

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

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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

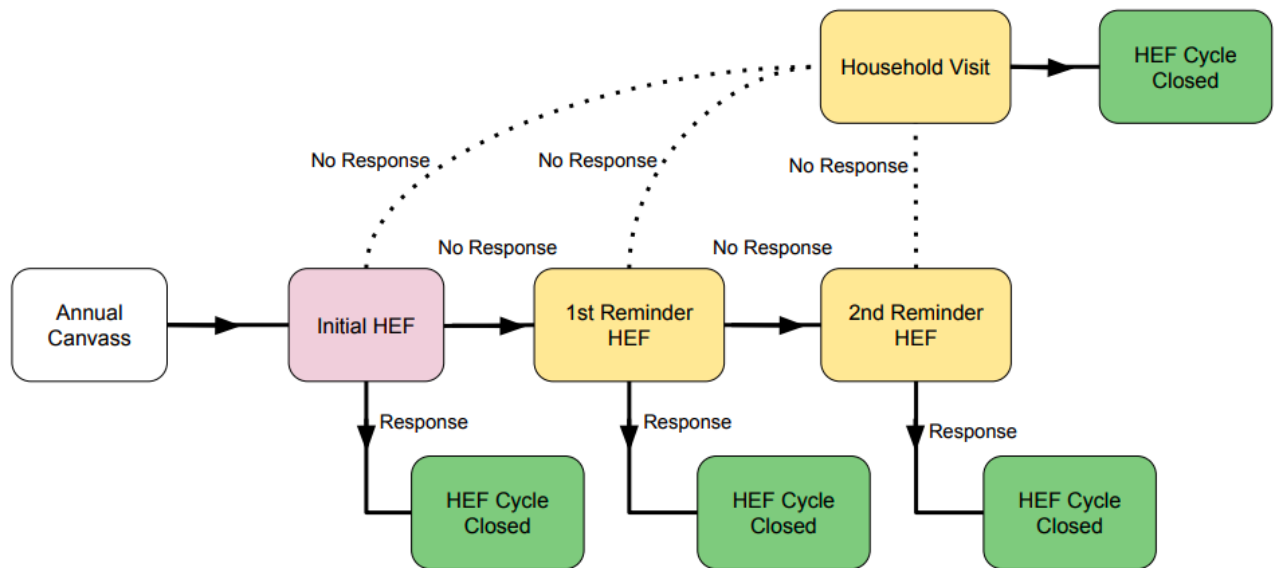
1. BACKGROUND

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.

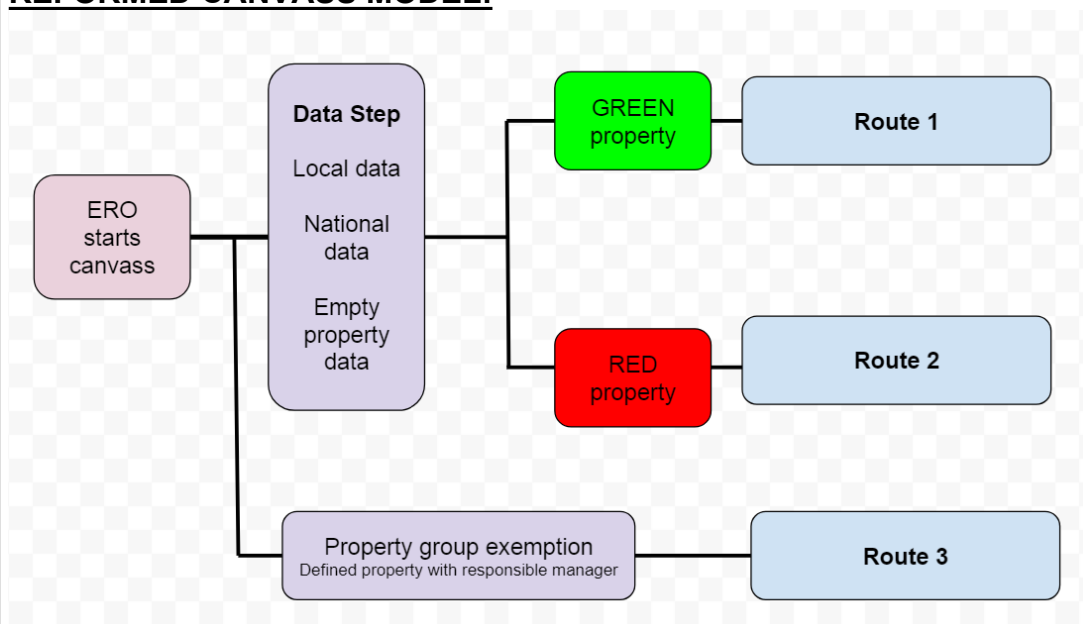
The purpose of the canvass of households under the revised model will be the same as under the current model, that is to find out -

- (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

