

ELECTORAL REGISTRATION REPORT 2011/2012

1 INTRODUCTION

This report provides the Board with information on the key activities and current issues surrounding Electoral Registration over the period 1 June 2011 to 31 May 2012.

The Electoral year can broadly be identified in two parts. Major elections fall to occupy the first half of the year while the annual 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.

As this report shall highlight electoral registration is about to enter a period of considerable major change. This shall without doubt represent a challenging phase for Electoral Registrations Officers throughout the country. However the over-riding aims remain constant, that of creating and maintaining a register that is as accurate and complete as practically possible while at the same time ensuring that in all decisions the voter is put first.

2 LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS 3 MAY 2012

The Local Council elections on 3 May 2012, being conducted under the terms of the single transferable vote (STV), created considerable interest not only due to the use of an electronic counting system but in a broader sense arising from the voters appreciation of the actual voting process under STV rules.

While not part of the Electoral Registration Officers remit it has been generally recorded that on both aspects these elections were a considerable improvement on the experiences of 2007.

During 2010/11 a new electoral management system was introduced within the organisation and while it performed to an acceptable level in respect of the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2011 a number of areas were identified for improvement.

For the elections in May 2012 therefore, not only were enhancements introduced within the system itself, but improvements were made in terms of the detailed planning that is undertaken within the organisation at election time. This, in addition to the allocation of key duties to specific senior managers resulted in an overall improvement in the performance of required activities surrounding the election.

The Lothian and Borders Election Working Group meets regularly throughout the year. However the frequency of meetings is increased prior to elections in order to ensure that proper consideration is given to the matters where there is close electoral registration officer and returning office partnership working. Such key partnership areas are the establishment

of the election timetable, production and issue of poll cards, the provision of absent voter information including personal identifying data, and the provision of ballot box registers.

A good and effective relationship between the ERO and RO is essential for the smooth running of elections and the Working Group provides a platform for proper relations to be established and built upon.

By its very nature an election provides a number of flash points and peaks in activity for the ERO.

During the period 2 April to 18 April the organisation received 2,978 telephone calls, 1,389 postal vote applications and 1,425 applications to register.

Following the election the number on the standing list for postal votes is 98,968, while the effect of alterations to the register resulted in a net gain of 784 electors.

This level of activity puts considerable pressure on the organisation as much of this information has to be processed within very short time frames.

It is a testament to the organisation, staff and internal processes that only very limited overtime was required during the days immediately prior to the closing dates.

One of the important tasks undertaken at this particular time is the provision of postal vote and postal vote personal identifier data. This ensures that all the required postal ballot packs are issued by each RO and that on receipt of postal votes these are capable of being checked against personal identifying information so as to reduce the possibility of fraudulent action.

This involves the provision of data files to printers and the third party companies contracted by the constituent councils of the Board to undertake the PI checking.

This is a considerable exercise in data extraction, checking, manipulation, presentation and supply carried out on a number of occasions within the election timetable and latterly within very restricted timescales.

This is an area of potential risk and further investigation shall be carried out prior to the next election in 2014 with the view of seeking further improvements.

3 2011 ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD CANVASS

During the 2011 canvass 351,915 forms were issued at the initial stage, with a further 161,618 issued at reminder stage, and 120,171 at the final reminder stage. From the initial issue 39,536 forms were retained for the purposes of door to door canvass.

The 2011 canvass followed very closely the results achieved during 2010.

The final return rate for the canvass forms was 75.84%. This is on a par with the previous year when the return rate was 75.02%. From those returned, 67.64% represented no change to the existing registration details and 32.36% of returns required changes of which 48,223 included requests from electors for postal voting application forms and 227,637 electors indicated a preference to be omitted from the edited register.

Although the canvass return rate was 75.84%, when secondary checks were made to Council Taxpayers Lists it confirmed that 38,355 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 85.61%, this being compared with 85.38% from 2010.

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 2011 canvass 73 temporary canvassers were employed to door to door canvass 39,536 properties between the dates 26 August and 19 September.

A cross section of the Lothian area was covered and in line with previous exercises, an analysis of returns shows that on average undertaking door to door provides a 7% increase in return level over a postal approach.

While door to door can provide improved results the costs of this approach is in the region of three times as expensive as the postal approach.

Recent communication with the Electoral Commission has led us to change our approach to door to door canvass for 2012. In order for us to more closely meet the performance standard set by the Commission as regards door to door canvass, following an initial post of canvass forms to all households householders who have not returned a form and do not match to robust records shall be subject to house to house enquiries.

An impact assessment of this alternative approach shall be made and the results provided to the Board in due course.

3.2 Alternative Methods of Return

During the 2011 canvass electors throughout Lothian were given the opportunity of returning what is termed a "same" canvass form by means other than return post.

A "same" return is where there are no changes made to any of the elector information contained on the canvass form. Electors were able to make this return by telephone, internet or SMS text. All the necessary information, contact numbers and passwords, was included with the canvass form.

In addition to making their return, electors were able to indicate if they wished a postal vote application form to be issued and whether they wished to opt out of the edited register.

The technology that enables these transactions has been in use for a number of years and therefore there was assurance that the system was secure and robust.

The following returns were made using these alternative methods, telephone 34,642, internet 30,078, text 14,947.

While it cannot be indicated that the provision of these facilities had the effect of increasing the overall canvass return rate a modest cost saving over postal returns was achieved. The main thrust is to provide the elector with up to date means of engaging with the registration process and the level of use in its first years was very encouraging. Further efforts shall be made during the 2012 canvass to promote these facilities.

4 INTRODUCTION OF INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

The move towards Individual Electoral Registration is continuing with more detailed proposals and a draft timetable recently issued for consultation by the Cabinet Office.

As a result of the consultation process and an evaluation of the data matching pilots undertaken during 2011 a number of alterations have been made to the original proposals. The most significant of these is the revised proposal that those households that return their Spring 2014 canvass form and who, as individual electors, are validated by way of data matching to a national source, shall automatically be deemed to have registered for individual registration. This shall significantly reduce the requirement to canvass each individual elector during the transition phase to IER.

Those households who do not return the Spring 2014 canvass form or who do not match to a national data source shall be subject to individual canvass and be required to provide personal identifying information.

From a logistical and cost standpoint this change provides considerable improvement from the initial proposals.

The other major change associated with IER is the intention to introduce electronic means of registration. This shall provide the elector with an easily accessed mechanism for registration and other related electoral activities. The development of this system is in its infancy with certain elements in prototype phase. Many areas, such as integration with office back office systems, remain under discussion and consultation.

A draft timetable in respect of IER is being developed. A number of the key phases and key dates within that timetable are indicated below,

- Annual canvass 2013 suspended
- Last household annual canvass, spring 2014
- European Election June 2014
- Transition to IER commences 1 July 2014
- (Referendum Scotland, autumn 2014)
- Electoral Register published under IER 1 December 2014
- Westminster Parliamentary Election May 2015
- Annual canvass under IER autumn 2015

The Assessor, both individually and as part of the Scottish Assessors Association, is in regular consultation with the Cabinet Office. The level of consultation is considerable and

this has allowed input from electoral practitioners to form an effective element in the decision making process.

The Board shall be provided with regular reports in respect of the progress made towards the introduction of IER and of the implications and issues that arise as a result.

4.1 Data Matching Pilots

During 2011 the Board participated with 21 other authorities nationwide in a Data Matching Pilot scheme. This scheme was primarily aimed at investigating the impact on the completeness and accuracy of the register as a result of allowing register data to be matched against another national data source.

While this scheme provided some interesting results certain elements were deemed by the Cabinet Office to require further investigation. As a result a second round of Data Matching Pilots are planned starting in July 2012 and running through into early 2013.

While there are a number of schemes with different objectives Lothian has agreed to be involved with two schemes, one aimed at improving the actual data match process between the register and other national data sources, the other to improve information on recent home movers.

The Board shall be provided with updates as this scheme progresses.

5 RECOMMENDATION

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

Graeme Strachan
Depute Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer