

Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel – 5 December 2011

Electoral Services

Wards: All

Portfolio: Councillor Towe, Finance and personnel

Recommendation:

That the report be noted.

Executive Summary:

Electoral Services is responsible for the management of all elections and referenda within the borough and also all electoral registration. All its major work is dictated by legislation, most often very prescriptive statutes and regulations. There are currently 45 statutes and 56 statutory instruments related to elections / referenda in the UK, with more on the way.

Between August and the end of November each year, we conduct an annual canvass of all households in the borough, in order to produce a new electoral register by 1 December.

Between December and September, electoral registration and absent voter applications are on demand.

General

There are two external bodies that we rely on for support and advice, being the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission also sets and monitors 17 performance standards we have to meet.

Elections

Since 1997 at least, there have been scheduled elections every year and 2013 will be the first year in the memory of election staff that there will be no scheduled elections.

The following table shows some election related statistics:

Elections held	Council May 2003	Combined all out council elections and Euro June 2004	UK General May 2005	Council May 2006	Council May 2007	Council May 2008	Euro June 2009	Combined UK General and council May 2010	Combined AV referendum and council May 2011	Council 3 May 2012 Police & Crime Commissioner 15 Nov 2012
Turn out	26.7%	36.51%	64.61%	34.97%	33.85%	29.37%	30.65%	61.07%	37.8%	
By-elections	3		2	1		2		2	1	
No of electors at Notice of election	183,184	186,809	184,277	189,338	190,979	190,052	188114	190315	190208	
No of postal voters at election	7,356	10,965	12,601	17,537	15,144	19,332	20838	23369	25138	Est 26,000
Number of Presiding Officers / Poll Clerks	182 / ?	182 / 188	178 / 204	178 / 178	178 / 178	154 / 154	154 / 154	154 / 175	154 / 283	142 / 175
Portacabins (temp polling stations)	3	3	8	9	12	14	15	23	19	23

It can be seen that since 2003 the number of electors has risen by just over 7,000 and the number of portacabins by 20 (approx £2,000 each). Since 2001 the number of postal voters has increased by about 1200%. The increase in the use of portacabins has been a mixture of changing attitudes to the use of schools, both by elected members and schools themselves, the difficulties of finding suitable building in other places or the closure / unavailability of buildings previously used.

The number of polling stations has been reduced by 40 over the same period by combining ballot boxes and registers in the same premises. This has increased the size of the registers but none exceed the 2500 limit set by the Electoral Commission and it does provide better value.

Since the 2007 elections, we are required to scrutinise the returning postal vote statements to check the dates of birth and signatures against those held by council (generally from postal / proxy vote applications). While software is used to facilitate this process, it is now a sizable operation in itself in the weeks leading up to polling day.

As from January 2012, we will be required to send a notice to those absent voters who have had their absent vote for 5 years and seek a new specimen signature. Voters are sent a reminder after 3 weeks and removed from the absent voter list after six weeks if they fail to provide a fresh signature. This will now be an annual exercise every January / February.

Every four years we are required to carry out a comprehensive review of polling districts and polling places. We have just completed the 2011 review and in the process completed a major restructuring of polling districts and registers. The next review is due in 2015.

Between 2003 and the end of 2012, we will have conducted 5 national elections and 1 national referendum. The cost of these elections / referenda has to be properly accounted for and claimed from central government, generally on a 50/50 basis. The compilation of these accounts is very time consuming and is carried out by the Electoral Services Manager post the election.

The workup to a May / June election begins in earnest in December, with the commencement of the recruitment of staff to fill approximately 730 positions and the booking of the premises. We also produce about 120 different documents, reports, spreadsheets, diagrams and maps for an election. The busiest period is the 5-6 weeks before polling day and we employ 3-4 temporary staff during this period to assist with the preparation. After polling day, it takes 3-4 weeks to sort out all the returned equipment, documents, stationery and ballot papers and package up all the documents.

It is a UK General election that creates a huge amount of extra work and pressure on the service in terms of phones calls (up from 2500 incoming calls for the 2008 council election to 5500 incoming calls for the 2010 general election in the 6 weeks prior to polling day) and new registrations and postal / proxy vote applications.

In 2011 we completed the modernisation of the polling station equipment, which means all stations now have modern, lightweight and compact polling booths, lightweight ballot boxes and better signage.

With national elections, we are obliged to conduct training for 300 - 400 polling station staff and team leaders. For stand alone council elections, we only conduct such training if there have been significant changes in legislation that affect polling or a specific need.

The following table shows our performance against the 7 election performance standards set and monitored by the Electoral Commission. These relate to the 2010 elections. For the combined council elections and Alternative Vote Referendum held on 3 May 2011, the Commission used 5 monitoring checklists (60 questions) in the build-up to polling day that we had to meet, which we did.

The Commission is moving to adopt this model of active monitoring of election related performance in the build up to an election, from 2012 onwards.

	Subject	Performance Standard	Performance
	Planning & Organisation		
1		Skills of the Returning Officer	Met the standard
2		Planning processes in place for an election	Above the performance standard
3		Training	Above the performance standard
	Integrity		
4		Maintaining the integrity of an election	Met the standard
	Participation		
5		Planning and delivering public awareness activity	Met the standard
6		Accessibility of information to electors	Met the standard
7		Communication of information to candidates and agents	Above the performance standard

Looking ahead – elections

On 15 November 2012 there will be an election for a Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands Police Force. The voting method to be used is the supplementary vote. This may pose significant issues for the counting of these votes. Because it is being held during the annual canvass, additional temporary staff will be needed to run both processes in parallel. The cost of the election will be paid for by central government

In 2014, there will be a combined council and Euro election in June.

In 2015 there will be a combined council and UK General election, with the possibility of an election for the House of Lords on the same day. A review of polling districts and polling places will also need to be completed in 2015.

The Localism Act provides for local referenda on council tax increases.

The current review of Parliamentary boundaries will come into effect in the May 2015 General election. Under the current proposals, this will increase the work load of the service as the constituencies will be larger and involve cross boundary issues with postal votes. It will also mean that the Sports hall at Wolverhampton University Walsall Campus will not fit in all three constituencies for verification and counting.

Electoral Registration

The following table shows some registration related statistics;

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
No of houses (canvass) end of yr	?	?	107,344	106,950	108,285	109679	109825	110115	111001	
% return at close of canvass	85.55%	80.23%	76.26%	88.15%	88.33%	87.39%	89.87%	91.20%	93.50%	
Permanent staff (FTE's)	3.5	3.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5

The annual canvass is an exercise to renew the electoral register and we commence the process in June by recruiting about 70 staff to hand deliver an initial and later a reminder form and later another 70 to carry out the door knocking phase. In the first week of August the first form is delivered to every household, with the names pre printed on it of those currently on the register at that household. In the first half of September we deliver a reminder form to those who have not returned the first one and then in October we send people door knocking to try and obtain the information from those who have not returned either of the first two forms.

We also employ 4 temporary staff for about 10 weeks to help with the processing of the returned forms.

In all, we process and scan about 85,000 forms as part of the annual canvass.

Since 2006 we have enabled people to use either the internet, an 0800 number or SMS (text) to tell us if there has been no change to the names etc on the form and hence

remove the need to return the form itself. This peaked at about 14% in 2010 and has reduced to about 10% in 2011 because the SMS channel was not used in 2011. In all previous years we had pre ticked the “opt out” for the edited register but we removed this pre tick this year as it was the view of the Electoral Commission, AEA and vested interest groups that people should make their choice anew each year. While people could exercise the opt out choice on the telephone or internet it was too difficult using SMS.

In 2005, we were the first council to use software to automatically read the changes made on the canvass forms. This has proved very successful and far more efficient than making all the changes manually.

In 2011, for the first time we used e-mail addresses people had given us through the internet channel, to send out a message before the printing of the first forms, to allow them to tell us if there were no changes. Just under 1200 households did so. We will continue to try and expand this new approach.

In 2011, for the first time, we carried out two data matching exercises against council tax database (on empty properties and those with the same names) before we printed the forms for the door knocking phase. This was very successful and meant printing about 13,000 less forms and saved about £10,000 in the door knocking phase.

From the figures in the table above, it can be seen that from a low of 76.26% in 2005, we have steadily increased the percentage return from each annual canvass and we hit a record of 93.5% this year.

We are obliged to try and find people who are not on the register and invite them to register. This involves using other databases to check against the register. Currently we use lists of tenants from the various housing associations, a monthly list of new council tax payers and the marriage register. In addition we receive monthly lists of deaths from the Registrars office.

Between December and mid August, we have what is called Rolling Registration. People can register during this period and the registers are updated once a month. In the build up to an election people can register and make an application for an absent vote up to 11 working days before the election. Legally, however, people cannot go onto the register between 11 August and 30 November.

The following table shows our performance against the 10 registration performance standards set and monitored by the Electoral Commission. These relate to the 2011 registration year.

	Subject	Performance Standard	Performance
	Completeness and accuracy of electoral registers		
1		Using information sources to verify entries on the register of electors and identify potential new electors	Above the performance standard
2		Maintaining the property database	Met the standard
3		House-to-house enquiries	Met the standard
	Integrity		
4		Maintaining the integrity of registration and absent vote	Above the performance standard

		applications	
5		Supply and security of the register and absent voter lists	Above the performance standard
	Participation		
6		Public awareness strategy	Met the standard
7		Working with partners	Met the standard
8		Accessibility and communication of information	Met the standard
	Planning and organisation		
9		Planning for rolling registration and the annual canvass	Above the performance standard
10		Training	Above the performance standard

Looking ahead – registration

The government is bringing forward the introduction of individual registration (as against the current household registration) to commence in 2014. The details of how it will be implemented are still being worked out but it will undoubtedly create a lot more work for the service and more temporary staff will need to be employed to help the processing of a considerably larger number of forms.

In years to come, provided individual registration is successful, it is expected that the annual canvass, in its current form, will be done away with and registration may be continuous and involve regular data matching exercises with both internal and external databases. The government has 20 pilot data matching exercises underway this year to test the feasibility of this approach.

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