

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE 28 JANUARY 2021

PART A : REPORT

SUBJECT: Report on Canvass 2020

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DATE: 8 January 2021
EXTN: 37600

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report presents a review of the 2020 Canvass for consideration by Members. It summarises the changes resulting from the 2019 Canvass Reform Regulations, sets out the outcomes for Arun, what worked well, and lessons learned.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Sub-Committee

- a) note the report; and
- b) agree that the Electoral Registration Officer continues to implement changes as necessary to the 2021 Canvass process for Arun District Council

BACKGROUND:

1. Reason for Canvass Reform

All ADC Councillors were sent a briefing note in July 2020 explaining the new process. Essentially this was developed by the Cabinet Office in order to enable Local Authority Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to target their resources more effectively. The main change has been that the new process starts with data matching to identify those properties where it is likely that the occupiers remain the same. The intention is that where this is the case EROs can run a 'lighter-touch' canvass reducing confusion and inconvenience for electors and allowing Electoral Registration Teams to operate more efficiently.

2. The New Process

We are required to match our Electoral Register information against national and local data before we start the Canvass. In practice this means matching our Electoral Register with DWP records and also with Council Tax information. Where all our details for a property match those of other records, we send a canvass letter **which does not**

require a response (unless those householders wish to make a change to the details in the letter – e.g. request an absent vote). This is the most significant change. The result of our data matching was that 80% of our properties received letters that did not require a response (unless there were changes to be notified to us). This is ‘Route 1’.

3. Where there are differences between the records, households receive a letter that they need to respond to by law. This is ‘Route 2’. The letters show everybody registered to vote at an address, with their registration information. This year all our letters went out via Royal Mail, rather than being delivered by our canvassing team, and landed on doormats during the first two weeks of August. In previous years this would have been done in July but was still ahead of a number of other authorities. We sent out 61,972 Route 1 letters and 14,001 initial Route 2 letters in August, followed by 7,647 Route 2 reminders on 21 September. We also sent out 6,625 canvass forms at the end of October.
4. If households don’t respond when they are required to, we have a legal duty to chase them up. This includes a final step of making personal contact with the household (personal canvassing).
5. We planned to do as much personal canvassing as possible by phone and email, but we are required by law to do door-knocking if we don’t receive a response from these properties. Obviously, the safety concerns around this were paramount and along with most authorities we did not in the end carry out face to face canvassing in 2020. The guidance from the Electoral Commission confirmed that in the case of exceptional circumstances where this process was changed, we had to be able to produce evidence that justified such a change. As Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) I discussed this and confirmed with the service that the pandemic did constitute exceptional circumstances! The decision was made to carry out all follow ups by e-mail or telephone where possible.

Outcomes of 2020 Canvass

6. Response Rates

- a. Responses, numbers and channels are set out in Appendix 1. Whilst there was still some duplication, this was very much less than in the previous system as the Route 1 letters were very clear that responses were only required if there was a specific change to be made. The other side to this is that we are not chasing 80% of our properties for a response. Although the letter says people should respond only if there are changes, firstly we know they won’t necessarily, and secondly, as we’re not sending reminders, when people move out there is nothing to prompt new occupiers to notify us. The way we dealt with this was to continue processing the e-forms received by Electoral Services via Council Tax for new residents. We do this anyway, but now it’s even more important to capture as many changes as possible in a timely way. For various reasons we are not notified of all changes and this work is also very time-consuming.
- b. Overall we received 8,538 responses to Route 2 properties, however we need to recognise that given the amount of work which went into cleaning the data as part of the matching exercise the Route 2 properties contained a very high

proportion of properties that we would normally struggle to contact or get a response from.

- c. Members should also note that the annual canvass only ever gives us a snapshot in time, and we expect changes throughout the year anyway. We need to report to the Electoral Commission on the operation of the canvass and it will be interesting to see what the national picture is on responses. Of course we were also not able to carry out personal canvassing and had a mixed response to e-mail and telephone canvassing. 'Cold calls' even from the Council are not necessarily welcome.
- d. We wrote to all households in the District in mid-January 2021 to inform them of a number of practical changes to the elections in May 2021 and part of this letter encouraged electors to consider how they wished to vote, encouraging applications for postal or proxy votes. We anticipate that some of the work we did not have to do following up Route 1 letters as part of the new canvass process, may move to a different time of year, particularly where we have big elections. That is registers may generally be slightly less accurate at the end of the canvass than in previous years, but that is likely to be adjusted as people make sure they can vote and that their details and voting preferences are accurate. Comparative canvass response rates are as follows:

Year	Overall Response Rate
2020	92.76%
2019	95.02
2018	96.45

7. Arun Direct Feedback

There was a noticeable decrease in calls this year due to most properties not having to respond. The view of Arun Direct staff is that there was surprisingly little confusion on the part of the public and some positive feedback about how much paper the new process saves (a regular complaint in previous years) and how much easier it is. Arun Direct did comment that there were quite a few old or incorrect telephone numbers which will not have helped the telephone canvass. Appendix 2 sets out overall contact numbers in the contact centre for the canvass period. These will only be indicative in terms of the canvass as specific 'wrap reasons' were not available in 2020.

8. What went well

- a. Electoral Services Staff spent a lot of time clarifying and understanding the new process, including briefings and training. This enabled the team with the ERO to make sensible decisions on what was practical in the first year, especially given the pandemic, which resulted in a number of adjustments to the original plan
- b. Communications worked well with briefings for the project team, including Arun

Direct, CMT, the Electoral Review Sub-Committee and Members generally. Electoral Services also worked with the Communications Team using video and social media in addition to letters to explain the new process to the public. The Canvass webpage was completely re-written and updated as things changed.

- c. There were considerable problems with set up, upload and download of data during testing, but this went smoothly when it had to be done 'for real' Thanks to IT for their support on this.
- d. Data matching worked well with Council Tax and was a very useful exercise. Unfortunately records need to match exactly (eg down to use of commas and spaces) which became obvious when manual matching identified more matches than the system. Need to look at this for next year.
- e. Printing went well with printers well briefed and working closely with us. There were practical difficulties for the team because of the need to do this work virtually.
- f. There was a good level of online responses for both Route 1 and Route 2 letters and the public generally liked this. Although we had a couple of comments, we are not aware of any complaints about the default process being solely an online response. This may have been in part because of the pandemic but is very encouraging as we move forward.
- g. Arun Direct were able to step in and support with telephone canvassing.
- h. Because a lot of people responded online to the canvass form we were able to send their ITRs by e-mail and were also able to use data from Chichester University to e-mail ITRs to students.
- i. Costs appear to be around 30% lower than in 2019, shown in Appendix 3, however we are not comparing like with like because of new processes anyway and different processes in 2020 because of Covid-19. It would be useful to have any detailed questions on costs from members in advance of the meeting.

9. What did not go so well

- a. Very stressful for the team planning for a totally new process alongside elections due in May 2020 which were only cancelled at the last minute (when most of the work had been done), all under very different working conditions. Elections and Electoral Registration remain relatively heavy paper processes despite the changes.
- b. Still some duplication with people in Route 1 properties responding where there were no changes. Hopefully this will become less of a problem as people get used to the new system.
- c. We had to use Arun Direct to do telephone canvassing (which they did

willingly) because they needed full access to the system to do it. Our software suppliers have now updated the system so tablets can be used for telephone canvassing so we can consider using personal canvassers to do this next year

- d. Canvassing of care homes and nursing homes was understandably a challenge. We would normally use a member of the team to visit each one as the phone doesn't really work well for this where we require updates/confirmation for a number of people.
- e. We had considered using the system to send initial letters by e-mail, which is a new provision of the reformed canvass. We decided against this for a number of reasons in this first year, and it seems to have been the right decision as other authorities who did this reported a high level of technical issues, bounce-backs and customers querying whether the emails were spam, which resulted in a lot more work for their teams. We will consider this again for 2021, once we are assured that the technical issues have been resolved.
- f. A lot of updates to 'fix bugs' in the new process and not able to do a second council tax matching exercise which we would normally do (the new canvass configuration does not allow this)

10. Conclusion

The Electoral Services Team has worked hard under difficult circumstances to deliver the new Canvass Reform process successfully. There are some areas that need further attention and improvements which the team would like to implement, but I am confident that we have a good understanding of what these are and how we should approach them. Uncertainties around the timing of the 2021 elections may not be helpful to this, especially if timing changes and encroaches on the canvass period.

I would like to express my sincere thanks as ERO to the Electoral Services Team and everybody else in the Council who supported them in delivering the 2021 Canvass.

2. PROPOSAL(S):		
To note the contents of the report		
3. OPTIONS:		
4. CONSULTATION:		
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		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
Safeguarding		x
Other (please explain)	x	
6. IMPLICATIONS: Ensuring the right of residents to vote in all relevant polls		

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:
To understand the new canvass process, what has worked and not worked and what areas need to be improved for 2021

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS: