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Title of meeting:	Cabinet
Subject:	Review of the 2023 local elections
Date of meeting:	25 July 2023
Report by:	Ian Fitchett, Electoral Services Manager
Wards affected:	All

1. Requested by

This report was requested by Cabinet at the meeting on 21 March 2023 following the delivery of the report on "what could be done to ensure greater accessibility to, and the promotion of resident engagement in local democracy".

2. Purpose

To review the 2023 City Council elections and the implementation of voter identification requirements.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Elections Act received Royal Assent in April 2022 and included new provisions requiring voters to present photographic identification when voting at a polling station.
- 3.2 The Act specified a list of documents that could be accepted for this purpose. The following documents are included in the list of acceptable photo ID:
 - UK, EEA or Commonwealth passport
 - UK or EEA driving licence
 - National ID card from an EEA state
 - Biometric immigration document
 - Older Persons' or Disabled Persons' Bus Pass
 - Defence Identity Card
 - Identity card issued with PASS accreditation
- 3.3 A free Voter Authority Certificate is available where a voter is not in possession of a photo ID from the specified list. This can be applied for online, on a paper application form or in-person.

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3.4 The new voter identification requirements were implemented at the City Council elections held on Thursday 4 May 2023. The new requirements will apply to all future elections including UK Parliamentary elections held after 5 October 2023.

4. The pre-election awareness campaign

4.1 The Electoral Commission launched a public awareness campaign in January 2023 to publicise the new voter ID requirements. Their campaign included television, online and social media advertising. In Portsmouth, it also included billboards and adverts on a number of the city's buses.

4.2 To support the national awareness campaign, a local programme of publicity and outreach work was launched. The aims of the local programme were:

- To raise awareness of the new voter id requirements and what types of photo ID would be accepted
- To publicise the option to apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate
- To promote electoral participation in general

4.3 The local awareness programme included the following publicity:

- Posters and leaflets were circulated to libraries, community centres, area housing offices, supermarkets and other locations across the city
- A leaflet with details about the new voter ID requirements will be included with the annual Council Tax bill
- An article was included in the Spring edition of the Council's Flagship magazine
- Social media advertising was undertaken and items were included on the Council's Facebook and Twitter accounts
- An email was sent to residents in March where an email address was held by Election Services (approximately 70,000 emails were sent)
- Visits were made to local libraries, area housing offices and main shopping areas to engage directly with residents and circulate leaflets

4.4 All registered voters received a poll card letter. The revised format of the poll card allowed for the inclusion of information about the new requirement to show photo ID along with the full list of accepted documents. These were delivered to all eligible registered voters from the end of March.

4.5 Outreach work was also undertaken to promote participation as well as the new requirements. Visits were undertaken to a number of community groups including the MAKE and Dynamite groups who support younger residents with learning disabilities. The Engagement Officer also toured the city's libraries, area housing offices and main shopping areas to engage directly with residents.

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4.6 Electoral Commission national research showed that 87% of voters were aware of the new voter identification requirements in the week before the election. Local experience was broadly in line with this estimate.

5. Delivering the City Council elections

- 5.1 In addition to the awareness activities, a range of practical preparations were required to implement the new requirements. The recruitment, appointment and training of polling station staff was critical to this aim. In total, 301 members of polling station staff were appointed for the 2023 local elections. This included 65 polling station stewards who were appointed to remind voters on arrival at the polling station about the new requirement to show photo ID.
- 5.2 The polling station staff are always crucial to the effective administration of elections. In addition to the range of existing processes and documentation, the new requirements represented a new layer of processes to learn. All polling station staff are required to attend an in-person training session and this covered the full breadth of new procedures for checking photo ID. This included understanding the types of acceptable ID type, how to check that the photo was a good likeness and how to deal with any name discrepancies between the document and the voter's entry in the electoral register. Written guidance was also provided.
- 5.3 The requirement to show photo ID meant that provision needed to be made to enable voters to be able to do so in private and all polling stations were issued with a privacy booth to facilitate this. There are a range of reasons why a voter may wish to show their ID in private and these were covered in the polling staff training. The reasons anticipated included where the voter was wearing a face covering such as a niqab or burka, where the voter was in the process of gender reassignment or where the voter was wearing a face covering for covid or health reasons. Polling station staff were provided with guidance to accommodate such requests and to be sensitive to any personal circumstances.
- 5.4 A leaflet was supplied to support voters arriving without photo ID. The leaflet set out the new requirements including what types of photo ID could be accepted and a reminder that the polling station would be open until 10.00pm. The intention of the leaflet was to encourage as many voters as possible to return and cast their vote.

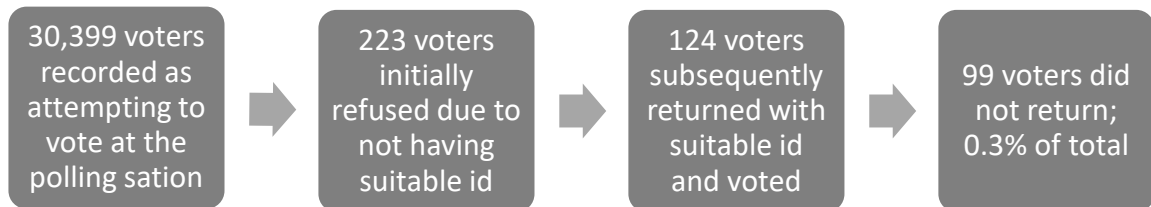
6. The impact of voter identification requirements

- 6.1 On polling day, a total of 223 voters were not issued with a ballot paper due to not having acceptable photo ID. This is the figure recorded by polling clerks inside the polling station; it does not include anyone who arrived at the polling station but did not enter after being reminded by the steward about the new requirements.

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6.2 The graphic below summarises the number of voters recorded as arriving inside the polling station, those not having photo id and those subsequently returning with suitable ID and voting:



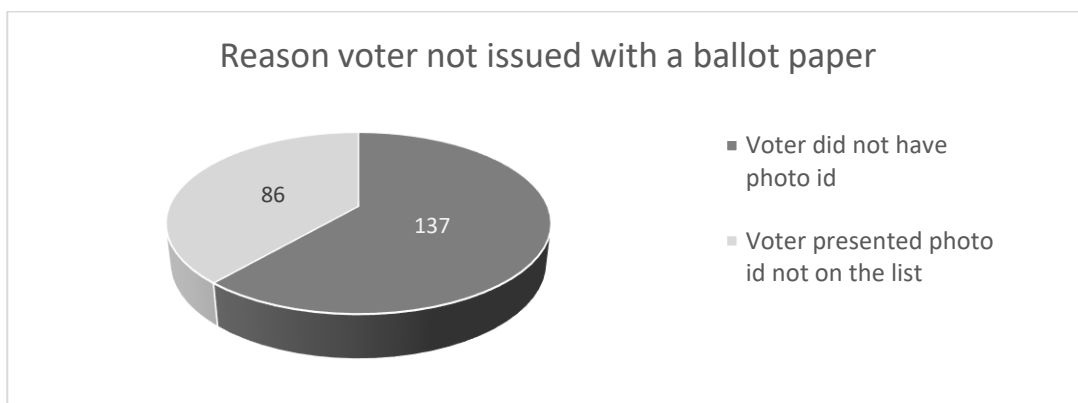
6.3 The table below provides the ward breakdown of voters initially failing the ID check and those subsequently returning with photo ID and voting:

	Baffins	Central Southsea	Charles Dickens	Copnor	Cosham	Drayton & F.	Eastney & C.	Fratton	Hilsea	Milton	Nelson	Paulsgrove	St Jude	St Thomas
Failed ID check	7	20	44	9	20	9	8	22	17	20	18	4	12	13
Returned and voted	3	12	20	8	12	4	3	16	11	9	12	2	5	7
Voters not returning	4	8	24	1	8	5	5	6	6	11	6	2	7	6

6.4 Overall, 99.67% of voters who arrived at the polling station completed the identity check and were able to vote. This compares to a national average of 99.75%.

6.5 For context, 273 postal votes were rejected because the voter did not complete their signature or date of birth correctly on the postal voting statement, or because the ballot paper or postal voting statement was missing.

6.6 The pie chart below shows the breakdown of voters turned away by reason:





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The chart reveals that approximately 40% of voters turned away had a form of ID that was not on the list of accepted documents. It is not known whether there was an assumption that certain types of ID would be accepted or whether there was confusion about what was included on the list.

- 6.7 The type of photo ID presented by voters was not recorded. However, feedback suggests that the most common form of photo ID used was a driving licence. The other most common forms of photo id used were passports and bus passes.
- 6.8 Where voters did not have an accepted form of photo ID they could apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate. In total, 455 applications were received by the deadline for the local elections. However, the table below shows that just 225 were recorded as being used at these elections:

	Baffins	Central Southsea	Charles Dickens	Copnor	Cosham	Drayton & F.	Eastney & C.	Fratton	Hilsea	Milton	Nelson	Paulsgrove	St Jude	St Thomas
Voter Authority Cert.	11	20	30	16	15	7	10	24	19	17	20	8	18	10

It is possible that some voters applied for use at Parliamentary elections. It is also possible that some applicants were testing the new service or perhaps believed that the certificate could serve as a form of photo ID for other purposes. Unfortunately the certificate does not include any details that would enable it to be used more widely.

- 6.9 It is likely that some voters did not vote because they did not have a form of accepted photo ID but it is hard to quantify the extent of this issue. The new requirements also meant that some voters will have needed to plan their visit to the polling station. Although many voters carry photo ID, such as their driving licence or bus pass, most voters do not routinely carry, for example, their passport. Some voters will therefore have been unable to vote by virtue of now needing to plan to have id with them.
- 6.10 The number of queries arising from voters on polling day about photo ID requirements was relatively low. This is based on calls from the public and feedback from polling station staff. The new requirements were widely publicised and the outcomes suggest that awareness of the new requirements was high. In practical terms, few issues occurred at the polling station which also suggests that the training, guidance and approach taken were appropriate.

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7. Voter turnout

7.1 Turnout at these elections decreased in percentage terms from 31.1% to 29.5% and in the number of votes cast at the polling station from 32,599 to 30,300.

7.2 However, there is significant variation in turnout and turnout change in different wards. The table below compares polling station, postal vote and overall votes cast in 2023 against the 2022 City Council elections:

Ward	Polling station turnout change	Postal voting turnout change	Total turnout change
Baffins	-292	+11	-281
Central Southsea	-15	-6	-21
Charles Dickens	-26	no change	-26
Copnor	-106	+3	-103
Cosham	-404	-87	-491
Drayton & Farlington	-190	-3	-193
Eastney & Craneswater	-229	-38	-267
Fratton	-61	+18	-43
Hilsea	+158	+11	+169
Milton	-202	+103	-99
Nelson	-240	+17	-223
Paulsgrove	-447	-53	-500
St Jude	-154	-5	-159
St Thomas	-91	-24	-115
Total	-2,299	-53	-2,352

7.3 As shown in the table above, most wards experienced a downturn but the situation was not consistent across the city:

- Turnout in Hilsea ward increased
- Turnout in Central Southsea and Charles Dickens wards was unchanged
- Turnout in Cosham and Paulsgrove wards reduced significantly

7.4 Postal voting was not included within the scope of the new ID requirements. The number of registered postal voters remained remarkably consistent in 2023. In total, 18,962 postal votes were issued in 2023 compared to 18,973 in 2022. The only ward showing a significant change in the number of registered postal voters was Milton ward which increased by 101.

Overall, in terms of the number of postal votes returned including those rejected, the turnout was consistent; 13,718 (72.3%) in 2023 compared to 13,741 (72.6%) in 2022.



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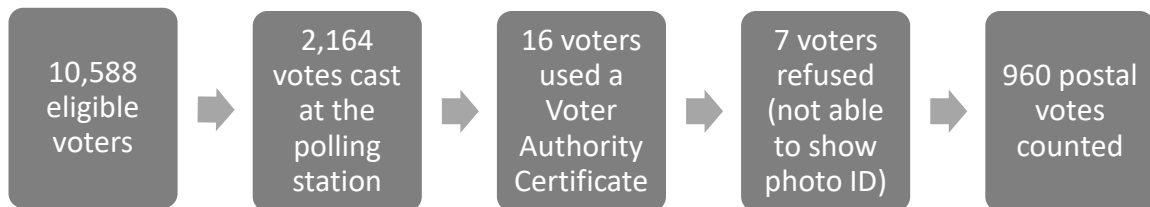
Postal votes accounted for 31.3% of counted votes at these elections compared to 29.3% in 2022.

7.5 It would seem inevitable that the introduction of voter ID requirements will have had some impact on the turnout. However, as suggested by the variation outlined in section 7.2, it is probable that in addition to the new requirements various other factors will have influenced the overall decrease in turnout. These could include factors such as voter apathy, the national political outlook and local political campaigning.

7.6 A similar decrease in turnout occurred at the all-out City Council elections in Southampton. The table below compares turnout in 2023 and 2022 in Portsmouth and Southampton:

	2023 turnout %	2022 turnout %	Decrease
Portsmouth	29.5%	31.1%	1.6%
Southampton	30.7%	32.5%	1.8%

7.8 The graphic below illustrates the key statistics as a ward average:



8. Legislation and funding

8.1 The Elections Act received Royal Assent in April 2022 and secondary legislation specifically relating to the voter identification provisions had been expected to be made in the summer of 2022. However, this was delayed and the two key statutory instruments, the Voter Identification Regulations 2022 and the Voter Identification (Principal Areas, Parish and Greater London Authority) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, were not made until October and December 2022 respectively.

8.2 The delay in the legislative timetable had a knock-on effect on other important aspects of the election planning process including the publication of Electoral Commission guidance, resources and awareness materials and the grant funding.

8.3 The grant funding was a particularly important aspect. Although a 'Letter of Comfort' was received from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 29 September, it was apparent in the autumn that areas such as the awareness campaign would need to be planned without knowing what funding would be available. The grant allocation was finally confirmed on 28 November 2022 and was

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received in two parts; the first tranche of £30,938 was received in December 2022 and the second grant totalling £51,481 was received in April 2023. A further payment is expected in April 2024.

- 8.4 The grant funding was significantly more generous than had been anticipated. To date, £25,444 of the funding has been used. Funding had also been allocated to a two-year fixed-term apprentice position but this position became vacant in June. Plans are in place to recruit another apprentice to provide additional capacity where pressure points are anticipated, such as processing Voter Authority Certificates in advance of the 2024 polls. The remaining funding will be used for further awareness activities ahead of the 2024 polls.

9. Planning for the 2024 elections

- 9.1 The Voter Authority Certificate is available to voters who do not have an accepted form of photo ID. The number of applications received was relatively low; 455 applications received by the deadline on 25 April. Research undertaken by the Electoral Commission estimated that up to six percent of voters may not have a form of accepted photo ID. Based on an average polling station turnout rate of approximately 30,000, this would equate to around 1,800 registered voters.

Voters can apply online, on a paper application form or in-person. The paper application option is not widely used as it requires a hard copy photograph. The in-person option will continue to be promoted and can be offered either at the Civic Offices or at venues around the city during the course of the engagement programme. Approximately 10% of applications to date have been in-person applications.

Further opportunities exist to promote the Voter Authority Certificate including the annual registration forms sent in the summer and autumn periods. It is likely that some voters did not realise that this option was available to them and further publicity and awareness activity will be undertaken to increase the number of applications ahead of the 2024 elections.

- 9.2 The messaging before the 2023 elections focussed on awareness of the new voter ID requirements. Awareness of the requirements was high as evidenced by the relatively low number of voters arriving without ID on polling day. Messaging in advance of the 2024 elections will focus on reminding voters to bring their photo ID when voting.
- 9.3 A General Election must be held by 24 January 2025. A communication and awareness plan will be developed to provide clear messaging as soon as the election is called. This will need to incorporate messaging to remind voters about the voter ID requirements; due to the higher turnout, up to half of voters voting at the General Election will be doing so for the first time under the new rules.

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Signposting will also be provided for information about the types of acceptable ID and how to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate.

- 9.4 The Voter Authority Certificate is a paper document. It is probable that some voters who applied for one will not retain it and will need to re-apply before the 2024 polls. Messaging will therefore remind voters who have already applied for a Voter Authority Certificate to check that they still have it before the application deadline.
- 9.5 The Government has set out plans to introduce a number of changes to postal and proxy voting ahead of the 2024 elections. These changes include:
- The ability to apply for a postal or proxy vote online via the Gov.uk service
 - An identity check will be included when applying for a postal or proxy vote which would operate on the same basis as when a resident makes an application to register to vote or for a Voter Authority Certificate
 - A three-year time limit will be introduced for postal vote arrangements after which the voter would need to re-apply

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has indicated that it currently anticipates that these changes will be introduced in late 2023.

The new provisions to allow online applications to vote by post will make the process more accessible. Once the service is launched, the new option will be promoted and included on routine communications with voters and as part of the engagement programme. Voters will continue to be able to apply on paper application forms.

- 9.6 The engagement programme will continue to promote participation and will cover all aspects of the electoral process including registering to vote, the availability of Voter Authority Certificates and postal votes including the online service. A number of partnerships have been developed with local groups and there are further opportunities to work collaboratively to reach new groups and expand the scope of engagement work. This includes Age UK Portsmouth, the City of Portsmouth College and a number of groups supporting residents with learning disabilities such as MAKE and Dynamite. This work has already shown some positive results; a small group of voters with learning disabilities voted for the first time at the 2023 elections.
- 9.7 Following the introduction of the new measures at the 2023 local elections, it is not anticipated that there will be a requirement to allocate stewards to the same number of polling stations in 2024. Stewards will be appointed at dual stations and those with higher turnout levels to assist voters and undertake a triage role.



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10. Conclusions

10.1 In total, 99 voters were recorded as arriving at the polling station without suitable photo ID who did not later return with acceptable photo ID and vote. This equates to just 0.3% of voters recorded inside the polling station and averages approximately seven per ward. However, this also needs to be balanced with the reduction in overall turnout which is likely to be partially attributable to the ID requirements. These factors are evidence that the new requirements disenfranchised some voters. Our approach to the 2024 elections and forthcoming General Election must recognise this and the need to continue to raise awareness of the new rules and the options available.

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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