

Report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Registration - Canvass Reform Process & Electoral Engagement

Purpose of the canvass

The annual canvass is carried out to audit the information included on the Electoral Register, to ensure that it is both complete and accurate. The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) has a duty to:

- include the names and addresses of citizens who are entitled to be registered, but who are not already registered;
- remove citizens who are on the register, but who are no longer entitled to be registered at a particular address (normally because they have moved).

Therefore, any canvass process must deliver outcomes that adhered to these two key principles.

Background to Reform

The electoral canvass has been reformed this year, as the previous system was considered outdated and inflexible. The one size fits all approach did not take account of differences between registration areas and was heavily paper based, expensive and complex to administer.

The key objectives of the reform are:

- to make the process simpler and clearer for citizens
- for ERO's to have discretion on how to run their canvass based on what suits their local area
- to reduce the administrative burden on ERO's and the financial burden on the tax payers
- to safeguard the completeness and accuracy of the register
- to maintain the security and integrity of the register
- to provide a model that is adaptable and has capacity for innovation and improvement

Key Changes

The new process provides the ERO with a number of additional measures at their disposal, including:-

- Data matching existing records to national and local data records
- Using electronic means of contact via email and text message (where possible)
- Sending different communications to different households at different times
- Making personal contact – to now include telephone in addition to a personal visit

Overview of New Canvass Process

Step 1 - Data Match & Route Allocation

At the start of the canvass all electors were data matched against Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) data. Each elector was given a green or red rating as either having matched against these records or having not.

- 101,351 households with all electors matching GREEN were placed in Route 1
- 33,085 households with at least one elector matching RED were placed in Route 2
- 7,344 households classed as 'defined properties' were placed in Route 3

Defined properties are those which have multiple occupants who do not form a single household i.e. Care Homes, Student Accommodation and HIMO's. Direct contact was made with a 'responsible person' at each address, such as the accommodation manager, in order to ascertain who is currently resident there. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain the HIMO data in time for inclusion in Route 3 this year, so they had to go into Route 2 instead. However, they will be placed in Route 3 at future canvasses.

Step 2 - Contact

Route 1 – All matched Electors

Electronic Communications (E-Comms) were sent to all matched electors between 20- 27 July 2020, where an email or mobile telephone number was held by Electoral Services (except for those under 18). The E-Comms asked the elector to confirm the details for their household online.

- If an elector at a household responded to the E-Comms - **Cycle Complete**
- If none of the electors at a household responded to the E-Comms, then a paper communication had to be posted. This was a Canvass Communication A (CCA) (see Appendix 1).

After receiving the CCA, households with no changes did not need to respond. However, those with changes were required to respond by either going online or by telephone or post, in order to make the necessary amendments.

Cycle now complete for all Route 1 properties – Electoral Services take no further action

Route 1 - Response Rates

Out of the 101,351 Route 1 households, 56,603 E-Comms were sent, with 48,291 electors being contacted by email and 8,312 by text message. 13,706 households responded to the E-Comms which is a response rate of 24.2 %. This meant nearly 14K fewer forms had to be printed and posted.

The number of households which then received a paper form was 87,652, this included households that did not respond to the E-Comms and those where no contact details were held. From this figure 3,794 households (4.32%) did respond, as they still had changes to make, even though their details had matched. These changes included both amendments to the current residents and requests from existing electors for postal vote applications or to 'opt out' of the open register.

Route 2 – Unmatched Electors

There were no E-Comms to Route 2 households at the first stage, as they had to receive a paper form or a personal visit as their initial contact. The form used for Route 2 is a Canvass Form (CF) (see Appendix 2).

Regardless of whether there are changes or no changes, a Route 2 household MUST respond to the paper form. They could respond by using any of the response channels e.g. online, telephone, text and post.

If a responses was received – Cycle Complete

If no response was received:-

- E-Comms were sent (if the contact details are held) and if still no response, then a reminder paper form was posted on 7 September 2020.
- If still no response received – E-Comms were sent again and then from 5 October 2020 contact was made by telephone, if a telephone number was held by Electoral Services.
- A personal visit should then have been carried out to all outstanding properties including those where no electors were currently registered or where no contact details were held.

Unfortunately the personal visit was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic as Nottingham City was placed under Tier 3 restrictions just prior to the implementation of the door knocking stage.

To mitigate against the lack of face to face contact through a personal visit and to maximise the number of households to be contacted, an additional form was posted to all outstanding households. The ERO also used their power to inspect and make copies of any records held by the local authority in order to obtain additional telephone numbers, so that contact could be carried out remotely. IT Services conducted a data mining exercising of other databases and were able to identify over 5k additional numbers. However, as E-Comms can only be made to a

matched elector, the telephone numbers had to be cross referenced against the data match results. The final result was an additional 1,594 telephone numbers on top of what was already held by Electoral Services.

Canvassers who had been initially recruited to conduct the personal visit were re-deployed onto the telephone canvass. By using their electronic tablets to record the information directly for upload onto the register, they were able to provide advice and request the required information as they would at the door, but via the telephone instead. All canvassers were Nottingham City Council (NCC) colleagues using NCC equipment, who had all undergone data protection and information security training, so that data security and the integrity of the register were maintained at all times.

To accommodate the additional work from IT Services and conduct the telephone canvass, the canvass was extended into December and the publication of the register delayed until 4 January 2021.

Route 2 - Responses Rates

The total number of households receiving a paper Canvass Form at the start of the canvass, which they were required to respond to, was 33,085. From this figure 11,453 households responded and a reminder was subsequently sent to 21,632 non-responding addresses.

In addition to this, following the initial paper form, E-Comms were also sent to any matched electors at these Route 2 households, where their contact details were held. Further E-Comms were sent to these electors on three more occasions to encourage them to respond.

At the time the personal visit stage was cancelled 17,315 Route 2 households were still outstanding. Each of these households received an extra form in lieu of a visit plus a telephone call where possible. The total number of properties outstanding at the end of the canvass is 14,226.

Route 3 – Defined properties

Defined properties in Route 3 did not receive a paper form. Instead, Electoral Services contacted the 'responsible person' for these properties by email to request the information. The 'responsible person' was either a Care Home Manager or a Student Hall Manager.

Care Homes

Electoral Services attended an online briefing with care home managers across the city and also provided information through the Contracting Care & Support Team, to outline the new process and to encourage them to respond promptly. A total of 77 care homes were contacted under Route 3 and currently only 38 have responded, even though reminders have been sent.

Obviously, care homes have been extremely busy this year dealing with the virus which may have impacted on their ability to respond. However, the response from care homes has always been patchy since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), as many have residents with lack of capacity, which makes the registration process extremely difficult, especially for those with no power of attorney.

Student Halls

The University of Nottingham (UofN) provided details of all students resident within their own halls of residence. All residents have been sent an Invitation to Register (ITR) communication to encourage them to register and reminders will be sent where necessary in due course.

However, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) were unable to provide details of students resident in their halls due to a technical issue with their system. We are currently liaising with NTU to try and acquire this information through other means.

In addition, 45 privately run halls of residence have also been asked to provide details of their residents. Unfortunately, only 13 of the 45 have provided the required information with several refusing to do so citing data protection issues, even though they were provided with clear guidance and the relevant legislation in advance.

However, we have managed to identify the majority of residents in the remaining private halls by using the student data provided to us directly from both universities (see below) and have sent them an ITR to register.

Student Data

Both the UofN and NTU have provided spreadsheets containing the names, addresses and nationalities of all of their students for the current academic year residing in private accommodation.

This data has been manipulated so that it can be imported into the electoral software and all eligible students that have provided a valid contact address are in the process of being sent an ITR, either digitally or by paper form, to encourage them to register. This is in addition to the process undertaken for halls of residence in Route 3 as outlined above.

Unfortunately the university data does not class as a response from the property and we therefore cannot use it as such, as it only provides information of possible new residents and no confirmation of existing entries on the register, which would require further investigation.

To address this in future we have requested an enhancement from our software provider, which we hope will be able to identify student properties which have not responded at the canvass, so that we can bulk review the pre-existing entries that did not match with the DWP and potentially delete the names of electors who are no longer resident.

Students are also using the JISC system introduced last year to register, by going online or clicking on the link when enrolling with their university. Electoral Services then upload their registration request onto the register from this system. So far 2,003 students have registered this way since the start of the canvass.

Canvass Overall Completion Rate

The overall percentage response rate in 2019 under the old system which included a personal visit was 83.29%. This year under the new system the completion rate for both Route 1 and Route 2 totals 89.42%. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, this represents an increase of 6.13%. Please see attached analysis and full breakdown by wards (Appendix 3)

Although the completion rate has increased, the electorate has actually dropped from 216,323 in July at the start of the canvass, to 207,684 electors on publication of the new register.

As you would expect, the electorate can fluctuate at different points of the electoral cycle, as it usually peaks around the time of an election due to a surge in registrations and then reduces on completion of the canvass.

The decline in electorate on publication of the register is not down to a lack of responses but as a result of the individual registration process. Although responses may have been received including new elector details, they will not become 'live' electors until they complete an ITR which is verified through DWP.

Therefore, the electorate tends to improve in the subsequent months after publication as this process is completed. The increase may take slightly longer than normal this year due to students not residing in the city at present. As due to current restrictions, many have not returned to their term time address and are currently studying remotely.

As all student are being sent their ITR's to register, we anticipate an increase in electorate once they return and especially in the run up to the election.

Rolling Registration

In addition to the canvass activity we have also been maintaining our usual processes.

Revenues and Benefits provide Electoral Services with data of Council Tax accounts that have been opened, closed or amended on a monthly basis, which allows us to maintain the completeness and accuracy of the register during the year and not only at the canvass.

Any potential new electors identified from these records are contacted to invite them to register to vote. Similarly, existing electors that have moved addresses are reviewed in order to remove them from the register.

Communications & Engagement

Throughout the canvass we conducted a programme of communications to assist us with our Engagement Strategy. The majority of this was delivered through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

During each stage of the canvass the marketing campaign communicated to citizens the following messages:-

- How Electoral Services may contact them – Email, text or Post
- When the information would be sent
- When they needed to respond by
- How they could respond – online, telephone, text and post

We used an eye catching infographic (see Appendix 4) to deliver the key messages and we also delivered a series of targeted Comms with appropriate visual content to groups such as students and home movers.

We also sent information out to BAME citizens through the equalities network to encourage registration, as in a recent Electoral Commission report, national figures suggested that citizens from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are less likely to register to vote. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing whether these targeted Comms have created any additional registrations from BAME citizens, as we only require nationality information as part of the registration process, not ethnicity but it was still considered beneficial to do.

An advert was placed in the LeftLion Student Guide (see Appendix 5) advising students that they can register to vote for their student address whilst living in Nottingham and that elections were scheduled for 2021.

Finally, adverts were also placed in the Arrow to ensure that citizens who do not subscribe to social media would also see the advert to remind them to respond, where necessary.

A voter engagement campaign will be launched soon to highlight the PCC election scheduled for May. As part of this we will be working with the student unions at the universities to help promote this to students to ensure they complete their ITR's and register in time to vote. In addition, we will be advising citizens that voting in person at a polling station will be safe as all COVID safety measures will be followed, however other options are also available i.e. postal and proxy votes.

Canvass Review

Electoral Services have participated in workshops and provided feedback to the Cabinet Office on the implementation of the reforms, some suggested amendments were:-

- Cabinet Office and the Office of Students to issue guidance to university accommodation providers (both university managed and private) to highlight the requirement for hall managers to provide the information to the ERO.

- Cabinet Office to provide a standard template data sharing agreement that all universities and LA's can complete and adopt.
- Amend the requirement to only be able to contact matched electors by E-Comms. As contacting a Red matched elector could also provide useful information about the property.

Analysis – Costs

Under the canvass reforms the vast majority of properties are no longer required to respond. Therefore the focus of the canvass is now on the hard to reach groups. As proven this year and in previous years there are still a high percentage of households that do not respond to the canvass form even after being chased numerous times. The reforms will now give us the opportunity to concentrate our efforts on identifying why these households are not responding and provide us with the chance to explore alternatives methods and conduct new engagement activities. This will hopefully improve completion rates further and help us encourage more citizens to register and vote in future elections.

The changes in the way we have conducted the canvass this year have also created an overall saving of approximately £40K on printing and posting costs. In the coming years it is hoped that these savings will increase even further as we expand the number of citizens we can communicate with electronically and maximise the number of households who respond through digital options rather than post.