

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