



REPORT TO: GRAMPIAN VALUATION JOINT BOARD ON 28 OCTOBER 2022

SUBJECT: ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

BY: THE PRINCIPAL ADMIN OFFICER

1. REASON FOR REPORT

1.1 To update the Board on current developments in electoral registration.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 It is recommended that the Board consider and note the content of this report.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The annual canvass is in progress with letters being issued to all households in Grampian during August. Follow up action for non responses is currently taking place by telephone and door to door canvass.
- 3.2 We are providing support to the Moray Council election team for a by-election being held in the Buckie ward following the resignation of a councillor.
- 3.3 Significant further legislative change is being introduced by the provisions of the Elections Act 2022.
- 3.4 A major update to our Electoral Management System will be applied in the near future providing new functionality for setting up and supporting elections.
- 3.5 Reviews are in progress in respect of both UK Parliamentary and Scottish Parliamentary boundaries.

4. ELECTORAL REGISTRATION UPDATE

4.1 Annual Canvass 2022

- 4.2 The canvass has been underway since early August with letters being issued to unmatched properties across the whole of Grampian on 2 August, to matched properties in Aberdeenshire on 9 August and to matched properties in Moray and Aberdeen City on 16 August.
- 4.3 The use of E-Communications is still in development and something we hope to utilise to encourage responses before the canvass concludes on 30 November
- 4.4 We have had considerable success in recruiting temporary staff to carry out follow up canvass visits across all of our areas, with many of these operating in their own local areas, thus cutting expenditure on travel to the more remote parts of Grampian. In all we have recruited 24 additional staff, bringing the team to 37 including our 4 full time permanent canvass staff.
- 4.5 The personal contact aspect of the canvass is being carried out in 2 phases. The first phase commenced on 12 September with all properties in rural areas being targeted along with some of the towns in Aberdeenshire and Moray and parts of Aberdeen City. 2,773 properties were available for phone canvassing as we hold a telephone number for a matched elector at the property, while a further 29,914 properties were selected for visits by the door to door canvass team. This phase of the canvass is due to conclude next week.
- 4.6 A further phase of personal contact commenced on 7 October, taking in the remainder of Aberdeen City along with the remaining towns of Aberdeenshire – Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Inverurie, Kintore, Portlethen and Westhill, and Moray – Elgin, Keith and Cullen. Currently 3,509 of these properties are eligible for telephone canvass, while 22,430 properties have been selected for a visit by a canvasser. These visits and phone calls must be completed by 30 November.
- 4.7 The additional demands of an unscheduled by-election have meant that we have not yet been able to train staff in the use of the tablet canvass solution. We are still aiming to deploy the tablets before the end of the canvass.

Local Government by-election – Moray Ward 3 Buckie

- 4.8 Due to the resignation of a councillor, a by election has been scheduled to take place on 3 November 2022.
- 4.9 The main statutory deadlines are:

Application to register to vote	Midnight Tuesday 18 October 2022
Application to vote by post, change or cancel an absent vote	5pm Wednesday 19 October 2022
Application to vote by proxy	5pm Wednesday 26 October 2022

- 4.10 With this election taking place during the annual canvass, the by election area was targeted for personal contact during the first phase. New potential electors were advised on the doorstep on how to register in time for the by-election, with follow up invitations to register being issued to all the potential electors who had not already registered.
- 4.11 Key electoral registration staff are working closely with the Moray Council election team in order to provide extracts from the electoral register and list of absent voters in a timely fashion in order to meet the timetable agreed with the election team's contract printer, Idox.
- 4.12 Poll cards were issued across the Ward on 4 October in accordance with the original plan, however planned industrial action by Royal Mail has had an impact. The original scheduled date for delivery of ballot packs coincides with a strike day on 25 October. Electoral registration staff worked quickly and positively with the election team to agree and implement an alternative schedule for extraction and upload of the ballot pack data in order to facilitate an earlier issue date for the ballots.
- 4.13 This means that some processes have to be repeated after the statutory deadline which, unfortunately, impacts on our services with respect to the staff involved and their other duties.
- 4.14 Emergency proxy rules have altered since the local government elections held in May, with the provision to apply for a emergency proxy specifically in relation to coronavirus no longer available. This provision was in place for 2 years with the period expiring on 23 September, 2022.

The Elections Act 2022

- 4.15 The Elections Act 2022 introduces the Government's manifesto commitments on electoral integrity and the wider democratic system. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has responsibility for the Electoral Integrity Programme (EIP) which will deliver the provisions within the Act.
- 4.16 The Business Change Network (BCN) is overseen by the Business Change Team (BCT) within DLUHC. The BCN enables two way flow of information between local authorities and the BCT through Regional Leads and Change agents.
- 4.17 Much of the secondary legislation needed to implement the provisions of the Act is currently in development.

4.18 The main provisions of the Act affecting Electoral Registration Office staff are:

- Introduction of the Voter Authority Certificate – Voter ID at polling stations at some types of election
- Introduction of online absent voting applications and identity verification for absent voting applications for reserved polls
- Introduction of the requirement for postal voters to make a fresh application every three years at some types of election
- Changes to proxy voting rules
- Removal of the 15 year limit on expatriates' right to vote

4.19 One of the key challenges in implementing the changes will be in relation to the divergence of rules in Scotland between those in force at UK Parliamentary elections and any UK wide national referendums, and those in force at Scottish Parliamentary, council elections and any other polls using the local government franchise.

4.20 This divergence has implications in respect of staff training, Electoral Management System (EMS) capability and communicating the differences to electors in order to avoid voter confusion.

4.21 The Electoral Commission (EC) has wide ranging responsibilities to support the changes including provision of guidance, amendments to forms and public engagement.

4.22 Key staff from the admin team attended a Seminar run by the Association of Electoral Administrators and DLUHC on 12 September in Birmingham. The seminar focussed on aspects of the Act to be introduced prior to polls taking in place in May 2023. A presentation and breakout session covered the Voter Authority Certificate, including a demonstration of the application portal showing the public facing application facility and the functionality for local authority staff to process applications. Other sessions covered the implications of the new voter ID rules at polling stations and the new rules around accessibility at polling stations. Finally a presentation was given on the funding model.

4.23 On the subject of funding, where a New Burden - a policy or initiative which increases the cost of providing local authority services - is identified, the increased costs to local authorities must be properly assessed and fully funded by the relevant government department.

4.24 Funding for New Burdens resulting from the implementation of the Elections Act will be met by a hybrid system of grants and Justification Led Bids. DLUHC has provided a timeline for grant applications and Justification Led Bids, but only in relation to voter ID and accessibility at this stage.

New Elections Module

- 4.25 Our software provider, Idox have released a new elections module within the EROS EMS. Senior members of the admin team attended training on the new module during September and October, however due to the by-election in Moray we will be unable to install the updated software until after polling day.
- 4.26 Initial impressions of the new module were positive, particularly in relation to the running of extremely time consuming storing and exporting tasks needed to produce outputs such as poll card and ballot pack data. According to the demonstration these processes have been reduced down to minutes rather than hours and therefore we are keen to move forward and get some hands on experience with the new system, initially in a test environment, in order to confirm that the advertised improvements will be delivered.

Constituency Boundary changes

- 4.27 The 2023 Review UK Parliament Constituencies is in progress at the Boundary Commission for Scotland. It was announced on 11 October that revised proposals will be published for a 4 week consultation period between 8 November and 5 December.
- 4.28 Boundaries Scotland conduct reviews of Scottish Parliament Constituency and Region boundaries every 8 to 12 years. The second review of Scottish Parliament boundaries commenced on 1 September 2022. It is expected that provisional proposals for consultation will be published in Spring 2023. A report will be submitted to Scottish Ministers by 1 May 2025 and, if approved, the new boundaries will be in effect for the next Scottish Parliament elections expected to take place on 1 May 2026.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 **In the third year of the new canvass model the main provisions are now well understood and being implemented efficiently. However, encouraging electors to engage outwith an election period remains challenging and the cost burden of thousands of personal contacts remains considerable.**
- 5.2 **A by-election during the canvass does require some adjustment of priorities with regard to the ordering of processing, but these are not particularly burdensome. However the diversion of key staff away from planned tasks onto an unscheduled task does have an impact.**
- 5.3 **Progress has been made in our understanding of the implementation of the Elections Act, but much is still unknown as we await secondary legislation. What is clear is that there are considerable challenges ahead for electoral services teams in a number of ways, and in particular with assisting voters to understand what they need to do.**