10 October 2023	ITEM: 7
General Services Committee	
Post Election Report - 4 May 2023	

Wards and communities affected: n/a	**Key Decision:** n/a

Report of: Asmat Hussain, Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer), Ian Wake, Returning Officer and Elaine Sheridan, Elections Manager
Accountable Assistant Director: n/a
Accountable Director: Asmat Hussain, Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)
This report is public

Executive Summary

A report to share with General Services Committee on the outcome and review of Elections for the Council by thirds, which took place on the 4 May 2023.

Commissioner Commentary

N/a

1. **Recommendation(s)**

1.1 **Note that a high-level report with data and general information to be taken to General Services Committee for noting and comments.**

2. **Introduction and Background**

2.1 The scheduled Local Government Elections for Thurrock Council took place on the 4 May 2023. The core objectives of the elections are governed by electoral legislation and guidance from the Electoral Commission.

2.2 The responsibility for the conduct for local elections in Thurrock resides with the Returning Officer (RO). The Acting Chief Executive was appointed to this role on 1 March 2023 and continued in the Returning Officer post for this poll.

2.3 Dr Dave Smith was appointed as the Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer for future elections at Council on 24 May 2023, with the Director of Legal and Governance appointed as Deputy Electoral Registration Officer.

2.4 The RO may appoint one or more persons to discharge all or any of his functions and the following officers were appointed as formal deputies with full powers for this election.

- Asmat Hussain - Director of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer)
- Elaine Sheridan - Electoral Services Manager

The following officers are appointed with limited powers

- 1 x DRO with limited powers – Postal Vote Opening
- 8 x Polling Station Inspectors – DRO with limited powers to undertake the duties of a Presiding Officer
- 1 x DRO with limited powers – to assist as Count Manager and reject Ballot Papers

The core team consisted of 2 full time permanent staff members, 1 full time, fixed term staff member and 1 temporary staff member (four-month contract).

2.5 The RO plays a central role in the democratic process ensuring that elections are administered transparently and effectively and that, as a result, the experience of voters and those standing for election is a positive one. It is recommended therefore that a review of the election and processes is undertaken post-election.

2.6 Thurrock Council elects by thirds. 16 wards were contested on 4 May 2023.

- Polling cards were delivered by hand by a team covering the borough
- 47 valid Nominations were received for the 16 wards
- The poll was conducted with 53 polling stations staffed by 53 Presiding Officers and 128 Poll Clerks.
- 12,634 absent votes were issued
- 8 Inspectors (including one office-based Inspector) were employed to assist across the borough. The office-based inspector was a new initiative and proved beneficial, freeing up the office team, providing an element of contingency in case a gender specific officer was required to review a voter ID, and assisting the Inspectors who were out in the field allowing a quicker response when needed
- The count took place at the London Cruise Terminal with 49 Count Assistants 14 Senior count staff, plus the team of Postal Voting Staff, Security, IT and Environment
- Other personnel involved pre-election included Comms, the Web team and contact centre, ICT, Security, Health and Safety and the Environment Team.

2.7 An Elections Project Board and Elections Working Group were formed to assist in the preparations and risk assessments. Following the election, the Project Board met to review the election. Some of the learning points are included at paragraph 8.

3.   Voter ID at polls

3.1   These were the first elections nationally, and in Thurrock, which were undertaken with Voter ID requirements. Voters were required to show an approved form of photo ID at polling stations. Electors applied for a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) via an online portal (ERO portal) or in person at the Town Hall.

3.2   Polling station staff were required to collect specific data. Not all the data collected is public information. The public data for Thurrock is available at [Use of voter ID at elections](#) and is shown below. The Electoral Commission is collating a national report and the statistics were supplied to the Commission by the deadline of 12 May 2023.

Elector Information	Total
Electors eligible to vote in person at polling stations	88,864
Electors who attended a polling station	18,054
Electors who requested a ballot paper at a polling station but were initially refused because they did not have voter ID	139
Electors who were initially refused a ballot paper at a polling station because they did not have voter ID, but who later returned with voter ID and were issued with a ballot paper	88
Electors who requested a ballot paper at a polling station but were refused because they did not have voter ID, and who had not been issued with a ballot paper by the time the poll closed	51
Electors issued with a ballot paper at polling stations	18,003

3.3   The core team worked with the internal Communications team and partners to publicise the requirements for Voter ID.

3.4   The Contact Centre phone line message about Voter ID went live from 23 January and this remained on the phone lines until the election. Colleagues were supplied with Frequently Asked Questions to respond to Voter ID enquiries. The total number of enquiries actually received by Customer Services Advisors was 29 throughout this period; 19 face to face in the Town Hall and 10 via the contact centre.

The Elections Office also handled Voter ID enquiries on the telephone and in person. Approximately 20 standalone queries were recorded in one month period (March-April). This is outside of the ERO portal and is an estimated

figure. However, the applications made on the ERO portal required many follow up calls, emails and correspondence.

3.5　Electors were able to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate in person at the Town Hall, which received positive feedback from electors. The team utilised existing Ipads to complete applications and processing in person provided the additional benefits of ensuring the elector was registered to vote, and the photograph taken would meet the criteria required.

3.6　Some electors found the online application challenging, but these were in the minority. The Election Team could identify from the online portal if an elector specifically asked for help, repeatedly had issues providing a suitable photograph or could not provide the identification details. The Election Team worked with Local Area Co-ordinators (LAC) from Adult Health, who support anyone 18 years or over, to engage with the elector and support them to obtain Voter ID. The Co-ordinators assisted electors with applications in the community and their own homes allowing the elector to participate in the democratic process.

3.7　From January 16th (go-live), the total number of Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) applications received was 218, of which 18 were rejected and 16 on hold as of 25 April (the deadline for applications for a VAC for 4 May).

3.8　In the lead up to the VAC deadline, media reporting led DLUHC to implement contingency plans for assistance in processing applications if the rate of applications peaked. This was not required, and applications were processed by the elections team.

3.9　A process for issuing Temporary VAC's, where the criteria was met, was available. No Temporary VAC's were issued. One emergency proxy was issued but unrelated to the Voter ID process.

4.　The Count

4.1　The Count took place at London Cruise Terminal, Tilbury on 4 May, commencing with the verification of votes at 10pm.

4.2　The venue was previously used in May 2021 and lessons learnt from that election contributed to changing the ballot box receipt layout and one way flow through the carpark, plus additional overflow parking.

4.3　The ballot boxes were all receipted within 75 minutes of the polls closing. Verification completed with the postal votes after midnight. The first result for Chadwell St Mary was declared at 1.02am with the final result for Corringham and Fobbing ward at 2.31am. There were two recounts necessary due to the close results.

5.   Post Election

5.1   Following the poll additional work in May continued including:

- calculating and running the payroll.
- processing documents returned from the poll.
- sealing documents as appropriate.
- arranging to destroy home address forms from nomination papers.
- calculating costs and supplying marked registers to candidates and agents.
- analysing and supplying data to the Electoral Commission.
- informing Postal Voters whose identifiers were rejected have been notified as required by law and requested to supply new identifiers if appropriate.
- polling stations used on 4 May have been written to requesting invoices and provisionally booking for May 2024. This has highlighted the need to review at least one station due to cost.
- responding to FOI's and requests for data.

6.   Feedback and complaints

6.1   **Complaints and issues**

- Two complaints were received from electors on polling day. One complaint was in regard to the polling station location and signage and one complaint in regard to Voter ID and how this was handled by staff.
- A complaint was received by the Monitoring Officer regarding intimidation at a polling station.
- Fly posting was an issue in two wards which took up officer time and resources.
- Social Media complaints and allegations regarding a candidate and members.
- Questions regarding the recount of one ward.

6.2   Reported threats of issues at polling stations due to Voter ID did not materialise. The team created a RAG system for polling stations and this was updated before polling day according to any local intelligence to enable the smooth running of polling stations and the correct resource levels deployed to each station. The RAG system was shared with the Police to inform them of their operation plans on the day of polls.

6.3   The polling station staff in general conversations, commented post-election, that it was 'not as bad as expected'. A survey was conducted of polling station staff with 92% of the 106 respondents surveyed willing to work again and 8% 'maybe'.100% of respondents answered that they enjoyed their day and felt equipped to deal with Voter ID at the polling station. When staff were asked if they faced any challenges on the day, the comments related to electors and their responses to being asked to provide Voter ID. These included "not happy/ waste of time", not having the correct ID (work ID or an unacceptable Oyster card), or unhappy with being asked to remove a face mask/cap.

7. Compliments

7.1 Positive feedback and compliments on the way the poll was run were received by the team. This included compliments from electors who contacted the office for assistance, staff who worked on the election and candidates and agents.

8. Lessons Learnt from the Reviews and Actions to take

	Action
Late changes to the project plan and administrative tasks being undertaken by the Electoral Services Manager	A Project Initiation Document (PID) will be developed for early sign off by the Returning Officer. Agreement on this will reduce some of the pressures with planning and changes in 2024
Communications	Internal Communications Team to lead and prepare in advance of elections a communication plan
Fly Posting rules Guest attendance at count	Hold a second candidates' and agents' meeting after close of nominations
Administration within the core election team	Explore the use of MEA (mobile election app) for staff appointments
Staff recruitment levels to meet Electoral Commission guidelines	• Explore the use of digital polling – a solution offered by Modern Democracy • Implement measures to recruit and highlight working on the election. The Elections Team have requested a slot on the Corporate Induction programme as one method of highlighting this.
Polling Day pressure on the core team	The helpline for Electoral Services will be diverted in future to the Contact centre – go live expected January 2024.
Polling station set up and staffing	• Review training methods and messages delivered • Review Polling Station Inspector rounds and checklists, increase visits made and introduce catch up session mid-day
Delays to finalising the verification and starting the count due to Postal Vote Opening	• Review procedure at Close of Poll for postal vote opening

	• Review the need for additional collection of postal votes by Inspectors at 9pm • Review the location of Postal Vote Opening in relation to the count hall (venue permitting)

9. Challenges, Changes and Issues identified for 2 May 2024

Resources – venues	Count venue for 2024
Resources – staffing	Core team and polling station staff
Combined poll	17 wards – local election 20 wards – PFCC (3 wards PFCC only)
BVI report	Implementing any outcomes from the BVI report
Boundary Commission Review of Parliamentary Constituencies	• Final recommendations to Parliament by 1 July 2023. Work to review and implement the recommendations • Parliamentary boundary review of Polling Districts and Places and (separate paper to General Services Committee)
Planning for a Parliamentary Election	• New Parliamentary boundaries • Take on the part constituency instead of 'give-away' due to Boundary change • Count two constituencies instead of one
Elections Act 2022 – implementation of further measures (outstanding)	• Online applications for postal voting (estimated go-live October 2023) • Overseas Electors statutory instruments made and changes take effect (January 2024) • Limit to the number of postal votes an elector may hand into a polling station • First past the post system for PFCC polls • Absent Vote secrecy rules statutory instruments made and apply from May 2024 (December 2023) • Postal Vote handling statutory instruments made and apply for May 2024 (December 2023) • EU citizens Voting and Candidacy Rights – statutory instruments

	made and take effect <u>after</u> May 2024 polls (November 2023)

10. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

10.1 The Project Board and Working group will monitor the work of the Elections team in relation to the scheduled election on 2 May 2024.

11. Reasons for Recommendation

11.1 For General Services Committee to note and be informed of the post-election review and way forward for the 2 May 2024 election.

12. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

12.1 n/a

13. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

13.1 n/a

14. Implications

14.1 **Financial**

Implications verified by: **Rosie Hurst**

Interim Senior Management Accountant

There are no financial implications arising from this report about the review of the election on 4 May 2023, however future committee reports regarding action plans or changes will have their detailed financial implications considered at that time.

14.2 **Legal**

Implications verified by: **Asmat Hussain**

Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

The requirements for the conduct of local elections are set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983 and in the Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006. 6.2 The matters set out in this report comply with the above legislation.

14.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**

Team Manager, Community, Development & Equality

The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on Local Authorities to promote equal opportunities. These considerations should sit alongside the statutory obligations set out in the Electoral Administration Act. The Electoral Administration Act (2006) and the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 seeks to improve engagement in the electoral process,

The work outlined in this report will continue to aid community participation in elections, by reviewing the introduction of Voter ID brought about by the Elections Act 2022, through engaging with partners who can assist and communicate the need for Voter ID in areas of the community who are less likely to have the required Voter ID. Voters without access to digital platforms are considered in the work of the team.

The Elections Act 2022 also introduced the need for increased accessibility at polling stations to ensure all voters have adequate facilities and opportunities to vote. From May 2023, there will be more support at polling stations for voters with disabilities and voters with a disability can be assisted in future by anyone over the age of 18 years old.

The review of the poll in May 2023 will enable the service to implement lessons learned and contribute to elector experience and participation in future democratic events.

14.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children

n/a

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. **Appendices to the report**

- None

Report Author:

Asmat Hussain

Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

Legal Services