

ELECTORAL REVIEW SUB-COMMITTEE

12 February 2019 at 6.00 pm

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

7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of interest made.

8. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 August 2018 were approved by the Sub-Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

9. REVIEW OF 2018 CANVASS

In the absence of the Chief Executive, the Group Head of Policy presented the report setting out the detail for changes to the process from previous years, inclusive of a full review of 2018 Canvass.

The key points highlighted to the Sub-Committee were:

- 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.
- The duties of the Electoral Services Team were revised in 2018 which resulted in clarification of duties with staff retaining some of their new responsibilities in order that the Electoral Services Manager can carry out a broader range of duties.
- Project planning started earlier than previous years which meant a clear plan was communicated to all concerned, with all deadlines met.
- The Electoral Commission published new templates that allowed Councils to customise elements of the Household Enquiry Form (HEF). Arun took advantage of this flexibility to more actively encourage online responses.
- Personal canvassing started earlier in high returning areas, at the first reminder stage. This resulted in positive feedback from canvassers. Lower-responding areas were then canvassed at the second reminder stage. This change meant that Arun was able to use a smaller personal canvassing team, but over a longer period of time.

- Fully utilised the automated data matching process between Arun's software supplier and Council Tax which allowed identification and confirmation of vacant properties quickly and easily.
- Personal canvasser visits were also completed at 99 care homes in the district which led to an increase in the numbers and accuracy of registrations for these residents and, an important consideration for a District like Arun with its particular demographics.
- A clear focus for the Electoral Registration Team is to decrease the number of people responding by post which would see a decrease in postage costs as well as saving administration time as returns needed to be input by hand into the system. However Arun would still be legally obliged to provide a free postal return service. Arun would need to continue to focus its online service as a multiservice function as the online service allows residents to make additional changes to their details unlike phone or text responses.
- A review took place with Electoral Registration colleagues from elsewhere in West Sussex in early 2018 a number said that they were trying an incentive approach to encourage the use of the online service based on a prize draw of high street vouchers with anyone being entered who had responded online by a given date. Arun may look into this in the future as savings from return postage are likely to far outweigh the cost of purchasing the vouchers.
- There were very few complaints about form deliveries, which were dealt with appropriately
- A thank you to the team for their hard work was given by The Group Head of Policy and the Sub-Committee were in agreement.

Comments from the Sub-Committee were:

- There was some discussion regarding the use of diagrams to clearly display the voting registration and HEF process for members of the public to ensure clarity of the two stage process of which the Group Head of Policy noted.
- It was also suggested when consideration would be given to the possible introduction of an incentive to encourage online registration that it also be considered that if vouchers are used then could these be vouchers for local businesses/ supermarkets allowing them to be spent within the Arun District. Along with this discussion the suggestion of linking up on a campaign to support those with limited computer skills and/ or those without access to a computer/ the internet with local Libraries in the Arun District to ensure that all residents who would like to vote online can.

- A request was made to the Group Head of Policy to ensure that evidence of costing was accurately provided in future reports to allow the Sub-Committee to understand the full impact of savings in this area.
- The Chairman asked if Arun District Council currently worked with housing developers in terms of providing them with cards to leave at newly built properties detailing the HEF and Voting registration process. It was explained that currently this was not something that Arun District Council do, however there had been a suggestion to introduce a 'Welcome Pack' for new developments from a recent meeting of the Electoral Services Team and this would be looked into. Councillor Bower confirmed that Littlehampton Town Council already do this and suggested making contact with them for advice on this.

The Sub-Committee requested it be noted that the Electoral Services Team should be commended for their hard work.

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

10. PROPOSALS FOR THE REFORM OF THE ANNUAL CANVASS 2020

The Group Head of Policy presented the report setting out the detail for the reform of the annual Canvass process in 2020.

The paper described the current process and summarised the proposals intended to enable local authority Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to target their resources more effectively.

The key points highlighted to the Sub-Committee were:

- Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) are required to conduct an annual canvass of all residential properties in the area for which they have responsibility.
- 2014 saw the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) which replaced the household registration system that saw one person in every household being responsible for registering everyone who lived at that address.
- Under the current process ERO's must send every household a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) and this requires a response regardless of whether any changes in the household had taken place and failure to respond is an offence.
- ERO's must follow up any non-responses with up to two reminders and carry out a household visit if required.
- The current process is highly prescriptive and allows ERO's little scope to adapt the process to best fit the needs of current residents and different property types.

- Feedback from ERO's indicated that there had been continued confusion from residents about the new 'two stage' process. Some believed that by completing and returning the HEF that they had registered to vote as was the case under the old household system. This led them to ignore the subsequent Invitation to Register (ITR) and therefore failed to register. Others instead of completing the HEF went online and registered to vote again, however due to there being no response to the HEF the EROs were obliged to continue the chasing cycle. Not only did this increase costs but created a negative impact on the public's experience of electoral registration.
- Online registration was made available in 2014, this made the process quick, easy and more in keeping with the way people increasingly live their lives. This process was extremely successful with over 25 million online applications having been received to date. However there was an unexpected consequence; people are increasingly opting to register outside of the canvass period. This signalled that the canvass itself was becoming less important in registering eligible electors. The canvass is now one of numerous ways that the ERO is able to update their electoral registers.
- The Cabinet Office piloted schemes over the 2016 and 2017 canvass in an attempt to address these issues. Four models were designed and piloted across 24 Local Authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales and it was these pilots that informed the proposed model for the annual canvass going forward.
- The proposal would not be looking to abolish the annual canvass as it would still be a crucial means to help ERO's identify additions and changes to the electoral register. The purpose of the annual canvass under the revised model would remain the same as under the current model. However it would be more targeted and efficient to ensure the Council was able to identify more residents who were not currently registered to vote as well as ensuring there would be opportunity to report changes in those residents properties if required.
- The new model will incorporate a 'data discernment step' that will inform the ERO which properties have not had a change to the household composition.
- The ERO would have the choice to follow one of two routes for each property. This would then allow for the process to be streamlined for those households that do not change each year. Enabling the ERO to target their resources to where responses and updates to the register are required.

- ERO's would also have the discretion to match their electoral register against locally held datasets such as Council Tax and housing benefit data.
- The Electoral Services Team included in their response to the Cabinet Office some concerns about the proposed changes inclusive of how 'clean' the data would be on various databases specifically relating to issues matching student households and second homeowners.
- The consultation finished on 30 November 2019 and a response alongside a draft legislation during the second half of 2019 with a view to implement changes from the middle of 2020.

Questions from the sub-committee were:

- Concerns were raised by the Chairman regarding potential abuse of the process, and wanted confirmation that there was a process of strong verification in the new proposal. It was confirmed that this concern was one of those raised by the Electoral Services Team which was highlighted in their report back to the Cabinet Office. However route 3 of this proposal would help Arun District Council to minimise this risk significantly.
- There was a further discussion around the possible introduction of a 'My Arun Account' to help support any campaigns/ incentives encouraging all residents to use online services with a focus on the importance of keeping their account details up to date.

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

(The meeting concluded at 6.46pm)