



Elections Panel Annual Report 2023

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Woking Borough Council Election – 5 May 2022

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Electoral Registration 2022-2023

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The revised Register was published on 1 December 2022. The total number of residential addresses at publication of the revised register was 44,451.

2.0 Registration Activity

- 2.1 To ensure that electors had as much time as possible to change or update their registration details, an elector leaflet which provided full details of the Borough election being held on 4 May 2023 was included in the Annual Council Tax mailing in March 2023. The leaflet also set out the new requirement for voters to show photo ID when voting at polling stations, the provisions in place to assist blind, partially sighted and other disabled voters at polling stations and changes to the format of poll cards.
- 2.2 In January 2023, Headteachers of seven local schools in the Borough were contacted to promote 'Welcome to Your Vote Week 2023' which was held between 30 January to 5 February 2023. The Electoral Commission led campaigns to raise awareness that 16 and 17 year olds can register as an attainer and are entitled to be included on the register of electors. A free resources pack, including presentation slides, social media graphics and posters was made available to the schools.
- 2.3 Several press releases were also issued by the Council encouraging registration within the Borough in the months leading up to the election.
- 2.4 The deadline to register for the Borough election was Monday, 17 April 2023. Electors who had submitted their applications had until Wednesday, 26 April 2023 to be verified to be included on the election register. If any new applicants could not be verified automatically, they were contacted to provide supporting evidence during this period. There were no problems with the Government Digital Service (GDS) and the online registration system for these elections.

3.0 Maintenance of the Register

Absent Vote Refresh

- 3.1 In January 2023, all absent voters with a personal identifier which was more than five years old were contacted to update their signature. Electors had six weeks to respond to the request and if no response was received after six weeks, the absent vote for the elector was removed.
- 3.2 1,954 electors were contacted with a new absent vote application form to obtain updated details. After three weeks, a reminder was sent to those electors who had not responded. 251 electors did not respond to either the initial request, or the reminder and the postal vote for these electors was removed accordingly. These electors were given the opportunity to re-apply for their postal vote when they were notified that the existing postal vote arrangement had been cancelled.

Data Checking

- 3.3 The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) uses Council sources to identify new electors to add to the Register. Regular updates from Council Tax are received, which lists the details of properties where the person liable for the Council Tax has changed. This information is cross referenced with the Electoral Register, and an Invitation to Register

(ITR) is sent out, to encourage the new occupants to register and confirm which electors can be removed from the Register. Changes to tenancy arrangements for WBC owned properties is also used to maintain the Register.

- 3.4 The Electoral Register is updated regularly with property updates from the Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG), and once it is verified that the new properties are occupied, ITR's are sent to obtain the new occupier details.

Electoral Reviews

- 3.5 The ERO reviews entries for electors where there is reason to believe that they are no longer resident at a property on a regular basis. Reasons for reviewing electors include notification of new residents at a property and post being returned from an elector as being undelivered.
- 3.6 Reviews are carried out when the ERO has received notification that an elector is no longer living at a property, but does not have secondary, collaborating information, such as Council Tax data, which is required to remove the elector from the Register.

4.0 Polling Places

- 4.1 The Council is required to review its Parliamentary polling districts and polling places before 31 January 2025. The Council carried out a review in October and November 2023 of the existing arrangements and invited comments and proposals for alternative arrangements.
- 4.2 Prior to the start of the review, Officers noted the majority of the existing arrangements were suitable and they would not be proposing any changes. Officers would be focussing attention on the St John's West polling district, with the view to changing the polling district boundary to include an alternative accessible polling place to the Sutton Avenue Common Room. In addition to this, Officers would be concentrating on the Barnsbury Polling District in identifying an alternative polling place to The Lighthouse Barnsbury if accessibility issues could not be resolved.

5.0 Annual Canvass

- 5.1 The canvass commenced on 17 July 2023 with the electoral register being disclosed to the Minister for the Cabinet Office as part of a data matching exercise known as national data matching and was carried out by using the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data. Once the results were received a further data matching exercise was undertaken at a local level using Council Tax and Housing and Benefits data known as local data matching.
- 5.2 The national data matching results were received on 19 July 2023 which gave a clear indication of the matched and unmatched properties in the Borough. The total number of matched properties and allocated to Route 1 after DWP matching was 31,209. The total number of unmatched properties and allocated to Route 2 was 13,278. The accuracy of the DWP dataset was 92.62%.
- 5.3 The local data matching was undertaken on 3 August 2023. The results confirmed that the total number of Route 1 properties was 36,917 and the total number of Route 2 properties was 7,694. The accuracy of the Council Tax dataset was 97.63%.

- 5.4 The total number of Route 3 properties was 47. These properties were exempt from data matching as they were primarily care homes, where a 'responsible person' could provide information on the residents.
- 5.5 All properties were contacted on 22 August 2023 with Route 1 properties receiving a Canvass Communication A (CCA) form or an E-Communications setting out who was registered at the property. 24,586 Route 1 properties were contacted by E-Communications this year. For those properties in receipt of a Canvass Communication A (CCA) a response was only required if the information was incorrect. These properties were only in receipt of the one canvass form and were not followed up. For those properties in receipt of an E-Communication a response was required, and a subsequent Canvass Communication A (CCA) form was sent to all non-responding properties.
- 5.6 Route 2 properties received a Canvass Communication B (CCB) form followed by two further contact attempts for non-responding properties. At the first reminder stage some electors received an E-communication and where no email address was held a subsequent Canvass Form was sent on 26 September 2023. At the final stage all non-responding properties received a personal visit carried out by the Council's canvassers.
- 5.7 All Route 3 properties were individually contacted by the Electoral Services Team.
- 5.8 15 canvassers carried out the second reminder, personal visit stage of the canvass from 28 October 2023, visiting all other properties that had not responded to the previous correspondence (either by email or by post). In total, 3,277 properties were included in this stage with each property receiving one contact attempt.
- 5.9 A breakdown of the returns by the individual routes is set out below.

Route 1 Properties	Responses Received
Number of responses received	13895
Number of responses reporting a major change	1774
Number of responses reporting no change or minor change	2365
Number of responses reporting no change	9790
Number of Additions within households	1110
Number of Deletions within households	966

Route 2 Properties	Responses Received
Number of responses received	5451
Number of responses reporting a major change	2097
Number of responses reporting no change or minor change	595
Number of responses reporting no change	2767
Number of Additions within households	1281
Number of Deletions within households	1294

Route 3 Properties	Responses Received
Number of individual responses received	47
Number of responses reporting a major change	36
Number of responses reporting no change or minor change	11
Number of Additions within households	272
Number of Deletions within households	126

5.10 A total number of 3111 Invitation to Register (ITR's) forms were issued to newly identified electors which were identified as part of the Canvass. A total number of 4886 new applications were received during the canvass period.

5.11 A total of 17,772 responses were received via the automated response services. This equates to 39.60% of all properties.

5.12 Prior to the publication of the register additional checks were carried out in October and November to ensure its accuracy.

Duplicate Entry Checks

5.13 Possible duplicate entries were analysed, checking against Council Tax records, to highlight where entries have been duplicated. Where Council Tax records show that electors have moved from one property to another, they were removed from the previous address and an Invitation to Register (ITR) was sent out.

Empty Property Check

5.14 The details of new developments in Woking, in particular the Sheerwater Regeneration and Town Centre developments were analysed, and cross referenced against Council tax records to ascertain which properties were empty or had been demolished.

Publication of the Revised Register

5.15 The revised register was published on 1 December 2023. The overall response rate to the annual canvass was at 94.85%.

5.16 At the start of the canvass a total number of 44,554 residential addresses were on the electoral register. The total number of residential addresses at publication of the revised register was 44,657.

5.17 The following information is given as a comparison of the register as at 1 September 2023, (the last publication of the rolling registration updates before the canvass) and the register as published on 1 December 2023.

Register	1 September 2023	1 December 2023
No. of Electors	75,235	75,736
Attainers (16 and 17 year olds)	407	317
Over 76s	7479	7509

Postal Voters	14,118	13975
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- 5.18 The number of electors increased during the canvass. Registration forms are sent to newly identified electors who register separately.
- 5.19 Electors who turn 18 in the course of the year (1 December – 30 November) are included in the attainer figures. Also included in the attainer figures are 16 year olds, who will turn 17 in the same period. As the newly identified attainer electors complete their registrations, the attainer numbers will increase.

Borough Election 4 May 2023

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides a comprehensive overview of the Borough Election 2023. It outlines the processes put in place from the initial publication of the Notice of Election to the declaration of the result, to comply with legislation and ensure the integrity of the election process.
- 1.2 The Elections Act 2022 introduced a new requirement for voters to show an accepted form of photo identification (ID) to vote in person at a polling station. In addition to this, changes were required to be made in terms of what help is available to people voting in a polling station. This legislation were implemented for the May 2023 Poll.

2.0 Photo Identification (ID)

- 2.1 A local Voter ID public awareness campaign commenced on Monday 9 January 2023 to coincide with the Electoral Commission’s national campaign at each stage up until the Borough Election on 4 May 2023. The campaign promoted key messages around the requirement for voter ID to vote at a polling station and how to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate. Resources such as social media channels, press releases, roadshows and the distribution of an elections leaflet to every property within the borough were used to raise awareness amongst electors. Posters were placed on borough and community boards around the borough and at key locations including the Town Centre, Woking Leisure Centre, Eastwood Leisure Centre and Woking Sportsbox. Leaflets were also distributed to community centres, places of worships and community groups/organisations.
- 2.2 Tailored information to help support vulnerable residents, traveller communities, disabled, older, trans and non-binary people to understand and meet the new voter ID requirements was circulated to over 477 charities/organisations within the borough.
- 2.3 Engagement sessions were held with the residents of the York Road Project in April 2023 to promote electoral registration and the Voter Authority Certification application process. These sessions resulted in six residents being added to the register of electors and the successful application for the Voter Authority Certificate.

2.4 An elector who did not have or did not wish to use one of the accepted forms of photographic ID, could apply for a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC). The Voter Authority Certificate application service went live on 16 January 2023. Electors could make an application online via the governments new ERO Portal, request a paper application or apply in person at the Civic Offices. Over 70 electors applied for the Voter Authority Certificate at the deadline for receipt of applications on 25 April 2023.

3.0 Accessibility of Polling Stations

3.1 A meeting was held with Members of the Woking Access Group on 18 November 2022 to discuss the new legislation regarding accessibility of polls ahead of the borough election. Feedback was sought on the range of support for voters with disabilities currently available in polling stations and the proposals to be implemented to make our polling stations more accessible to all.

3.2 Provisions to further assist blind, partially sighted and other disabled voters at polling stations was implemented for the borough election on 4 May 2023. Polling stations were provided with the following additional equipment to help all electors to vote independently and in secret:

- Notice of the range of help and support available to electors
- Pencil grips
- Large A5 magnifying devices
- LED touch sensor light in disabled polling booth
- Polling station staff name badges
- Yellow ballot box slot highlighters

3.3 The Council's online polling station finder tool was updated to include a function whereby electors could view the accessibility facilities and support available at our polling stations prior to Polling Day.

4.0 Notice of Elections

4.1 The Notice of Elections was published on Friday, 24 March, on the instruction of the Returning Officer.

5.0 Election Staff

5.1 The Returning Officer appointed seven Deputy Returning Officers (DROs). They were appointed with full powers and their role included adjudication of returned postal vote statements, inspecting polling stations and the oversight of individual count teams.

5.2 The election was managed by the Electoral Services Manager, with support from the Electoral Services Officer, Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services and Head of Democratic Services.

5.3 The opening of postal votes was managed by the Head of Democratic Services supported by the Democratic Services Team.

5.4 Polling station and count staff were recruited, where possible, from Council employees and previous election staff. Staff were notified that, when accepting an offer of employment to work in a polling station they were consenting to work during the hours of poll without a rest break and in excess of the maximum working hours provided by the Working Time Directive.

6.0 Staff Training

6.1 All staff working in a polling station undertook training. The training was undertaken on-line and received positive feedback.

6.2 Additional training was provided and delivered by the Electoral Services Manager specifically in relation to the new Voter ID requirements.

6.3 A Returning Officers Briefing was held via Microsoft Teams on 2 May to emphasise the key points and priorities ahead of Polling Day.

6.4 Count supervisors and assistant count supervisors received full guidance on the verification and count process in advance. Additionally Count supervisors and assistant count supervisors were briefed prior to the start of the verification and count process.

7.0 Nominations

7.1 Nominations for Borough election were dealt with by the Electoral Services Manager.

8.0 Poll Cards

8.1 Poll cards were printed and issued after the Notice of Election was published on 28 March 2023.

8.2 One further poll card mailing was sent on 25 April 2023, to ensure all eligible electors received official notification.

9.0 Postal Votes

The management in the printing and production of the postal ballot packs was outsourced to a commercial supplier, Civica Election Services for this election. The fusion pack design was selected which fuses the postal voting statement and the ballot paper together, prior to printing. The Fusion pack therefore eliminates the risk of ballot paper mismatch. The Electoral Services Manager retained oversight of the process and attended Civica's offices to inspect the packs before they were distributed.

Issue of Postal Vote Packs

9.1 The first stage issue of postal votes was on Friday, 14 April 2023. A further postal vote issue was despatched on 24 April 2023, these were for electors who registered to vote after 17 April 2023 (registration deadline) and those who applied for a postal vote by 18 April 2023 (postal vote deadline). In total, 14,289 postal votes were issued which equates to 19% of the electorate being sent a postal ballot.

9.2 37 replacement ballot paper packs were issued up until the deadline of 5pm on Election Day. Packs are reissued in cases where the elector advised that they had spoilt their ballot papers, lost their postal ballot papers, or had not received them. In such circumstances, the original postal vote ballot paper was cancelled, and a new postal vote pack was issued.

Opening of Postal Votes

The opening of all postal votes was held at Export House on the third floor.

- 9.3 Opening sessions started on Monday 24 April 2023. As in previous years, the DROs adjudicated the postal vote scanning. Agents were advised in advance of the dates of the opening sessions.
- 9.4 In total five opening sessions were held. The final opening session was held on Thursday, 4 May which dealt with those postal votes arriving in the post on the day of the election, those handed in at either the Civic Offices or polling stations and those returned by the Post Office through the final sweep.
- 9.5 The post box at the Civic Offices was checked at 10.00pm and a final 'sweep' was undertaken by the Royal Mail at their delivery office, which resulted in further postal votes being received.

Returns Analysis

- 9.6 71.4% of postal vote packs were returned, representing a total of 10,201 envelopes returned.

Process Followed

- 9.7 Postal votes are opened, and the contents checked prior to the scanning of the postal vote statement. At this stage, a postal vote can be provisionally rejected for the following reasons:
- Ballot Papers Numbers do not match – ballot papers cannot be accepted where the number on the ballot paper envelope does not match the number on the postal vote statement.
 - Ballot Paper Envelope and Ballot Papers are missing.
 - Postal Vote Statement is absent.

Verification of Postal Vote Statements

- 9.8 After the initial checks, postal vote statements are verified by a DRO, to ensure the signature and date of birth provided on the statement matches those on the original postal vote application.
- 9.9 The reasons for rejecting a postal vote at this stage are:
- Date of Birth Rejected – either the date of birth has not been entered on the postal vote statement, or it does not match the date of birth provided on the postal vote application.
 - Signature Rejected – either the signature has not been entered on the postal vote statement, or it does not match the signature provided on the postal vote application.

- Signature and Date of Birth Rejected - either the voter did not complete the postal vote statement, or both the signature and date of birth provided on the postal vote statement did not match the signature and date of birth provided on the postal vote application.

Rejected Postal Votes

9.10 The table below sets out the number of postal votes rejected through the scanning process. Postal votes are recorded as provisionally rejected in those instances where there is a possibility of reconciling the issue (such as a missing Statement). Any provisionally rejected postal votes which cannot be reconciled are deemed rejected at the close of poll.

Category	2021	2022	2023
Rejected	261	277	208
Provisionally Rejected	285	122	168
Reconciled	16	98	148
Total Rejected	530	301	228
Missing Ballot Papers	58	9	4

9.11 Set out below are the number of postal votes rejected as part of the signature and date of birth verification process.

Reason for Rejection	2021	2022	2023
Date of Birth Rejected	74	84	49
Date of Birth Missing	0	23	39
Signature Rejected	168	115	68
Signature Missing	0	14	18
DOB and Sig Rejected	11	12	19
DOB and Sig Missing	0	26	11
Lost, Spoilt and Cancelled	8	3	4

Post - Scanning Checks

9.12 Following the scanning of the postal vote statements, the contents of the ballot paper envelope are checked. A postal vote can be rejected at this stage for the following reasons:

- Ballot Papers Numbers do not match – ballot papers cannot be accepted where the number on the ballot paper does not match the number on the ballot paper envelope.
- Ballot Papers were absent.

9.13 Any errors relating to personal identifiers were recorded at the scanners. Where electors needed to update their identifier, they were contacted following the election. Any clerical errors were also corrected.

10.0 Polling Stations

- 10.1 45 polling stations were used for the elections in 29 venues, 11 of which were dual stations and 2 were triple stations.
- 10.2 All polling equipment was delivered prior to polling day and Presiding Officers were asked to record any issues that occurred or were reported on polling day in a log book. This included possible errors on the register, visits from Police Officers and cases where electors were marked as an absent voter and claimed not to have asked for a postal vote. This information has been analysed and, where appropriate, electors have been contacted.
- 10.3 Seven representatives from The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DHLUC) observed the poll at various polling stations and attended the postal vote opening session on 4 May 2023 and Count as Electoral Commission Observers. Feedback received was extremely positive in the efficient running of the borough election.
- 10.4 Polling station data was provided to Democracy Club to be included in the voting tool, polling station finder. Between Monday 1 May and Thursday 4 May a total of 3056 residents in the Borough used this tool to find their polling station.

11.0 Voter Identification Data

- 11.1 All polling stations were provided with documents to capture and record information relating to the voter identification requirements. The Ballot Paper Refusal List (BPRL) and Voter ID Evaluation Form (VIDEF) notes sheet were used throughout polling day.
- 11.2 Woking was one of a few local authorities selected by the Electoral Integrity Programme at DHLUC to provide early voter ID response data from the May Poll. The data would be used to address issues raised by local and national media, politicians and others with an interest in the implementation of voter identification. Woking's data was provided to DHLUC after the close of poll at midnight on 4 May.
- 11.3 The data shows that 99.7% of electors voting in the borough's polling stations brought photo ID that met newly introduced voter ID requirements.
- 11.4 Collated figures across the borough show 17,377 electors voted at our 45 polling stations on 4 May.
- 11.5 The figures show while 154 electors were initially turned away, 110 returned with acceptable ID and were able to vote. This means 71.4% of those initially turned away returned and were issued with a ballot paper.
- 11.6 At the end of polling day, 44 electors who tried to vote in a polling station were not given a ballot paper because they did not meet the new voter ID requirements – 0.3%.

12.0 Verification and Count

- 12.1 All polling station documentation and ballot boxes were returned to Woking Leisure Centre on Thursday, 4 May following the close of polls. Following the completion of the final postal vote opening session the postal ballot papers were stored alongside in the Main Hall overnight with two security guards' presence.
- 12.2 The verification of the Borough election was held on Friday, 5 May at Woking Leisure Centre from 9.30am. There were five count teams consisting of a count supervisor, an

assistant count supervisor and fourteen count assistants. Four count teams were located in the Main Hall and one in the Wurlitzer.

- 12.3 The count of the ballot papers for the Borough Election commenced from midday. Following the confirmation of the Borough results, all count teams were released at 4.00pm. SERCO removed all documentation and equipment from Woking Leisure Centre to the secure store.
- 12.4 During the count, security staff were in place in the Main Hall and Wurlitzer. CCTV cameras were installed in the Main Hall which covered the document sorting area, the counting areas and the entrances to the room.
- 12.5 Colour coded wrist bands were issued to all attendees, to differentiate between levels of security access for all those in attendance.

Storage of Documents

All documents returned from polling stations and counted ballot papers were sorted into crates in the Main Hall and these were sealed and removed to a secure store at the Civic Offices on Friday, 5 May.

Turnout

- 12.6 The turnout for the elections was 37%.

13.0 Electoral Integrity

- 13.1 The Returning Officer and DROs were available to investigate and deal with any matters reported from Polling Stations, Candidates and Agents on Polling Day. No significant issues were reported, and no issues were reported to Surrey Police.
- 13.2 There are no concerns in respect of electoral integrity to report.

14.0 Conclusion

- 14.1 The election was a success. The process ran smoothly and efficiently. The elections team have invited feedback from those involved to continue to review and improve its practices and procedures where possible.

REPORT ENDS