

# Arun District Council

<b>REPORT TO:</b>	<b>Corporate Support Committee – 27 June 2023</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Review of the Elections held on 4 May 2023</b>
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	<b>Lauren Fairs-Browning, Electoral Services Manager</b>
<b>LEAD MEMBER:</b>	Councillor Francis Oppler
<b>WARDS:</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>CORPORATE PRIORITY / POLICY CONTEXT / CORPORATE VISION:</b>  Access to the democratic process is key to the delivery of the Council's strategic aims and objectives, with the local elections providing electors with the opportunity to exercise their fundamental democratic right to vote.	
<b>DIRECTORATE POLICY CONTEXT:</b>  The Electoral Services team sits within the Law & Governance group within the Chief Executive's directorate. The delivery of successful local and national elections is a clear policy of the directorate given the fundamental need for those electors who are able to vote to do so.	
<b>FINANCIAL SUMMARY:</b>  There are no financial implications associated with this report.	

## 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report reviews the arrangements for the Arun District and Town/Parish Elections which took place on 4 May 2023. The report provides key facts, figures, information and feedback and considers lessons learned, as well as seeking support for future improvements.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is requested to review the information presented and make any comments to the Returning Officer.

## 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 3.1 The report reviews the arrangements for the Elections which took place on 4 May 2023. It provides information, feedback and considers lessons learned.

## 4. DETAIL

### Elections that took place

- 4.1 The district, town and parish council elections took place on Thursday 4 May 2023 with James Hassett as Returning Officer (RO) and Daniel Bainbridge as Deputy Returning Officer (DRO). Other officers were also appointed as DROs with specific powers for adjudicating ballot papers at the count and refusing the issue of ballot papers at polling stations due to the introduction of Voter ID legislation.
- 4.2 The RO is fully accountable for all aspects of these elections and as with all ROs is directly accountable to the Electoral Commission, rather than the local authority.
- 4.3 The contested polls were:
- District council elections – all 23 wards
  - Town and parish council elections – 13 wards

Bognor Regis Town Council	Hatherleigh, Hotham, Marine, Orchard and Pevensey wards
Felpham Parish Council	Felpham East and Felpham West wards
Littlehampton Town Council	Beach, Brookfield, Courtwick with Toddington, River, Wick and Wickbourne wards

### Election planning

- 4.4 The introduction of Voter ID was a dominant factor in the preparation for these elections. We began preparations a year in advance of May 2023 so that we could be as prepared as we could be when the legislation came into force. We had many concerns about how Voter ID would work in practice and whether there would be enough national publicity to inform electors of the significant change to the way in which they would be issued with ballot papers and voting. We sent a household notification letter (HNL) to every residential household within the Arun area at the end of January 2023 informing residents about who was registered at the property, their voting method as well as information about the elections and the changes that were being introduced.
- 4.5 We developed a plan on how we would deal with the additional workload and brought in additional staffing resource to manage the high level of expected Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) applications. Arun received 251 applications, the majority of which were accepted first time or following the resubmission of photographs that were not initially acceptable under the legislation.

## **Communications**

- 4.6 Communication is critical in relation to any election, and it was particularly important in May 2023 due to the complexity of the combination of elections and the additional measures to be observed because of Voter ID.
- 4.7 We developed a robust communications plan well ahead of the elections utilising the HNL and a dedicated webpage in January 2023, poll cards in March 2023, press releases and social media posts throughout the election period, particularly ahead of deadline dates to try to avoid late applications.
- 4.8 Arun Direct has always provided excellent support to the Elections Team, without which it would not have been possible to deliver electoral registration or elections. This was again the case for the 2023 elections.

## **Poll cards**

- 4.9 We hand-delivered the majority of the poll cards for these elections as usual.
- 4.10 We again included a map of the location of the elector's polling station to assist them and a QR code to be scanned when requesting a ballot paper in order to speed up the process of locating the elector's details when arriving at the polling station.
- 4.11 Due to the new legislation concerning Voter ID, ordinary poll cards were required to be printed as A4 rather than the A5 that we would normally use. We decided to create an A4 letter with a detachable poll card which highlighted the need to bring photographic ID when voting at a polling station. The letter also included details on the accepted forms of ID and the VAC. The postal, proxy and postal-proxy poll cards remained in the same format with slight changes to the wording to include details of Voter ID.

## **Nominations**

- 4.12 391 nomination papers were received in total across all 70 electoral areas up for election. We used the email informal checking process as we had done in 2021 as well as candidates and agents being able to drop their nomination packs at the Civic Centre reception. Candidates and agents were then provided with a receipt.
- 4.13 There were a significant number of errors on the forms, which is normally the case and which confirmed the need for the checks, but the majority of nomination forms were ultimately corrected, received, confirmed to be valid and accepted. The view of the Elections team is that the e-mail checks worked well generally as a clear e-mail to candidates and agents appeared to be helpful on both sides, but this process was very time consuming due to the amount of errors that needed to be corrected. We were unable to book a large enough venue to be able to provide in-person appointments but we have decided we will look to implement this for future elections.

## **Electoral registration**

- 4.14 As we had sent a letter to all households in January 2023, we were able to encourage people to register significantly earlier than the deadline. This meant we were able to manage the increase in registrations across the election period and concentrate on processing the increase in postal vote applications. We did receive an increase in duplicate registration applications which is an ongoing issue.

## **Absent voting (postal, proxy and postal-proxy)**

- 4.15 There were very few requests for proxy votes this year, with only 66 in total, including 7 emergency proxies, which is very similar to the 65 proxies and 7 emergency proxies for the 2021 combined elections.
- 4.16 Due to the introduction of Voter ID all voters were strongly encouraged to request a postal vote if they did not have the required photographic ID. In the run up to the elections 23,795 postal votes were issued, The postal vote turnout was 63% (15,103 verified votes) against 70% (16,428 verified votes) for the 2021 combined elections.
- 4.17 Royal Mail were under some pressure due to the much higher number of postal votes for all authorities. We received a number of complaints that electors did not receive their postal votes by the first day to reissue lost/undelivered packs. We reissued a total of 48 packs for this reason.
- 4.18 Authorities across the country were faced with the same issue which will be raised with Royal Mail centrally. Should Royal Mail not be able to guarantee delivery times for future elections we may need to consider using alternative arrangements. This may include hand delivery of postal packs, which is permitted within the legislation, and/or private sector delivery support.

## **Staff and training**

- 4.18 We contacted around 300 staff on our database in September 2022 to begin the recruitment process for these elections. A large number had been removed following a staffing review after the 2021 elections where staff had told us that they did not wish to remain on the database. This was mainly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, amongst other reasons.
- 4.19 The allocation of roles was a difficult process for the Elections Team due to the lack of numbers, particularly for Presiding Officers. Despite highlighting in the appointment letters the importance of the role we still had a great number of people who chose to drop out throughout the election period, increasing the pressure on Elections Team resources.
- 4.20 After a number of internal communications, including a direct appeal from the Returning Officer, and existing staff recruiting externally we were able to secure the required number of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks for each polling station and are confident we can retain this staffing level for future elections.

- 4.21 We planned to provide training via Teams for all staff, but following the first two sessions we decided to change this to a hybrid approach with some staff coming to the Civic Centre whilst the other remained on Teams. This was due to some staff needing additional assistance or not having adequate technology to be able to view the presentation clearly. In light of this we have decided to offer hybrid training for all future elections.
- 4.22 New Presiding Officers were also offered a further training session at the Civic Centre which took them through the process of opening and closing the polling stations and the paperwork they were required to complete, as well as advice on some scenarios they were likely to encounter. We received positive feedback on this session and will continue to provide this in the future.

### **Postal Vote Opening**

- 4.23 We were able to resume normal postal vote opening procedures for these elections after the 2021 Covid-19 restrictions were no longer required.
- 4.24 Due to the increased number of permanent postal voters in 2021 and then a further anticipated increase due to Voter ID we decided to extend the postal vote opening sessions to start from 9.30am each day.
- 4.25 The extended opening sessions worked well and we will continue to do this for future elections as we are able to open more on a daily basis as well as completing the necessary paperwork at the end of each day.

### **Polling stations**

- 4.26 As we intended, the majority of the polling stations reverted back to those used pre-Covid. Changes were made to the location of certain stations due to venues no longer being available or temporarily unavailable due to building works. We used 89 polling stations across 69 venues, against 28 polling stations across 26 venues in 2021.
- 4.27 As explained above, we included the elector's polling station details in the HNLs sent in January as well as the revised poll cards, highlighting the need to check whether a change had been made to the normal venue. This was mirrored on the Council's website, in press releases and on social media activity around the elections. We had very few issues with the venues on polling day and a small number of minor complaints where people had not fully read their poll cards. In the future we will look at further ways to highlight any changes, including sending text messages and emails to electors where we have their details and are able to use them.
- 4.28 Arun District Council is required to carry out a polling district review between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025, and therefore any comments received will be used in this review. We will also be asking for further feedback from all stakeholders as part of the consultation period for this exercise. We are constantly reviewing our polling station venues, therefore we do not expect to encounter any issues with this work.

- 4.29 iPads were once again used in polling stations instead of the paper Electoral Registers, Corresponding Numbers List and Ballot Paper Account. We were also able to use the tablet to gather the Voter ID statistics required by the Electoral Commission. This meant that we were able to compile the information in time for the extremely tight deadline of Friday 12 May 2023. The iPads worked very well and saved a lot of officer time as well as that of the polling station staff. Electors experienced a more efficient voting experience because of this. Using technology is the way forward for officers and for the electoral process, hence why we have entered into a further 5-year contact with the supplier, Modern Democracy.

### **Polling day and Voter ID**

- 4.30 Despite our concerns around Voter ID and the lack of understanding of the new process we only turned 22 people away from polling stations, with 12 of them returning later in the day with an accepted form of ID. It appears that most people were aware of the change in legislation and where they did not have ID made arrangements for a postal or proxy vote or applied for a VAC. We had a number of complaints on the day but these were based on the fact that the elector did not agree with the new legislation, rather than our processes. We were able to provide them with the contact information for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Electoral Commission on prepared complaint cards. We also forwarded on any complaints that we received via email.
- 4.31 Although we did not receive the anticipated level of issues and complaints, the turnout was slightly lower than in 2019 which may mean that electors were put off due to the changes and decided not to vote. We are planning for the fact that there will be a lot more interest and complaints ahead of the next UK Parliamentary election, to be held by 28 January 2025.

### **Verification and count**

- 4.32 The verification and counts for all contested elections were held on Friday 5 May 2023. The verification commenced at 9am and the first count started around 1.30pm.
- 4.33 The verification took slightly longer than normal due to the number of new counting assistants employed - 40 out of the 68 assistants had never been involved in the count before. All staff were fully trained but having not done the count in practice they lacked the hands-on experience and we will be looking at how to provide more practical training in the future. This was also one of the reasons that the individual counts took longer than expected. There were a number of other issues identified which will be taken into account in planning for future verification and counts.
- 4.34 The staff found the Kangaroo Boards very easy to use and were mostly well received by observers as they were able to check the results for each board easily. The boards are only used for multi-member wards so for the next scheduled elections we will be using the standard count procedure.

## **Conclusion**

- 4.35 Officers are pleased with how our arrangements for these elections ran in practice and the Elections Team worked extremely hard to make sure that all tasks were completed accurately and in the required timeframes. The main area for improvement received from the feedback was the timings at the verification and the count, which will be looked at and improved for future elections. It should be stressed that where improvements can be made the count will still take a long time due to the complexity of district and parish elections and multi-member wards.

## **5. CONSULTATION**

- 5.1 The feedback received from relevant consultations is set out within the Appendices to this report.

## **6. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

- 6.1 There are no alternative options to bringing this report to the Committee.

## **7. COMMENTS BY THE GROUP HEAD OF FINANCE/SECTION 151 OFFICER**

- 7.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## **8. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **9. COMMENTS OF THE GROUP HEAD OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE & MONITORING OFFICER**

- 9.1 Compliance with all relevant electoral legislation, including the newly-introduced Voted ID requirements, is always a significant challenge for any election and the Returning Officer, Electoral Services Manager and their team. The processes used in these elections, including new processes introduced in relation to Voter ID, were fully compliant with legislative requirements and the outcome was that the 4 May local elections in Arun were conducted in accordance with statutory requirements.

- 9.2 Any and all additional processes introduced as a result of this review and feedback from members will likewise be fully compliant with legislation.

## **10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT**

- 10.1 The report sets out the staffing levels required to run the local elections and the challenges around recruitment.

## **11. HEALTH & SAFETY IMPACT**

11.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **12. PROPERTY & ESTATES IMPACT**

12.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **13. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) / SOCIAL VALUE**

13.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **14. CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT/SOCIAL VALUE**

14.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **15. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT**

15.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **16. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT**

16.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

## **17. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION / DATA PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS**

17.1 There are no such implications associated with this report.

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### **CONTACT OFFICER:**

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### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:**

Appendix 1 – Election statistics report

Appendix 2 – Feedback received from candidates and agents

Appendix 3 – Feedback received from staff