

## ELECTORAL REGISTRATION AND ELECTIONS

Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee - 23 January 2018

Report of Chief Officer Corporate Services

Status For Information

Key Decision No

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**Executive Summary:** This report sets out the improvements which have been made to Electoral Services for electoral registration and elections within the scope of the current legislative framework.

Further improvements will be made to enable the Council to deliver efficiencies, enhance and automate processes and further improve the service delivered to customers.

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**Portfolio Holder** Cllr. Anna Firth

**Contact Officer** Nicola Fletcher, Ext. 7188

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**Recommendation to Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee:**

The report be noted.

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### Introduction and Background

- 1 This report is provided to update Members on the progress which has been made in streamlining and improving electoral registration and election processes. Electoral registration and the running of elections is highly prescribed in various pieces of primary and secondary legislation.
- 2 In the last two years, there have been three major elections and a national referendum, namely the Police and Crime Commissioner election in May 2016, the EU Referendum in June 2016, the Kent County Council elections in May 2017 and the UK Parliamentary General Election in June 2017. Additionally, there have been a number of by-elections for county council divisions, district wards, parishes and parish wards.
- 3 Each election has seen an increase in the level of voter registration and the number of postal voters. There was a significant increase in the number of registration applications for the EU Referendum and the Parliamentary General election. The tables below provide a summary of the data for these elections.

	<b>EU Referendum</b>	<b>General Election</b>
Registered eligible electors	87,253	88,077
Turnout	80.6%	71.8% (Sevenoaks Constituency only)
Postal voters	15,164	12,141 (Sevenoaks Constituency only)

	<b>1 December 2015</b>	<b>23 June 2016</b>	<b>1 December 2016</b>	<b>8 June 2017</b>
Registered electors	87,698	89,652	89,086	90,590

- 4 At the KCC election in May 2017 Sevenoaks completed the declarations for all its divisions second in Kent and declared its single constituency third in Kent for the Parliamentary General Election.
- 5 Each year Electoral Services is required to carry out an annual canvass between July and December which involves sending a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to every residential property in the district. If a response is not received then up to two additional forms have to be sent and a canvasser has to make a personal visit to the property to encourage a response or collect the required information. During the 2016 annual canvass 49,946 initial HEFs were sent and this figure rose to 50,346 for the 2017 canvass. Information about the annual canvass was included in In Shape encouraging residents to confirm the details for their property.
- 6 The law requires that each year, by 31 January a notice is sent to every absent voter (postal, proxy and postal proxy voters) whose signature on the personal identifiers record is more than five years old. The notice asks that they provide a refresh signature if they wish to remain an absent voter and advised that the absent vote will be removed if they do not provide a new signature within six weeks. This process is known as refreshing absent vote signatures and in 2018, notices will be sent to over 3,000 electors where the signature is more than five years old.
- 7 A review of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places will be conducted in 2018 under the requirements of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. It has to be started and completed within a period of 16 months that starts on 1 October of every fifth year after 1 October

2013. There are currently 74 polling districts in the Sevenoaks District Council area and each polling district must have a designated polling place.

### **Electoral Registration Improvements**

- 8 A range of service improvements are being delivered to help automate processes, where this is permissible under current legislation, to make efficiencies and improve customer service.
- 9 In 2016 legislation was introduced, the Representation of the People (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which allowed for Invitations to Registers and application forms to be emailed to electors rather than only to be sent by post. This has been introduced by Electoral Services for certain stages of the ITR chase cycle and the result has been a reduction in print and postage costs and an increase in the number of people registering to vote online in direct response to the email. The ITR email wording is statutory and as such cannot be amended locally. ITRs and application forms cannot be emailed to all pending electors only those for whom an email address is held and we will seek to grow the number of email addresses held.
- 10 At present, all correspondence sent by Electoral Services is being reviewed to ensure that it is customer focused and delivers the key message in the most appropriate and effective way. As a part of this review, some testing will be done of different versions of the same letter type to see which version has the most positive impact. Some letters, such as the Invitation to Register letter cannot be amended because the letter is prescribed and there are some letters where the exact wording is not prescribed but the content is. The revised letters will make individuals aware of the options of electronic response methods.
- 11 During the 2017 annual canvass a test of canvassing with tablets for both HEFs and ITRs was carried out for some canvass areas. The analysis of the test was positive in terms of response rates, customer feedback and ease of use for the canvassers. Tablets will be introduced for all canvassing in early 2018. There will be an initial expenditure for the hardware and the software. However, will be a reduction on the print costs of second reminder ITRs, reduce the number of paper forms which have to be scanned and processed and increase the efficiency of the canvass.
- 12 As a part of the budget setting process, a saving of £2,000 on postage costs for Electoral Services has been identified and is being considered as part of the current budget process. This saving will be delivered by emailing more ITRs where possible and by emailing various letters to electors, such as confirmation acknowledgements, opt out acknowledgements and postal vote application forms. A system has been put in place to monitor the savings made across each type of letter as it is emailed.
- 13 Electoral Services is actively engaging with other sections and departments across the Council to enhance and improve the registration process for residents. This includes continued work on identifying new data sources to

help identify potential electors and the information which is provided to explain the importance of registering to vote. For example, using the Electoral Commission's template public engagement resources a new infographic is being developed which will explain how and why to register. This could be made available in reception, included in other information given by the Council to new residents or handed out to individuals when they have meetings with Council Officers. Electoral Services is working more closely with the Housing Team to work with HERO officers to promote electoral registration, to offer registration assistance and for providing general information on electoral registration.

- 14 Wider engagement with various target groups is being developed and this will include closer liaison with care homes and targeting under registered groups within the district. Additionally, 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 A number of small scale office based improvements have been made to help improve efficiency and accuracy of the service, examples of this include a revised procedure for parish council vacancies, a dedicated receipt book for electoral documents handed in to reception, the purchase of barcode label machines for registration documents and additional scanners have been installed to enable every team member to be able to scan returned forms and applications. Electoral Services calls are now managed through NetCall which has helped to improve customer service levels and to provide information if an issue requires further investigation.

### **Election Improvements**

- 16 Under current legislation there is limited scope to change the way that elections are administered but there are a number of internal changes which have been made to deliver efficiencies.
- 17 For each national election, Electoral Services recruits and trains in excess of 400 staff to work on polling day, at the count and at postal vote openings. The process for recruiting and allocating election staff has been modernised with the majority of staffing letters now being sent by email with an option of accepting or declining a job electronically. There are a small number of letters which still have to be sent by post because the individual does not have an email address. Emailing letters has seen a reduction in print and postage costs and for quicker responses to role allocations which was especially useful for the snap Parliamentary General election in June 2017. This method for staffing will continue to be used for future elections.
- 18 Poll staff training is being reviewed before each election and incremental changes are being made to improve this. Some of the changes include offering a session on a Saturday morning, delivering separate training for new staff and for returning staff and encouraging more interactions and discussions during the training.

- 19 The materials that are provided to polling stations are, within the legislative framework, being reviewed and improved. Bespoke election materials and paperwork are now provided by an external provider. Documents produced in-house are being consolidated to try to reduce the amount of paperwork which is completed by Presiding Officers, such as combining logs and questionnaires.
- 20 Improvements have been made to the way that the results of elections counts are recorded so paperwork required for the count process is produced automatically and real time updates of the progress and results of the count can be made available for attendees.
- 21 Tests are currently being undertaken to determine the quickest and most accurate method for counting multiple member seats in preparation for the District and Parish elections in 2019.
- 22 At the recent Penshurst, Fordcombe and Chiddingstone by-election in August 2017 remote scanning of postal vote statements at the final postal vote opening session at the count was trailed. There were no issues during this trial and further tests will be done at any future by-elections with a view to remote scanning being used for the District and Parish elections in 2019.

#### **Future Improvements**

- 23 There are still further improvements and ideas which can be implemented and this will be developed during 2018.
- 24 It is planned to hold an open morning in early 2018 to increase awareness and interest in the jobs which are available on polling day. Alongside this, the option of working part time on polling day, for example an early shift from 6.30am to 2.30pm and a late shift from 2.30pm to 10.30pm for poll clerks will be investigated. It is hoped that this will encourage more people to want to work on elections as they would not have to commit to a full day from 6.30am to 10.30pm.
- 25 A video for poll staff training will be created which will show examples of how to set up a polling station and cover typical scenarios.
- 26 The features available in the electoral software system will be further used to automate more processes such as importing lists of empty properties and new properties which will help improve the accuracy of the register and reduce time inputting data.
- 27 In February a Household Notification Letter (HNL) will be sent to all the residential properties which did not respond to a HEF and it is hoped that this will help to improve the accuracy and completeness of the Electoral Register.

## Potential National and Legislative Developments

- 28 The Law Commission is now working on bringing forward a number of reforms using secondary legislation, such as consolidating statutory instruments. Consideration is still being given to how and when changes to primary legislation can be made.
- 29 The Government has issued a policy paper which explains its approach to removing the 15 year registration rule for British citizens living overseas voting in Parliamentary elections.
- 30 The Minister for the Constitution has made a statement on anonymous registration and the Government is considering the procedure for some individuals who would register as anonymous electors.
- 31 During the 2017 annual canvass, 21 local authorities took part in pilots trialling different models for canvassing across the UK. It was anticipated that the pilot process would save between £1.2 million and £1.7 million across the 21 local authorities and if the changes were made permanent and rolled out nationally it could result in an annual saving of £20 million per year. It was also hoped that the changes and flexibility would allow local authorities to increase registration levels by better targeting those who do not usually respond during the canvass. The analysis of these pilots is awaited.
- 32 At the local elections in May 2018, voter ID pilots will be taking place in five local authority areas and there will be a separate postal voting pilot taking place at Tower Hamlets. The form of the ID will be set by the councils but it will include photo ID and non-photo ID to see which is the most effective and efficient. Voter ID was raised in the report on voting and fraud by Sir Eric Pickles and the Electoral Commission has recommended since 2014 that an accessible, proportionate voter identification scheme should be introduced in Great Britain. At this point in time the Government has ruled out any move to electronic voting in the UK.

## Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

None

## Key Implications

### Financial

The action plan that has been set out for improvements to the elections service is based on a fully resourced team being able to deliver the daily requirements on the service, preparation for elections and having the capacity to deliver service improvements.

A budgetary saving of £2000 on postage has been identified for Electoral Services and can be delivered, subject to Members agreeing this saving in the Budget.

