

CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL

Governance and Ethics Committee

11 January 2024

Report title	Evaluation of Annual Canvass 2023	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield	
Accountable director	David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer	
Originating service	Electoral Services	
Accountable employee	Alice Peacock	Deputy Electoral Services Manager
	Tel	01902 55 0551
	Email	Alice.Peacock@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report has been considered by	Election Board	18 December 2023

Recommendation for action:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Provide feedback on the 2023 annual canvass.

1.0 Purpose

1.1 To provide an evaluation of the 2023 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 This is the fourth year of the reformed annual canvass. The annual canvass started with a national data match of the electoral register with Department for Work and Pension (DWP) records to categorise properties into 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 canvass communication 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 The earliest the annual canvass can start by 1 July and conclude by 1 December for the publication of the revised register. Wolverhampton started contacting electors as part of the annual canvass on 4 July 2023.

3.0 Overall Evaluation

3.1 On 1 July 2023, there was an electorate of 185, 687. The national and local data match took place in July using the same approach as last year, and there continues to be a high property match rate meaning there are fewer properties that needed to be canvassed via route two. The following table shows the number of properties and responses by route for 2022 and 2023.

Canvass	Route one	Route two	% response to route two	Overall completion rate
2022	81% (93, 805)	19% (22, 420)	69.3% (15, 549)	94.1%
2023	81% (94, 355)	19% (22, 285)	74% (16, 484)	95%

3.2 An evaluation of the annual canvass by the Electoral Commission in 2022 revealed that nationally 74.4% of properties were allocated to route one, so Wolverhampton was higher than the average both in 2022 and 2023, and higher than the West Midlands average of 74.2%.

- 3.3 The overall canvass completion rate was higher than last year at 95% compared to 94.1%. This could be attributed to a high match rate to begin with, and the additional responses gained from canvassers conducting the door knock. A total of 5,803 properties were outstanding a response at the end of the canvass. All of these properties received two written communications, two door knocks and a leaflet through the door encouraging them to respond to the canvass communications. Overall the total electorate reduced by 894 electors to 184,505 compared to 185,399 in 2022, and the number of postal voters reduced by 1,773 to 32,912 compared to 34,685. It is expected that these numbers will increase significantly ahead of a general election, as nationally the impact of event led registration is seen.
- 3.4 Positively, the number of attainers (young people aged 16-18) increased by 1,141 to 1,739 compared to 598 in 2022.
- 3.5 The annual canvass will conclude on 2 January 2024, when the revised register will be published. There are 184, 505 electors on the electoral register and 32, 912 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 46, 257 properties this year compared to 42, 838 in 2022, and there was a 45.3% response rate (20, 953), which was an increase on the 29.7% (12, 735), response rate at this stage in 2022. In 2022 there were some 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:

	2022	2023
Properties	93, 805	94, 355
Full responses	25, 446 (27.18 %)	27, 277 (28.9 %)
Changes (electors added/deleted)	76	452
No changes	25,394	18, 731

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

	2022	2023
Post	86 (0.3 %)	154 (0.5 %)
Internet	22, 176 (87.1 %)	23, 479 (86.3 %)
Phone	1, 779 (7 %)	1, 322 (4.9 %)
Text	740 (2.9 %)	797 (2.9 %)
Email	84 (0.3 %)	50 (0.2%)
Phone call to customer services/electoral services	460 (1.8 %)	1, 420 (5.2%)

4.5 An area of improvement for the 2023 Annual Canvass for route one properties was to further increase the number of emails being sent out and responded to, to reduce the cost of printing and postage. Data mining and data matching options with other council databases were used as part of this year's data match which led to a higher percentage of properties in route one.

5.0 Route 2 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 22, 285 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:

	2022		2023	
	Properties contacted	Response rate	Properties contacted	Response rate
Stage 1: CCB letter	22, 425	33 % (7, 471)	22, 285	31.2 % (6, 974)

Stage 2: Telephone canvass	2, 297	28 % (637)	2, 737	18 % (493)
Stage 2: Canvass Form	12, 656	8.5 % (1078)	14, 775	10.1 % (1, 494)
Stage 3: Door knock	10, 671	60 % (6, 354)	11, 362	54.9 % (6, 236)

- 5.3 In 2022 industrial action impacted the delivery of the stage 2 canvass forms resulting in a timetable crossover of stage 2 and 3. This led to a reduced response rate for stage 2 but an increased response to canvassers door knocking in stage 3. In 2023 the canvass timetable was brought forward to account for possible disruption.
- 5.4 There was a ten per cent drop in the response for telephone canvass this year. Generally, electors were less willing to provide details over the phone. Due to the telephone canvass being less effective than anticipated it is proposed that going forward these properties will be put through to a door knock route.
- 5.5 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:

	2022	2023
Post	3.1% (694)	6.8% (1,103)
Internet	35.6% (7, 993)	47.9% (7, 821)
Phone	2.4% (543)	3.4 % (555)
Text	0.4% (82)	0.5 % (85)
Email	0.04% (9)	0.1 % (15)
Door knock	22.1% (4, 951)	28.6% (4, 674)
Phone call to customer services/electoral services	3.1% (686)	8.8 % (1, 441)

- 5.6 The door knock was trialled at an earlier stage than in the annual canvass in 2022 to give canvassers more time to visit properties. The initial start date for canvassing in one ward had to be pushed back due to a by election held on the on 28 September 2023. The canvass in the affected ward started after the result was declared. All canvassers commenced the door knock after the final closing date for elector registration for the by election. Canvassers worked from September up until the start of November. In previous canvasses they have worked from the beginning of October up until the end of November. The feedback from canvassers was that they preferred working September – October due to the weather and daylight hours. This will be reflected in next year’s canvass timetable.

6.0 Route 3 evaluation

- 6.1 Electoral Services contacted 76 care homes by emailing and calling senior responsible offices up to three times. After the initial email, they were also sent a canvass form in the post with a pre-paid return envelope. 63% (49) of care homes responded to the canvass communication, which was higher than last year when 41% of care homes responded.

7.0 Financial implications

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications associated with the recommendations of the report.
- 7.2 The costs associated with the annual canvass are funded by the electoral registration budget. The current net budget for 2023-2024 is £316,000. The costs of future canvass operations will continue to be closely monitored as inflationary increases in postage costs and software are being seen. Funding of inflationary pressures will look to be mitigated through efficiencies in the first instance with any growth needing to be considered as part of future budget setting processes alongside the medium term financial strategy (MTFS) and will be subject to future reports.

[LD/20122023/Z]

8.0 Legal implications

- 8.1 The statutory provisions for the annual canvass have been met by the ERO.

[SZ/20122023/P]

9.0 Equalities implications

- 9.1 All communications sent to electors provide them with numerous ways to respond to the information - by phone, online or post. Many electors prefer to call Electoral Services directly or visit the Civic Centre to return their response and Electoral Services are happy to assist electors with responding to the information in whichever way suits them.

10.0 All other implications

- 10.1 There are no other implications arising from this report at the present.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

- 11.1 Update on the 2023 Annual Canvass, Governance and Ethics Committee, 7 September 2023.

12.0 Appendices

- 12.1 Appendix 1- Route one responses received - all wards
- 12.2 Appendix 2- Route two responses received - all wards
- 12.3 Appendix 3- Route three responses received– all wards