



Public Document Pack

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28 January 2019

Committee Manager: Carley Lavender (Ext. 37547)

ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Electoral Review Sub-Committee will be held in the **Committee Room 1** at the Arun Civic Centre, Maltravers Road, Littlehampton, BN17 5LF on **Tuesday, 12 February 2019 at 6.00 pm** and you are requested to attend.

Members: Councillors Dendle (Chairman), Wotherspoon (Vice-Chairman), Bower, Chapman, Charles, Elkins, Haymes and Purchase.

AGENDA

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members and officers are invited to make any declarations of pecuniary, personal and/or prejudicial interests that they may have in relation to items on the agenda, and are reminded that they should re-declare their interest before consideration of the item or as soon as the interest becomes apparent.

Members and officers should make their declaration by stating:

- a) the item they have the interest in
- b) whether it is a pecuniary, personal and/or prejudicial interest
- c) the nature of the interest

3. MINUTES

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting held on 1 August 2018 (as previously circulated).

4. ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA THAT THE CHAIRMAN OF THE MEETING IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

5. REVIEW OF CANVASS

(Pages 1 - 6)

This report presents the recently published proposals for the reform of the annual canvass process in 2020. Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

6. PROPOSALS FOR THE REFORM OF THE ANNUAL CANVASS 2020

(Pages 7 - 14)

This report presents a review of the 2018 Canvass for consideration by Members. It sets out changes to the process from previous years, what went well and areas for improvement.

Note : *Indicates report is attached for all Members of the Council only and the press (excluding exempt items). Copies of reports can be obtained on request from the Committee Manager).

Note : Members are reminded that if they have any detailed questions would they please inform the Chairman and/or relevant Director in advance of the meeting.

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO AND DECISION OF ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE ON 12 FEBRUARY 2019

PART A : REPORT

SUBJECT: Review of the Annual Canvass 2018

REPORT AUTHOR: Nigel Lynn, Chief Executive and Electoral Registration Officer
DATE: 21 January 2019
EXTN: 37600
PORTFOLIO AREA: Corporate Support

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report presents a review of the 2018 Canvass for consideration by Members. It sets out changes to the process from previous years, what went well and areas for improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Members are asked to note the report, in particular areas which have gone well in 2018 and areas for improvement in 2019.

1. BACKGROUND:

1. Background

- a) The Annual Canvass for 2018 was successfully completed with a response rate of 96.45%, against figures of 95.45% in 2017 and 92.53% in 2016. Therefore, more people are able to vote than previous years.
- b) Delivery of Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) took place between 3 and 29 July. The majority of forms were delivered by hand to 72,865 properties, with a smaller number of forms (2.25%) being sent by post due to the location of properties.

2. What went Well

- a) 2017 was a particularly challenging year for the Electoral Services Team, with an unexpected snap General Election, the absence of the Electoral Services Manager and a change in senior management. During this year the team members had to learn new skills, particularly around relatively new elections software and the new Individual Electoral Registration processes which were still settling down.

Following the return of the Electoral Services Manager in 2018 the skills and allocated duties of the Electoral Services Team were reviewed which resulted in clarification of duties with staff retaining some of their new responsibilities in order that the Electoral Services Manager could carry out a broader range of duties. The Senior Electoral Services Officer took on full responsibility for planning the Annual Canvass which worked well in terms of clarity and limiting duplication of work between herself and the Manager.

- b) Project Planning was started earlier than usual with a clear project plan communicated to all concerned, with all deadlines being met. The Electoral Services Team meets weekly throughout the year, and the annual canvass was discussed at each meeting during the canvass period. This enabled progress to be discussed, and any issues resolved quickly.
- c) Following a review of canvass pilots carried out in 2017 the Electoral Commission published new templates which allowed Councils to customise elements of the Household Enquiry Form (HEF). Arun took advantage of this flexibility to more actively encourage online responses in the covering letter, including information on the relative costs of different methods of responding. The Electoral Registration Team consulted Customer Services and Communications staff on these changes. The team also changed wording on the website and produced a YouTube video about how to complete the HEF online: <https://www.arun.gov.uk/canvass>. This was viewed 664 times on YouTube and 766 times on Facebook.
- d) All councils are required to send an initial HEF, at least one reminder form, and to undertake personal canvassing to visit properties from which we have not received a response to the HEF. In previous years personal canvassing has tended to take place later in the process, at second reminder stage. In 2018 personal canvassing started earlier in high returning areas, at the first reminder stage. This resulted in very positive feedback from canvassers (lighter, better weather and a better response to door-knocking from residents as they had received their HEFs relatively recently). Our personal canvassers then visited properties in lower-responding areas at second reminder stage. In implementing this change we were able to use a smaller personal canvassing team, but over a longer period of time.
- e) During 2018 we have fully utilised the automated matching process between our software supplier and Council Tax. This allowed us to identify and confirm vacant properties, more quickly and easily. We were also able to match properties where our registered electors were the same as council tax account holders, saving time for the Electoral Registration team and in particular for personal canvassing. These matching exercises were undertaken at different stages of the canvass to ensure that all properties received forms and therefore any occupants had the opportunity to inform us of any changes they wished to make.
- f) Personal canvassers visiting a property and getting no reply left calling cards which reminded residents that they could respond online or email us, which worked well in increasing the use of HEF response e-mails, especially when occupants were unsure of the process or wished to raise questions with us.

- g) We also conducted personal canvasser visits to all care homes to increase the numbers and accuracy of registrations for care home residents, an important consideration for a District like Arun with its particular demographics. Our personal canvasser visited 99 care homes, including homes for people with learning disabilities and for vulnerable residents
- h) The back office team worked continuously with personal canvassers to ensure that additional checks were carried out where possible where canvassers were unable to make contact with residents at particular properties. Whilst this did take additional time we are confident that this has resulted in a 'cleaner' register being published on 1 December 2018.
- i) This is the third year that personal canvassers have used tablets to allow them to log HEF responses online. This saves time as information from residents via canvassers is downloaded directly into the system. There were a number of problems last year between the Electoral Services Team, IT at Arun and the software providers as there were bugs which needed to be resolved and frequent issues with data upload. The situation was much improved this year and we have agreed a way forward with IT which should improve things further for 2019. We will improve systems training for the personal canvassers now that we are fully confident in the most effective way to use the tablets, in part following feedback from the canvassers.
- j) There was very good team work across the organisation during the Canvass. A particular example of this is where the 'slitting' machine in the post room broke. On some days as many as 9,000 HEF return envelopes could come in. During this period the Arun Direct team helped, whenever they could, by slitting and removing HEFs from envelopes which could be done in the Contact Centre and enabled the Electoral Registration Team to process papers much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

3. Areas for Improvement

- a) A clear focus for the Electoral Registration team is to decrease the number of people responding by post. This will decrease postage costs considerably and save back office time as returns need to be input by hand to the system. However, we are legally required to provide a free postal return service. The HEF template we used in 2018 was designed to increase an online response. The online response did increase (see table below), however the other automated response methods decreased drastically, and the postal response remained roughly the same. Unfortunately our software system can only differentiate between automated and non-automated HEF responses. Therefore the 'all other methods' heading includes, email, council tax matching, and all other responses. We have used figures for scanning to reflect the forms we received through the post and these are included in the following table.

Return Method	2017 %	2018 %
Post (Scanned)	48.43	48.41
Telephone	16.92	5.3
Internet (online)	4.40	26.81
SMS (text)	15.57	No information
All other methods	14.68	19.48

- b) Online responses allow residents to make changes to their details. However phone or text responses only allow residents to confirm details, not to change them. So an increase in online responses is still an improvement. However we do need to look further at how to divert electors away from a postal return.
- c) During 2018 the Cabinet Office has been consulting on and reviewing the new canvass process, following feedback from all councils that this is more expensive, time consuming and confusing for electors. In the last two years all councils have struggled to communicate with electors, the main area for confusion being the two stage process with the HEF followed by the actual registration of the individual. There has also been considerable duplication of individual registrations following national publicity pre-elections which means that people who have already registered as part of the normal annual process have registered again in the approach to elections. Electoral Registration teams need to check all these duplicated registrations. This issue has also been raised by many councils. A paper setting out the key areas for the review will be presented to the ERSC on 12 February 2019. The new processes are expected to be introduced for 2020.
- d) When we met with Electoral Registration colleagues from elsewhere in West Sussex early in 2018 a number said that they were trying an incentive scheme to encourage the use of the online service. These were based on a prize draw of high street vouchers with anyone being entered who had responded online by a given date. We may look to do this in the future as the savings from return postage are likely to far outweigh the cost of purchasing the vouchers. There is of course a principle involved in that electors are legally obliged to complete their registration and Members felt last year when this came up that an incentive was not appropriate. We will ask for feedback from those authorities who used incentives last year before reconsidering this.
- e) There were a very few complaints about form deliverers, which were dealt with

appropriately. One of the complaints involved a number of forms for a block of flats being put through the letter box and taken by one occupant. This was dealt with and access to such properties will form part of the risk assessment for future years with forms being delivered by post if necessary.

4. Conclusion

The Electoral Registration Team has worked hard to deliver a successful canvass, taking on board lessons learned from previous years and always seeking to improve the processes. I would like to personally thank them for all their efforts.

2. PROPOSAL(S):

Members are asked to note the report, in particular areas which have gone well in 2018 and areas for improvement in 2019.

3. OPTIONS: N/A

4. CONSULTATION:

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify) Staff teams involved in canvass, Electoral Registration Officer Members of ERSC at this meeting	X	
5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)	YES	NO
Financial		X
Legal		X
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		X
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		X
Sustainability		X
Asset Management/Property/Land		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		X

6. IMPLICATIONS:

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:

Review of key democratic process

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

N/A

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO AND DECISION OF ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE ON 12 FEBRUARY 2019

PART A : REPORT

SUBJECT: Proposals for the reform of the Annual Canvass 2020

REPORT AUTHOR: Jackie Follis, Group Head of Policy and Deputy Electoral Registration Officer

DATE: 21 January 2019

EXTN: 37580

PORTFOLIO AREA: Corporate Support

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report presents the recently published proposals for the reform of the annual canvass process in 2020. The paper describes the current process and summarises the proposals intended to enable local authority Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to target their resources more effectively. The proposals include using data matching (using both national and local data) at the start of the canvass to identify those properties where it is likely that the occupiers remain the same. Where this is the case, EROs will be able to run a lighter-touch canvass. The proposals aim to reduce confusion and inconvenience for electors and allow EROs to operate more efficiently. This paper also summarises the Arun District Council response to and concerns about the proposals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Sub-Committee is asked to note the contents of the Report

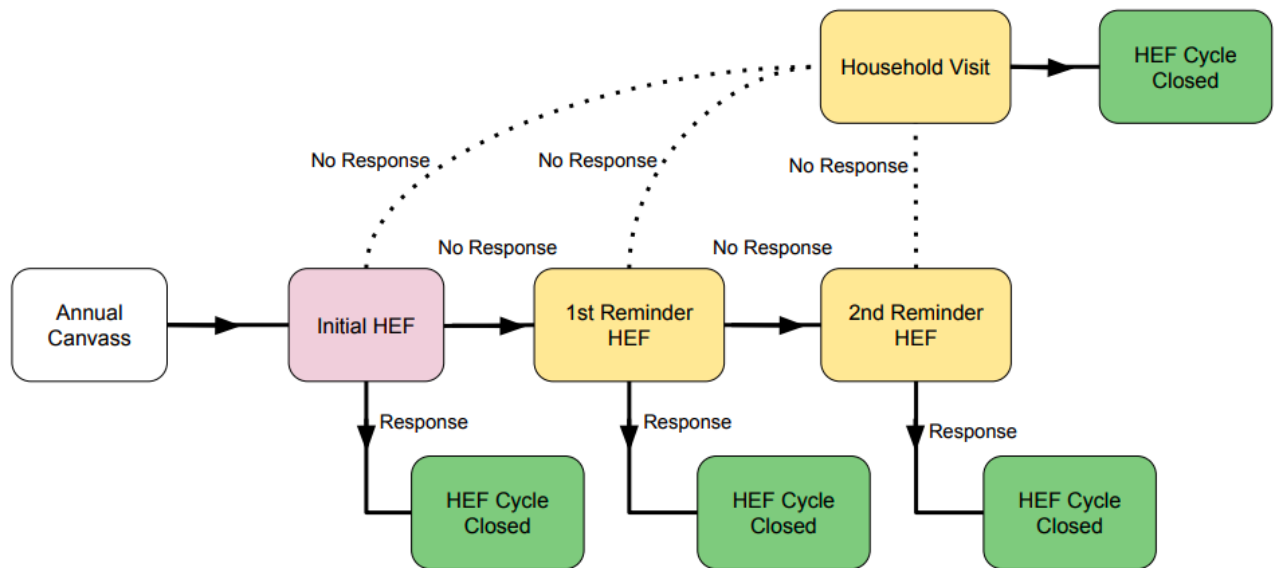
1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Current Process

Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) are required to conduct an annual canvass of all residential properties in the area for which they have responsibility. In 2014, Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced in Great Britain to replace the household registration system, where one person in every household was responsible for registering everyone who lived at that address. Under IER, each person in a household is required to apply individually to be registered to vote. They must also provide 'identifying information', such as their date of birth and national insurance number, which is used to verify their identity, as part of their application to register to vote. This is an annual requirement and a revised version of the electoral register must be published each year by 1 December.

EROs must send every household a Household Enquiry Form (HEF). The HEF requires a response, regardless of whether there have been any changes in the household to report. Failure to respond is an offence. EROs must follow up any non-responses with up to two reminders and carry out a household visit if required. The household visit can be conducted at any stage; any of the initial, first reminder and second reminder HEF steps can be combined with the household visit or it can be conducted as a separate process. Each HEF must be issued in paper form and be accompanied by a postage paid return envelope. This is shown below:

CURRENT PROCESS:



Key:
 Action to be completed only once (but at any stage)
 —————> Mandatory Action (to be completed at highlighted stage)

The current canvass gathers information on potential additions, changes and deletions to the register. However, since the introduction of IER in 2014, further action is required to convert this information into actual changes on the electoral registers. The annual canvass is therefore no longer a registration process in itself. EROs must individually invite potential new electors to apply to register, and verify their identity, before they can be added to the register. This process sits separately to the annual canvass but can, and generally does occur concurrently.

1.2 Issues with the current process

The process is highly prescriptive and allows EROs little scope to adapt the process to best fit the needs of current residents and different property types. It also does not allow EROs to explore more efficient ways of canvassing or introducing modern technology into the process.

1.2.1 The current canvass requires a resident from every property to respond

This is regardless of whether or not there is a change to report. The large majority of households, some 88% across England and Wales (but higher locally we believe), remain stable from one year to the next; this means that these residents must respond simply to report that nothing has changed in the composition of their household.

1.2.2 Electoral Registration Officers are now required to undertake a more resource intensive process

Prior to 2014, the annual canvass process registered citizens to vote as well as allowing the ERO to make amendments to existing entries and delete out of date entries directly from information provided on the canvass form. The annual canvass is now an information gathering exercise only, if someone new is added to the HEF, the ERO must now issue them an Invitation to Register (ITR) and follow the prescribed chasing cycle. The additional registration costs for 2017-18 were approximately £18.5m across Great Britain.

1.2.3 Citizen confusion caused by a 'two stage' process

Feedback from EROs indicates there is continued confusion from citizens about the new 'two-stage' process. Some citizens believe that by completing and returning the HEF they are registering to vote (as was the case under the old household system), leading them to ignore the subsequent Invitation to Register (ITR) and failing to register. Others, instead of completing and returning the HEF, are going online and registering to vote again. As there has been no reply to the HEF the ERO is obliged to continue the chasing cycle on the HEF, causing confusion for the citizen. This not only increases costs, but has a negative impact on citizens' experience of electoral registration and could impact their view on engaging with democracy.

1.2.4 Changing nature of how citizens engage with registering to vote

Online registration was made available in Great Britain in 2014. It is quick and easy and fits with the way citizens increasingly live their lives. Online registration has been overwhelmingly successful, with over 25 million online applications to date. This has had an unexpected consequence: citizens are increasingly opting to register outside the canvass period. For example, in 2016 there were twice as many additions to the register outside the canvass period than during the canvass, signalling that the canvass itself is becoming less important in registering eligible electors. The canvass is now only one of numerous ways that the ERO is able to update their electoral registers.

To attempt to address these issues with the current canvass process, the Cabinet Office piloted schemes over the 2016 and 2017 canvass. Four models were designed by Electoral Administrators and piloted across 24 Local Authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales. These pilots have informed the proposed model for the annual canvass going forward and more information is included in the Cabinet Proposals (link in Background Papers).

1.3 Proposed New Model for the Annual Canvass

The annual canvass is still a crucial means to help EROs identify additions and changes to the electoral register. The proposals will not therefore be looking at abolishing the annual canvass process as a whole.

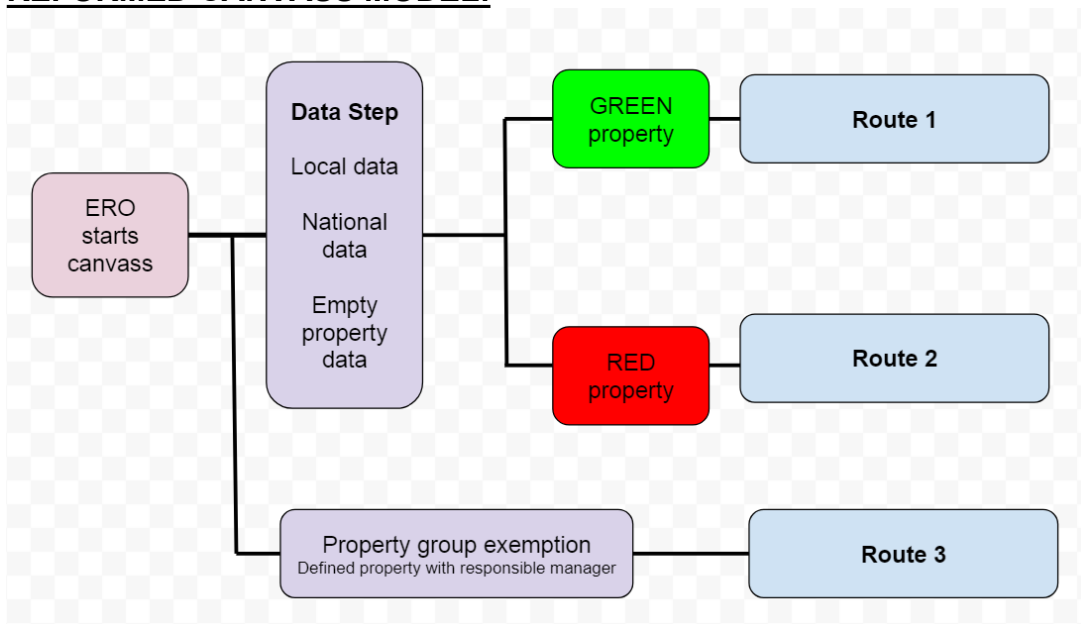
The purpose of the canvass of households under the revised model will be the same as under the current model, that is to find out -

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

However, the annual canvass process is only one of the many ways an ERO is able to find information to update their electoral register. It sits alongside year round activities such as mining other datasets (such as council tax records, etc.) to identify residents who are not currently registered to vote, and specific targeted work for certain groups. This means that the annual canvass process must be more targeted and efficient. It will also still need to ensure that every property is contacted during the canvass period, to ensure there is the opportunity to report changes in those residents at a property if required.

The proposed new canvass model will incorporate a 'data discernment step'. This will inform the ERO which properties have not changed household composition, based on data held on other sources. The ERO will then have the choice to follow one of two routes for each property. Route 1 (below), for properties where the data suggests no change in household composition and Route 2 for properties where the data matching highlights that there may be a change to the information the ERO currently holds for the property. This will allow the canvass process to be streamlined for those households that do not change each year and enable the ERO to target their resources to where responses and updates to the electoral register are required.

REFORMED CANVASS MODEL:



For the data step to be completed efficiently the data used must be as accurate as possible. There is likely to be a mandatory national data matching exercise with each ERO required to upload their electoral register to the IER digital service (which is the system used to verify the identity of applicants to register to vote). Consideration is also being given to using the DWP Customer Information System which is already used in the electoral registration process to verify an applicant's identity. Other national datasets may also be used in the future.

EROs will have the discretion to match their electoral register against locally held datasets, such as council tax and housing benefit data. For some EROs, matching against local data will be an essential step, because national datasets could be less complete or up to date in some areas, for example, if there is a high level of population movement.

The data matching, both national and local, will be conducted at an individual elector level. If an elector does not appear on the national or local data sets, they will be deemed as red ie 'not matched', although The ERO will have the discretion to override an individual's result if they have a valid reason to do so. As the canvass process functions at a property level rather than an individual level, the ERO will then need to determine the overall match rate of the property. The property match status will be either green (matched) or red (not matched). The advice is likely to be that for any property with one or more red electors, the property as a whole should be deemed red. A property should only be deemed green if all electors currently registered there are green at an individual level.

In simple terms (there is a lot of technical detail to be considered which is not included in this briefing) the options in terms of the process to be followed are:

- Route 1 in the new process will be used where the ERO can match all electors at the property using nationally and locally held data. This proposes that each household will be sent a communication (paper to be more certain that it has been received) setting out everyone who is registered at that address, which gives them an opportunity to let the ERO know if anything has changed, which has not been picked up in the data matching exercise. If no response to this communication is received the ERO will have the option not to follow this up.
- Route 2 will be used where one or more electors at a property have not been matched and as with the current system EROs will still be required to make three contacts with the household, plus a personal visit. EROs will have more flexibility about the method of contact used, for example some people may be more likely to respond to a text or e-mail than a letter, assuming councils have telephone numbers/e-mail addresses. Pilots have shown that a combination of different contact methods may be more effective at gaining a change response.
- Route 3 could apply where certain properties are exempted, for example houses in multiple occupation where there is no one resident who can or will take responsibility for accurately completing the HEF for all other residents. In this the ERO can require a single officer who is responsible for a property (eg a landlord) to provide a list of eligible residents who are resident at the property so that they can be contacted individually. Experience of some landlords suggests that this may not be very successful.

1.4 Response to consultation and concerns from ADC

The Electoral Services Team has concerns about the proposed changes and a number of their concerns are set out below and were included in our response to the Cabinet Office:

Previous data matching experience gives us considerable concern about how 'clean' various databases actually are. It is likely that local databases (eg council tax) will be more accurate than national ones and indeed the proposal states "For some EROs, matching against local data will be an essential step, because national datasets could be less complete or up to date in some areas, for example, if there is a high level of population movement." There are likely to be issues with for example matching student households, second home owners and other properties in areas of high population turnover. The team is concerned about the accuracy of the databases, which may lead to 'false' matches.

There is a suggestion in the proposal that in a Route 1 scenario an e-mail contact should be permitted as the first form of contact (where an e-mail address is held), followed by a paper contact if there is no response. We have serious concerns about this as it would appear that one individual would be asked to verify that the information held about that household is accurate. How would a council choose which individual to send this to if we hold different e-mail addresses for a number of occupants; there is no relationship between an e-mail and a property; e-mails change from time to time, etc... We would need to understand a lot more about how this might work and be clear about how we would ensure GDPR compliance. It is not clear whether a pre-paper communication e-mail would save or create additional work as it is another stage in the process. It is also likely that if a household is matched using databases, with no prior contact with the household, an unsolicited e-mail is likely to cause some confusion, particularly when the system is first implemented.

There are concerns that if there is no longer any mandatory follow up for households following Route 1, i.e. those which match, if the ERO decides that there will be no follow up due mainly to the cost, the system is potentially open to abuse and electors may be disenfranchised.

There were also a number of technical questions which do not need to be covered here.

1.5 Conclusion

The consultation finished on 30 November 2018. The intention is to publish the response alongside draft legislation during the second half of 2019 and implement changes from the middle of 2020. If new regulations are delayed due to other Government Priorities this would cause Local Authorities serious problems, which we hope is understood. It is possible that the planned implementation date of 2020 will slip.

Our overall feeling is that whilst there are concerns about some of the proposals something needs to happen in the longer term to streamline the process. It may be that a phased introduction with e-mail options being introduced later would be sensible, unless the Cabinet office can come up with an efficient way of using e-mails which complies with GDPR. We recognise that until a new process is introduced we can't be certain of how it will be received or how efficient it will be and the ERO will need to make decisions on how Arun implements areas where flexibility is allowed.

What is certain is that this will involve significant change and communicating a changed process clearly will require much thought at both national and local level.

2. PROPOSAL(S): Members are asked to note the report.

3. OPTIONS: N/A

4. CONSULTATION: N/A

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify)		X

5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)

	YES	NO
Financial		
Legal		
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		
Sustainability		
Asset Management/Property/Land		
Technology		
Other (please explain)		

6. IMPLICATIONS:

To be confirmed when the regulations are published

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:

Information for Members on proposed changes to the annual canvass process.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Cabinet Office Proposal for reform of the annual canvass, published 5 October 2018

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744501/Canvass_Reform_Policy_Statement.pdf

