

**REPORT TO:** SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**DATE:** 14 SEPTEMBER 2021

**TITLE:** TURNOUT IN LOCAL ELECTIONS – INITIAL REPORT

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**RECOMMENDED that the Committee:**

- A** Notes the information within the report as background and future government proposals.
- B** Approves the questions (attached as Appendix D to the report) for consultation.

## **BACKGROUND**

1. The review submission form (attached as Appendix A to the report) requests that a review is carried out to understand why residents feel disconnected from local politics and why turnout in local elections is lower than for national elections. The review should include a consultation with the public.
2. The Council's Electoral Services has two distinct areas of activity. Firstly, Registration and maintenance of the electoral register. Work on electoral registration is undertaken all year round and currently is required to undertake the annual canvass, which begins in June focusses on ensuring that all eligible residents are registered to vote. This is the statutory responsibility of the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). Secondly, in three years out of four (called election by thirds), the authority (and when casual vacancies arise) holds District Elections. The planning for scheduled elections normally starts at least six to eight months in advance, including ensuring the availability of polling stations and staff. This is the statutory responsibility of the Returning Officer appointed by the Council (RO).
3. In addition, the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places once every five years. The most recent in Harlow being held in 2019. The Government have also begun a review of Parliamentary constituency boundaries by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) for which the initial consultation period has just finished. The LGBCE is

also responsible for undertaking periodic reviews of warding arrangements (Electoral Review) which has the ability to recommend changes to Ward Boundaries, numbers of Councillors and Elections frequency.

### Statistical History

4. Turnout in elections, and particularly local elections, has decreased over the years in Harlow. The same picture is seen nationally. At the local elections in May 2021 the voter turnouts in Harlow were as follows:

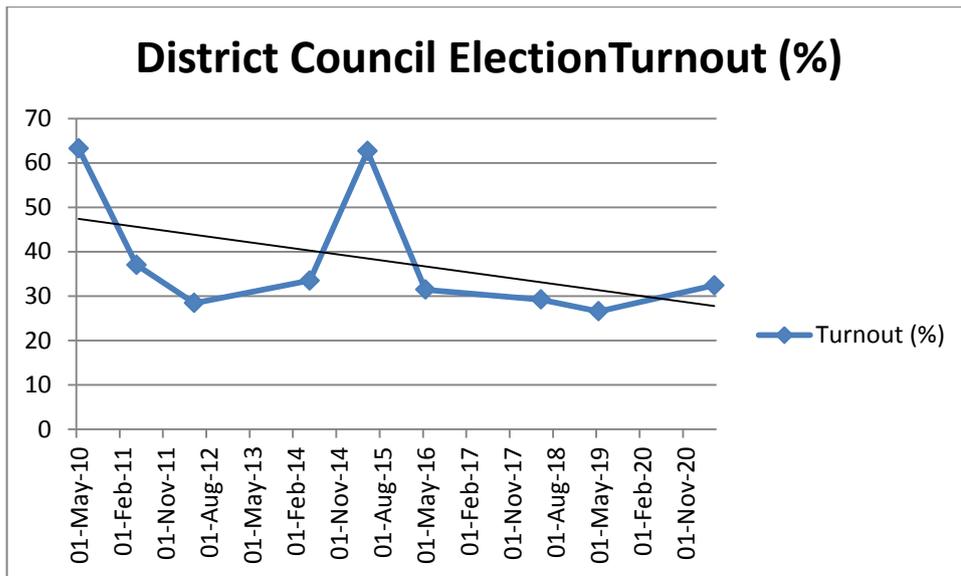
- a) District – 32.42 percent
- b) County – 32.41 percent
- c) PFCC – 32.35 percent

The combination of polls in 2021 did not push up voter turnout.

5. Below is a table which shows the turnout at district and county elections (excluding by-elections) over the past 10 years.

<b>Election Date</b>	<b>Election</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>	<b>Combined</b>
6 May 2010	District	63.26	Yes – with Parliamentary
5 May 2011	District	37.03	Yes – with AV Referendum
3 May 2012	District	28.43	No
2 May 2013	County	25.95	No
22 May 2014	District	33.48	Yes – with European
7 May 2015	District	62.65	Yes – with Parliamentary
5 May 2016	District	31.45	Yes – with PFCC
4 May 2017	County	28.59	No
3 May 2018	District	29.22	No
2 May 2019	District	26.55	No
6 May 2021	District	32.42	Yes – with County and PFCC
6 May 2021	County	32.41	Yes – with District and PFCC

6. The below line chart shows a downward trend of district council election turnout, but it should be noted that this is exaggerated by there not being a recent combined District and Parliamentary election. At District level this is particularly apparent when the elections are not combined with another type of election.



7. There has also been a steady decline nationally in turnout at General Elections, although those aged 55 and up have had a flat turnout rate. Turnout for those aged 54 and under has declined and this decline is most significant amongst the 18-24 age group.
8. In terms of comparable national statistics on District Council elections, the most recently published report by the Electoral Commission (2018) on turnout suggests an average turnout of 35.2 % (down from 37.4% in 2014) . Of this 35.2% only 34.9% (12.3% of all electorate), actually attended the polling station, the remainder being postal voters.
9. In 1964, the turnout was comparable across all age groups, but there is now a significant difference in turnout by age. There is no similar breakdown by age of voting at local elections, but it is a reasonable assumption that turnout increases by age at local elections as well.
10. According to 2011 census data, Harlow has a slightly lower percentage of 16-24 year olds than the national average 10.84 – 11.86. It also has a higher percentage of 25-59 year olds 48.48 – 46.92, and a lower percentage of 60-74 year olds 12.27 – 14.57. For those aged 75 and over, the numbers are comparable.

### Registration Activity

11. People are legally required to register to vote and can do so from the age of 16 in England. The vast majority of those who are eligible to register in Harlow have done so with 94.3 percent registering in the 2020 canvass. Most of those who have not registered live in temporary accommodation. There is also natural churn on the electoral register as people move properties over the course of the year.
12. In 2014, new legislation changed the registration system from a household based system to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Its aim was to give each

individual control over their own registration and a new online registration service was created to make registering easier. To ensure the security of this service it also sought additional information, such as their National Insurance number to verify a person's identity. This was a significant change and the registration rate did drop. However, as people got used to the system the registration rate has recovered.

13. The canvassing system was also been streamlined in 2020. In previous years a form was sent to every household asking them to confirm whether there were any changes. Where names are added, under IER, residents are then sent an individual form to complete (which they can also do online). A response was needed from all households.
14. Now household information is data matched against Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) data and local records and where all information matches, households are sent a notification letter which only requires action if there are changes. Households which do not completely match are sent a canvass form which is a legal requirement to respond to. This can be done by returning the form or going online. In 2020 and this year we have achieved a match rate of approximately 80 percent of households which means that only 20 percent of household will receive a canvass form.
15. Where households do not respond, the Council is required to send at least two reminders and one of the reminders must be a physical visit to each property. The Council employs electoral canvassers for this purpose. The new canvassing requirements should reduce the number of properties that need to be visited which means a greater focus can be placed on registering new voters.
16. The transition to IER has enabled voters to register online. There is no longer any need to contact electoral registration teams directly when registering. The Council has also used technology to improve the canvassing process. Households can respond online when they receive household forms.
17. For the first time in 2021, using a combination of savings and Government Grant, the Council has been able to fund the purchase of new canvassing technology for a two year evaluation pilot. Canvass Staff will now be using computer tablets to undertake doorstep registration which should further speed up canvassing. An evaluation of the success of this pilot will be undertaken in the latter part of 2022, one of the success measures would be increased registration.
18. The Council's Communications Team use social media to highlight awareness of the registration process throughout the period of the canvass and in the run up to pre-election registration deadlines. This includes information on the process of registering to vote, as well as applying for postal or proxy votes and the nominations process. This is done using Electoral Commission nationally provided material which is in line with yearly TV and radio campaigns placed by the Commission.

19. Council staff have previously engaged with younger people to encourage registration but this has latterly been curtailed due to the pandemic.

### **Performance Standards**

20. The electoral commission has set ERO's a number of performance standards against which registration activities are measured. We are directed towards the following outcomes:
  - a) Electoral registers are as accurate and complete as possible, ensuring that everyone who is eligible and wants to vote is able to do so;
  - b) Absent voting is accessible, ensuring that everyone who is eligible and wants an absent vote is included on the relevant absent vote list; and
  - c) Stakeholders and electors have confidence in the secure management of the electoral registers.

### **Elections**

21. As part of its polling station reviews, the Council looks at a variety of criteria to determine the suitability of polling stations. Access, both in terms of parking, and disabled access is a key consideration when determining whether somewhere is suitable to be a polling station. This is set out in Electoral Commission guidance which reinforces the general equalities duties placed upon the Council. The Commission has also produced a checklist which is attached as Appendix B to the report. An interim review is to be undertaken this year as polling station locations were altered in May 2021 following ministerial requests not to use schools as polling places.
22. The Council already works actively to engage with electors, particularly those who are known to be less likely to register and to vote including young people and ethnic minority groups. A copy of the Public Awareness Strategy is attached as Appendix C to the report.
23. Councillors will be aware that the pre-election period (the period between the publication of the notice of election and the election day itself) places limits on what the Council can and can't do. As a general rule the Council can't take any action which would be seen as promoting or supporting a particular political group. However, the Council can promote voting in general, and it does this through the Public Awareness Strategy, and primarily using Electoral Commission national campaign materials.

### **Voter ID**

24. On 5 July 2021, the UK Parliament introduced new legislation, the Elections Bill, which is hoped will strengthen the integrity of UK elections and protect democracy. One of the main measures (and challenges) is voter ID where voters will be required to show an approved form of photographic ID to be allowed to vote. It is likely that this will be brought in for the UK Parliamentary

election in May 2024 but could lead to big challenges for the Elections Department especially if the secondary legislation and guidance is not provided in a timely manner.

25. Voter ID has been trialled in various areas of the UK and the Electoral Commission's report on the 2019 pilots found that there were no significant issues with voter ID, it increased voter confidence in the elections process but it is crucial that this does not lead to disenfranchisement.
26. Concerns have been raised that the introduction of voter ID would lower turnout, particularly among more vulnerable groups who are less likely to have traditional forms of photo ID. Therefore any voter who does not have an approved form of identification will be able to apply for a free local voter card from their local authority. Details of how this will work have not yet been released. It is noted that in Northern Ireland voters have been required to bring ID to a polling station since 1985 and photographic ID since 2003 and voter confidence is consistently higher with virtually no allegations of electoral fraud at polling stations. Also, other European countries use voter ID, including France, Germany, Austria as well as Switzerland and Canada.
27. Following the 2019 General Election, the Electoral Commission carried out research on how people felt the election was run. This showed that:
  - a) Seventy-eight percent were satisfied with the process of registering to vote;
  - b) Ninety-three percent of those who voted were satisfied with the process of voting;
  - c) Eighty percent said they knew a lot or fair amount about the election;
  - d) Eighty-one percent found it easy to access information on what the election was for; and
  - e) Eighty-eight percent said it was easy to get information on how to register, and how to cast their vote
28. The majority of concerns surrounded campaign techniques and the belief that information about politics online is not trustworthy. The findings published by the Commission did not highlight any concerns from the public about the inadequacies of polling stations, but there was a significant minority of people who didn't feel they had enough information about the election. It is likely that for local elections this number would increase as there is less press coverage of local elections.

## **ISSUES/PROPOSALS**

29. This review will focus on identifying barriers to voting in Harlow, will be non-political and will therefore not determine whether there are particular policies which deter voters.
30. It is recommended that the questions attached as Appendix D to the report be approved. These will be included as part of an online consultation. The Council will also contact different community groups to encourage their members to complete the consultation, along with promotion via social media encouraging people to complete the survey.
31. The outcomes of the consultation will be analysed and an action plan will be developed which addresses areas highlighted by the consultation. This will then be reported to the Committee at its December meeting. Following the adoption of the action plan, a further report will come to the Committee meeting in September 2022 updating the Committee on progress against the action plan.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)**

None specific.

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Head of Environment and Planning**

### **Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)**

None specific.

**Author: Simon Freeman, Head of Finance and Property and Deputy to the Chief Executive**

### **Housing**

None specific.

**Author: Andrew Murray, Head of Housing**

### **Community Wellbeing**

As contained in the report.

**Author: Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing**

### **Governance (Includes HR)**

The reports sets out the Council's engagement activities for both registration and elections. The Council is under a governance reporting arrangement with the statutory body, the Electoral Commission and is also bound by restrictions on political publicity contained in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, as amended by Section 349 Communications Act 2003 and Section 27 of the Local Government Act 1988.

**Author: Simon Hill, Head of Governance**

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – Review Submission Form  
Appendix B – Electoral Commission Checklist  
Appendix C – Public Awareness Strategy  
Appendix D – Questions for Consultation

### **Background Papers**

None.

### **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

DWP – Department for Work and Pensions  
ERO – Electoral Registration Officer  
IER – Individual Electoral Registration  
LGBCE – Local Government Boundary Commission for England  
RO – Returning Officer