

25 September 2023

Voter Identification – learning from Local Elections May 2023

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: All

Purpose: For Information

1. Aim

The purpose of this report is to provide Walsall Council's Audit Committee with an overview of the introduction of Voter Identification (Voter ID) on the recent Local Elections and the lessons learnt. This is to provide assurance regarding the actions taken and the ongoing activity that will be delivered to continue to embed Voter ID requirements.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The Elections Act 2022 and Voter Identification Regulations 2022 require electors in England to present an acceptable form of identification to vote in polling stations for all future elections and referendums held in England from May 2023.
- 2.2 The Returning Officer (RO) and Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) have a responsibility to ensure that electors are aware of these requirements and that they have the necessary identification to vote. Where an elector does not have an acceptable form of ID, the legislation places a requirement on the RO to provide free Voter ID, known as a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC), to the elector upon receipt of application.
- 2.3 The Presiding Officer (PO) at each polling station was responsible for checking electors' identification and, where accepted, issuing a ballot paper to the elector.
- 2.4 Privacy booths were deployed across Walsall to provide a secure environment for electors to present their identification if they wish to do so. Female members of staff were also available in every polling station to check the identification of female voters if requested.
- 2.5 Postal votes were not affected for the Local Election in May 2023 but will be for all subsequent elections.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 Audit Committee are recommended to note the responsibilities of the RO and the ERO and of the actions taken and planned to deliver these responsibilities.

4. Report detail - know

- 4.1 The Elections Act 2022 and Voter Identification Regulations 2022 required electors in England to present an acceptable form of identification to vote in polling stations during the Local Elections in May 2023.
- 4.2 To support this requirement being implemented the council:

- a. Ran an extensive media campaign to raise awareness of the requirements that included producing our own video and using Section 31 funding to purchase advertising space on bin wagons and E&S website.
 - b. Following consultation with the workforce equalities group we purchased what were considered to be the best available version of a privacy pod for every polling station. This was to provide electors with privacy when removing and replacing any face coverings.
 - c. Created a mock polling station in the Council House so we could offer Councillors and community leaders the opportunity to see the privacy pod and explain the process for electors visiting polling stations. We also used this mock polling station as part of the training delivered for Polling Station Inspector's (PSI's) and Presiding Officer's (PO's).
 - d. PSIs were required to also attend PO training, so they understood the responsibilities PO's had. In the training for PSI's and PO's the new requirements regarding voter ID were covered at length and included the necessity of accurately completing the Electoral Commission (EC) evaluation forms, required to assist the national evaluation of the introduction of Voter ID.
 - e. Organised for two mobile security units to routinely visit polling stations throughout the day of the poll that were available to be deployed if needed to defuse a situation as it was unclear how voters would react if they were refused a ballot paper.
 - f. Provided all polling stations with a copy of the EC Polling Station Handbook which included details of acceptable photo ID in advance of the day of poll as part of their training.
 - g. Ensured there was a female member of staff in every polling station to assist female voters as required.
- 4.3 All Polling Stations were required to complete a Voter ID Evaluation Form (VIDEF). This involved recording when a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) or Anonymous Elector Document (AED) was used as the form of photo identity, where electors were not issued a ballot paper as they did not have an acceptable form of ID and the number of electors who subsequently returned with an acceptable form of ID and were issued with a ballot paper. The VIDEF recorded how the introduction of photo ID impacted on the issuing of ballot papers and the existing, established reasons to refuse to issue a ballot paper impacted electors.
- 4.4 From the VIDEF's we know that Walsall appears to have had a slightly higher than nationally average refusal rate based on not having an acceptable form of photo ID. These statistics were collated and published online shortly following the election. [Voter Identification Statistics \(walsall.gov.uk\)](https://www.walsall.gov.uk/voter-identification-statistics) have been included as an appendix to this report. These statistics show that almost 62% of voters that were refused a ballot paper initially returned with an acceptable form of identification and were issued a ballot paper.
- 4.5 Although a privacy pod was provided in every polling station it was not widely used in most polling stations. One PO reported that when no other electors were present voters were happy to remove face coverings at the desk and not use the privacy pod as there was an all-female team of staff working at the polling station.
- 4.6 A survey of all polling stations was completed following the election and anecdotally there were reports of voters intentionally testing how the requirement for photo ID was being implemented and monitored, arguing, and appearing disgruntled when asked for ID but then being able to produce ID. There was also some confusion and frustration regarding what was accepted as per the guidance provided and why other forms of photo ID were not. For example, NHS staff ID passes, Police ID and other forms of employee ID were not on the list as being acceptable nor were ID documents issued in Pakistan although Pakistan passports were acceptable. It is not yet known if there will be any changes to what forms of ID will be accepted moving forward or if the list will be extended.

- 4.7 When available national evaluations of the implementation of Voter ID will be reviewed, evaluated, and learning will be used to inform future planning. The elections team is using the feedback from 2023 to inform future planning and will be commencing with another media campaign promoting the requirements of Voter ID in the coming months.
- 4.8 In addition to the ongoing requirements for Voter ID the 2nd tranche of legislation from the Elections Act 2022 will also need to be implemented prior to the elections in May 2024. These changes primarily impact on absent voters, i.e., those that do not vote in person at a polling station (postal voters, proxy voters and overseas voters).

5. Financial Information

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

6. Reducing Inequalities

- 6.1 The ongoing communication and engagement activity seeks to ensure all eligible electors can participate in upcoming elections, reducing any inequalities and addressing any accessibility issues.

7. Decide

- 7.1 Audit Committee are asked to note this report and the actions being taken to ensure electors are aware of the Voter ID requirements.

8. Respond

- 8.1 As part of the ongoing implementation of the Elections Act 2022 the elections team under the guidance and direction of the ERO and RO will continually review and revise activity to ensure responsibilities are fulfilled.

9. Review

- 9.1 This report has been provided as requested to consider the impact of Voter ID on electors. Additional changes are being implemented as the 2nd tranche of Elections Act 2022 implementation. The ERO and RO continue to review requirements and work to ensure voters are not disenfranchised. All action taken is reviewed and revised as required.

Authors:

Helen Dudson, Electoral Services Manager

James O'Sullivan, Deputy Electoral Services Manager

Voter Identification Statistics

Local Election – 4th May 2023

In line with Electoral Commission guidance the Returning Officer for Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council is releasing the data below which shows the total number of electors who were turned away from the polling station as a result of not having an acceptable form of ID, or not presenting any form of ID, and the total number of those who returned with ID and subsequently issued with a ballot paper.

A breakdown of this data has been sent to the Electoral Commission in line with the Voter Identification Regulations 2022. It is expected that the Electoral Commission will publish a report later this year on the impact of Voter ID in the polling stations.

Data	Figure
The number of polling station electors who applied for, but were not issued with, a ballot paper	767
The number of polling station electors who were not issued with a ballot paper	473
Total Ballots cast	48,713
Borough wide turnout	24.54%

The Regulations make clear that breakdowns of this data can only be provided to the Electoral Commission and Secretary of State. The Returning Officer is therefore unable to provide Voter ID statistics on a Ward or Polling Station level.

Any questions relating to this data can be forwarded to The Returning Officer, Electoral Services

Office, Walsall Council, Civic Centre, Darwall Street, WS1 1DB.