



**Scrutiny Committee**

**16:30 to 18:45**

**20 July 2023**

Present: Councillors Ackroyd (chair), Carrington, Francis, Fulton-McAlister Galvin, Haynes, Kidman (substitute for Thomas (Vi)), Osborn, Padda, Peek (substitute for Thomas (Va)), Prinsley, Sands (M) (substitute for Driver) and Schmierer (substitute for Fox)

Apologies: Councillors Driver, Fox, Francis, Stutely, Thomas (Va) and Thomas (Vi)

Also Present: Councillor Kendrick

**1. Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**2. Minutes**

**RESOLVED** to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meetings held on 29 June 2023.

**3. Scrutiny committee review of the impact of the Elections Act 2022, particularly that relating to Voter ID on Norwich City Council Elections in 2023**

(The chair took the item early).

The chair welcomed the elections team leader, the democratic and elections manager and the cabinet member for resources to the meeting.

The democratic and elections manager gave a presentation, (available [here](#)) and answered member questions.

A member commented that it was interesting to see the use of bus passes as a means of identification and considered that proof of age cards should be publicised as an acceptable form of voter identification. The democratic and elections manager commented that there was currently no charge to obtain a proof of age card but this might change. He emphasised the promotion and use of Voter Authority Certificates (VACs) which were free and issued by local authorities directly.

Applications for VACs were made by completing an online application, providing a national insurance number and uploading a photograph, if the photo was acceptable and the applicant was on the electoral register then a VAC was issued. If an individual was unable to get online they could be assisted to make the application in person at city hall including having a photograph taken. In response to a member question the elections team leader advised that the numbers of people presenting in person for assistance with VAC applications during the local elections was low. Even if the number increased fivefold there was capacity within the team to support this. The democratic and elections manager commented that in terms of what resource the team needed this could not be judged until secondary legalisation on Voter ID was in place.

In response to a member question the democratic and elections manager advised the government dictated which forms of identification were acceptable to use as voter ID. A member asked if there had been an issue with peoples forms of identification differing from what their names were listed as on the electoral roll. The elections team leader advised that there were no examples of a ballot paper not being issued due to a name discrepancy. The democratic and elections manager referred to polling station staff training which covered several possible scenarios. Mitigation was put in place in that if polling station staff were considering refusing a form of voter identification they would call the office to discuss and there was also the option to call in a polling station inspector.

The head of legal and procurement advised that in preparation for the local election consideration was given to the issues that minority groups might face such as the trans community or religious groups that wore face coverings. Adjustments such as the provision of a safe discreet space were used as mitigation. In response to a member question the elections team leader advised the trans community were consulted about the Voter ID process at a national level.

Members discussed the change of legislation requiring all postal voters to reapply every three years, and that all current postal voters had to submit a new signature by January 2026. A member asked if there was enough money in the budget to conduct a targeted mail shot to groups at risk of exclusion. The democratic and elections manager advised that the authority was awaiting the issuing of secondary legislation before it could decide where resources would be allocated.

The head of legal and procurement advised that there was forecast to be a budgetary overspend at the end of quarter 1 2023/24. This was largely due to the significantly above inflation increase of stationery and postage costs. If there was justification a case could be made to government for extra funding to target mailshots at cohorts.

In response to a member question on improving communications, the democratic and elections manager advised that the information conveyed on a poll card was subscribed by law. The elections team leader advised that there was greater scope to include information on the canvas form and this was being considered. The democratic and elections manager advised that all channels of communication the council had were used to publicise Voter ID including social media channels.

In response to a discussion on promoting the need for Voter ID with younger voters the democratic and elections manager referred to the good relationships which existed between the council and universities in the city, the University of East Anglia and

Norwich University of the Arts, this enabled students to be enrolled on to the electoral register when they registered for their course.

Members discussed the extension of the right to vote in general elections to all British nationals living overseas, previously it was only for overseas voters who had lived abroad for less than 15 years. The democratic and elections manager advised that these individuals would vote in the last ward they lived in, in terms of how this would work for those who had never registered, this information and more would hopefully come out in secondary legislation which was being awaited. The election team leader noted that in the last general election there were approximately 400-600 overseas electors registered in Norwich and this was expected to triple with the extension of eligibility.

A member commented that the problem with the Voter ID legislation was that it removed the right to vote from a significant percentage of people and asked what the likelihood was of a new government repealing the legislation. The cabinet member for resources noted that the Labour Party were committed to radical changes to the legislation including giving the right to vote to European Union Citizens with a permanent right to reside in the country. It was suggested that the committee should write to all party leaders asking for polling cards to be able to be used as voter identification

In response to a member question the elections team leader noted the key change of legislation which had happened since the production of the report was the extension from early 2024 to January 2026 of the need for all registered postal voters to reapply. Norwich had 20,000 registered postal voters and a communication strategy would be considered as part of the process but the council were still awaiting confirmation of detail within secondary legislation.

A member noted that 68 individuals were unable to vote in the last local election; he considered this figure likely to increase at the general election and asked how polling staff would be trained to deal with challenging behaviour. He also referred to feedback he had received from a gentleman who was able to use a passport which was 20 years old as the picture still looked like him. How would consistency be assured across polling stations. The democratic and elections manager advised that polling station staff were taught to take a positive assumption to enable voters to vote and were trained to manage conflict. If a potential voter was to be refused they were instructed to call the office for advice too therefore ensuring consistency. The elections team leader advised that no one had been refused at the local election because of a poor likeness to their identification.

A member commented that the issuing of VACs at city hall worked well during the election and thanked the team for their work. She asked if a theory of change model existed around voter inequalities, one that worked to see who would be excluded from voting long term and how they could be incorporated. The democratic and elections manager noted that there was data now from the local election which would be used to target excluded groups.

A member considered that a pertinent recommendation would be to ask cabinet to rerun the postal vote campaign run during covid which encouraged all non postal voters to register as this could help a significant proportion of people to navigate Voter

ID issues. The head of legal and procurement noted that calculations indicated the costs of this exercise would be £55,000 and it would be helpful if the council could secure funding from government to do this work. The democratic and elections manager advised that the process of applying for a postal vote was changing and moving to an online application. The detail on this was being awaited but would need to be considered as part of any communications campaign.

The democratic and elections manager advised that any recommendations would go to cabinet and then to the council's Returning Officer to consider as it was the Returning Officer who had the responsibility for elections. In terms of the response to a campaign to increase those registered for postal votes the last campaign garnered an increase in postal voters of 10,000. The change to registering for a postal vote online might impact registration depending on how this was to be managed and detail was still being awaited. The head of legal and procurement noted that the council had a new elections management system which was used at the last election and this had improved efficiency in the processing of postal votes.

A member proposed that committee consider a recommendation to ask cabinet to commission a trial of participatory democracy methods including citizen assemblies based on the model of the theory of change to ensure wide scale representation was achieved. Elections were only one part of democracy and the use of participatory democracy such as citizens assemblies could be considered as a means of increasing engagement during the election period. Members discussed that councillors were elected and represented citizens but it was noted that citizens assemblies were a different form of democracy and did not replace councillors. A member noted that however well commissioned a model of participatory democracy was, it rarely ensured that individuals of all socio-economic backgrounds were included and therefore it was incumbent upon councillors to be a conduit for democracy.

Following a vote it was:-

**RESOLVED** to ask cabinet to:

- 1) As part of a future council consultation process, investigate sources of funding to trial and potentially Commission demographically balanced participatory democracy methods including citizens assemblies based on the model of theories of change to ensure widescale representation is achieved;
- 2) Research those in Norwich who may be disenfranchised as a result of the introduction of voter ID and assess how the Council can promote uptake amongst those disenfranchised;
- 3) Ensure that communications planning for future elections includes:
- 4) Promoting the Voter Authority Certificate and Proof of Age passes as an avenue for securing voter ID and engage with local communities to raise awareness;
- 5) Promoting that acceptable Voter ID includes expired ID and, where relevant, EU passports and identity cards;

- 6) Promoting the concept of Voter ID to younger groups, including those able to vote for the first time, and the different communication methodologies that may be more relevant for younger groups such as alternative social media channels;
- 7) Ask the Electoral Registration Officer to re-run the postal vote registration programme as previously undertaken in 2020 to raise awareness amongst non-postal voters, requesting funding if available to do so;
- 8) Thank the Returning Officer and her team for the work undertaken to support the implementation of Voter ID and the successful undertaking of the May 2023 election in Norwich;
- 9) To write to all party leaders to request that if called on to form a government, they should prioritise the abolition of the Election Act 2022, and if not, to include the poll card as an acceptable form of ID.

#### **4. Report from the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (NHOSC)**

Councillor Prinsley advised that at the last meeting of the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (NHOSC) questions were asked of the three acute trusts about their waiting lists, the introduction of electronic patient records and the waiting times especially at outpatients and surgery. The point was made that extremely long wait times had reduced but there was an increase in those waiting a long time. In terms of progress on how the hospitals were integrating with each other, in order to achieve greater efficiencies, there were long delays with the introduction of electronic patient records which were key to this.

There was a discussion at the meeting regarding staff retention at hospitals especially in relation to nurses and he raised a question about parking. He considered that if it were difficult for staff to park at the hospital then this impacted staff retention. The second part of the meeting focussed on engagement with the Norfolk Eating Disorder Services which was a service in transition. A member commented that there were issues in relation to medical emergencies and eating disorders and the wait time for children and young people. He noted that wait times for adults were not measured and that he would like to see the data in relation to out of area placements.

It was noted that the full minutes of the meeting were publicly available on the County Council's website [here](#).

**RESOLVED** to note the update from the Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

#### **5. Report from the Norfolk Countywide Community Safety Partnership Sub Panel (NCCSPSP)**

It was noted that the last meeting was held on 8 June 2023 prior to the appointment of the current representatives. The full minutes of the meeting were publicly available on the County Council's website [here](#).

## **6. Scrutiny committee work programme 2022-23**

Members considered the work programme and following debate it was:

### **RESOLVED to**

- 1) ask the committee officer to ask officers if the topic on how the council addresses anti-social behaviour could be moved from the October to September meeting of committee;
- 2) move the topic on the Corporate Plan update to October 2023 meeting of committee and to note this could be subject to change;
- 3) move the topic on the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy to the March 2024 meeting of committee; and
- 4) ask officers to circulate a terms of reference for a task and finish group in relation to Retrofitting by email and for the group to convene and to report back to committee at its November 2023 meeting.

CHAIR