

REPORT TO: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 7 DECEMBER 2021

TITLE: TURNOUT IN LOCAL ELECTIONS – FINAL REPORT

LEAD OFFICER: SIMON HILL, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE AND CORPORATE SUPPORT (01279) 446099

CONTRIBUTING OFFICERS: ALISON HODGSON, ELECTORAL SERVICES MANAGER (01279) 446038

ADAM REES, SENIOR GOVERNANCE SUPPORT OFFICER (01279) 446057

RECOMMENDED that:

- A** The Returning Officer be requested to develop an action plan to deal with issues identified by the survey that are within the control of the Council on:
- i) Specific issues raised about polling stations; and
 - ii) Communications on voting options and absent voting

BACKGROUND

1. At its meeting on 14 September 2021, the Committee agreed to carry out a consultation on what could be done to improve turnout at local elections. This consultation ran from 20 September until 1 November. The survey was available to complete online and paper copies were available at the Civic Centre. Libraries were also provided with copies.
2. In total 168 people responded. A copy of the survey results is attached as Appendix A to the report.
3. All bar one of the respondents was registered. This is in line with the registration rate in Harlow.
4. The answers show that respondents are most likely to vote in Parliamentary elections and least likely to vote in the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner elections. This reflects general turnout patterns. The figures would reflect a much higher turnout than ordinarily seen, but this is likely due to people who are most likely to respond to this type of survey also being more likely to vote.
5. The answers to question 5 indicate that a lack of information about candidates and their policies is the most likely to stop someone from voting and these are

the factors which were most likely to have stopped someone voting in the past as set out in question 7.

6. Issues relating to polling stations had a moderate impact. Issues completely out of the Council's and political parties control such as weather or work commitments have a limited impact.
7. The age profile of respondents largely mirrors voter turnout patterns, with particularly low response rates in the 18-24 and 25-34 age categories.
8. Most wards had fairly consistent response rates with the exception of Church Langley. Whilst both wards have larger electorates, the response rate was disproportionate and may suggest higher general levels of engagement with the voting process.

ISSUES/PROPOSALS

Findings of the survey for action by Councillors and Political Parties

9. Overwhelmingly the three biggest reasons for people not voting were, not knowing the candidates, not knowing the candidates' policies, or not feeling that the parties standing in their ward represent their views.
10. The Council is only able to provide limited information about candidates. During the pre-election period the Council has to avoid doing anything that could be seen as promoting a particular party or candidate. This is set out 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. The Government published a code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity in 2011. The Code is based around seven principles to ensure that all communications activity meet the requirements of the statutory framework.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recommended-code-of-practice-for-local-authority-publicity>
11. The rules applying to the pre-election period do not stop councillors from issuing their own publicity as long as council resources are not used. The Council's guidance on the pre-election period is attached Appendix B.
12. This Council is required to appoint a Returning Officer who is responsible for the conduct of elections in accordance with the law. One of the Returning Officer's responsibilities is to publish a statement of persons nominated these are published on the Council's website and are available at the Civic Centre as well as sent to the polling stations and other locations around the town to be displayed on a notice board.
13. It is noted that a significant number of people do not feel that the parties in their ward represent their views. For the district elections in 2021, four out of the eleven wards had a choice between two political parties. No ward had more than four candidates.

14. Issues of visibility and political diversity of candidates are for political parties to address. The Committee may wish to evaluate the general results and the comments left by respondents to the survey and consider them with their political groups.

Findings which the Council can action

15. Some residents highlighted that polling station access was difficult. The Council does have to follow the Government's guidance when selecting polling stations and it has a statutory responsibility for reviewing polling districts and polling places every 5 years. The next review is due to be completed before the elections in 2024 however the Council can carry out reviews of polling station arrangements at any other time. An interim review has recently been carried out on some polling stations and a report will be considered by Full Council shortly.
16. This survey has highlighted concerns at polling stations in Bush Fair, Church Langley, Old Harlow and Toddbrook. In these wards every polling station has a car park with the exception of St Mary's Church Centre where there is no specific off-street car park. However this polling station has a fairly small electorate and alternative locations are not known. No particular parking issues were identified at the time of the last review.
17. It is recommended that the Returning Officer develops an action plan to address any specific issues which may be identified with polling stations in these wards. This will take place after the local elections in May in case the issues experienced were a result of the Covid restrictions in place at the time.
18. It is noted that some people did not vote due to work commitments. As Councillors will be aware absent voting by post and by proxy are available to all electors. Furthermore, emergency proxies are available to those who cannot attend at shorter notice for reasons such as work, or ill health. The Council does have a communications plan which includes how electors can vote if they cannot attend their polling station in-person, however It is recommended that the Returning Officer's action plan looks at how the Council can further raise awareness of absentee voting methods.

IMPLICATIONS

Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)

None specific.

Author: Andrew Bramidge, Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration

Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)

None specific.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy to the Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Housing

As contained in the report.

Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing

Community Wellbeing

As contained in the report.

Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment

Governance (Includes HR)

As contained in the report.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Support

Appendices

Appendix A – Results of Local Turnout Elections Survey

Appendix B – Council Purdah Guidance

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

None.