ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF VOTER ID ON PLYMOUTH RESIDENTS AND ELECTIONS TEAM
Electoral Services

1. INTRODUCTION

Photographic voter ID has never been required in England before 2023, with the exception of a small number of pilot areas in 2018 and 2019.

The debate around voter ID in the UK, outside of Northern Ireland, has been marked by references to the security of the process and perceptions of electoral fraud on one side, and with those concerned about the effect on turnout and the inclusivity of the process on the other. In 2014 the Electoral Commission recommended the introduction of voter ID in polling stations, specifically referencing how the change could improve both the security of the system and confidence in electoral processes, stating that: 'perceptions of fraud can be as damaging as actual incidents of electoral fraud'.

A few years later, and following the high profile cases of electoral fraud in Tower Hamlets, Sir Eric Pickles led a review into electoral fraud in England, also suggesting that voter ID be introduced as a means to decrease the risk of fraud and increase public confidence in elections.

Following these recommendations, and a pledge to 'legislate to ensure that a form of identification must be presented before voting', in 2018 and 2019 voter ID was trialled in several pilot areas in England. Different types of ID were trialled, including poll cards and photographic identification

After the pilots, the government announced its intention to roll out the policy across the UK. This developed into the 2022 Elections Act, which introduced the legal requirement to present photographic identification in polling stations from May 2023 – a particularly stringent requirement compared to the other piloted options.

This report looks at:

- issues identified whilst administering the May 2023 local elections and how these affected how the elections were run in Plymouth
- the impact of Voter ID on Plymouth City's registered electors and elections officials
- how the actions taken by the Council, the Returning Officer and the elections team to support residents at future elections, including measures to provide information and support to those who may struggle to meet the new identification requirements
- any additional resources and costs thereof that may be required to ensure that all Plymouth residents are able to exercise their right to vote in future elections

2. BACKGROUND

Scheduled local government elections were held in England on 4 May 2023.

In England, 230 principal area local authorities held elections for 8,057 vacant seats. In addition, there were council by-elections, thousands of parish and town council seats and four local authority mayoral elections in Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield and Middlesbrough.

Scheduled local government elections can usually be planned well in advance. However, these May polls were a step into the unknown to deliver. The new voter identification requirements introduced unfamiliar voting processes and created new challenges for voters, polling station staff, candidates, election agents and electoral administrators.

3. LEGISLATION

The Elections Act 2022 (the Act) received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022.

For clarity, Elections Act provisions apply to:

- English local government elections and referendums
- Police and Crime Commissioner elections in England and Wales
- UK Parliamentary by-elections
- UK Parliamentary general elections (from 5 October 2023)
- UK Parliamentary recall petitions.

The Voter Identification Regulations 2022 and The Voter Identification (Principal Area, Parish and Greater London Authority Elections) (Amendment) Rules 2022 came into force on 16 January 2023 – less than four months before polling day.

The regulations implementing voter identification measures include:

- requiring voters to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued for relevant polls taking place on or after 4 May 2023
- requiring EROs to issue Voter Authority Certificates (VAC) free of charge to eligible electors who apply.

4. ELECTIONS ON 4 MAY 2023

Elections Act Issues

It was inevitable the May 2023 polls would be challenging. The Act introduced significant changes to the voting process for both voters and electoral administrators. The challenges in delivering these changes were markedly intensified due to late legislation and guidance, plus additional issues as outlined below.

a. **Late legislation** - Parliamentary scrutiny of the Elections Bill delayed the passing of the Act, contributing to secondary legislation being made less than six months before polling day. The lateness of the legislation directly impacted the EC's ability to provide key guidance, with RO guidance not available until 8 February 2023. The combination of late legislation and late guidance meant training for elections staff in Plymouth was also held later than we would like to have seen. As a result, we were inevitably focused on understanding and implementing new legislative requirements at a time when they would usually be concentrating solely on delivering the election.

b. **Voter Authority Certificates (VAC)** - on 16 January 2023, the UK Government launched a website for electors to apply for a free VAC if they did not hold suitable photo ID to vote in a polling station. While the portal allowed to the electoral registration team to process applications from 16 January, much of the necessary processing functionality was not ready at launch. The team had to employ manual processes and workarounds to meet legal requirements.

c. **Postal vote application volumes** - political parties encouraged electors to apply for a postal vote to avoid needing to show ID in the polling station. This contributed to a measurable increase in postal vote applications received shortly before the deadline in some areas. Late applications take time to manually process, especially if additional verification is required. They are also more labour intensive to print and post out at the busiest point of the election timetable. This can reduce the time electors have to receive and return their vote, which can be further compounded by supplier issues.

d. **Polling station paperwork** - additional polling station forms were introduced for 4 May: the Ballot Paper Refusal List (BPRL), Voter Identification Evaluation Form (VIDEF) and VIDEF notes sheet. These new forms have been added to an already significant amount of documentation Presiding Officers (POs) are required to fill out and return.

e. **Acceptable forms of valid photo ID** - on 4 May 2023, electors presented a wide variety of identification, both with and without photos. While documents without photos were straightforward, it was more complicated to evaluate down other types, such as a passport from Zimbabwe or a British format immigration document. Other local authority issued IDs

such as taxi licences and gun licences were presented on 4 May but could not be accepted. There were also instances of police warrant cards, NHS and other emergency services photo ID being presented.

f. **Polling station staffing** - Elections Act requirements suggested additional staff resources were required. In Plymouth, additional Poll Clerks and Polling Station Inspectors were required. While enough staff and sufficient reserves have initially been recruited, late vacancies occurred and remained a concern right up to, and on, polling day. This common challenge was made worse by the increasing complexity of this year's polls.

5. ELECTION TURNOUT

Turnout at these elections was 32.3 %, which was slightly lower that at the last comparable set of elections in 2022: 32.7%; 2019: 33.7% and 2018: 34.9%.

Table 1 shows the comparison in overall (polling station + postal vote) Ward turnout from 2018.

Ward Level Electorate, Ballot Papers and Turnout

		2023	2022	2021 (Covid-19 elections)	2019	2018
Budshead	% Turnout	30.1%	31.2%	37.3%	35.0%	34.6%
Compton	% Turnout	39.9%	37.5%	42.9%	39.2%	41.3%
Devonport	% Turnout	24.1%	26.3%	28.9%	28.4%	30.0%
Drake	% Turnout	32.7%	32.7%		23.7%	29.4%
Efford & Lipson	% Turnout	28.8%	29.3%	32.6%	30.7%	32.3%
Eggbuckland	% Turnout	33.7%	33.1%	36.4%	35.7%	37.4%
Ham	% Turnout	27.4%	29.4%	30.1%	30.8%	32.9%
Honicknowle	% Turnout	23.3%	27.1%	27.9%	30.3%	32.2%
Moor View	% Turnout	33.0%	34.8%	38.5%	35.5%	37.4%
Peverell	% Turnout	40.8%	44.6%	48.1%	45.2%	46.9%
Plympton Chaddlewood	% Turnout		35.7%	37.2%		28.4%
Plympton Erle	% Turnout	35.5%		37.8%	35.6%	
Plympton St Mary	% Turnout	38.6%	33.8%	40.1%	37.0%	37.0%
Plymstock Dunstone	% Turnout	43.2%	38.6%	41.9%	36.0%	38.6%
Plymstock Radford	% Turnout	34.8%	35.1%	37.7%	35.6%	37.5%
Southway	% Turnout	29.7%	31.0%	35.1%	35.5%	35.1%
St Budeaux	% Turnout	28.3%	28.2%	33.3%	30.9%	30.2%
St Peter and the Waterfront	% Turnout	27.7%	28.5%	30.9%	30.2%	31.8%
Stoke	% Turnout	32.7%	33.4%	36.2%	33.2%	35.9%
Sutton and Mount Gould	% Turnout	30.3%	31.0%	32.9%	31.7%	33.5%
		32.3%	32.7%	36.1%	33.7%	34.9%

Table 2 shows polling station turnout per Ward.

Polling Station Voter Turnout			
	2023	2022	2021
Ward	% Turnout	% Turnout	% Turnout
Devonport	17.8	20.2	22.5
Ham	19.0	21.5	21.7
St. Budeaux	18.6	19.4	24.1
Honicknowle	15.7	19.9	20.0
Budshead	21.7	22.8	28.8
Southway	21.0	22.4	26.3
Moor View	22.8	25.5	29.1
Eggbuckland	24.1	23.9	27.3
Stoke	25.6	26.9	29.2
Peverell	34.5	38.4	42.1
Compton	32.2	30.7	35.8
Drake	28.2	28.7	
St Peter & the Waterfront	21.2	21.7	23.7
Sutton &Mount Gould	25.1	25.6	27.8
Efford & Lipson	21.8	22.8	25.8
Plympton Chaddlewood		27.4	29.2
Plympton St Mary	30.1	26.0	31.7
Plympton Erle	27.6		30.4
Plymstock Radford	26.1	26.8	29.8
Plymstock Dunstone	34.1	30.2	33.7
Average	24.3	25.1	28.2

Table 3 shows postal vote turnout per Ward.

Postal Vote turnout			
Ward	PV%	PV%	PV%
Devonport	68.7	66.7	66.5
Ham	71.3	70.5	70.2
St. Budeaux	76.4	72.6	76.3
Honicknowle	70.0	69.8	73.3
Budshead	70.5	71.7	75.4
Southway	68.4	69.6	72.7
Moor View	74.0	75.0	76.5
Eggbuckland	71.6	69.8	72.7
Stoke	74.6	71.7	74.5
Peverell	71.5	74.1	75.0
Compton	74.3	71.3	75.2
Drake	70.0	71.2	
St Peter &the Waterfront	69.6	71.3	71.8
Sutton &Mount Gould	71.6	72.0	70.7
Efford & Lipson	72.7	70.1	72.3
Plympton Chaddlewood		75.3	72.7
Plympton St Mary	77.5	70.6	77.2
Plympton Erle	76.6		73.5
Plymstock Radford	73.9	73.1	73.4
Plymstock Dunstone	79.6	73.4	76.2
Average	72.9	71.6	73.6

The data above shows that there is a slight decrease in polling station turnout in most Wards and there is direct correlation between this and the increase of postal vote being returned. However, there were four Wards that had both increase in polling station turnout and postal vote return rate:
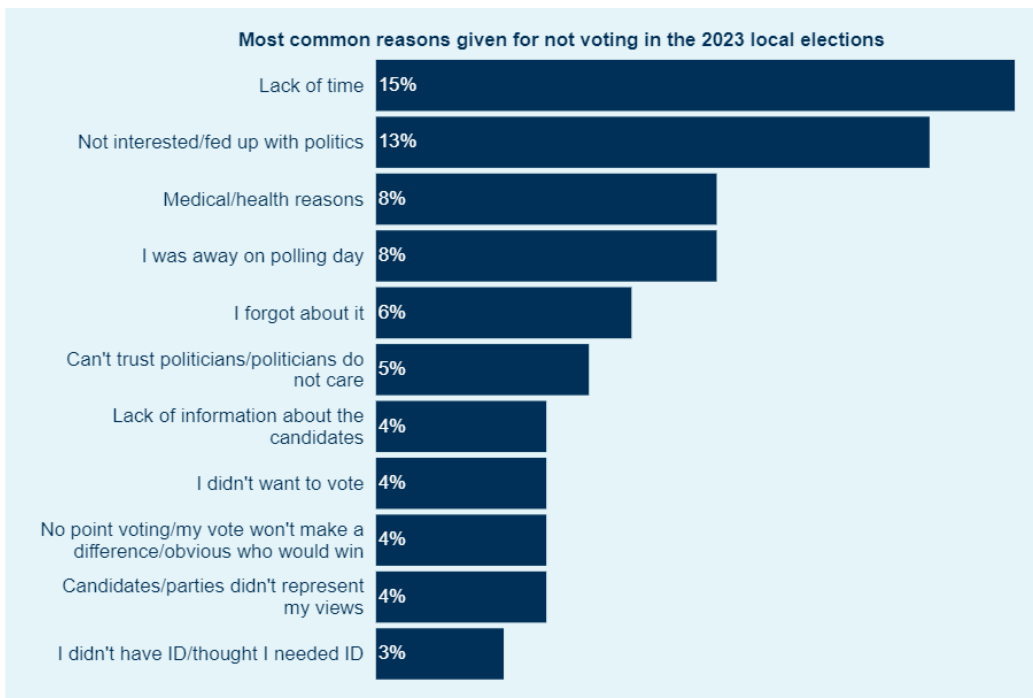
- Eggbuckland
- Compton
- Plympton St Mary
- Plymstock Dunstone

According to the Electoral Commission's report (September 2023), the most common reasons given by people who told them they did not vote were:

- lack of time or being too busy at work (mentioned by 15% of non-voters)
- a lack of interest in, or being fed up with, politics (13%)
- medical reasons unrelated to Covid (8%)
- being away on polling day (8%)

Although it was not one of the most common reasons given, 3% of non-voters said they did not vote because they did not have ID, and 1% said it was because they did not agree with the requirement to show ID to vote at a polling station.

Table 4 shows the most common reasons given for not voting in the 2023 local elections (Electoral Commission, September 2023).

Most common reasons given for not voting in the 2023 local elections

Reason	Percentage
Lack of time	15%
Not interested/fed up with politics	13%
Medical/health reasons	8%
I was away on polling day	8%
I forgot about it	6%
Can't trust politicians/politicians do not care	5%
Lack of information about the candidates	4%
I didn't want to vote	4%
No point voting/my vote won't make a difference/obvious who would win	4%
Candidates/parties didn't represent my views	4%
I didn't have ID/thought I needed ID	3%

6. VOTER ID STATISTICS

The Voter ID statistics below were gathered from polling stations at Plymouth City Council local elections held on Thursday 4 May 2023.

Total number of **polling station electors** who applied for, but at least initially were not issued with, a ballot paper	176
The total number of **polling station electors** who were not issued with a ballot paper and who later returned with accepted ID and were issued with a ballot paper	90
The number of **polling station electors** who applied for but were not issued with a ballot paper by close of poll	86

Contextual Information

The total number of electors who were eligible to vote in person at the **polling stations**	158,918
The total number of voters issued with a ballot paper at **polling stations**	38,614
The percentage of electors eligible to vote in person at the **polling stations** who voted	24.3 percent

Proportions

Percent attended the **polling station** and were able to vote on 4 May	99.8 percent
Percent who applied for but were refused a ballot paper by the close of poll	0.2 percent
The percentage of electors who applied for, but were initially refused, a ballot paper	0.2 percent
Of the electors initially refused a ballot paper, the percentage who later returned with accepted ID and were issued with a ballot paper	51.1 percent

7. ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICER AND RETURNING OFFICER TO MITIGATE RISKS

Use of Electoral Commission materials as well as running a Plymouth-specific publicity and communications campaign:

- Advertisement in Local Newspaper (Herald)
- Social Media messaging (both targeted and general)
- Flyers and posters in our libraries
- Billboard advertising including bus shelters
- Posters in city car parks
- Pull-up banners in Hospital entrances
- Messaging in resident and student newsletters
- Stakeholder and Councillor toolkits
- Staff screen savers and email signature

Flyer included with Council Tax bills for all households sent in March 2023.

Poll cards dispatched at the end of March 2023 were redesigned to inform electors about the types of valid photo ID that would be required to vote in a polling station.

Distinct Polling station messages/signage placed outside polling stations before and on the day of poll: "You must have eligible photo ID in order to vote at this polling station in the upcoming election"; "You must show eligible photo ID to vote here today!"

Personal email/text messages to all residents for whom we hold contact details.

All polling station staff, including around 230 poll clerks, had face to face training.

20% standby polling station staff recruited.

8. FUNDING

Additional funding was provided to cover the implementation of voter ID. We made full use of the £110K we were allocated to carry out a successful 2023 local election.

We anticipate a further payment in the region of £60k in November 2023 to cover 2024 elections (Voter ID) but this funding has not yet been confirmed.

Post 2024, funding to support local elections will be allocated through the central government Revenue Support Grant – details of which are yet to be released.

9. CONCLUSION

Voter ID was implemented without significant visible problems at the May 2023 local elections in Plymouth.

A separate report from the Electoral Commission published on 13th September, "Report on the May 2023 local elections in England" concluded that despite challenging circumstances, electoral administrators were able to deliver well-run elections and that public confidence in the electoral process remains high. They noted nevertheless:

- That some people found it harder than others to show accepted voter ID, including disabled people and the unemployed.

- Variations in ownership of accepted photo ID and in awareness of the need to show ID when voting in person.

- Given there are important elections that are due to be held during the next 18 months, it will be important to improve accessibility and support those people who do not have an accepted form of ID.

Considerable efforts were made by the electoral registration team to ensure we were well prepared for Voter ID and local data suggests it had minimal impact on the integrity of the 2023 vote.

10. CHALLENGES AHEAD

Tranche 2 of the Act will introduce further complexity and challenges. It:

• requires postal voters to reapply for a postal vote every three years, replacing current rules only requiring a signature refresh every five years

• restricts the handling of postal votes, including limiting the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station or council office, and requires returns to be recorded

• further limits the number of people someone may act as proxy for • changes voting and candidacy arrangements for EU citizens

• allows all British citizens living overseas to register to vote and vote in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK or whether they were ever registered to vote.

These changes are being introduced to a system already under pressure, even before Voter ID and accessibility changes were introduced

There are particular concerns about the volume of registration and postal vote applications likely to be received immediately before a poll, and the increasing burden and responsibilities being placed on Presiding Officers.

New UK Parliamentary boundaries

The next UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) is likely to be run on new constituency boundaries. This will require significant adjustments in a short period, especially for a local authority like Plymouth where constituency boundaries are shared with neighbouring local authorities.

UKPGE timing

The repeal of the Fixed Terms Parliament Act 2011 means the next UKPGE could be held at any time within the five-year Parliamentary term. The latest date the next UKPGE can be held is Tuesday 28 January 2025.

UKPGE planning and delivery is challenging with no date known and the possibility of a 'snap' poll. Limited notice to deliver an enormous and complex project will be complicated by new boundaries, new voting procedures, limited resources and the need to recruit and train an army of temporary staff.

It could be argued UKPGEs were administered at short notice in the past, but that was before the days of postal voting on demand, the introduction of rolling registration, and online registration capability up to 12 working days before the poll.

Pressures for the next UKPGE will be exacerbated by the introduction of Elections Act Tranche 2 measures. These include the extension of the overseas franchise and online absent vote applications alongside those introduced in May, such as VACs.

Combined UKPGE

If the next UKPGE election is held on 2 May 2024, it will be combined with scheduled Police and Crime Commissioner and Plymouth City's local government elections. With sufficient notice, there are benefits to combined polls.

However, if a UKPGE is announced after poll cards and postal vote packs have been produced, we are concerned the industry would be overwhelmed. As an example, there would be an automatic doubling of the number of postal voting packs, leading to challenges in production, distribution and processing.

It should be noted that 2 May 2024 polls will see Plymouth City running two separate polls. This will require days of counting, and coordination across multiple local authority areas to complete all declarations.

Polling station capacity

While no widespread major issues arose in May 2023 following the introduction of Voter ID, a UKPGE presents different challenges.

The voting process now takes longer, with ID checked for each elector and additional paperwork to complete. In addition, postal vote handling provisions will be in place from May 2024, further adding to the burden placed on Presiding Officers.

UKPGE turnout is generally significantly higher than at local elections. The EC reports local election turnout in May 2022 was 33.6%, compared to a 67% turnout for the December 2019 UKPGE.

To avoid queues, it will be necessary for ROs to review the size of the electorate at each polling station, administrative processes, staffing numbers and roles. It is unlikely totally effective solutions will be available in every circumstance.

While there were a limited number of issues reported by polling station staff on 4 May 2023 because of voter ID requirements, there are likely to be more at a higher turnout and high profile UKPGE.

Staffing

Recruitment and retention of sufficient and competent temporary elections staff is increasingly challenging.

It is becoming increasingly apparent fewer people are willing to take on evermore complex polling station roles. Tranche 2 Elections Act changes will further increase the burden on Presiding Officers (PO). When a voter hands in a postal vote at a polling station, for example they will have to complete a form, which the PO will need to monitor. This will increase polling station staff work and need to be considered when allocating staff. At the local elections in 2022, 102 councils reported an average of 617 postal votes handed in at polling stations. More can be expected at a UKPGE.