

ELECTORAL SERVICES UPDATE

Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee - 22 January 2019

Report of Chief Officer Corporate Services

Status For Information

Key Decision No

Executive Summary: This report sets out an update on improvements which have been made in Electoral Services within the current legislative framework.

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

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Anna Firth

Contact Officer Nicola Fletcher, Ext. 7188

Recommendation to Legal and Democratic Services Advisory Committee: That the report be noted.

Introduction and Background

- 1 This report is provided to update Members on the progress which has been made in streamlining and improving practices and procedures within Electoral Services.
- 2 During 2018, three by-elections were administered, two for Edenbridge Town Council on 3 April 2018 and one for the Farningham, Horton Kirby and South Darenth District Ward on 30 August 2018.
- 3 Between July and December 2018, Electoral Services conducted the annual canvass which required a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to be sent to every residential property in the district. If a response was not received, then up to two additional forms had to be sent and a canvasser had to make a personal visit to the property to encourage a response or collect the required information. 50,757 forms were sent for the 2018 annual canvass and the revised register was published on 1 December 2018.
- 4 As of 1 December 2018, 44,525 (88%) of HEFs had been returned across all the HEF stages including the personal visits by canvassers. Approximately, 11,500 residential properties were visited as a part of the annual canvass. The responses received online for all the stages totalled 24,840 - 56%, the

number of paper responses was 19,377 - 43% and a small number of 'other' responses. Some properties returned HEFS using multiple channels.

- 5 In comparison to the previous year, the overall response rate for the 2017 annual canvass was 88%. The online response rate for the 2017 annual canvass was 42%, the paper response was 57% and other was 1%.
- 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 2019, notices will be sent to over 1,610 electors where the signature is more than five years old.
- 7 A review of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places will be conducted 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 The covering letter for the HEF was changed for the 2018 annual canvass. For previous canvasses, the standard covering letter provided by the Electoral Commission as a template was used. In 2018 this was changed to a template which explained how easy it was to return the form online while still offering the option to complete the form by post, phone or text message. The increase in online returns between 2017 and 2018 was 14%.
- 10 All correspondence sent by Electoral Services has been 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 was 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. There has been no negative feedback to any of the letter amendments which have been made. Additionally, the content of letters will continue to be reviewed on a periodic basis.
- 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 have been introduced for all canvassing, which is now being undertaken by three Electoral Outreach Canvassers who were appointed to the Council in 2018. The introduction of the tablets has seen a reduction in print costs for the HEFs and Invitations to Register (ITR). It has also resulted in a reduction in the number of paper forms which had to be scanned and processed and increased the efficiency of the canvass.

- 12 The type and quantity of letters sent by Electoral Services by email has been increased and this project will continue as far as permitted under current legislation.
- 13 The postal vote application form sent by Electoral Services and the Contact Centre has been amended to make it easier to complete and to bring it in line with the Electoral Commission's template form.
- 14 Electoral Services officers now have access to the Tell Us Once service which is improving the accuracy and completeness of the register.

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 and improvements for staff and customers.
- 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 staff being given the option to use a be-spoke web based system to accept job roles, update personal details and book training. This will be offered alongside the traditional letter system for those staff who do not wish to use the web based system.
- 18 Poll staff training is reviewed before each election and incremental changes are being made to improve this. Some of the changes include offering a training session on a Saturday morning and looking to create a video to support the sessions. Additionally, staff who wish to be poll clerks are being offered the opportunity to work either a morning or evening session if there is another member of staff who can work the alternate shift.
- 19 An open morning was held for Council staff in July 2018 to promote election job roles and this event was well attended. As a result, 23 new staff have been added to the staffing database. A short survey was conducted after the open morning to ascertain how useful it was. 100% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided was useful, that they understood what each of the election roles would involve and that the application form was easy to complete. All respondents felt that their knowledge levels of election roles had increased after the open morning.
- 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 A new system for counting ballot papers for multiple member seats is being introduced for the District and Parish elections in May 2019. This is a reusable board which will replace the traditional grass skirts.
- 22 At the by-elections in 2018 remote scanning of postal vote statements at the final postal vote opening session at the count was used. There were no issues during these elections and so this will be continued, where appropriate, at future elections.

Future Improvements

- 23 There are still further improvements and ideas which can be implemented and this will be developed during 2019.
- 24 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.
- 25 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.

Proposals from Government

- 28 The Government has published some proposed reforms to the annual canvass in a policy statement and then consulted on these proposals in late 2018. It is intended that any reforms would be implemented in 2020. The proposals are intended to allow the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to target resources more effectively and carry out, both national and local, data matching at the start of the canvass to identify properties where it is likely the occupiers remain the same. The ERO will be able to conduct a light touch canvass on properties identified as such.
- 29 The Overseas Electors Bill would result in the removal of the existing 15-year time limit on British Citizens who live abroad registering as overseas electors and therefore enfranchise any British citizen overseas who was previously resident or registered to vote in the UK. The Bill completed the committee stage on 14 November 2018 and is due to have its report stage and third reading on 25 January 2019.
- 30 The Cabinet Office has recently consulted on draft legislation which would remove the requirement for candidates to have their home addresses published on the ballot paper at principal area elections, parish and community council elections, local authority mayoral elections and combined authority mayoral elections. It is expected that this legislation will be in effect for the May 2019 polls.

31 At the local elections in May 2019, further voter ID pilots will be taking place at eleven local authorities. The aim of the pilots is to provide further insights into how best to ensure the security of the voting process and reduce the risk of voter fraud. Each local authority will test one of the following models; photo ID, photo and non-photo ID, traditional poll cards or poll cards with barcodes which can be scanned.

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.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

The report explains the legal framework which the Electoral Registration and Returning Officer must operate within to deliver their personal responsibilities for the electoral processes. Failure to adhere to these 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 progress which has been made to date with planned improvements for Electoral Services and provides the recent electoral context for these changes.

There are a number of further improvements to be made and these will be introduced during 2019.

Members are recommended to consider the information provided within the report and note the actions the service will take to deliver these and any future legislative changes.

Appendices None

Background Papers None

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Chief Officer Corporate Services

