

North Somerset Council

Report to the Partnerships and Corporate Organisation Management Overview Policy and Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 10th November 2022

**Subject of Report: North Somerset Council District and Parish Elections
4th May 2023**

Town or Parish: All

**Officer/Member Presenting: Philippa Penney, Head of Democratic and
Electoral Services**

Key Decision: No

Reason:

No decision being taken.

Recommendations

That the Panel notes the arrangements for the forthcoming North Somerset District and Parish elections scheduled to take place on Thursday 4th May 2023 and offers any observations for consideration by the Returning Officer.

1. Summary of Report

This report summarises the planning and actions undertaken to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of the forthcoming North Somerset District and Parish elections. It also notes the provisions of the Elections Act 2022 and the impact this will have for these elections.

2. Policy

The delivery of the election aligns with the North Somerset Council Corporate Plan vision of openness and fairness and is reflected in the priority to achieve a council which empowers and cares about people.

3. Details

- 3.1 As members will be aware, the next scheduled elections for North Somerset Council and the town and parish councils throughout the North Somerset area will take place on Thursday 4th May 2023.
- 3.2 To give an idea of the scale of the operation, at the last set of local elections in 2019 the eligible electorate was over 165,000. Approximately 28,000 voters chose to use a postal vote, whilst the remainder voted via the ballot boxes located across 128 polling stations. Nearly 600 nominations were received from candidates contesting the district and parish seats. 350 polling staff were deployed with a total staff count of 950 including the verification and counting of the votes, transport, IT and contact centre colleagues etc.

- 3.3 Preparations for the May elections are progressing with premises confirmed for the postal vote issue and opening, polling and count venues. Staff appointments are currently underway along with completion of those processes that can be undertaken ahead of the notice of election and nominations period. These include preparing briefings to parish councils and prospective candidates, updating staffing lists, liaising with printers, our software provider, and other third-party suppliers.
- 3.4 The council's website is being updated with comprehensive and accessible pages dedicated to the various aspects of the election and will be the key communication tool throughout the electoral process.
- 3.5 A draft timetable is attached showing the key dates that any potential candidates along with prospective agents will wish to be aware of:

Publication of Notice of Election	20/03/2023	
Start of Nominations	21/03/2023	
Close of Receipt of Nominations	04/04/2023	4.00pm
Delivery of Notice of Withdrawal of Candidature	04/04/2023	4.00pm
Appointment of Election Agents (District only)	04/04/2023	4.00pm
Publication of Statements of Persons Nominated	05/04/2023	4.00pm
Bulk issue of postal votes	15/04/2023	(Saturday)
Deadline for Registration applications	17/04/2023	Midnight
Deadline for Postal Vote & Postal Proxy applications	18/04/2023	5.00pm
Deadline for Voter Authority Certificate applications	25/04/2023	5.00pm
Deadline for ordinary Proxy Vote applications	25/04/2023	5.00pm
Deadline for appointing Poll and Count Agents	26/04/2023	
Day of Poll (7.00am to 10.00pm)	04/05/2023	
Verification of the votes (following close of poll)	04/05/2023	
Counting of the votes	05/05/2023	

- 3.6 The verification of the votes will start following the close of poll as ballot boxes are delivered to the count venue.
- 3.7 The counting of the votes will take place on Friday 5 May and will start with the district papers. It will then move on to the parish count as the day progresses. Only 20 of these counts will be for a single vacancy i.e., the single member district wards. All other counts will have more than one vacancy and therefore papers will be counted using kangaroo board style counting sheets.
- 3.8 Declaration of results will be made following completion of each electoral area count.

Elections Act 2022

- 3.9 The Elections Act 2022 was passed through Parliament on 23 April 2022 and makes changes to the UK electoral system. The Act seeks to improve the security, accessibility and transparency of elections and campaigning, and contains measures that effect elections and the way we vote. Whilst the timetable for implementing

some of the measures has been delayed, two of them will be in place for the elections in May 2023.

3.10 Voter identification

Electors will have to show an approved form of photographic identification to be allowed to vote at a polling station. If they cannot provide one of the required forms of identification as set out in the legislation (e.g., driving licence, passport) they will be able to apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate from their Electoral Registration Officer.

3.11 Accessibility

Returning Officers (RO) will have a general responsibility to take all reasonable steps to support voters with disabilities. The Electoral Commission will be providing guidance on what measures ROs can look to put in place for their area. The provision for voters to be assisted by a companion will be extended to allow anyone over the age of 18 to assist.

3.12 Future changes

Although not in place for the elections next May, additional measures will come into force at various subsequent points. These include:

- A ban on political parties and campaigners from handling postal votes
- A limit on the number of postal votes a person can hand in at polling stations
- Changes to the process for applying for postal votes
- EU citizens will no longer automatically be able to register to vote, vote and stand for election
- Removal of the 15-year limit on voting rights for British citizens living overseas
- Introduction of the First Past The Post voting system for Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

4. Consultation

The process for the conduct of elections is prescribed by legislation and thus not subject to consultation. The legislation is supplemented by guidance from the Electoral Commission.

5. Financial Implications

Election costs at combined local elections are split between the district council and the parish councils. North Somerset Council costs will be met from the elections reserve and the parish councils will be recharged following the elections.

The additional costs being incurred as a consequence of the Elections Act will be the subject of new burdens funding provided by the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, in a hybrid mix of grant funding and justification-led bids. Whether sufficient new burdens funding is provided to cover actual costs incurred remains to be seen.

6. Legal Powers and Implications

The conduct of the election including the polling and count rules are governed by the Representation of the Peoples Act 1983 and subordinate regulations.

It is a legal requirement to comply with the Elections Act 2022 and subsequent secondary legislation in the form of Regulations and to ensure that the Council meets its obligation (under section 54 of the Representation of the People Act 1983) to provide sufficient resources to the Electoral Registration Officer.

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

None

8. Risk Management

The risks are that legal action may result if the legislative requirements are not met, which would result in additional costs and a loss of reputation for the Council. These risks can be mitigated by ensuring that appropriate planning and resources are put in place, in good time.

9. Equality Implications

All polling stations and electoral service venues remain compliant with the relevant disability legislation. Under the Equality Act's Public Sector Equalities Duty, decision makers are required to consider the need to advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people's needs.

10. Corporate Implications

The Council is legally required to provide the Returning Officer with sufficient resource to ensure that the election is administered effectively.

11. Options Considered

There are no other options, the legislation must be complied with.

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Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

Electoral Commission Risk Register – local elections 2023

Electoral Commission website – local elections in England

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent/local-elections-england>

NSC website pages – *relevant pages currently in development*

Elections Act 2022 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/contents/enacted>