

<p style="text-align: center;">Non-Executive Report of the:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">General Purpose General Purposes Committee</p> <p style="text-align: center;">28 September 2023</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">TOWER HAMLETS</p>
<p>Report of: Janet Fasan – Director of Legal and Monitoring Officer</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Classification: Open (Unrestricted)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Elections Act 2022 - Electorate Engagement Update – Electorate Engagement Update</p>	

Originating Officer(s)	Robert Curtis
Wards affected	Not applicable

Executive Summary

- 1.1. Following the introduction of the Elections Act 2022 the implications for the electorate of Tower Hamlets, political representatives and elected members is acknowledged as significant.
- 1.2. On 13 June 2023, following an update on the progress of the implementation of the incremental stages of the Act, the committee requested that a further update be provided on the progress and plans being made to engage the electorate of Tower Hamlets.
- 1.3. This report updates GPC on the planning that is in place, the co-operation between departments within the Council, the national engagement planning undertaken by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators.
- 1.4. Where scheduled polls are to take place additional collaboration will also take place later this year with the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) for the GLA polls to be held on Thursday 2 May 2024 to ensure a consistent message across London and, when a date is known, whatever is required by DLUHC for the General Election that must be held no later than 28 January 2025.
- 1.5. It should be noted that in some circumstances statutory instruments have yet to be approved and clarification of process continues to be updated as the incremental introduction of the various stages of the Act takes place.
- 1.6. Consequently, the engagement planning is a continuous process updated and reviewed supplemented by the experiences of other authorities from polls held in May 2023 and guidance provided by the national organisations.

Recommendations:

General Purpose Committee is recommended to:

- Note the engagement planning for the Elections Act 2022 and the continual updating and reviews of implementation as we approach the GLA polls in May 2024, the General Election to be held no later than 28 January 2025 and the changes to electoral registration.

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

1.1 This report is for information to be noted

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

2.1 N/A

3. DETAILS OF THE REPORT

- 3.1. On Tuesday 13 June 2023 GPC was informed of the significant changes that have started to be implemented and will continue to do so over the next 18 months to 2 years, following the Elections Act 2022 becoming law.
- 3.2 The challenge for the Electoral Registration Officer, Returning Officer and the Council is to ensure that all the changes are communicated to the electorate in a timely fashion to ensure that those eligible to vote are able to do so and that none of the changes have a detrimental effect.
- 3.3 The Act is comprehensive and is not being implemented in its entirety in one stage by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) who have set in place a rolling programme of secondary legislation and statutory instruments to implement the various changes. To support this guidance has and will continue to set out the necessary processes that will have to be followed as the deadline for each change approaches.
- 3.4 A timetable of the implementation of the incremental introduction of the Act is detailed in **Appendix A** but could vary slightly as each phase of introduction is introduced.
- 3.5 It should be noted that since the 13 June 2023 the introduction of all absent voters having to reapply for a postal vote in 2024 has now been changed with existing long term domestic postal and postal proxy voters able to continue to be able to vote by post without reapplying until the 31 January 2026.
- 3.6 Those affected by the Act are those with the following franchise at UK Parliamentary elections who must be
- be registered to vote in the constituency.
 - be of voting age – 18 years old on polling day.
 - be either a British, qualifying Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland; and

- Not be subject to any legal incapacity to vote – Peers in the House of Lords, prisoners serving a prison sentence or having been convicted of committing certain electoral crimes.

3.7 There are two exceptions to 3.6 above for local elections and that is peers in the House of Lords and EU citizens resident in the UK may also vote in local elections as long as they meet the age and residency requirements, but EU citizens' rights to remain registered and stand as candidates are now subject to change within the Act.

3.8 Whilst it is acknowledged that the responsibility of informing the electorate lies with the Returning Officer, Electoral Registration Officer, and the Council here in Tower Hamlets for those scheduled polls held for the GLA and the General Election when that is called this responsibility will also fall on the GLRO, DLUHC and the Electoral Commission.

3.9 Communications to the electorate by elected members, political parties and candidates continue to be subject to printing and publication requirements so whilst updates of the changes will continue there are additional requirements from November 2023 where campaigners will now be required to include imprints on any digital campaign material.

This means that many types of digital material such as social media adverts, tweets, and like posts, will require an imprint.

3.10 Preparations have included thus far.

- A formal communications plan for Tower Hamlets has been compiled with input from Electoral Services, Tower Hamlets Communications, and the Chief Executive Officer in his capacity as the Borough Returning Officer for the GLA. The plan will be reviewed at an elections project board to be convened towards the end of the year.
- To supplement all engagement, the Electoral Commission have supplied a suite of voter information resources designed to raise awareness a number of which were tried and tested at the elections held across the UK in May 2023 namely:
 - how to vote up leading up to polling day
 - when elections are happening
 - finding a polling station
 - getting help at the polling station
 - what to do if an elector needs help to vote
 - who tellers are
 - polling station opening times
 - things to remember if voting in person
 - how to keep everybody safe when voting in person
- The suite of public awareness products ranges from press releases, social media templates, posters and videos and resources for people with a learning disability and/or autism.
- These are continuously being reviewed and updated and can be found here.

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/partner-charity-or-local-council/voter-information-resources>
- High level meetings with the Greater London Returning Officer (GLRO) have taken place and will continue over the next 9 months to discuss and arrange consistent

engagement programs across London taking into consideration good practice undertaken by many authorities across the UK at the elections held in May 2023. Tower Hamlets Communications will be represented as part of this London wide group to ensure that messages to the electorate and stakeholders are consistent.

- Additional changes e.g., postal votes, overseas electors, European Union Citizen changes as detailed in Appendix B will be subject to close inspection on what the practical implications will be. These changes are not yet in place because the incremental implementation approach by DLUHC so only general communications can be released at this stage without definitive detail on how this will directly affect the electorate.
- Polling cards will no longer exist in their current guise but will be an enveloped A4 document containing the traditional information namely deadlines, electors name and polling station, and will have a circular enclosed with information relating to Voter ID and the implications following the introduction of the Act. This has been successfully undertaken by London authorities who have held recent by elections and will form part of the best practice review prior to the GLA polls taking place.
- An article has been published in Our East End circulated to every household in the Borough with information relating to Voter ID, the annual canvass, the changes to the Parliamentary Constituencies and the forthcoming GLA.
- The electoral register database currently holds in excess of 133,000 emails for electors out of an electorate of 208,232 (56.57% as of 1st September 2023). It is proposed by utilising the Governments secure NOTIFY email distribution that we can inform a high percentage of those on the electoral register of the changes along with the necessary hyperlinks to look up more information if required. This free service will be utilised on more than one occasion.
- All emails sent to the electorate as a matter of course from the electoral services team has information relating to Voter ID with hyperlinks to the Commissions website.
- A Voter ID leaflet was produced for the May polls by the Commission translated into a number of languages. This currently being redrafted, and representation has been made to the Commission that a Bangla version be made available, it wasn't in May 2023, so this can be printed and made available in areas throughout the Borough. This will also be available as an electronic attachment should anyone want the leaflet to be sent to them.
- The Commissions Voter ID pamphlet has also been enclosed as an A5 circular with the electoral canvass documentation circulated to every household in the borough in August 2023 for the annual canvass, this the compilation and publication of the revised register of electors. The leaflet will also be added to all reminders posted out.
This is attached at Appendix D
- The Electoral Services Team will be attending public events through the summer and into the New Year with commissioned pop up banners and information relating to Voter ID high on the agenda.
- The Councils web site has a specific page in the Elections Act 2022 and will be continually reviewed on a regular basis as the incremental changes are introduced.

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/council_and_democracy/elections_voting/Elections-Act-2022.aspx

- Following the polls held on Thursday 4 May 2023 across the UK good practice is slowly starting to be circulated to all ERO's and RO's and electoral administrators and will be adopted where implementation proved successful. These good practice examples will be disseminated to RO's and ERO's once the final analysis has been completed by Government, The Commission, and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA).

4. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Concern has been expressed nationally that many members of the electorate have been disenfranchised and have not attended or have been turned away from polling stations because they did not have the necessary documentation to satisfy the Voter ID requirements.

4.2 The data from May 2023 has been collated and a final report due but the provisional analysis from the Commission is as follows.

- Awareness of the need to bring ID to vote at a polling station was high
- Awareness and take up of the Voter Authority certificate was low
- At least 0.25% of people who tried to vote at a polling station were not able to because of voter requirement
- Around 45 of all non-voters said they didn't vote because of the voter ID requirement
- The UK Government and the wider electoral community should work to improve the collection of data at polling stations
- Levels of voter confidence and satisfaction were similar to previous elections (89%)
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/voter-id-may-2023-local-elections-england-interim-analysis>

5. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 None

6. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1 Funding for the Elections Act 2022 is detailed in the attached **Appendix C**

6.2 To date Tower Hamlets has received the following grants from DLUHC for the implementation of the Act

- 22/23 - £10,300
- 23/24 - £6,306
- 23/24 - £52,070

7. COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 The Elections Act 2022 sets out changes in the arrangements for the conduct of elections. This report demonstrates the Council's ongoing compliance with these changes.
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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- Appendix A - Key Events
- Appendix B - Elections Act Summary
- Appendix C - DLUHC New Burdens Funding
- Appendix D - Electoral Commission Leaflet

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)

List of "Background Papers" used in the preparation of this report.

- NONE

Officer contact details for documents:

- N/A