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**Title of meeting:** Cabinet

**Subject:** Widening Participation in Local Democracy

**Date of meeting:** 21 March 2023

**Report by:** Ian Fitchett, Electoral Services Manager

**Wards affected:** All

**1. Requested by**

Full Council requested the commissioning of this report at the meeting on 19 July 2022 to look at "what could be done to ensure greater accessibility to, and the promotion of resident engagement in local democracy."

**2. Purpose**

To summarise the steps currently being undertaken to encourage participation in the electoral process and what further measures can be taken to increase participation.

**3. Background**

- 3.1 The Electoral Registration Officer is responsible for compiling and maintaining the Register of Electors and has a duty under Section 69 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 to take steps to encourage electoral participation.
- 3.2 The Returning Officer is responsible for the administration of elections. This includes a new requirement to take all reasonable steps to support voters with disabilities.
- 3.3 The first step to participation is to be registered to vote. The table below shows the number of voters included on the electoral register on the date of publication of the updated annual version:

Dec 2018	Nov 2019	Jan 2021	Dec 2021	Dec 2022
145,510	148,583	150,319	147,884	147,632

- 3.4 Election turnout patterns are one measure of electoral participation. However, turnout is impacted by fluctuations in the size of the electorate so it is therefore

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important to consider the overall number of votes cast in addition to the percentage turnout.

Over the last twenty years, turnout has remained stable. In terms of the actual number of votes cast, there has been a small increase in recent local elections and in particular in recent Parliamentary elections.

The tables below show election turnout and the total number of votes cast at elections since 2001:

Local elections not combined with another poll									
Year	2002	2003	2006	2007	2008	2012	2018	2019	2022
%	30.5%	26.6%	33.4%	31.8%	31.9%	26.3%	31.8%	31.5%	31.1%
Votes	43,568	37,633	44,979	43,496	42,812	38,932	46,557	45,577	46,097

Local elections combined with another poll (excluding General elections)					
Year	2004	2011	2014	2016	2021
%	34.9%	35.3%	32.5%	31.1%	32.3%
Votes	43,821	51,656	47,808	43,933	48,389

General elections					
Year	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
%	59.1%	61.0%	60.5%	65.1%	64.4%
Votes	78,514	85,737	87,635	91,947	93,643

- 3.5 The percentage turnout has remained relatively stable over the last twenty years but turnout remains below the UK average as detailed in the table below:

	Local elections 2022	Local elections 2021	General election 2019
Portsmouth	31.1%	32.3%	64.4%
Southampton	32.5%	32.8%	65.1%*
Unitary authority average	32.1%	34.3%	Not available
UK average	33.6%**	35.9%	67.3%

\* Southampton Test and Southampton Itchen constituencies

\*\* 159 local authorities had local elections in May 2022

- 3.6 Levels of postal voting have been low in Portsmouth in comparison to both neighbouring local authorities and the UK average. However, caution should be exercised when evaluating this apparent deficit as there may be underlying reasons for the relatively low uptake. For example, the city's high population density means that the average distance to the allocated polling station will be lower than in many other local authority areas. However, efforts to increase participation should ensure that residents are aware of the options available to them.

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The table below compares the percentage of the electorate registered as postal voters for selected local authorities at the 2022 local elections:

	Portsmouth	Southampton	Havant	Gosport	Fareham
% Postal voters	12.8%	14.8%	13.9%	16.5%	20.1%

- 3.7 The introduction of new voter identification requirements at the 2023 local elections is a significant change. It is inevitable that some voters will not already possess one of the acceptable forms of photographic identification. Provisions have been made for a free form of photo identification in the form of a Voter Authority Certificate. However, this new requirement adds a new dimension in terms of widening participation in the electoral process.

**4. Target groups**

- 4.1 There are various potential barriers to electoral participation and the engagement and outreach work undertaken are key steps to reducing these barriers and encouraging participation.
- 4.2 Residents with either a physical or learning disability may experience additional barriers to participation, particularly in terms of the accessibility of the democratic process. It is important that measures to encourage participation take into account accessibility in the broadest terms and that partnerships are developed with local disability groups to better understand any additional measures required to achieve this.
- 4.3 In order to participate in local democracy, residents first need to be registered to vote. National research shows that certain groups are less likely to be registered. The Electoral Commission reported the figures in the table below in 2018 showing under-registration by certain demographics groups:

Age (% registered to vote in 2018)		
18-34	35-54	55+
72%	85%	93%

Nationality (% registered to vote in 2018)		
UK or Irish	EU	Commonwealth
85%	54%	62%

Tenure (% registered to vote in 2018)			
Owner	Mortgage	Social renter	Private renter
91%	85%	83%	58%

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Duration at current address (% registered to vote in 2018)			
Up to 1 year	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 2 and 5 years	Between 5 and 10 years
36%	70%	83%	90%

These statistics support the targeting of the following groups:

- Younger residents including students
- Residents from ethnic minority groups
- Residents in private rented accommodation and those who have recently moved home (there is a correlation between these two factors)

4.4 Other socio-economic factors such as income, health and literacy are further potential barriers to participation.

**5. Aims of engagement work**

5.1 The Election Services team includes an Electoral Engagement Officer whose role is dedicated to encouraging electoral participation. The creation and development of this role is fundamental to driving electoral participation and inclusivity.

The role has responsibility for delivering specific and targeted engagement and outreach activities across the city. Various partnerships have been developed with local disability, cross cultural and other organisations and community groups.

5.2 The focus of messaging is typically related to the current stage within the electoral cycle. For example, in the pre-election period, the messages will be broader and provide information about the forthcoming election. Areas to be covered will include details about the type of election, key deadlines, how to apply for a postal vote and about the importance of registering to vote as a prerequisite to participation. Messaging this year will also focus on the new voter identification requirements.

In the summer and autumn months, messaging will focus on measures to promote voter registration. During this period preparations are underway for the compilation and publication of the new register published annually in December. Residents are asked to review and update the details held for the residents at their property. All 94,000 dwellings in the city receive a communication from the Electoral Registration Officer requesting this information.

5.3 Public awareness is a key priority. This includes circulating materials and information in public spaces to promote voter registration, participation in upcoming electoral events and options such as postal voting. Engagement and outreach activities amplify these messages by working directly with local groups who may be more likely to experience barriers to participation.

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- 5.4 Accessibility is a core theme in the work undertaken. It is important that materials and information are provided in clear and accessible formats. The voter journey must be accessible to everyone, including those with physical or learning disabilities, from materials to encourage participation to the voting process itself. The face-to-face nature of engagement work allows for focussed and tailored messaging to supplement the broader public communications channels.
- 5.5 Understanding the way that democracy works is an important factor. Our experience has shown that some residents find the idea of voting at a polling station intimidating due to a lack of understanding of the process and what to expect. Such barriers can be reduced through education and initiatives such as setting up mock polling stations at community venues to demonstrate the voting process. Our polling station staff are also able to provide assistance on polling day and are encouraged to be proactive in offering assistance.
- 5.6 Engagement work must address perceived voter apathy. Raising awareness of the importance of voting is key to improving participation, particularly in terms of making sure that residents understand the relevance of democracy in determining how policies are made and how services are delivered. Residents are often more aware of national politics due to media coverage and so it is important to set out the role of the Council in delivering local services and how participation can make a local difference.

## **6. Current engagement and outreach programme**

- 6.1 Raising awareness of the new voter identification requirements is currently an important priority area for our messaging. The new rules require all voters to provide photographic identification when voting at a polling station. Where a voter does not have a form of ID specified in the regulations, they may apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate.

The current work programme is focussed on promoting awareness and disseminating information about these new requirements as widely as possible. Traditional communication channels are also being utilised such as the Council's website, printed materials such as posters and flyers, and social media posts.

- 6.2 Visits are being made to each of the Council's libraries and area housing offices to provide the opportunity to talk directly to residents about voting and answer any questions. Display banners and printed materials are used to reinforce the key messages. Similar activity has been undertaken in the Civic Offices reception area.
- 6.3 We are working with the City of Portsmouth College to promote electoral participation with younger residents. Information is provided to under 18s about

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voting, democracy and registering to vote and face-to-face sessions have been held at the Highbury campus with the SEND group. Further sessions are planned with the wider college population. This age group has a lower rate of registration and is less likely to be familiar the voting process.

6.4 Working in partnership with the University of Portsmouth has increased the number of students included on the electoral register. The University includes a voter registration stage as part of the annual academic enrolment process. Visits have been made to the University to directly engage with students and materials are distributed to the Student Union and communal areas in halls of residence accommodation.

6.5 Working with residents with learning disabilities is an important area of work and a number of groups have been contacted to promote participation.

A successful event was completed with the Dynamite and MAKE groups which support young people with special education needs or disabilities. This included a practical demonstration of the voting process. Further events organised by the Aldingbourne Trust have been attended and we envisage this to be a key partnership going forward.

We are also in regular contact with Adult Services and the Council's Learning Disabilities Champion.

6.6 We are working with the Council's Community Development Officer to promote electoral awareness and encourage participation within the city's Asian community.

Another element of this work is to prepare for the new voter identification requirements. If a voter wears a face covering, such as a niqab or burka, there will be a privacy booth available at each polling station to allow the identity check to be completed in private by a female member of staff.

6.7 In order to provide a more interactive experience when engaging with audiences who may not familiar be familiar with the voting process, mock up polling stations have been set up at events to demonstrate the physical voting process. So far, this has been trialled with some smaller groups but has proved to be a useful tool in demonstrating the practical element of voting and further application of this approach is planned.

6.8 A range of further initiatives are part of our overall awareness and registration campaigns including:

- a) Council Tax new occupant data is used to contact home movers and other new residents to invite them to register to vote
- b) Posters, leaflets and postcards are circulated to libraries, community centres, area housing offices and other locations across the city

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- c) Articles are regularly included in the Council's Flagship magazine
- d) A leaflet with details about the new voter ID requirements will be included with the annual Council Tax bill
- e) The Registrar distributes materials at Citizenship Ceremonies
- f) Leaflets are provided to letting agents for distribution to new tenants
- g) Information has been circulated to local naval personnel via the Naval Families Group
- h) We have also worked with Supported Living, sheltered housing teams and care homes to promote voter registration and the availability of postal or proxy voting options

### **7. Future development areas**

- 7.1 Printed materials sent by post, such as voter registration forms, do not tend to attract a high response rate. In fact, response rates have been in decline in recent years, in part due to more complicated statutory processes. City centre areas, such as Landport and Somerstown, have particularly low response rates to mailed forms.

Canvassers are one option utilised to follow up with non-responding individuals and properties and this approach can yield more positive results. Although resources are not currently available to pursue this as a default option, extended use of personal canvassing is planned.

The use of tablet devices has also made the process more efficient and enabled a more dynamic approach. Two-way communication is more conducive to achieving a complete response for the particular circumstances and many residents appreciate this opportunity rather than completing paper forms.

- 7.2 Following on from the points made in 7.1 we can see that there are significant benefits to being able to register residents 'on the go' as opposed to relying on printed materials. We therefore intend to undertake a programme of activities to send small teams to busy locations across the city to encourage participation and complete the voter registration process in person at these locations.
- 7.3 Plans are being developed to work in partnership with the Regeneration Engagement Team. This will provide access to more experience and expertise to develop activities to reach a larger audience in the most effective ways and to use new methods and strategies in more creative and innovative ways.

### **8. Conclusions**

- 8.1 The electoral engagement programme as a whole is in the early stages of development. The establishment of a permanent role focussing on this area of work

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is a relatively recent addition to the Election Services team. The initial progress was also disrupted during the pandemic. However, the current and planned activities, outlined in section 6 and section 7 respectively, will be reviewed and evaluated to determine effectiveness. It is expected that as experience grows and partnerships evolve, new areas will be explored and developed.

- 8.2 The current programme is aimed at improving awareness and removing barriers to participation for residents. However, it must also be recognised that political disengagement is a wider national issue.

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Signed by (Director)

**Appendices:**

**Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location