

Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel – 26 February 2013

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. This is an update on the service.

Electoral Services 2013

While there are no scheduled elections in 2013, the service still has the following work to carry out;

On going; the receipt and processing of applications for registration, absent votes and the capture of new properties, is a daily task.

We obtain lists of tenants from the housing associations operating in the borough and we also receive, each month, a list of new council tax payers. We check these against the register and any person we find not on the register, we sent an application to them. We also do the same with the marriage register. These are labour intensive tasks and this year we are able to devote a lot more time to them than in previous years.

January – March; we are carrying out a statutory refresh of signatures for 3621 permanent postal voters. This requires a notice to each one and a reminder after 3 weeks and then any that have not returned them after 6 weeks is automatically cancelled. Permanent postal voters are required to supply a fresh signature every 5 years.

The accounts for the PCC election are compiled during this period and submitted to the Government for the balance of the cost to council of running the election.

Introduction of Individual Electoral registration (IER); a briefing paper on this subject was sent to all members on 3 September 2012 (see Appendix A).

There will be training throughout the year, by the Cabinet Office and the Association of Electoral Administrators.

In June we will be required to conduct a test data matching exercise, with the Department for Works and Pensions, and possibly council tax, using a new digital portal developed by Cabinet Office.

Initially, the data matching will be name and address only but later on it will gradually include date of birth and National Insurance number, which have to be provided when people register under the new IER system. I believe there is no intention on the government's part for us to retain national Insurance numbers.

The returned results should have a large number that will be a 100% match, and the balance made up of partial matches and no matches. Quite a bit of work will be required on the partial matches to gauge how much work will be required on this category after the live data matching work in June 2014, which starts the actual commencement of the transition to IER. The outcome will inform the amount of resources required to carry out the live data matching in June 2014.

September: The government wants the 2014 postal voter signature refresh to be brought forward to September 2013.

October: A review of polling districts is required to be completed in the 16 month period from 1 October 2013. As 2014 is going to be a very busy year for the service, we will commence the review in October 2013.

November: the annual canvass normally commences in the first week in August. However, the Government wants to delay this until 11 November because it wants an up to date as possible register to commence the data matching work that will start in June 2014. This will mean the delivery of the reminder canvas form in the week before Christmas and the door knocking phase in January. Legislation has not yet been passed to effect this change.

December: Planning and organising for the May / June 2014 Council and Euro elections commences in earnest.

Electoral returns

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%	28.95%	12.55%
By-elections	3		2	1		2		2	1	1	
No of electors at Notice of election	183,184	186,809	184,277	189,338	190,979	190,052	188,114	190,315	190,208	195,253	197,323
No of postal voters at election	7,356	10,965	12,601	17,537	15,144	19,332	20,838	23,369	25,138	23,552	24,072
Number of Presiding Officers / Poll Clerks	182 / ?	182 / 188	178 / 204	178 / 178	178 / 178	154 / 154	154 / 154	154 / 175	154 / 283	139/257	138/255
Portacabins (temp)	3	3	8	9	12	14	15	23	19	23	23

polling stations)												
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It can be seen that since 2003 the number of electors has risen by just over 14,000 and the number of portacabins by 20 (approx £2,000 each). Since 2001 the number of postal voters has increased by about 1200%, although since 2010, the annual increase has slowed down considerable.

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 44 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.

Review of the Police and Crime Commissioner election

The turnout was the most disappointing aspect of this election. Of the 12.55% (24,768) of the electorate who voted, 11,465 were postal votes (representing a 47.6% return) and 13,303 voted at polling stations (representing a 7.68% turnout).

The lack of information on who was standing and what it was all about was, I believe, was the highest contributing factor. The time of year probably the second highest factor.

The Electoral Commission did arrange for a pamphlet to be delivered to each household which described how the Supplementary Voting system worked but the how effective it was has not been determined and anecdotally, a fair percentage of households either did not receive it or did not recognise it for what it was or were not interested anyway.

To save money, the Home Office decided to set up a web site for information on candidates rather than provide funding for a leaflet drop. The majority of voters were in the upper age brackets and many of them in Walsall probably do not have easy access to the internet. We certainly received many complaints about this aspect and we alerted the Regional office (Birmingham City Council) about this but it was too late to alter.

The verification and count arrangements went well although it was quickly obvious to us why we prefer to use the sports hall for large counting operations than the town hall.

The number of doubtful votes we processed was considerably smaller than what we had anticipated, which had been based on the London mayoralty elections over the last four cycles.

On reflection, the team that handled the combined by election and PCC verification and count should have been located in a separate room, as there were cramped for space, which significantly hampered their operation.

Future PCC elections will all be combined with the Council's May elections and on a four yearly cycle.

The Government funding limit for the election was £338,653 (VAT included) and Council received an advance of 75%. The accounts have not yet been finalised but they will be

submitted before the end of March 2013. The cost is likely to be about £30,000 less than the funding limit. The net cost of running the election will be about £285,000.

2011 Alternative Vote referendum

In December 2012, the Electoral Commission (EC) published its report on the costs of the AV referendum held in conjunction with Council's elections, on 3 May 2011

The table below shows the comparative cost per elector over the West Midlands metropolitan councils.

Figures taken from EC's December 2012 report on the Costs of the May 2011 AV Referendum						
	Actual cost	Funding	Electorate at notice of election	Cost per elector	% of funding used	Funding per elector
Birmingham	£771,264	£949,809	742,689	£1.04	81.2%	£1.28
Coventry	£279,519	£313,652	223,676	£1.25	89.1%	£1.40
Dudley	£227,186	£353,652	241,055	£0.94	64.2%	£1.47
Sandwell	£248,488	£327,600	195,056	£1.27	75.9%	£1.68
Solihull	£158,406	£246,450	160,745	£0.99	64.3%	£1.53
Walsall	£237,110	£281,916	190,208	£1.25	84.1%	£1.48
Wolverhampton	£224,841	£293,635	176,275	£1.28	76.6%	£1.67

Electoral Services future plans

At some point in the year, the office is to be moved into the Council House but no date has been fixed.

The 2014 and 2015 calendar years are going to be the busiest years the service has ever faced. The transition to IER begins in earnest in mid 2014 and continues into late 2015 and there are two major elections in each of these two years, which are likely to be combined.

In terms of technology, we use an up to date electoral registration and election management system, which includes Intelligent Character Recognition software for the processing of canvass forms (whether this can be extended to IER remains to be seen). We use an e-canvass system to allow people to use e-mail to tell us there are no changes to their registration.

We also use an up to date system for processing and checking returned postal vote statements (Date of Birth and signatures).

We make 0800 telephone and internet channels available to residents during the annual canvass and also an automated service during elections for postal voters to check if we have received their postal vote.

We are always on the look out for ways in which technology can be utilised to make registering easier, within the constraints of the law.

The elections web pages are currently being updated.

Legislation

The Government is currently guiding the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill through Parliament.

The Bill's principal focus is to provide for the accelerated introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), but it also includes a number of electoral administration provisions. The electoral administration provisions in the Bill are as follows:

- To extend the UK Parliamentary election timetable from 17 to 25 working days and move the deadline for candidate nominations to 19 working days before the date of poll. This will allow ballot papers and postal ballot packs to be printed and issued much further in advance of polling day than at present, thereby facilitating greater voter participation for all postal voters but particularly those overseas and military voters based abroad. This change will also ease the pressure that exists in the system and facilitate combination with other polls (such as local government elections);
- To require the publication of two additional updates to the electoral register in the run up to polling day, thereby enabling people who register in the run up to polling day to be added to the electoral register and sent their poll card or postal ballot pack earlier than is currently possible;
- Make changes to the timing of polling place and district reviews in Great Britain to bring them in to line with the proposals to set Parliamentary terms to 5 year periods, and the five year cycle for UK Parliamentary boundary reviews implemented by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. Under the draft provisions, a local authority must carry out and complete a review of all the polling places and districts for UK Parliamentary elections in its area within the period of 16 months beginning from 1st October 2013, and the period of 16 months beginning with 1st October of every fifth year after that;
- Address the legislative lacuna that presently prevents jointly-nominated candidates using party emblems on the ballot paper at UK Parliamentary elections;
- Enable the Secretary of State to reduce or withhold a Returning Officer's fee following a recommendation from the Electoral Commission, in the event of poor performance;
- Allow Police Community Support Officers to enter polling stations and count venues;
- Provide for regulations to be made which will require Electoral Registration Officers to inform electors, after a poll, that their postal vote identifiers have been rejected (unless fraud is suspected). This will help voters who submit their postal ballot packs in good faith to avoid their vote being rejected at successive elections;
- The introduction of a civil penalty allowing council's to require individuals to make an application under IER and fine those who subsequently refuse;

The Government has also announced that it will introduce secondary legislation to:

- Require that 100 % of `postal vote identifiers` are checked in respect of postal votes in future. This implements a recommendation made by a number of stakeholders to ensure the integrity of the electoral process and provide an additional safeguard against electoral fraud;
- Allow those voters called away on business or military service at short notice very close to the day of the poll, to vote by allowing them to appoint an emergency proxy. This will allow more people the opportunity to exercise their right to vote where their circumstances have changed unexpectedly.

Undoubtedly there will be changes as the Bill progresses through Parliament and a lot of detail to absorb when it is enacted and regulations that subsequently follow.

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Briefing Paper on the Introduction of Individual Electoral Registration and Other Activities to be Undertaken

The Electoral Commission has for many years called for a change in the law to allow for individual registration, to better protect against electoral fraud. The previous Labour government made provision for a phased introduction in the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. Registration in Northern Ireland has been on an individual basis since 2002.

The Coalition Government's policy is to speed up the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and remove the voluntary phase. Consequently a White Paper and draft legislation were published on 30 June 2011.

From the summer of 2013, Electoral Registration Officers (ERO's) will be required to begin the transition from the current household registration system, where one member of a household can register all eligible members in the household, to an Individual Electoral Registration (IER) system, where each eligible person is responsible for their own registration.

The principal legislation, the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill and its subsequent regulations have not yet been enacted, so much of the fine detail has not yet been fixed.

IER will require people to provide their date of birth and National Insurance number, which will be validated by the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP). A signature will not be required although it will still be required for an absent vote.

IER will involve elements of data matching against a trusted public data set (likely to involve data matching with the DWP and possibly Council Tax), on-line registration, traditional canvasses, mini canvasses, validation of applications (National Insurance numbers / dates of birth) with the DWP and registration at the point of other day to day transactions with the government or council.

The following is an outline of the key registration activities that are known / anticipated at this stage:

Activity	When	Comment
Trial data matching (DWP)	Timing unknown but anticipated to be about mid 2013	Testing of the processes and systems. Some additional resources may be required. It will give us a ball park idea of the scale of numbers likely to be registered by this method in 2014
Household canvass	Dec 2013 to Mar 2014	This will be the last household canvass. Government has delayed it so as to have as up to date a register as possible before the May/June 2014 elections and the data matching work to be

		commenced in July 2014. No additional resources required
Data matching (DWP)	July 2014	Those that are matched will be “passport” onto the new register and will not need to apply. We will have to write to each one to tell them. Additional resource requirement unknown at this stage.
Canvass	Aug - Nov 2014	<p>Registered electors (who have not been data matched) will receive personally addressed applications, including an insert to identify additional occupants.</p> <p>Such forms will still need to be delivered twice, if no response to the first one and if no response to the second form is received, a door knocking campaign will have to be undertaken. This regime is the same as currently but with individual forms instead of one per household. Considerable difficulty is anticipated if door knockers have to ask people for the date of birth and national insurance number of all eligible persons in the household.</p> <p>Empty properties and households where there is doubt that an elector is still resident will be sent a new form- the Household Enquiry Form and followed up with an individual registration application form, if a response is received.</p> <p>Applications will need to be validated with the DWP, using their National Insurance number and date of birth.</p> <p>Those who fail to respond but are deemed eligible will be carried forward to enable participation in 2015 General Election</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Electors must be registered under IER to cast a postal vote or vote as a nominated proxy •New electoral registers will need to be published by 1st Dec <p>Significant additional resources will be required for this canvass</p>
Mini canvass	Jan – Mar 2015	Probably targeted at under represented groups and low return areas. This is a new activity and additional resources will be required. It is not known if this has to be repeated every year or not.
First full IER canvass	Aug - Nov 2015	<p>This canvass will request data on all persons resident in every household.</p> <p>A new form, a Household Enquiry Form, will be sent to all properties</p> <p>Following the 2015 canvass, the electoral register will consist only of electors who have made individual applications under IER</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Revised electoral registers will need to be published by 1st December and the transition to IER will be complete. <p>Additional resources will be required.</p>
Civil penalties	Not known but anticipated to be after the 2015 canvass	It is anticipated that legislation will include a provision for a civil penalty for those failing to make an application when invited to do so. The details are unknown but it could be a large administrative exercise requiring significant additional resources over a short term

The Electoral Commission will conduct a public awareness campaign in 2014 and 2015 and local authorities will be expected to support this by their own publicity.

The government is committed to funding the full cost of the transition to IER, over and above the current cost of electoral registration.

To ensure that this funding is used to allow the ERO to fully comply with their statutory duties in regard to the transition to IER, the Cabinet Office is proposing that:

No additional funding is provided unless the Chief Executive signs a declaration that there will be no reduction on spending on electoral registration from their normal source of income from the previous year. This will be important because 2013/14 and 2014/15 are critical years for the electoral register and it is not anticipated that any less is to be spend on registration in these years.

Other activities

Commencing after the 2014 elections, we will be required to write to all postal voters who have had their postal vote rejected, advising them of the reason(s) why they were rejected, unless fraud is suspected.

While the initial exercise will generate a lot of enquiries, it is expected that the volume should reduce significantly over the years as it is hoped people will become more particular in filling out their postal voting applications and statements, now feedback will be given as to why their vote was rejected.

Since the beginning of 2012, we now have to ask postal voters to supply a fresh signature where their current one was received 5 years ago. This will now be an annual exercise in January each year.

Polling district reviews

The timing of polling place and district reviews will change to bring them in to line with the Parliamentary terms of 5 year periods, and the five year cycle for UK Parliamentary boundary reviews implemented by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. A local authority must carry out and complete a review of all the polling places and districts for UK Parliamentary elections in its area within the period of 16 months beginning from 1st October 2013, and the period of 16 months beginning with 1st October of every fifth year after that.

New Parliamentary boundaries

If Parliament approves the proposed new constituency boundaries for the May 2015 general election, then this will very likely require significant extra numbers of poll cards, ballot papers, counting time and transport.

Elections

- In 2013 there are no scheduled elections.
- In 2014 there are the council ward elections and a European Parliamentary election in June. We would expect these to be combined but Government has not considered the matter as yet.
- In 2015 there will be combined UK General and council elections.
- In 2016 there will be combined council and Police and Crime Commissioner elections
- In 2017 there are no scheduled elections.

Neighbourhood Planning Referenda

The likelihood of Neighbourhood Planning Referenda is difficult to accurately gauge. If a number of them are required in the IER transition period (2014-2015) then electoral services will require additional resources.



Peter Allsop
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