

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL	Governance and Ethics Committee 14 January 2022
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Report title	Evaluation of 2021 Annual Canvass	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet member for Governance and Equalities	
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Report has been considered by	Election Board	14 December 2021

Recommendation for action:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the 2021 annual canvass.

1.0 Purpose

1.1 To provide an evaluation of the 2021 annual canvass.

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. The annual canvass now starts with a national data match of the electoral register with DWP records to categorise properties in to route one – matched properties (indicating no change in household composition), or route two - no match (indicating a change in household composition). This allows the ERO to take a flexible approach and target resources on properties where there is a change.

2.3 Route one properties receive a 'light touch' canvass, where they are sent a letter but only need to respond if there is a change. The route two properties must respond and are sent multiple different types of communications including a door knock to elicit a response. There is also a route three for properties with a senior responsible officer who can respond on behalf of the residents. In Wolverhampton, Care Homes with a senior responsible officer are assigned to route three.

2.4 It is important to caveat the comparison of the two canvasses under Canvass Reform with the fact that the door knock element of the 2020 annual canvass could not take place due to Covid restrictions in place at the time. The door knock did take place for the 2021 canvass.

3.0 Overall evaluation

3.1 The annual canvass commenced in July 2021 and at that point there was an electorate of 183, 956. The national and local data match took place in July using the same approach as last year, and there was a positive increase compared to last year as 8% more properties matched, so there were fewer properties that needed to be canvassed via route two. The following table shows the number of properties and responses by route for 2020 and 2021.

Canvass	Route one	Route two	% response to route two	Overall completion rate
2020	71% (81,360)	29% (33, 834)	59.9% (20,261)	89%
2021	79% (92, 227)	21% (23, 283)	67.1% (15, 623)	93.4%

- 3.2 Typically the electoral register is more accurate when elections take place as people tend to make sure they are registered to vote ahead of an election. In 2020, there were no elections. In 2021, there were local and regional elections. A household notification letter was also sent to all households in March 2021. These factors will have contributed to a more accurate and up to date register which is why the match rate was higher this year.
- 3.3 Evaluation by the Electoral Commission revealed that nationally 75% of properties were allocated to Route one, so Wolverhampton was higher than the average this year, and higher than the West Midlands average of 77.5%.
- 3.4 The overall canvass completion rate was higher than last year. This could be attributed to a higher match rate to begin with, and the additional responses gained from canvassers conducting the door knock. A total of 7,660 properties were outstanding a response at the end of the canvass.
- 3.5 The annual canvass concluded on 1 December 2021, when the revised register was published. There are 182, 811 electors on the electoral register and 35, 932 postal voters.

4.0 Route one evaluation

- 4.1 Properties in route one only needed to respond if there was a change, except for those who received an initial email as they were required to respond to ensure that the communication had reached the property.
- 4.2 Emails were sent to 15,507 properties this year, and there was a 27% response rate (4,198), which was an increase on the 22% response rate at this stage in 2020. In 2020 there were a lot of queries from residents checking whether the email was legitimate as they had not been contacted in this way before. There were minimal queries this year and more communications were put out in residents' newsletters and on the website to inform residents that they may receive this email.
- 4.3 Households without email addresses and those who did not respond to the email 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 online only if there were changes required. The table below shows the outcome of the route one contacts:

	2020	2021
Properties	81,360	92, 227
Full responses	12, 939 (15.9%)	10, 705 (11.6%)
Changes (electors added/deleted)	2, 772	30
No changes	10, 168	10, 679

4.4 Properties in this route only need to respond if there is a change. The vast majority of those who responded reported no change. Overall, there was a positive outcome as there were much fewer changes made compared to last year, indicating a more accurate and up to date register at the beginning of canvass. The following table shows the contact methods electors used to respond, which shows a sustained channel shift towards more online responses:

	2020	2021
Post	577 (4%)	280 (2.6)
Internet	11,515 (89%)	9, 827 (91.8%)
Phone	116 (0.9%)	83 (0.8%)
Text	64 (0.5%)	38 (0.4%)
Email	12 (0.1%)	21 (0.2%)
Phone call to customer services/electoral services	646 (5%)	454(4.2%)

4.5 An area for improvement for the 2022 Annual Canvass for route one properties will be to increase the number of emails being sent out and responded to in order to reduce the cost of printing and postage. Data mining and data matching options with other council databases will be explored to see if more email addresses can be imported in to the electoral register.

5.0 Route two evaluation

5.1 All households in this route are required to respond and the ERO is required to contact these households three times and one of these must be a personal canvass such as a telephone call or door knock.

5.2 All 23, 283 properties 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. Properties who did not respond at this stage were then sent an A3 double sided Canvass Form with a pre-paid envelope. Properties who did not respond to the canvass form then received 2 door knocks and a leaflet posted through the door. The table below shows the outcome of the route two contacts:

	2020		2021	
	Properties contacted	Response rate	Properties contacted	Response rate
Stage 1: CCB letter	33, 834	30% (10, 025)	23, 283	32% (7, 530)

Stage 2: Telephone canvass	2, 129	30% (628)	0	N/A
Stage 2: Canvass Form	23, 696	15% (3,78)	15, 753	20% (3, 217)
Stage 3: Door knock	N/A Additional canvass form – 18, 018	N/A 24% (445)	12, 536	39% (4, 876)

- 5.3 At each stage of this year’s annual canvass, the response rate was improved compared to last year.
- 5.4 The following table shows the contact methods electors used to respond, which shows a sustained channel shift towards more online responses and less by post:

	2020	2021
Post	21%	11.5% (1,804)
Internet	54%	51.9% (8,107)
Phone	25% - all other contact methods. Data not available by type	4.9% (773)
Text		1.1% (172)
Email		0.08% (12)
Door knock		18.8% (2, 951)
Phone call to customer services/electoral services		11.5% (1, 801)

- 5.5 There was a software glitch with the Elections Management System which meant that the telephone canvass option could not be utilised this year. The provider, Civica unfortunately could not resolve the issue for this year’s canvass but assured it would not happen next year. Data matching options will be explored to gather more contact details for properties.
- 5.6 The door knock was trialled at a later stage in the annual canvass so that canvassers worked right up to the register publication date. Canvassers worked from the beginning of October up until end of November. In previous canvasses they have worked from the beginning of September up until the end of October. The feedback from canvassers was that they preferred working September – October due to the weather and daylight hours. This will be accommodated in next year’s canvass timetable.

5.7 It was difficult to recruit and retain canvassers for this year annual canvass. The Electoral Commission research also found that many local authorities have struggled to recruit canvassers due to the ongoing concerns around Covid-19.

5.8 Next year, following the local elections, a recruitment campaign will be launched to recruit more canvassers and to give them smaller rounds to manage so that they have more time to make more than the statutory visit to each property to try and obtain a response.

6.0 Route 3 evaluation

6.1 One employee from Electoral Services led on canvassing 62 care homes by emailing and calling senior responsible offices up to three times. After the third contact, they were sent a canvass form in the post with a pre-paid return envelope. 20% (26) of care homes responded to the canvass communication, which was lower than last year when 60% of care homes responded to the same approach. This is more typical of previous canvasses.

7.0 Financial implications

7.1 Against the background of a high match rate the cost of the annual canvass has been met from the £312,000 budget set aside for electoral registration in 2021-2022. The costs of future canvass operations will have to be closely monitored. Forecasts will be incorporated in quarterly revenue monitoring reports and any emerging budget pressures highlighted as part of that process. [GE/15122021/N]

8.0 Legal implications

8.1 The statutory provisions for the annual canvass have been met by the ERO.
[DP/20122021/C]

9.0 Equalities implications

9.1 Due to the nature of population turnover in each ward, each ward does have a different percentage of properties that are allocated to each route. The nature of the reformed Annual Canvass enables Electoral Registration Officers to focus resources on the wards where the data indicates that there has been a change in household composition.

10.0 All other Implications

10.1 There are no other implications arising from this report.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

11.1 Electoral Commission report on 2021 canvass in Great Britain:

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/2021-canvass-great-britain-july-september>