

Governance Committee

12 February 2021

Report title	Evaluation of 2020 Annual Canvass	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance	
Accountable director	David Pattison: Director of Governance	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
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Report has been considered by	Not applicable.	

Recommendation for action:

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

1. Note and provide feedback on the evaluation of the 2020 annual canvass.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an evaluation of the 2020 annual canvass; the first one to be delivered under Canvass Reform.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 It is a legal requirement for the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to carry out an annual canvass to ensure that the electoral register is up to date.
- 2.2 The 2020 annual canvass was the first to be held under the reformed canvass as per The Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019. Changes were introduced to give ERO's more flexibility in how they approach the annual canvass. The key change was the introduction of a national data matching step to match the electoral register with DWP records to provide results on where properties have matched (indicating no change), or not matched (indicating a change) to inform the ERO of which route to take. There are now three different routes and multiple contact permutations available within each route:
- Route 1 properties are unlikely to have changed and these households only need to respond if they want to make a change.
 - Route 2 properties are likely to have changed and they are required to respond to the canvass communication they receive.
 - Route 3 properties in Wolverhampton are Care Homes where a Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) is required to provide an update on their current occupants.
- 2.3 Even with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Cabinet Office confirmed that EROs are still required to meet their statutory duties including conducting household visits *where it is safe to do so*. If an ERO felt household visits could not take place, they would need to be clear as to the reasons why. In Wolverhampton, the decision was taken to initially postpone the door knock due to safety concerns, and then a later decision was made to cancel it completely due to the second national lockdown where household visits were not possible. At all stages advice was taken from Public Health officers to support the position taken. Household visits are effective at eliciting a response from households who have not yet responded to the letters they have received. The ERO took the following mitigating actions to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register:
- Reminder canvass form with a pre-paid return envelope posted to all non-responding properties
 - Data matching against council tax and housing benefit data.
 - Additional corporate communications messages to encourage non-responders to respond.

As the canvass was not delivered as fully intended under canvass reform, this cannot be a true evaluation of the impact on canvass reform, but there are things that worked well and areas for improvement that can be built in to 2021 planning.

3.0 Evaluation

- 3.1 The annual canvass commenced in July 2020 and at that point there was an electorate of 183,625. The national data match took place in July, and 68% (78,788) properties matched which were allocated to route 1 (light touch canvass), and 32% (36,427) properties did not match which were allocated to route 2. 79 care homes were allocated to route 3.
- 3.2 Electoral Services also made use of the optional local data matching stage and used council tax data, void properties data and customer services data and were able to match a further 2,572 properties to route 1, which took the totals up to 71% allocated to route 1 and 29% to route 2 and 0.5% to route 3. Nationally, 73% of properties were allocated to route 1.

4.0 Route 1 properties

- 4.1 A Cabinet Office survey revealed that over half of local authorities did not use the new canvass communication methods of e-comms and telephone canvassing. These methods were used for the Wolverhampton canvass. 35% of route 1 properties (29,281) were sent an email asking them to respond to the canvass online. Information was put on the council website to explain to residents that they may receive an email from the council asking them to respond to the canvass form. There were a number of queries from residents checking whether this email was legitimate as they have not been contacted in this way before. A handful of households opted out of being contacted by email in the future. 22% (6,587) of households who received the email responded online.
- 4.2 For households without email addresses and for those who did not respond to the email, they were sent a Canvass Communication Form A which was a two sided A4 letter without a pre-paid envelope showing the names of people registered at this address and to invite them to respond **only** if there were changes required, and if needed to do so online. 14% (12,939 properties) responded to route 1 communications– 21% (2,772) of these were major changes (additions and deletions to the register), and 79% (10,168) were minor changes (such as change of name, application to vote by post). The majority (89%) of all responses received in route 1 were made online, with just 4% (577) by post, and the others by phone, text and email.
- 4.3 This was a significant channel shift, as in previous canvasses the majority of responses would have been by post in the pre-paid envelope and all properties in Wolverhampton would have to respond even if there was no change. This reduced paper processing and the administrative burden in the office, which was particularly beneficial this year with the Electoral Services team largely working from home. Wolverhampton will continue to use e-comms for route 1 properties and explore the option to do more data matching to gather more email addresses for households, and to make collection of contact details a key focus with every communication with electors going forward.

5.0 Route 2 properties

- 5.1 All households in this route are required to respond and the ERO is required to contact these households three times, where they do not reply, and one of these must be a personal canvass such as a telephone call or door knock. 33,834 households received a Canvass Communication Form B letter which was an A4 double sided letter without a pre-paid envelope and electors were encouraged to respond online. 30% (10,025) of households responded at this stage. For the next stage, 2,129 properties where telephone contact numbers were held for matched electors were contacted via a new method of telephone canvassing. Ten employees from customer services were employed to undertake this activity over a four-week period. Some advisors spoke additional languages which was beneficial in getting a response from some households. 30% (628) of households contacted via telephone responded over the phone.
- 5.2 The second contact method was a canvass form which is similar to the household enquiry form sent in previous years with a pre-paid return envelope. This was sent to 23,696 properties who had not responded to the first stage contact. 15% (3,678) of these properties responded.
- 5.3 The final contact method was scheduled to be a door knock which could not take place, so a final canvass form and pre-paid envelope was sent to 18,018 properties. A further 24% (4,445) responded to this stage. At the end of canvass there were 13,573 households outstanding.
- 5.4 These outstanding properties will receive another opportunity to update the electoral registration details when all properties in Wolverhampton will receive a Household Notification Letter in mid-February, which will also include information on the upcoming election and how they can apply for absent votes.
- 5.5 Even with a pre-paid envelope provided, 54% of responses were received online, 21% by post and by 25% email, text or phone, indicating a strong channel shift as the messaging on the letter encouraged electors to respond online.
- 5.6 Usually, the canvass in Wolverhampton starts in July with canvassers going out in September. Now that there are fewer households to require a response from, households may be more likely to respond later in the year rather than during the summer holiday period. It is proposed that the 2021 canvass first communications start towards the end of August, with reminder letters in September and household visits in October.
- 5.7 It is felt that the canvass communication permutations used worked well and the same routes and contact methods will be employed for 2021.

6.0 Route 3 properties

- 6.1 One employee from Electoral Services led on canvassing care homes by emailing and calling senior responsible offices at care homes up to three times. After the third contact, they were sent a canvass form in the post with a pre-paid return envelope. 60% (47) of

care homes responded to the canvass communication, which was higher than in previous years, so communicating with SRO's in a more flexible way was beneficial and Wolverhampton will continue to canvass care homes via route 3.

- 6.2 The ERO has a data sharing agreement with Wolverhampton University who sent student data from all of the student halls of residence, so that the ERO could send individual registration forms to students in addition to canvassing these properties.

7.0 Overall response rate

- 7.1 The overall canvass completion rate was 89%. In the last few years the canvass response rate in Wolverhampton has been between 90-94%. However, it is difficult to compare the response rate of this canvass with previous year, as 71% of properties have not been required to respond and this year there has been the added complication of Covid-19. The revised register was published on 4 January 2021 with an electorate of 183,479.

8.0 Financial implications

- 8.1 The annual canvass is funded from the revenue budget set aside for Electoral Registration. The budget for 2020-2021 is just over £309,000. In addition to this the Cabinet Office has provided grant funding of just over £14,000. This individual electoral registration grant allocation is almost £38,000 lower than the previous year in anticipation of reduced costs emanating from reform of canvass processes. The anticipated reduction in costs has not, however, been fully realised this year and an overspend against budget is forecast. This can be accommodated within the wider Governance Division, which is forecasting an underspend overall, but a bid for additional grant funding of £30,000 has been submitted to the Cabinet Office. This submission is currently under review. [GE/19012021/A]

9.0 Legal implications

- 9.1 There are statutory provisions covering the delivery of electoral registration activity, and the decision to not undertake the door knock due to public health concerns has been appropriately mitigated and supported by the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office. The legal advice is therefore that the approach has been a lawful one. [DP/26012021/A].

10.0 All Other Implications

- 10.1 There are no other implications arising from the recommendation in this report.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

- 11.1 None.

12.0 Appendices

12.1 None.