

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee – 27 June 2024

Subject: Elections Act and Recent Elections Progress Report

Report of: The Chief Executive

Summary

To outline the planning, and governance arrangements for the implementation of the existing and the final duties of the Elections Act 2022 for Manchester. This report also provides an overview of key lessons learned from the May 2024 local and mayoral elections, as well as initial preparation for the upcoming UK Parliamentary General Elections and other electoral administration statutory exercises.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to note:

- Ongoing progress to implement existing duties of the Elections Act, particularly Voter ID, accessibility, online absent voting applications, and changes to postal and proxy votes delivered to a polling station.
 - The implementation of the final duty of the Elections Act around EU Citizens Voting Rights, as well as implementing likely increased registration of overseas electors for the forthcoming UK Parliamentary General Election.
 - To consider lessons learned from the recent May 2024 local and mayoral combined elections and prepare for the UK Parliamentary General Election.
 - To review the effectiveness of elections outreach and engagement activity for the May 2024 elections and further work in delivering the UK Parliamentary General Election.
 - The impacts of this work on additional duties of the Electoral Services Unit in 2024, including delivering a statutory Polling Districts Review and 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</p>
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	<p>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 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 has been 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 2024 local 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 are 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 direct 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. A detailed process has begun to refresh it for the next decade.</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. The Council also helps to support the Mayoral and the UK Parliamentary General Elections, allowing residents to influence city region and national government policy.</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 grants to cover expenditure provided to date on the Elections Act (this covers the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25):

2023/4 Funding and Costs -

Grants received from government	- £238,404.00.
Additional Justification Led Bid Claim received	- £94,584.00.
Total grants allocated (Financial Year 2023/24)	- £332,988.00.
Total Spend for 2023/24	- £538,996.00.

Total Council funded expenditure - £206,008.00.

UK Government funding was not sufficient to fund the total costs of the additional burdens in 2023/4 and the £206k of additional costs was funded through Council resources.

2024/5 Forecast fundings and Costs -

Grant already received for OAVA/Overseas	- £25,616.00.
Grants expected	- £68,110.00.
Other forecast grants for remaining duties	- £140,594.00.
Total Grants for Tranche 2 (Financial Year 2024/25)	- £234,320.00.
Expected spend for 2024/25	- £662,959.00.
Expected shortfall for 2024/25 (no JLB claim)	- £402,639.00.

Based on current forecast costs and funding, whilst there is currently a forecast shortfall of £402k, it should be noted that the Government's Justification Led Bid (JLB) submission window has recently opened following the polls in May 2024 and the Elections Team are currently preparing a submission for further JLB funding that will be used to fund the expenditure shown in the information above. Once the outcome of the further funding bid is known any potential implications will be picked up and reported as part of the overall council budget reporting.

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 3 EUVCR laid in February 2024
- Elections Act Implementation Timeline
- Fact sheets from Manchester Elections Outreach Pack - https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500329/elections/8664/elections_outreach_resources
- Electoral Commission Quick Guides to Voting – <https://www.youtube.com/user/ElectoralCommission1/videos>

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. It has included a significant number of different legislative changes relating to both electoral registration and the delivery of elections. These have come into effect in stages throughout 2023 and 2024. The 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.
- 1.2 The changes that came into effect 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.
- 1.3 The changes that came into effect at the 2 May 2024 local and mayoral elections included:
 - 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.
 - Requiring postal voters to reapply every three years, replacing the current rules of refreshing their signature every five years.
 - Further limit to the number of people an elector may act as proxy for.
 - Restricting the handling of postal votes – political campaigners were no longer permitted to handle postal votes (apart from their own or family members), and the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station was reduced to a maximum of six.
 - 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.
- 1.4 After the May 2024 combined election, the final duty of the Elections Act 2022 will come into place. The post-election 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.
- 1.5 This report provides an overview of progress with delivering these legal duties. The report also considers some of the impacts of the duties on the May 2024 combined elections and potential impacts on the UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE), which has been called by the UK Government for Thursday 4 July 2024.

1.6 The report also outlines extensive elections outreach and engagement activity of the Electoral Services Unit, the Communications Team, and the Neighbourhood Services Teams in responding to these duties.

2.0 Review of progress with the Elections Act duties implemented for the 2023 and 2024 local / mayoral elections

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 Since the launch of the VAC portal at the end of January 2023, a total of 1,636 Manchester residents had applied for a VAC prior to the May 2024 local election. Of these applications, 584 applications had taken place after the May 2023 local election and prior to the May 2024 combined elections (with 36 applications on hold). This figure remains significantly less than was modelled for, with calculations showing that there 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.

2.1.3 For the May 2024 local and mayoral elections there was no requirement from the UK Government for the Council to provide statistics on voters that were turned away due to not possessing the correct, or any, photo ID. Feedback from polling station staff highlighted that there were considerably less issues with Voter ID at these elections compared to 2023. This was also reflected in the Elections Registration and Command Hubs of which only 48 calls on voter ID queries were received. It should be noted that the government have asked for polling station staff to record such statistics on Voter ID for the next two UKPGEs, including the election on 4 July.

2.1.4 The Electoral Commission's analysis of issues around Voter ID from the May 2024 combined elections was expected to be published in July, though it may be delayed due to the calling of the UKPGE. It will focus on those Councils and Combined Authorities who were dealing with Voter ID issues for the first time. An issue that the Government is focused on potentially changing is to add the new Veterans Card on to the approved list of accepted ID. However, with the calling of the UKPGE for 4 July there was no time to add this card to the list through a legislative change in Parliament.

2.2 Accessibility

2.2.1 A second 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 specialist equipment to assist disabled electors and those electors where English was not their first language.

2.2.2 For the May 2024 combined elections the following documents were provided in polling stations:

- 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 ongoing engagement process the Electoral Services Unit continues to regularly engage with the Manchester Disabled Persons Forum Sounding Board. An initial discussion after the May 2024 combined elections with the group suggests there were no issues raised with the accessible provisions in polling stations. A more detailed discussion is taking place in mid-June.

2.3 Online Absent Voting Applications (OAVA)

2.3.1 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 by completing paper applications and returning them to the Electoral Services Unit. From November 2023, a new government portal based at the website <https://www.gov.uk/apply-postal-vote> allowed registered voters to alternatively apply online.

2.3.2 The new online 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. If an elector already has a postal or proxy vote arrangement in place they did 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.

2.3.3 Since this duty came into place, from 1 November 2023 – 17 April 2024 (deadline for registration for the combined elections), a total of 2,834 postal applications have been made, 2,604 using the government's online portal and 230 in paper form to the Electoral Services Unit. Of these applications 92 were on hold awaiting further evidence. In the period 18 April – 30 May a further 1,754 applications have come in (1,536 online and 218 by paper application). For the UKPGE there remains concern over the time it is taking for staff to process these applications when registration levels are likely to be considerably higher. These concerns have been previously raised with the government, who are introducing more enhancements to the portal. Staff in the Elections Team are fully trained to use the new portal and transfer information to the Xpress system, in its current state, making relevant

adjustments as improvements are released. In addition, a group of bank staff are receiving refresher training in case they are required.

2.4 Postal Vote handling rules

2.4.1 The May 2024 combined elections were the first at which representatives of political parties and campaigners were not able to handle completed postal votes and postal vote envelopes from individual voters and deliver them to polling stations on polling day. The Elections Act stipulates that 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.

2.4.2 Feedback from polling station staff was that this new change did not create any significant issues. There were a couple of isolated examples of members of the public leaving the polling station before they had filled in the form required to verify that they were delivering their postal votes. Details of the new arrangements for postal vote handling are detailed on Postal Voting Statements and Instructions, as well as on the return envelope.

2.5 Overseas Voting changes

2.5.1 From January 2024, important changes around voting rights for British citizens living overseas came 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.

2.5.2 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.

2.5.3 In Manchester, prior to this duty there were 611 registered overseas voters. Since the portal went live and prior to the May 2024 election, 729 people had sought to register as an overseas elector, of whom 211 had also applied for an absent postal or a proxy vote (needs updating). In the period from 25 April - 30 May a further 185 applications have come in through the portal. It is impossible to say how many additional overseas voters will seek to register for the UK Parliamentary election before the 19 June deadline, but it could be considerable. A small team within the Elections Team are processing overseas elector registrations and handling the complex issues surrounding them.

2.6 EU Citizens Voting Rights (EUCVR) changes

2.6.1 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 for local and mayoral elections (such citizens are not eligible to vote in the UKPGE). 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 such elections. To date these agreements have been made with Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, Poland, and Denmark. Residents from the Republic of Ireland are not affected by this change due to a long-standing arrangement between the UK and Irish governments.

2.6.2 The Elections Team have matched all the residents that this duty applies to, and it has prepared 5,122 emails and 717 letters to inform them of this change. However, the decision of the UK Government to call a UKPGE on 4 July has delayed this correspondence going out. They will now be sent after the election has taken place.

2.7 Community Engagement and Communications for 2024 elections

2.7.1 With a longer period to prepare for the May 2024 elections, the Elections Team developed a comprehensive outreach programme, which was reported to the committee in February 2024. For the May elections this included:

- the creation of an Elections Outreach Pack of 10 informative factsheets explaining voter ID, accessibility and so forth. These can be found at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500329/elections/8664/elections_outreach_resources
- the creation of an Easy Read elections factsheet which has been passed to an extensive number of disability groups, autism and neurodiversity support groups and the Manchester Disabled People's Sounding Board.
- placing Electoral Commission 'Quick Guides to Voting' YouTube video clips on the Council's 'Elections and Voting' web pages, and these have been promoted extensively to a wide range of groups.
- established an Elections Act Forum to engage with sector groups, along with tailored presentations to all the CHEM Health Equity Sounding Boards, MACC (in North, South and Central Manchester), Age Friendly Manchester, Manchester Homelessness Partnership, Manchester Women's Aid, and local government trade union representatives.
- cooperated with Manchester Education, Youth Services, and an education expert from Manchester University to develop a teacher's elections and democracy pack, election posters for young people and active engagement with the Manchester Youth Council.

2.7.2 In addition, the three Council Neighbourhoods Teams undertook a considerable amount of local engagement activity utilising local knowledge and local community networks, to ensure engagement with underrepresented groups and key target audiences. This included sharing social media messages, emailing voter ID booklets, flyers (included translated versions) and posters, engaging with faith and community groups, disseminating

elections information tool kits, and encouraged businesses and community organisations to put election information posters in prominent places. A detailed database has been developed and shared with the Elections Team outlining this work.

- 2.7.3 22 Council Libraries and the Digital Inclusion Team also provided support to residents to fill in Voter Authority Certificate applications. This service was advertised to relevant groups across the city.
- 2.7.3 The Electoral Commission repeated a four stage national communications and engagement campaign for the 2024 local elections campaign to raise awareness of Voter ID and other election core messages.
- 2.7.4 To supplement the national campaign, the Communications Team developed and delivered a Greater Manchester wide communications campaign across all 10 Local Authorities on behalf of GMCA comprising:
- Out of home advertising on digital screens
 - Adverts on bus backs, sides and rears
 - Adverts on Metrolink trams and interchanges
 - DAX radio adverts
 - Print adverts in GM and local newspapers
 - Geotargeted mobile adverts
 - Paid social media.
- 2.7.5 The Communications Team also sought to make EC partner materials accessible to a wider audience, for example, additional language translations, Easy Read, accessible formats and animations.
- 2.7.6 For all the elections in 2024, several resources to aid with local engagement will be provided to electors. These include:
- A printable leaflet for voters (translated into 22 community languages)
 - A summary 2-sided leaflet
 - A guide for staff and volunteers
 - Posters and social media assets
 - Social media toolkits.

2.8 Governance and Capacity

- 2.8.1 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 through 2023 and 2024. This team also delivered the mayoral election through a CARO (Combined Authority Returning Officer) Hub engaging with each authority – it was co-located with the Council's Command Hub on polling day.
- 2.8.2 An Elections Act Steering Group remains in place to provide support to the Elections team through 2024. These meetings are co-chaired by the City Solicitor and the Deputy Chief Executive.

2.8.3 The resource requirements in the core elections team have been strengthened with an additional resource of 6 staff recruited for the local, mayoral and UK Parliamentary General Election (making a temporary total of 20 full time staff). In addition, a 'bank' of 14 internal MCC staff have been recruited to provide additional capacity and are assisting with managing peaks in demand for the UK Parliamentary election. They have received initial training on all aspects of the Elections Act in readiness for supporting the Electoral Services Unit should it be required.

3.0 Lessons learned from the May 2024 elections for the UKPGE

3.1 Whilst there has been a very short time between the May 2024 combined elections and the calling of the UKPGE, there has been wide discussion and consideration of these elections to provide some 'lessons learned' to implement for the general election.

3.2 These include:

- Issues at polling stations – a full risk assessment of all polling stations was provided to Polling Station Inspectors (PSIs) and Greater Manchester Police. Extra staff were also placed in polling stations where there were newer candidates who were unfamiliar with procedures in and around stations. There was a small number of issues at polling stations in the Longsight and Rusholme wards, but these were dealt with quite quickly by PSIs with support from GMP. A review of these specific issues has taken place with the staff concerned, and feedback will be used to positively influence arrangements in July.
- Election Counts – there was feedback from staff, candidates and agents over a general lack of Tannoy announcements, particularly when there were delays in the verification process. This is being actively considered in conjunction with GMCA. Issues such as this rarely occur at standalone Local Authority Polls, but the Tannoy announcements are being reviewed for all Polls and particularly for combined Polls where the Council does not have sole overall control of them. The timing and key messages throughout the Count continues to be considered from an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion perspective.
- All Candidates and Agents and elected members are given the contact numbers for the Council's Elections and Command Hubs to report any issues of concern on polling day, which is the quickest and most efficient way to resolve any issues. The Elections Team are encouraging use of these contact details for the UKPGE. They will be reiterated in Candidates and Agents briefings and mailings through the UKPGE period.
- The Elections Team are feeding other lessons learned from the May combined elections into relevant processes for the UKPGE.

3.3 The UKPGE Election Multi-Agency Planning Group and the Elections Steering Group continue to meet on a regular basis through to 4 July. A lessons learned review meeting is also scheduled for after the election.

4.0 Polling District Review and Annual Canvass

- 4.1 A statutory polling district review needs to be undertaken. With the decision to call the UKPGE for 4 July the review will now commence post poll. The Electoral Services Unit will keep the Constitution and Nomination Committee fully updated around the review.
- 4.2 The Annual Canvass will also take place post poll. Following the canvass the new electoral register will be published on 1 February 2025.

5.0 Recommendations

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