2022 for Manchester. This includes developing extensive engagement and producing an Elections Outreach Pack.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to note:

- The ongoing work to implement promotion of the Voter ID scheme and increased accessibility for elections.
 - The implementation and challenges of the second tranche of duties from the Elections Act, including online absent voter registration, changes to the process for overseas voting and changes to proxy and postal votes delivered to a polling station.
 - To outline the work of the Electoral Services Unit in developing an Elections Outreach pack and a wider dissemination strategy fully supported by the Council's Neighbourhood Teams and the Communications Team.
 - The plans for a statutory Polling Districts Review and impacts on the Annual Canvass.
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Wards Affected: All

<p>Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city</p>	<p>The legislative changes brought about by the Elections Act have had a slightly negative impact on achieving the zero-carbon target across the city. This includes a greater number of polling stations required across the city to handle longer transaction times and more staff travelling across the city to work in stations, some of which are required to use their cars for the role they carry out on polling day. There is a greater deal of paperwork required in stations to capture voter information to report back to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) and the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Services unit are aware of the impacts the</p>
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	<p>Elections Act changes will bring and will continue to actively try to reduce the impact wherever possible. For example, much of the Elections Outreach Pack will be issued by email and placed online, though there will be some paper copies to assist those who are impacted by digital exclusion, and to place on public building noticeboards.</p>
<p>Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments</p>	<p>An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) was undertaken for the May 2023 local elections, and it will be undertaken again for the 2024 elections. The Electoral Services Unit has engaged closely with the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Team over its content.</p> <p>Voter Authority Certificates (free Voter ID requests), new Online Absent Voting Applications and new Overseas Voting Applications 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. The Electoral Services Unit is using its Electoral Outreach Pack to advertise and promote applications to these systems, and support residents who find them challenging or who are currently digitally excluded.</p>

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS/Contribution to the Strategy
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, for example, the additional time administrative staff will need to process applications for Voter Authority Certificates and online absent (postal and proxy) voting and overseas voting portals, additional equipment that may be required for some offices or polling stations, and additional poll clerks / presiding officers (and training of them) that will need to be employed for polling day. DLUHC are responsible for providing funding for this additional burden.

Funding is being provided through a hybrid approach comprising of grant payments and Justification Led Bids (JLB). Grants will enable a proportion of the allocation to be distributed via a single grant payment. Justification Led Bids will release funds retrospectively based on the evidence of spend. Below is an outline of expenditure provided to date on the Elections Act:

Tranche 1 duties on Voter ID and Accessibility -

Grants received from government	- £238,404.00
Council spend on Voter ID & Accessibility	- £362,313.40
Justification Led Bid (JLB) submission for (an outcome on this bid is awaited from the government)	- £123,909.40

Tranche 2 duties on Online Absent Voting Applications and Overseas Voting -
Grant already received for OAVA/Overseas - £25,616.00
Further grant expected - unknown
The Government's Justification Led Bid (JLB) submission window will be open again following the polls in May 2024.

At this stage it is difficult to project the additional costs with any certainty however it is anticipated that the grants and the payments received from the JLB will not cover the full costs of the implementation of the Elections Act.

Financial Consequences – Capital

None

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy, please contact one of the contact officers above.

- Statutory Instruments – Tranche 2 Voter ID Laid in October 2023
- Elections Act Implementation Timeline
- Fact sheets from Manchester Elections Outreach Pack – these are also on the Manchester City Council website at this link – https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500329/elections/8664/elections_outreach_resources
- Electoral Commission report on the May 2023 election – <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-may-2023-local-elections-england>

- All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution report on Voter ID - <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6033d6547502c200670fd98c/t/64ff05b5797e5a2707ddf3fb/1694434746644/VID+Inquiry+Report+FINAL.pdf>
- Local Government Information Unit report on the impact of voter ID – the views of electoral administrators - <https://lgiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-impact-of-voter-ID-the-views-of-administrators.pdf>
- Letter from Parliamentary Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee to the UK Government on Voter ID, 10 November 2023 - <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41955/documents/208978/default/>

1.0 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Elections Act 2022 has been introduced to make new provision for and amendments to existing electoral law. The current UK Government claims the Act will ensure that UK elections remain 'secure, fair, modern, inclusive, and transparent'. It also allows the government to meet its 2019 manifesto commitments in this area of policy.
- 1.2 A significant number of different legislative changes relating to both electoral registration and the delivery of elections are coming into effect in stages throughout 2023 and 2024. These changes had an impact on the delivery of the Local Elections in May 2023, and will likely impact on the Local and Mayoral Elections in May 2024, and the next UK Parliamentary Election, which could happen any time up until January 2025. These changes place significant additional responsibilities and resourcing pressures on the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and Returning Officer (RO), and the local authority in its widest sense.
- 1.3 The changes that were implemented at the May 2023 local election included:
 - Voter ID – Requirement for voters attending at polling stations to show an approved form of photo ID 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 The Electoral Services Unit provided the committee with an initial update on the impacts of these duties in its report of 22 June 2023. A further update is outlined in Section 2.1 and 2.2 below.
- 1.5 Further provisions of the Elections Act come into effect from the end of October 2023 and will impact on the 2 May 2024 local and mayoral elections, and these include:
 - Enabling electors to apply online for an absent vote through a national portal, with both online and paper applications requiring the applicant's identity to be verified (implemented at the end of October 2023)
 - Requiring postal voters to reapply every three years, replacing the current rules of refreshing their signature every five years (implemented at the end of October 2023)
 - Further limit to the number of people an elector may act as proxy for (implemented at the end of October 2023)
 - Restricting the handling of postal votes – political campaigners will no longer be permitted to handle postal votes, and the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station will be limited (implemented at the end of October 2023 and will be in place for 2024 elections)
 - Allowing all British citizens living overseas to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK, with applications required to be updated every 3 years (implemented January 2024).

- 1.6 After the May 2024 combined election, the final duty of the Elections Act 2022 will come into place. The post-May period will allow Electoral Services to complete important statutory governance arrangements. This includes:
- European Union (EU) citizens voting - a review of the eligibility to vote in local elections for some EU citizens who moved to the country after the UK left the European Union
 - A statutory Polling District Review alongside the Annual Canvass of electors.
- 1.7 This report provides an overview of progress with delivering all of these legal duties. An identical version of this report will also be shared with the Constitution and Nomination Committee being held on 31 January 2024 for information purposes.
- 1.8 The report will also outline in section 4 the wider activity of the Electoral Services Unit in responding to these duties through the development of an Elections Outreach Pack and important engagement with a range of communities in the city.
- 1.9 These changes have had an impact on the timing of a Statutory Polling Districts Review, which is now planned to start through the summer and autumn 2024. The timing of the UK Parliamentary Election in 2024 / 5 may also impact on the review, which must take place no later than January 2025.

2.0 Review of progress with the duties that were implemented in May 2023

2.1 Voter ID

- 2.1.1 The Voter ID requirements came into place for the May 2023 local election. This required voters to show an approved form of photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper was issued. It also created a national portal to register for a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) for those electors who do not possess any of the accepted forms of ID. The Electoral Services Unit print out and send these VACs to all electors who successfully apply for them.
- 2.1.2 From the launch of the VAC portal at the end of January 2023, 1,058 Manchester residents applied for a VAC prior to the May 2023 local election. This was significantly less than was expected or modelled for, with calculations showing that as many as 7,000 residents in the city who do not possess the accepted form of ID and need to apply for a VAC. There has been a slow increase in VAC applications following the elections. By the end of December 2023 there had been an additional 179 VAC applications since the May local election.
- 2.1.3 As there are parts of the UK that did not have local elections in May 2023, such as London, Birmingham, Bristol, all of Scotland and Wales, the Electoral Commission will repeat its national campaign to publicise the Voter ID scheme from January 2024. A local communications campaign will reiterate the need

for people to apply to this scheme if they do not have an accepted form of photo ID.

2.1.4 At the May 2023 local election, 1,649 electors in Manchester came to a polling station either without the correct photo ID or no ID. Of this number, 1,060 electors returned with ID and voted, but **589 potential electors did not return and did not then vote at the election**. Nationally, in the 230 Councils who held elections in May 2023, the Electoral Commission calculated that just over 14,000 electors who wanted to vote were unable to do so due to not possessing the correct photo ID or a VAC.

2.1.5 In their September 2023 final report reviewing the local elections the Electoral Commission noted that older voters, younger voters, disabled voters, unemployed voters, voters in poorer districts of towns and cities, and minority ethnic community voters had been proportionately negatively affected by the implementation of voter ID. On Voter ID the Commission's report recommended:

- The UK Government should review the current list of accepted forms of Voter ID to identify any additional documents that could be included to improve accessibility for voters. The focus should be on ID that would support people who are least likely to have the documents on the current list, including disabled people and those who are unemployed.
- The government should explore whether the deadline for Voter Authority Certificate applications could be moved closer to polling day, to extend its availability for voters who do not have any other form of accepted ID to apply for a VAC.
- The government should enable registered voters who do have accepted ID to make an attestation at their polling station on behalf of someone who does not have any form of accepted ID (also referred to as 'vouching' and used in countries like Canada, which was also recommended by the UK Parliamentary All-Party Group on Democracy and the Constitution).
- Polling station staff should still collect data on the impact of voter ID at future elections.

2.1.6 The UK Government provided its response to the Electoral Commission's recommendations in December 2023 that it did not see the need to expand the list of acceptable Voter ID or bring in the concept of vouching. There will be no changes to the existing duties for elections in 2024.

2.2 Accessibility

2.2.1 Along with voter ID, another duty that came into force for the May 2023 local election was for Returning Officers to provide "equipment for relevant persons to vote independently". As a result, the Electoral Services Unit provided at all polling stations equipment to assist disabled electors and those electors where English was not their first language. This included a large sample copy of ballot paper, a tactical voting device, braille copies of the ballot paper, temporary ramps, additional seating, magnifiers, accessible polling booths,

accessible stationery, parking spaces (where available) for disabled voters, temporary doorbells, hearing loops and audio versions of ballot papers.

2.2.2 Other considerations that were also provided included:

- Guides about voting and what assistance is available – including easy read / web versions.
- Key documents in polling stations were translated into 22 community languages, with additional connections to the national ‘Language Line’ service.
- A message on poll cards for voters that required it to request adaptations / equipment from the Electoral Services Unit.

2.2.3 As part of its engagement process, that is discussed in more detail in section 4 below, the Electoral Services Unit has twice engaged with the Manchester Disabled Persons Forum Sounding Board after the local election. There was positive feedback on the accessible provisions in polling stations, with some useful suggestions for improvements. A number of these enhancements for 2024 elections are being developed, as noted in section 4 below.

2.2.4 In reference to accessibility, the Electoral Commission recommended that levels of awareness of the support and equipment available, especially in polling stations, is still lower than it could be. They have encouraged Election Teams to be pro-active in engaging with disabled people groups, which the Electoral Services Unit are doing.

2.3 Companions of disabled voters

2.3.1 From the 4 May 2023 poll, 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, thus removing the requirement of being registered to vote. This duty went smoothly at the May polls.

2.4 Community Engagement and Communications for 2023 and 2024 elections

2.4.1 In order to support the changes outlined for May 2023, a comprehensive communications and engagement campaign was developed and took place from January 2023 (when VAC applications were launched) to the day of poll.

2.4.2 The EC held a four stage national communications and engagement campaign for the 2023 local elections campaign to raise awareness of the Voter ID duty. Their research calculated that 87% of the public were aware of the Voter ID and accessibility changes by the week of the poll. The EC are undertaking a similar campaign in 2024. Staff from the Council’s Communications Team have been engaging with the EC over the media buying, assets and reach of this campaign in 2024.

2.4.3 For the 2023 local election (and being implemented for the 2024 local and mayoral elections), a consistent GM wide approach to amplify and complement the EC’s national campaign was organised. This seeks to ensure

that key messages are consistently disseminated widely across Greater Manchester, with each local authority contributing a proportion to purchase GM wide advertising channels to supplement Electoral Commission messaging at a local level. This campaign is led by Manchester City Council's Communication Team.

- 2.4.4 This campaign for both elections in 2023 and 2024 includes making EC partner materials accessible to a wider audience, for example, additional language translations and/or accessible formats. Effective local engagement activity was also developed in 2023 and has been developed in 2024 at a neighbourhood level, utilising local knowledge and local community networks via Neighbourhood Teams, to ensure engagement with underrepresented groups and key target audiences. This has been complemented with the development of an Elections Outreach Pack and significant engagement with a range of communities as outlined in section 4 below.
- 2.4.5 The 2024 local campaign will again mirror the EC's campaign timings and will take place over the next few months.
- 2.4.6 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 will sit alongside this with a focus on Manchester only advertising sites, digital channels, community networks, free and partner channels.
- 2.4.7 A communications plan has been drafted and the approach shared and discussed with GM colleagues. The Local and Mayoral Elections 2024 communications approach is being developed and is attached at Appendix A.

2.5 Governance and Capacity

- 2.5.1 A Strategic Elections function was established in 2022, based at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), to provide the 10 Greater Manchester districts and GMCA with specialist knowledge and dedicated strategic resource for 2023 and 2024. The purpose of this function is to provide GM authorities with the knowledge and understanding to prepare for the extensive and complex legislative changes arising from the implementation of the Elections Act 2022, including voter ID requirements, overseas electors', and online postal vote applications. In addition, the wider implications arising from the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 and the outcomes of the current Parliamentary Boundary review which has created the following constituencies in Manchester – Blackley and Middleton South, Gorton and Denton, Manchester Central, Manchester Rusholme, Manchester Withington, and Wythenshawe and Sale East.
- 2.5.2 An Elections Act Steering Group has been in place since June 2022 to provide support to the Elections team through 2023 and 2024. This group contains senior staff from wider services to support this work including HROD, ICT, Comms, Neighbourhoods, PRI, Risk and Finance, working through the significant interdependencies that exist across the different workstreams to ensure these are reflected in the thinking. As part of wider work, the Elections

Strategic Lead for Greater Manchester is also in attendance at this Steering Group focusing on areas where close joint working arrangements are desirable for consistency. These meetings are co-chaired by the City Solicitor and the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer.

- 2.5.3 The resource requirements in the core elections team have been strengthened with an additional resource of 6 staff to support the work required. Core staff numbers remain under review, whilst work continues to try and predict the volume of work that will be created by the introduction of the new Tranche 2 measures. In addition, a 'bank' of internal MCC staff have been recruited to provide additional capacity and assist with managing peaks in demand as and when required, for example in the 6-week election period. Whilst the bank staff were not required for the 2023 local election, there is a greater likelihood they will be needed for the May combined election and the UK Parliamentary election (and even more so if it is a triple poll). They are being trained on all aspects of the Elections Act and in readiness for supporting the Electoral Services Unit should that be deemed necessary.
- 2.5.4 In both the 2023 and 2024 elections, a number of resources to aid with local engagement will be provided to electors. These include:
- A printable leaflet for voters (translation into some community languages)
 - A summary 2-sided leaflet
 - A guide for staff and volunteers
 - Posters and social media assets
- 2.5.5 The staffing requirements for the 2024 polls are currently under review, taking into consideration an increase of polling stations to 242 (as in 2023) across the city due to the anticipated increase of transactions times, hence more staff required. As is usual practice, staff who have previously worked in elections are being contacted and allocated to roles. Staff have been notified of the May 2024 poll via Broadcasts, encouraging staff members without a role to get in touch. Staff from partner organisations are also being contacted, such as GMCA and the NHS.
- 2.5.6 As Elections is a corporate priority it is a requirement for staff to work or be available if necessary. For this reason, staff are made aware that leave should not be booked for both the polling day and the official counts. A withdrawal process will be in place for exceptions, which is managed by HR in conjunction with Strategic Leads.

3.0 New Elections Act duties that have come into force since the May 2023 local election

3.1 Online Absent Voting Applications (OAVA)

- 3.1.1 In addition to voting in person, registered voters have the option to alternatively vote by post or nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf. This was previously undertaken using by completing paper applications sent and returned to the Electoral Services Unit. From November 2023, a new

government portal based at the website <https://www.gov.uk/apply-postal-vote> allows registered voters to now apply online.

- 3.1.2 Registered voters would need to have to hand the address where they are registered to vote, their date of birth and their National Insurance number (if they do not have their National Insurance number, they will be required to provide another document to verify their identity). They will also need to indicate the specific date of the election or referendum they want to make a postal vote for, if it is only for a one-off postal vote (otherwise they will be deemed a postal or proxy voter for all subsequent elections). As part of this process, voters also need to upload a photo of their handwritten signature in black ink on plain white paper. If voters cannot provide a signature or one that always looks the same, they may be able to apply for a postal vote signature waiver within the service.
- 3.1.3 This system is being encouraged by the government for all new voters, but the existing paper application system can also be used by electors who prefer it. **It is important to note, if an elector already has a postal or proxy vote arrangement in place they do not need to reapply.** As part of this change, electors applying for a postal vote will be required to renew their application and their signature every 3 years, instead of every 5 years. Existing proxy voters who have an arrangement in place before 31 October 2023 must reapply and make a fresh application by 31 January 2024 – the Elections Team have written to all of these voters. Proxy voters can undertake this by sending in a paper application to the Electoral Services Unit or can apply to vote by proxy at this website - <https://www.gov.uk/apply-proxy-vote>. Testing the service has brought up some challenges for those who have permanent proxy status, which has been communicated to the government.
- 3.1.4 Since this duty came into place, from 1 November 2023 – 2 January 2024, 395 postal applications have been made, 126 in paper form and 269 using the government online portal. Of these applications 90 are on hold awaiting further evidence. In discussions with colleagues across the ten Greater Manchester local authorities, and with the Association of Electoral Administrators, there has been some concerns raised over the time it is taking to process some of the applications, along with challenges in uploading signatures from the government portal to the Council's Xpress electoral management system, and the time this may take closer to the election. These concerns are being raised with the government, who are introducing more enhancements to the portal. Elections team and bank staff are being trained to use the new portal and transfer information to the Xpress system, in its current state, making relevant adjustments as improvements are released.

3.2 Postal Vote handling rules

- 3.2.1 Following legislation that came into place in December 2023 as part of the Elections Act, the government have legislated that from the elections in May 2, 2024, representatives of political parties and campaigners will not be able to handle completed postal votes and postal vote envelopes from individual voters and deliver them to polling stations on polling day. Voters can only

hand in their own postal vote plus the votes of up to five family members or people for whom they provide regular care. Family members include an individual's spouse, civil partner (either in a civil partnership or living together), parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild.

3.2.2 Voters will not be allowed to hand in more than six postal ballot packs (that's five postal packs in addition to their own). They will have to complete a form at the polling station to verify the number of packs being handed in, including their own pack.

3.2.3 Political parties have been informed of this important change. The government have deigned it as a criminal offence if representatives of political parties or campaigners seek to deliver postal votes to the polling station.

3.3 Overseas Voting changes

3.3.1 From January 2024, important changes around voting rights for British citizens living overseas come into place. The major change is that there will no longer be a 15 year limit on voting rights, and the registration period will change. The registration period for these voters will be extended from one year to three, and as such overseas voters will only need to register to vote every three years.

3.3.2 Under the change made in the Elections Act, any British citizen living abroad who has previously lived in, or been registered to vote in the UK, will have the right to vote at UK Parliamentary elections. These voters will be registered at the constituency where they were last registered to vote, or where they were last resident if they were not registered to vote before. Such voters will have to provide evidence of living at a Manchester address, or to seek an attestation from another registered voter of good standing to support their application.

3.3.3 In Manchester, prior to this duty there were 611 registered overseas voters. It is impossible to say how many additional overseas voters will seek to register for the UK Parliamentary election, but it could be considerable, particularly given the imminence of that election. The Electoral Services Unit has received full training on the new government portal for overseas voters (postal and proxy voting paper requests are still also permitted) and will keep a close eye on the level of applications. Bank staff will also be trained to use the new portal if they are required due to larger than anticipated numbers of applicants.

3.4 Changes to Parliamentary Boundaries and impact on Polling District Review

3.4.1 An order to put new Parliamentary Boundaries into place came into force in November 2023, but the new constituencies will only come into effect when the next UK Parliamentary election is called. If a byelection takes place before this election it will be held under the existing constituencies and not the new constituencies.

3.4.2 As reported to the committee in June 2023 the new constituencies that will be in place at the next UK Parliamentary election in Manchester are:

- **Blackley and Middleton South** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Charlestown, Crumpsall, Harpurhey, Higher Blackley and Moston, as well as the Rochdale Council wards of East Middleton and South Middleton).
- **Gorton and Denton** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Burnage, Gorton & Abbey Hey, Levenshulme and Longsight, as well as the Tameside Council wards of Denton North East, Denton South and Denton West).
- **Manchester Central** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Ancoats & Beswick, Cheetham, Clayton & Openshaw, Deansgate, Miles Platting & Newton Heath and Piccadilly, as well as the Oldham Council wards of Failsworth East and Failsworth West).
- **Manchester Rusholme** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Ardwick, Fallowfield, Hulme, Moss Side, Rusholme and Whalley Range).
- **Manchester Withington** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Chorlton, Chorlton Park, Didsbury East, Didsbury West, Old Moat and Withington).
- **Wythenshawe and Sale East** (taking in the existing Manchester wards of Baguley, Brooklands (Manchester), Northenden, Sharston and Woodhouse Park, as well as the Trafford Council wards of Brooklands (Trafford), Priory and Sale Moor).

3.4.3 The Electoral Services Team have provided a Memorandum of Understanding with Oldham, Rochdale, Tameside and Trafford Council over cooperation around delivering the elections for these new constituencies. Manchester will be the designated Acting Returning Officer for each of the cross-boundary constituencies.

3.4.4 Discussions have taken place within the Elections Steering Group and the AGMA Elections Managers Group over the timing of the UK Parliamentary election, which could potentially be held on the same day as the local and mayoral election, or at another date at any point up to January 2025. This will remain a live discussion throughout 2024. When the government calls such an election, there will only be a maximum 25 days' notice to deliver it. It is very likely that bank staff would be called upon to support the Elections Team in a triple poll scenario. Discussions have already started with Manchester Central Convention Centre (MCCC) with regards to the possible availability of space for a count venue should an election be called at short notice. Conversations are also taking place with senior officers across Manchester City Council, looking at alternative count venues, should MCCC not be available in its entirety for a general election that is not held in May.

3.4.5 As noted in its report to the Constitution and Nomination Committee meeting of 12 July 2023, initial consideration was given to holding an interim review of polling districts, beginning in mid-July 2023 and ending in late November 2023. However, following internal legal advice and information from the Election Commission it was decided to postpone this option due to the complexity of undertaking such a review when amended parliamentary boundaries have not been implemented until November 2023. As such a statutory polling district review is now due to take place after the May

elections. Such a review must take place no later than January 2025. An October 2024 UK Parliamentary election could create some complexity with undertaking this review, along with the Annual Canvass. The Electoral Services Unit will keep the Constitution and Nomination Committee updated around the review.

4.0 Engagement work May 2023 to present date

- 4.1 With the Electoral Services Unit having more time after the May 2023 local election to engage directly with communities, it has developed a comprehensive strategy to interact with a wide range of groups over summer and autumn 2023. This has included the establishment of an Elections Act Forum and the development of an Elections Outreach Pack. As part of this activity, engagement has taken place with the Council's Neighbourhoods and Communications Teams to add renewed focus to this work. At the heart of this activity is to disseminate detailed elections information to community groups, to seek helpful feedback and to encourage key messages to be shared widely across Manchester.
- 4.2 The Elections Outreach Pack is a series of ten short 2 – 3 page factsheets on all aspects of the Elections Act and electoral registration. These include information on the following areas relevant for public dissemination:
- The core changes affecting the public from the Elections Act.
 - Information on Voter ID and applying for a VAC.
 - Information for voters on increased accessibility at polling stations.
 - Ways the Council is seeking to support all parts of the community in the electoral process.
 - Information on polling stations and where they are located.
 - How to register for elections.
 - How to register as an anonymous elector (for example for women voters avoiding domestic violence) on the electoral register.
 - Outlining the changes to Parliamentary constituencies and encouraging early electoral registration, given the short time to register once a UK Parliamentary election is called.
 - Explaining the different services of Manchester City Council, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the UK Government that voters elect councillors, the Mayor and MPs to work on their behalf of.
 - Explaining the new Online Absent Voting Application.
- 4.3 The pack is being made available as paper copies and as electronic digital copies. They have also been placed on the Council's website, are being translated into a number of the most commonly used community languages and a generic 'easy read' summary is being developed for those that need them. Mention is made on the fact sheets to contact the Council's Digital Inclusion team to assist registration and relevant applications. Manchester is the first Council to develop such a detailed pack, and these fact sheets are being shared with colleagues in the other 9 Greater Manchester local authorities and the Electoral Commission.

- 4.4 The Electoral Services Unit has engaged across all core community sectors in the city to alert them to the new Elections Outreach Pack, to seek feedback on the major changes to the electoral process, and to cooperate with groups where possible and practical. The groups that have been directly engaged with can be found in Appendix B.
- 4.5 Whilst existing resources makes it difficult to go to community events, there has been some engagement with the likes of the Manchester Youth Council, the Wythenshawe 'Community Connectors' event and the MACC Community Fairs. The Elections Team have also established an Elections Act Forum which met on October 10 to explain the detail behind the Elections Outreach Pack and encourage the groups noted above to pro-actively disseminate information through their communities. The Forum will also include an email conduit for ongoing information, and it met again on 17 January 2024 and (resource permitting) in early March 2024 to provide relevant updates.
- 4.6 The valuable contacts that this process has provided to the Electoral Services Unit will also deepen the quality of an Equalities Impact Assessment being developed for the elections in 2024 (which will enhance it further from the assessment made in 2023). To give some practice examples, a number of initiatives are being developed following discussion with disabled groups to provide easy read documents, understand the needs of blind and neurodiverse voters, develop animation and videos to assist understanding of the changes in elections, and the Elections Team are looking into creating a core message in a video format in a number of community languages.
- 4.7 The other aim of this work, particularly through the Elections Act Forum, is to explain to groups that the intense activity of organising the three elections of 2024 means the Elections Team does need to rely on other groups in assisting with community dissemination throughout 2024.
- 4.8 The Elections Outreach Pack was also sent out to all elected members in December 2024. The Elections Team encourages all councillors to promote the fact sheets through local community groups. Neighbourhood Services and Communications have developed a spreadsheet to try and capture as much community engagement as possible, and the Elections Team have an ongoing spreadsheet to record all the engagement they make across community groups.

5.0 Changes that are expected to come into force after the May elections

- 5.1 The final duty of the Elections Act relates to EU residents that have come to the UK since the country left the European Union. The Elections Act removes the rights of some EU citizens to vote and stand in elections in England and Northern Ireland. The changes apply to local and mayoral elections in England. EU citizens where the UK Government has negotiated agreements with EU Members States to allow its citizens living in the UK to vote, in return for the same right for UK citizens living in that country, will still be able to vote and stand in elections. To date these agreements have been made with Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg and Poland. Residents from the Republic of

Ireland are not affected by this change due to a long-standing arrangement between the UK and Irish governments.

5.2 This duty will come into place after the May elections and the Electoral Services Unit are preparing to contact all relevant citizens that this impacts from the electoral register.

5.3 As noted above, the statutory Polling Districts Review will also take place after the May elections and continue until November, ready for the publication of a new register in December 2024.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 The recommendations to the Committee are contained on page 1 of this report.

7.0 Appendices

Appendix 1 - Communications and engagement campaign for 2024

Appendix 2 - List of groups engaged with for Manchester Elections Outreach Pack