

Electoral Registration Briefing Note

Introduction

Further to a request made by the Audit & Standards Committee meeting held on 8 March 2018 this briefing note is intended to set out the main processes and controls in place for electoral registration to maintain data quality, minimise errors and prevent fraud.

An assurance review of electoral registration arrangements was carried out in March 2016, following the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), resulting in a substantial assurance: *Based upon our findings there is a robust series of suitably designed internal controls in place upon which the organisation relies to manage the risk of failure of the continuous and effective achievement of the objectives of the process, which at the time of our review were being consistently applied.*

Since the review in 2016 the Democratic & Electoral Services teams (D&ES) were merged into a single joint team for Chiltern and South Bucks District Councils. This has resulted in processes and locally provided forms e.g. absent vote applications and those that are not prescribed being harmonised to a single format. Only the Council's branding remains different. All phone calls are directed to a single phone number. Two email addresses remain in place which can be accessed by the D&ES team.

Invitation to Register (ITR)

Electors wishing to register to vote can do so via www.gov.uk/registertovote alternately they can complete a paper ITR or phone the Council. The D&ES team process ITRs, absent vote application forms, evidence of identity, open register opt out request, overseas declarations and forms relating to special category elector. All staff handling electoral registration enquiries are trained and provided with appropriate procedure notes.

All paper forms are scanned into the Council's electoral management software (EMS) daily before being processed in the work queues and updated. Letters of confirmation are then emailed or posted to electors. Registrations made via www.gov.uk/registertovote are sent securely to the Council's EMS for processing by the D&ES team.

If an elector's details do not match with the records held by the Department for Work and Pensions the elector is sent a letter requesting further documentary evidence to confirm their identity. If the records match and they meet the eligibility criteria to vote they are then added to the electoral register.

Duplicate entries arising where an elector repeatedly registers to vote are detected via the EMS and can be checked by the D&ES officers before being merged as one elector.

The work queues are processed daily by D&ES officers.

To avoid clerical errors one officer processes application and a different officer then checks them. The same process is carried out with Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) during the canvass which is referred to later in this paper.

The D&ES team can also check Council Tax records for the purpose of checking that information contained on the electoral register is accurate and up-to-date.

Canvass

The annual canvass usually starts in July and ends on 1 December when the revised register is published. The aim of the canvass is to enable the Electoral Registration Officer to publish an accurate and complete revised register on 1 December. Each household in the district is sent a HEF which they must respond to either confirming that the details of electors registered to vote at the property are correct, or advise us of any changes. If a response is not received a reminder is sent a month after the initial forms are despatched.

Canvassers are sent to properties in September to chase up any non-responding households.

The majority of canvassers are Council staff and have previous experience carrying out this work. New canvass staff are required to demonstrate previous experience and how they are suitable to perform the role. Checks are carried to ensure they are legally entitled to work in the UK. All canvassers undertake annual training including specific information about data protection, customer service, and safeguarding requirements.

In 2017 tablets were trialled by canvassers to collect data from electors at their homes, now considered the optimal method for collecting information, rather than printed forms. This approach was successful in 2017 and will be used again in 2018. The tablets transfer data over a secure encrypted connection directly into the Council's election management software. This promotes data protection, improves efficiency and reduces risk to canvassers.

A project plan is in place for each canvass.

Postal Votes

There are a number of measures in place to reduce the risk of postal vote fraud.

When an elector applies for a postal vote they are required to provide personal identifiers which include their signature and date of birth. When a postal vote is received during an election a postal vote statement must be completed by the elector and must match the details provided on the initial application. Where details do not match the postal vote is rejected and does not proceed to the count. This is to reduce the risk that a postal ballot paper has been completed by someone other than the elector themselves. The Electoral Registration Officer is required to write to all electors after an election where their postal vote has been rejected. They must provide a new signature if they wish to continue to vote by post.

All applications for postal and proxy votes (where someone votes on the electors behalf) are refreshed after 5 years to ensure that recent signatures are held on the EMS. The elector, or elector's proxy, are sent a form requesting that a new specimen signature be provided. They must respond to the request or their application is deleted and they must vote in a polling station.