

# ELECTORAL REGISTRATION REPORT 2010/11

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24 June 2011

## 1.0 Introduction

This report provides the Board with information on the key activities and current issues surrounding Electoral Registration over the period 1 June 2010 to 31 May 2011.

The Electoral year can broadly be identified in two parts. Major elections fall to occupy the first half of the year while annual electoral canvass consumes the latter half. The timing of this report is such that information is provided on the most recent election in conjunction with the previous years' canvass activity.

Notwithstanding the increasing activities and role of the Electoral Commission and the involvement of central government, it remains a challenge to engage with the elector so as to ensure a high level of completeness and accuracy within the register and secure their participation in the democratic process.

## 2.0 General Election and Referendum 5 May 2011

While not generating as much public recourse to the organisation as was seen at the General Election the previous year, the Scottish Parliamentary Election and Referendum on the Alternative Vote did generate considerable activity with over 7,000 telephone calls being taken during the period 1 April to 6 May, and over 1,000 e-mails received and responded to during the same period.

At the time of an election, updates to the register to reflect new electors, postal vote applications, and proxy vote applications, are driven by statutory deadlines by which time applications must have been received.

For example in the week leading up to the closing date for receipt of postal vote applications some 3,600 forms were received. Such heavy receipt of applications puts considerable pressure on resources especially where that information has to be processed and confirmed, then prepared for transmission to the printing contractors appointed by Returning Officers less than 24 hours after the closing date.

All the timetable target dates, agreed with Returning Officers, for the delivery of information were met. However it has to be acknowledged that this was only achieved by the use of overtime and on a number of occasions with senior staff working to midnight to ensure data was ready. This is an area for some concern as it is anticipated that for the forthcoming local authority/....

2.0/ authority elections the time available for the final processing of applications shall be shortened from 24 hours to merely a few. This is a result of the selection of a specialist partnership supplier for the purposes of providing e-counting and the production of ballot papers and postal ballot packs throughout Scotland.

There was an additional layer of complexity resulting from the Referendum being held on the same day. Due to franchise regulations some voters were only able to vote in either the Scottish Parliament election or the referendum. There was a requirement therefore that certain processes had to be undertaken twice in order to ensure that data being provided to Returning Officers showed clear distinctions in voter franchise.

In the period prior to the election we undertook a variety of promotional activities ranging from advertising on bus shelters and phone boxes to locating and staffing our display stand at such venues as Almondvale Centre, Livingston, Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, Brunton Hall, Musselburgh, and the Penicuik Centre. As a direct result of our pre-election promotional activity 680 register checks were carried out, 295 applications to register were completed and 50 postal vote applications received.

While there are a number of review meetings being held over the coming weeks with various organisations with election involvement, the following are a few of the issues identified directly from our own internal review.

- The last date for receipt of postal vote applications causes considerable pressure and leaves little time to secure corrections to errors on applications that are received on the final days. A longer time frame would be preferred.
- A more public promotion of the date when postal ballot papers are due for delivery should be considered. While strictly a Returning Officer duty we are happy to assist with this where practical.
- The provision of Personal Identifier data to each of the Returning Officers is becoming increasingly technical especially as we are dealing with three different companies appointed by the Returning Officers. We shall be engaging with each Returning Officer individually to establish ways in which improvements can be made to this process.
- The organisation utilises a third party product in order to undertake its electoral duties. A number of improvements have been identified that would be beneficial to the election process and contact has already been made with the product supplier in order to commence discussions.
- To varying degrees the Electoral Registration Officer provides a number of services to the Returning Officers during elections. These are over and above those requirements that are required through legislation. While it is agreed that flexibility is an important attitude to have at election times it is felt that by strengthening these arrangements through discussion and agreement greater clarity on what services are being provided to whom and when can be achieved. The Returning Officers shall be approached individually on this matter.
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- As the election process as far as it affects the ERO is becoming increasingly technologically complex it is being considered whether the role of key senior staff should, during the election timetable, be temporarily re-designated to match certain specific responsibilities. While this may create a degree of specialism it shall also reduce risks and lead to improvements in the processes and procedures adopted.

On Election Day we provide a telephone service responding to enquiries not only from the general public but also from polling station and returning officer staff.

As a result a total of eight clerical error corrections were made to the register enabling electors to cast their vote.

In the build up to the Election and Referendum 5,312 electors were added to the register and 3,767 deleted resulting in a net electorate gain of 1,545. The total registered electorate now stands at 597,998. The number of postal vote electors on the standing list prior to the election period was 95,405 and this figure rose to 100,506 on the 5 May. Following the removal of the "one off" applications specific to the election, the standing list of postal voters now stands at 96,918.

### **3.0 2010 Annual Canvass**

During the 2010 canvass 389,101 forms were issued at the initial stage, with a further 165,087 issued at reminder stage, and 123,492 at final reminder stage. Compared to the 2009 canvass, the second and third stages involved higher numbers of forms being issued, however the overall return rate for 2010 was a slight improvement over that achieved in 2009.

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

The final return rate for the canvass forms was 75.02%. This is a slight improvement on the 74.57% achieved in 2009 and halts a trend of declining annual return rates. From those returned forms, 63% represented no change to the existing registration details, 37% of returns required changes, of which 31,447 contained requests from electors for postal voting application forms, and 192,474 indicated a preference to be omitted from the edited register.

Final processing of the required changes to the register was completed during November and the new register was duly published by the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010.

Although the canvass return rate was 75.02%, when secondary checks were made to Council Taxpayers Lists it was confirmed that 41% of households where no return had been received, were still in occupation. In compliance with legislation these electors were carried forward from the previous register.

The full return or retention of households can therefore be presented as 85.38%, this being higher than the 84.8% recorded in 2009.

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### **3.1 Door to Door Canvass**

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

During the 2010 canvass 77 temporary canvassers were employed and 41,000 households were subject to door to door canvass. A cross section of the Lothian area was covered and an analysis of returns shows that on average undertaking door to door canvass provides a 7% increase in return level over a postal approach.

Door to door canvass can provide improved canvass results however as the cost of such an approach is approximately three times as much as postal costs it is unlikely, given current financial constraints, that there shall be an expansion of this approach in the coming years.

### **3.2 Void canvass**

We are able to identify properties where there are currently no voters registered. These are referred to as void properties. At the start of 2011 we undertook a canvass of 7,823 void properties with the following result, 235 voter registration forms were completed at the point of canvass and a further 447 voter registration forms were returned by post.

This was seen as being of some benefit and shall be repeated periodically.

### **3.3 Alternative Methods of Return**

The total number of canvass forms returned during 2010 was 291,982. Out of these 185,729 represented returns where there were no changes to the elector details. These are referred to as "same" returns.

For the 2011 canvass households throughout the Lothian area shall be able to make a "same" return via the Telephone, Internet, or SMS text. This is in addition to the normal postal return option.

The technology for this facility has been available for some time and has been in use amongst other Electoral Registration Officers for a number of years.

This facility is being introduced for a number of reasons, firstly it provides the elector with an easier, efficient, and modern method of making a return, secondly, the facility is part of the new electoral registration software recently introduced within the organisation and therefore set up and operation is straightforward, thirdly, the reduction in postal returns shall assist with reducing levels of manual processing, and fourthly a return made in this fashion is considerably cheaper than postal return charges.

In addition dependant on the method chosen, electors shall also be able to indicate that they wish to opt out of the edited register, and request a postal vote application form should they wish.

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3.0/ The Board shall receive a report following the 2011 canvass of the take up rates of this new facility.

#### 4.0 **Introduction of Individual Registration**

The current Westminster government is pursuing plans to introduce a system of Individual Registration.

This means there shall no longer be a canvass issue to households but instead individual canvass forms could be issued to all those individuals named on the register. In addition electors shall initially be invited to supply personal identifying markers, such as date of birth, signature, and National Insurance number, thereafter this shall be mandatory information required on the canvass return.

The proposed timetable for introduction indicates that the 2014 canvass shall be conducted on an individual canvass basis with provision of personal identifier information being voluntary. From 2015 onwards the provision of this identifying information shall be mandatory.

Within the Lothian area there are approximately 598,000 electors currently registered. This means that in terms of printing, stationery, and postal costs there could be something approaching a 70% increase of current costs. On top of this the organisation shall have to deal with substantially increased processing workloads within the same timeframe that the household canvass was conducted.

At its inception in 2014 alternative means of recording "same" return may not be appropriate with only a postal return being acceptable, and the ability to use door to door canvass must be in some doubt due the requirement to provide personal identifier information.

Within the organisation the creation of a detailed impact assessment and associated risk register for the introduction of IER is underway and the Board shall be kept apprised of the issues and recommendations that arise as a result.

#### 4.1 **Data Matching Pilot Scheme**

As part of a precursor to the introduction of IER the Cabinet Office has instigated a data matching pilot scheme in order to establish whether such activity provides opportunities to secure a greater level of completeness and accuracy to electoral registers.

While The Political Parties and Elections Act 2009 provides the necessary legislation for the creation of data matching schemes, specific enabling statutory instruments are in place for this particular scheme and Royal Assent, allowing the pilot to proceed, was given on the 13 June 2011.

Lothian Valuation Joint Board has been selected as one of 22 Councils and Joint Boards to participate.

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4.1/ In essence the pilot involves comparing electoral register data with that held by other national organisations. Once property address information is matched between the data files an examination of the name information attached to that address can follow. This may then allow the Electoral Registration Officer to undertake direct canvassing where there appears to be the opportunity to add names to the register or amend existing information.

The pilot has a limited life span with the end date being November 2011. All procedures and processes used in the pilot are subject to Cabinet Office scrutiny and security protocols are in place. In addition Privacy Impact Assessments along with service level agreements between the ERO, the Cabinet Office and the other national organisations have been created.

Both the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission are carrying out progress monitoring and evaluation exercises on the pilot. In addition the Board shall be kept abreast of progress and the final outcome.

## 5.0 **Boundary Commission**

A major boundary review affecting Westminster parliamentary boundaries is under way. The aims are to reduce the number of constituencies while at the same time create a balance as regards the number of electors within each constituency.

This review shall be finalised during 2014 for implementation prior to the next general election due in 2015.

## 6.0 **Recommendations**

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

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**Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer**

**24 June 2011**