

Council Meeting – 13 September 2010

Notice of Motion – Electoral Register

1. Introduction

The following motion has been submitted by Councillors Nazir, Robertson, Burley, Sarohi, Westley, Barton and Oliver

This Council is committed to ensuring that all of our residents who are eligible to vote are registered to vote. The electoral register is the foundation stone of our democracy and we have a duty to ensure that it is both accurate and complete - helping to empower citizens and increase public engagement in the democratic process.

This Council believes that the Council should take every effort to ensure that the 2010 electoral register in the Borough of Walsall is as complete and accurate as possible, so as to provide a proper basis for any revision to electoral boundaries. In addition this Council notes that the Electoral Commission currently believe that approx 3.5 million people are missing for register in England and Wales alone and that this trend is especially stark amongst many specific social groups.

This Council therefore directs:

- 1) the Electoral Registration Officer and his/her staff to conduct door-to-door inquiries at all households where no-one responds to a letter requiring registration, with at least two personal calls on all non-responding households.*
- 2) that an effective advertising campaign is launched now to encourage people to register, targeted at social groups among whom under-registration is known to be a problem and targeted at residents in those neighbourhoods where the electoral register is believed to have the lowest levels of completeness.*
- 3) the Chief Executive to ensure a joined-up approach across all parts of the Council to encourage residents to register to vote;*
- 4) the Electoral Registration Officer to ensure that in the absence of any evidence that a particular household is empty or that the electors have moved or died, that the names in all such non-responding households should be carried over.*

2. Background Information

The census forms the basis of the national understanding about the number of people in the country and their entitlement of services. From this and other data sources, it is possible to estimate the number of people entitled to vote in local, national and European elections and also in occasional referenda.

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) figures for the Borough estimate that there are currently 202,450 people over the age of 16 and 195,630 over the age of 18.

The number of electors as at May 2010 was 188,600. This represents some 96.5% of the population eligible to vote. (The average of the other six West Midlands councils is 93.9%). In order to reach 100% of the estimated number of people in Walsall, it would be necessary to identify and persuade some 7000 further people to provide details and be included on the register.

The registration process involves the stages outlined below:

- a) An initial canvass form is hand delivered by council employed canvassers, to every household in the borough in early August.
- b) A "reminder" form is delivered in mid September, to every household that has not returned the initial form.
- c) From mid October, for 3 weeks (4 weekends) Personal Canvassers employed by the Council go door knocking at households that have not returned either of the first two forms. This has been ongoing since 2007. Staff have to pay at least 2 visits to a house and are then encouraged to leave the canvass form at the house (as they will be paid for it if it is returned in time) if the second visit has been unsuccessful.
- d) Once the new register is published on 1 December, elections staff check through lists of tenants supplied by the various housing associations in the borough, looking for people who are not on the register. The office posts a personalised letter and application form to these people.
- e) The elections office also checks the marriage register and sends personalised letters to newly weds who are not on the register.
- f) Elections staff check a monthly list of new council tax payers to the elections office and again, looking for people not on the register and then they post a personalised letter and application form to them.
- g) After 15 October, the date, in law, by which the annual canvass has to be relevant to (that is people can be entered on the canvass form if they will be resident at an address on that date) election staff check council tax records of empty property against the register to identify for people listed against an empty property that have not returned a canvass form. A legal review process is then initiated, by sending a personalised letter to each person. A non return after 14 days will see that person removed from the register. This is done to ensure the accuracy of the register.
- h) Council tax staff send out a new resident pack to new council tax payers and included in this is an electoral registration form (this is suspended during the annual canvass period).
- i) Rolling registration forms are available on the Council's and the Electoral Commission's web sites.
- j) Press releases are made at key stages of the annual canvass in order to promote the widest possible understanding.

By law, people who do not return an annual canvass form for two consecutive years are automatically removed from the register. In 2009, this amounted to about 5,000 names.

The wards with lowest return rates (less than 90% average) for an annual canvass are:

Birchills Leamore
Blakenall
Willenhall North
Willenhall South
Bentley & Darlaston North
Darlaston South
Paddock
Palfrey
Pleck
St Matthews

3. Future Developments

A number of initiatives are currently being explored for trial and potentially wider implementation.

As can be seen above, there is already a significant degree of follow up work both with the Council's systems and with partner public agencies. Officers are currently exploring the feasibility and costs involved of:

- Including electoral registration as an item when dealing with issues raised with callers at the First Stop Shop.
- Inviting partner agencies to assist in promoting registration when dealing with clients.
- Inviting community organisations to actively promote registration.

Each of these would have costs associated for which there is currently no provision.

4. Future Developments

One hundred percent registration is unlikely. There is evidence that some people simply do not wish to be registered and do not wish to vote. However, it will be possible to identify and persuade some more people to do so, albeit, a small percentage of those not on the register. It should be noted, however, the unit costs of success will rise considerably.

Set out below is a table which exemplifies the cost structure of securing registration:

	% return of initial total (110,000 households)	% return of forms dispatched	Approx unit cost of a return	Legal basis
Initial canvass form	56%	56%	£0.75	Sec 10 RPA 1983
Reminder canvass form	14%	32%	£1.15	Sec 9A(1)(a) RPA 1983
Door knocking (Personal canvassers)	15%	51%	£1.80	Sec 9A(1)(b) RPA 1983

Additional measures tried before or used currently

Letter to non returns, after personal canvassers (approx 10,000 letters)	Used in 2007	5%	£6.4	Sec 9A(1)(c) RPA 1983
Housing Association tenant lists, after new register published (16,500 individual records checked)	Used for the first time in 2009	10%	£11.1	Sec 9A(1)(d) RPA 1983

5. Financial Implications

The further measures being explored and described at section 3 would require growth in the elections budget of some £16,000. If early progress is to be made then this would need to be made available now.

Advertising campaigns can be prepared and implemented. The cost would be determined by the media used and frequency. This is considered to be amongst the least effective spend. However, should the Council wish this to be implemented, then it will be necessary to approve a budget.

In addition to the measures referred to at section 3. The most effective approach is likely to be extended personal canvassing. It is estimated that this may cost in the region of a further £15,000.

Paul Sheehan
Chief Executive

3 September 2010