

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION REPORT 2009/2010



1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with an update on major Electoral Registration activities that have occurred in the last 12 months and to indicate the issues that are facing Electoral Registration in the coming years.

Electoral Registration is increasingly subject to greater interest and scrutiny. There are understandable expectations that Registers are as complete and accurate as possible. Regular cycles of elections, legislative changes, the public promotion of registration, and the activities of the Electoral Commission all play their part in raising Electoral Registration from what was once perceived as a back office activity to an essential and high profile local authority function.

2 ANNUAL CANVASS

The process of undertaking the annual postal electoral registration canvass commences in mid summer with the creation of timetables and early contact with printers to establish the requirements for canvass form numbers and content. Also at this time preparations are made to enable an element of door to door canvass as opposed to postal canvass to be undertaken.

Between the months of September and November canvass forms are sent to all households in the Lothian area. There are three stages to this canvass with stages two and three being reminders to those who did not respond either after the first or second issue.

During the 2009 canvass 385,512 forms were issued initially, with a further 156,190 issued at stage two and 120,780 at stage three. Compared to the 2008 canvass, the second and third stages involved higher numbers of forms. This means that, for 2009, a poorer return rate was experienced after the initial issue of forms.

The third stage issue of forms contains a separate letter outlining in plain terms the implications for the non return of the canvass form and lack of inclusion on the electoral register.

The final return rate for canvass forms for 2009 was 76.5%. This was slightly down on the previous year. From these returns, 60% represented no change to the existing registration details, 40% returns required changes, of which 32,210 contained requests for postal voting, and 123,995 indicated a preference to be omitted from the edited register.

Final/...

- 2/ Final processing of the required changes to the register was completed during November and the new register was duly published by the 1st December 2009.

Although, as indicated above the return rate for canvass forms was 76.5%, when secondary checks were made to Council Taxpayers Lists it was confirmed that 8.5% of households, where no return had been received, were still in occupation. Those electors were carried forward from the previous register in compliance with legislation. The full return or retention of households can therefore be presented as 85%, which represents a 2% fall when compared to 87% for the 2008 canvass.

2.1 Door to Door Canvass

As in past years an element of annual canvass was undertaken on a door to door basis rather than postal.

Difficulties with the recruitment of canvassers in conjunction with concerns over budget resource led to fewer households being canvassed in this manner than during 2008. Notwithstanding this some 28,000 households were subject to door to door canvass, the results of which support the view established after the 2008 canvass.

As reported previously to the Board door to door canvass costs nearly three times as much as postal canvass however it does on average produce a higher return rate. An analysis of returns for 2009 indicates the following, for areas where a door to door canvass took place in 2008 and 2009 there was a slight decrease in the return rate of 1.22%, in areas that switched from postal to door to door the return rate rose by an average of 8.55%, and for areas where there was a return to postal from door to door the rate fell by an average of 13.22%.

Clearly moving to a door to door canvass produces an improved return, to what extent that can be maintained in subsequent years is perhaps subject to matters other than the nature of canvass.

For the 2010 canvass there shall be greater emphasis placed on the door to door approach. The use of internal staff resource as opposed to temporary staff in respect of certain canvass activities shall release funds to support a larger number of canvassers covering a larger number of households.

Resources permitting it is anticipated that some 40,000 to 45,000 households shall be canvassed in this manner.

2.2 Alternative Methods of Return

During the 2009 canvass the total number of forms returned was 298,000. Out of these 178,800 represented returns where there were no changes to the elector details. These are referred to as "same" returns.

Consideration is being given to establishing alternative ways for these returns to be made. Options currently exist to use telephone returns, text returns and on-line returns. Although this obviously places the elector to the fore and offers greater scope to make a return to us there/...

2.2/ there is a legal argument that such methods should not be employed as electoral legislation still maintains a requirement for a signed return to be provided to the Electoral Registration Officer. However with a possible move away from household canvass to individual registration and the significant increase in processing levels that would ensue it would be short sighted not to investigate all possible options that would help maintain service delivery.

The Board shall be kept aware of this investigation and any proposals that follow. Any changes could potentially be put in place for the 2011 canvass.

3 GENERAL ELECTION 6 MAY 2010

The General Election on the 6th May created the biggest workload over a short period that this organisation has seen for many years.

From the 6th to the 20th April 9,185 telephone calls were received and in the same time frame our web site took 8,100 hits with 5,964 application forms being downloaded.

For the month of April 14,000 transactions were carried out on the Electoral Register. This led to 5,000 new electors being added and 8,000 new applications for postal votes being processed.

As Postal Voting now includes the provision of personal identifier information this adds another layer of processing and requires special mechanisms to be in place to ensure the data is safely and timeously supplied to Returning Officers. The bulk of all of this activity came as a surge in the last two weeks before the closing date for applications of 20th April.

Overtime was in operation during this period with many senior staff working to midnight on the closing day.

While the high level of required processing led to a short delay with providing data to the Printer I am pleased to say that, through good communication with the Printer, this had no impact on the proposed delivery times for postal ballot papers and Returning Officers have indicated their satisfaction with the performance of the organisation as regards the provision of data.

An election review meeting has already taken place within the organisation with the decision taken to investigate the following areas in anticipation of future elections:-

- to apply additional existing staff resource to non processing activities thereby allowing all trained processors to maximise time available on this task;
- review the process surrounding e-mail receipt;
- review the process for letter issue following phone calls;

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- review the mail room location and layout, consider physically separating scanning activities from opening and sorting of mail;
- review of our web site with regard to Electoral Registration information ensuring plain English is in use and all forms are accessible; and
- consider the possible use of on-line delivery of applications.

A letter of thanks from the Convenor of the Board was received and circulated to all staff which was much appreciated.

4 PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

There is now a legislative requirement placed upon Electoral Registration Officers to undertake promotional activities that aim to maximise registration levels.

The Board has in the past been provided with information on the range of activities that are carried out, however as these are becoming more focused and evaluation increasingly possible, listed below were the steps taken to promote registration to the public in the light of the general election.

- Participation with West Lothian Councils' Democracy Challenge initiative aimed at school pupils led to 253 additions to the register.
- Receipt of school lists from each Council led to the following registrations, Edinburgh 229, East Lothian 83, Midlothian 55, West Lothian 54.
- Electoral registration presentations to 6th form pupils were given at Balerno and Broughton High schools
- Visits with our information stand were made to Stevenson and Telford Colleges, and Registration advertising posters were sent by agreement to West Lothian College, Oatridge College, Jewel and Esk Valley College, Queen Margaret University, Herriot Watt University, Napier University and Newbattle Abbey College.
- Contact was made with Edinburgh University that led to 107 registrations and discussions are on going with the NUS in order to establish new initiatives aimed at registration for students.
- New display stand material having been purchased the following locations were visited, Central Library, Penicuik Centre, Royal Infirmary, West Lothian Civic Centre, Waverley Court, John Muir House, Brunton Hall, Telford College, Stevenson College, Almondvale Centre, Milan Group, Portalee Centre, between these venues there were a total of 22 visits that resulted in 443 checks to the register, 283 fresh registration applications being made, and 37 applications for a postal vote completed.

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- The following Carer Organisations were contacted with all of them receiving registration information and posters for display, in many instances the organisation's newsletter carried specific information about registration and the election, Minority Ethnic Carers of Older People, Help The Aged/Age Concern, Care for Carers, and Vocal.
- The following organisations dealing with homelessness were also provided with information, Edinburgh Cyrenians, Bethany Christian Trust, Newlands Supported Accommodation Project, Blackburn Homeless Unit, Quentin Homeless Unit, East Lothian Council Housing Department, Midlothian Council Housing Section, CEC Services for Communities.
- Radio advertising was taken with Forth1 and Forth 2 and over a staggered three week period our message was played on 57 occasions. It is estimated that over 700,000 adults heard our advert.
- Bus shelter advertising also took place at ten sites for a two week period with all Council areas represented. We received specific recognition of this advertising.
- Poster advertising was undertaken at Haymarket Station and within two Edinburgh cinema complexes
- We continue to attend Edinburgh Citizenship Ceremonies and provide information packs to similar events in all our Council areas. Since January 2010, 125 new registrations were achieved.
- Housing and Nursing Associations were contacted and information and posters on registration and postal voting provided.
- Posters were sent to all Community Centres, Libraries and Council Offices
- Advertising was undertaken in the Edinburgh Service Community Official Guide that is published by the Army and Naval Welfare Services and issued to all service households.

As a direct result of these activities we have been able to record that 1,366 new registrations have been processed. We intend to build on this programme with emphasis on direct contact with the electorate in preference to general advertising and shall aim for greater penetration with minority groups.

A note of thanks is given to the Communications personnel from each of the Boards constituent councils who have in many instances provided contacts and access to various organisations, and who in their own right have undertaken promotional registration activities on behalf of their Council.

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5 ELECTORAL COMMISSION

During December 2009 we provided the Electoral Commission with our self-assessment in respect of Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers. This assessment was first supplied in 2008 and Lothian was one of a number of offices chosen for a validation exercise by the Commission. Our self-assessment remained unaltered following this checking exercise.

There are ten performance standards in total covering the four broad subject headings of, completeness and accuracy, integrity, participation, and planning and organisation.

The 2009 return, on which the Commission did not perform validation, indicated that we met the required standard in six instances and exceeded it in four.

On a national basis both the Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers are required to provide a Financial Return to the Commission indicating costs associated with annual canvass and the running of elections. Returns were made for 2008 and 2009. A draft report has been issued however a number of statistical anomalies were highlighted and the report awaits formal release.

Earlier this year the Commission produced a paper highlighting issues surrounding the "completeness and accuracy" of Electoral Registers. This report took as its base data from early census material and combined it with registration levels and social trends. It also referred to case studies of which South Ayrshire and Glasgow were the only Scottish inclusions.

Electoral Registration Officers nationally have expressed concern as regards the conclusions drawn by this report with considerable doubt being placed on the statistical information being used. To this end a meeting has been arranged between the Commission and the Scottish Assessors Association to discuss the conclusions of the report but more importantly to establish ways that both the Association and the Commission can work together to improve levels of accuracy and completeness within registers.

Hopefully from the information provided within this Report members can see that there is no complacency within Lothian as regards providing the electorate with the necessary information and encouraging registration.

6 BOUNDARY COMMISSION

Following consultation the Boundary Commission has recently issued its proposals as regards boundary changes for the Scottish Parliamentary constituencies. There are a number of changes affecting Lothian along with a number of constituency name changes.

Registration/...

- 6/ Registration Officers shall now commence a dialogue with Returning Officers in connection with a review of polling districts and places.

As has occurred in previous years the 2010 canvass shall be carried out reflecting existing boundaries but the new Register published on the 1st December shall reflect the Commissions proposals.

7 LEGISLATION AND FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

There are a number of legislative changes either enacted or proposed that are worthy of mention.

Firstly, legislation has been enacted that shall allow, in the event of an election being called during the annual canvass, canvass return forms to be processed as if they were applications for registration. Previous legislation in such circumstances required the sending of an application for registration to those electors whose names newly appeared on canvass returns.

While there are always additional pressures in the event of an election being called during the annual canvass this change is geared towards putting the elector first and shall also reduce some of the additional workload and timetable pressures for Registration Officers.

Second, there is an outstanding legislative change in respect of the annual canvass, one that is being heavily canvassed by the Electoral Commission. This would see a move away from the household annual canvass to a system of individual registration. In addition this may also include the collection of individual personal identifiers, as is current for postal vote applications, aimed at minimising fraudulent activity.

Such a change would bring pressures to Registration Officers with not only substantial increases in processing workloads but also increased costs in respect of printing, stationery and postage.

Legislation is also proposed in respect of the Interim Elections Management Board, the performance of which has been much applauded recently, with one of the elements being to give the Convenor of the Board directional powers of the activities of the Electoral Registration Officer. Discussions and consultations are ongoing as regards this issue with a possible outcome being that directional powers shall only apply to activities surrounding elections rather than general registration duties.

Board members shall be kept apprised of the outcome of the final legislative implications in respect of the IEMB.

Lastly, there are consultations ongoing regarding the Edited Register and the option for the voter to opt out of the register that is made available for public sale. This could see the demise of the edited register and possibly the sale of the full register to credit rating agencies curtailed.

In/...

- 7/ In respect of forthcoming activities, preparations are already underway for the 2010 canvass, rolling registration activities shall continue, and we shall respond to applications for postal voting etc. In addition we are reviewing Electoral Registration software that is available in the market place and shall decide later in the year if there is a good business case for change.

In terms of forthcoming elections the timetable is as follows, Scottish Parliamentary 2011, Scottish Local Government 2012, European Parliamentary 2014, Westminster Parliamentary and Scottish Parliamentary 2015. In addition there is an anticipated by-election in Edinburgh Ward 16, Liberton/Gilmerton, and possible National Referendums on new voting systems and elections to the House of Lords.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Board is asked to note the content of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joan M Hewton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Joan M Hewton
ASSESSOR

25 June 2010