

VOTER REGISTRATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee - 20 March 2018

Report of Chief Officer Corporate Services

Status For Information

Key Decision No

Executive Summary: This report sets out the current proposed plan for encouraging electoral registration and elector engagement in the electoral process. It outlines some of the activities which will be undertaken.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Anna Firth

Contact Officer Nicola Fletcher, Ext. 7188

Recommendation to Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee:

The report be noted.

Introduction and Background

- 1 It is the duty of councils to look at ways of promoting high levels of registration to support democracy and engagement in civic life. Research conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2013 identified several demographic groups that are least likely to be registered to vote. These are:

Students and younger people (under 35);

People living in the private rented sector;

Certain Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups;

British citizens living abroad;

Commonwealth and EU citizens, and

Those classified as social grade DE (as defined by the Office for National Statistics as semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest grade occupations).

- 2 The Portfolio Holder has requested that Electoral Services investigate options for youth engagement in particular, and look at ways to increase levels of youth voter registration.

- 3 A comparison of the 2011 Census data and the current ward elector totals has shown that registration levels across the district are extremely high at approximately 95%, compared to a national average of 84.7%. Using the same 2011 Census data, there are, on average 125 people not registered in each of the 26 wards across the District. Census data figures will include individuals who are not eligible to register because of nationality or people who have chosen to register at a different address if they have a second home.
- 4 The voter registration process did not require disclosure of a date of birth for all applicants until Individual Electoral Registration was introduced in 2014. We are therefore unable to determine an accurate age profile of those not registered to vote in each ward.

Engagement Activities

- 5 At present a new Public Engagement Strategy for electoral registration is being developed which will focus on engaging with electors and encouraging registration in line with the Electoral Commission's performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers (ERO). This new strategy will include making more effective use of social media and be in place to encourage registrations in advance of the next scheduled elections in 2019.
- 6 The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (House of Commons Select Committee) produced a report in November 2014 on Voter Engagement in the UK, with recommendations that included the engagement of young people. The Government's response in February 2015 indicated that they felt there was a strong case for making greater efforts to register 16 to 18 year olds at school and in college—particularly as registration now takes place on an individual basis and can be done, easily, on-line, from school. The Cabinet Office is working with the Department for Education on promoting this in schools.
- 7 The response also stated that effective citizenship education is an important part of the process of becoming an engaged voter, and should continue to be a part of the national curriculum. Schools' citizenship education courses specifically include discussion of the political and governmental structures of the UK and the electoral systems that operate in the UK, and also the practicalities of registering to vote and actually participating at an election.
- 8 Electoral Services officers are planning to liaise with Kent County Council (KCC) to ascertain to what extent local democracy is included in the national curriculum delivered in local schools.
- 9 As Members will be aware three new posts have been created for Electoral Outreach Canvassers who carry out the door to door canvassing and work on encouraging participation in the electoral process.
- 10 The Outreach Canvassers will also be able to deliver workshops and information sessions on electoral registration to a range of audiences.

- 11 Electoral registration forms and letters will continue to be modified, where legislation allows, to deliver the most appropriate message and call to action for residents. A recent successful example of this has been the review letter testing where three revised legislatively compliant and more customer focused letters were sent out. There has been no adverse feedback from any of the three versions.
- 12 The new Electoral Outreach Canvassers will continue the liaison and close working relationships with care homes to help facilitate the resident's participation in the electoral process.
- 13 Mencap received Government funding to look at ways of increasing voter registration and voting, and has developed an easy-to-read guide to registering to vote and voting, to be used in a one-to-one setting for with people with learning disabilities, their families and carers. Mencap is also adapting the Government's freely available resource for engaging young people in the democratic process, specifically for young people with a learning disability.
- 14 Representatives from support groups and charities like Mencap and the RNIB will be invited in to discuss with officers the registration process and any support or resources which could be offered by Electoral Services.
- 15 Electoral Services officers will also liaise with organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Porchlight to discuss ideas for improving registration rates.
- 16 Electoral Services will continue to work with other Council departments to help promote electoral registration and to offer registration assistance.
- 17 Bite the Ballot is a national, youth-led movement which works to engage communities by working in schools and community settings, choosing a current national issue to stimulate debate. They have a Community Engagement and Insight Programme taking place during National Democracy Week (2nd - 6th July 2018). This Programme has been reviewed and it has been concluded that it would not be appropriate to take this particular initiative forward.

Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

- 18 None

Key Implications

Financial

Any activities undertaken to encourage electors to register and to participate in the electoral process will be met from existing budgets.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

Under Section 8 of the RPA 1983 it is a requirement for every district council and London Borough to appoint an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). Whilst the ERO is appointed by the council, the ERO's responsibilities are personal. The ERO is required to take steps to encourage participation by electors in the electoral process and meet the performance standards set by the Electoral Commission.

Failure to adhere to the legislative requirements on the ERO and the Returning Officer would be a significant risk to the Council.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

This report sets out for Members information the approach and actions which will be taken by Electoral Services to improve levels of voter registration.

There are a number of further improvements to be made and these will be introduced during 2018.

Members are recommended to consider the information provided within the report and note the actions the service will take to deliver higher levels of voter registration.

Appendices None

Background Papers Cabinet Office Electoral Registration Analysis -

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/226739/Electoral-Registration-Analysis-CO.pdf

Political and Constitutional Reform Report -

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/1037/103704.htm>

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Chief Officer Corporate Services