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**REPORT TO: Grampian Valuation Joint Board on 26 January 2024**

**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 concluded on 30 November 2023 and revised registers were published on 1 December 2023

3.2 Major changes to the rules for registration of overseas electors, as introduced by the Elections Act 2022 came into effect on 16 January 2024.

3.3 Liaison with Returning Officers (RO) and election teams from the 3 constituent authorities.

3.4 Considering reports from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire election teams in relation to the statutory review of polling districts and polling places.

3.5 Completion of the UK Parliamentary constituency boundary changes and progress of the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary changes.

3.6 Annual signature refresh (for devolved elections) and reserved proxy write out.

**4. ELECTORAL REGISTRATION UPDATE**

**4.1 Annual Canvas 2023**

4.2 The annual canvass concluded on 30 November 2023, with all the required follow up activity being completed prior to that date.

- 4.3 The overall canvass model was the same as in recent years, the exception being the use of e-comms sent to matched properties, which achieved a response rate of 29% and resulted in savings in printing and postage costs.
- 4.4 The overall response rate from unmatched properties at 61.5% was little changed from previous years and again required significant resourcing to carry out over 50,000 house visits and just under 5,000 telephone canvass contact attempts.
- 4.5 Revised registers were published on 1 December 2023 and promptly distributed to those individuals and organisations who are entitled to receive them “on publication”. Further work was then carried out to distribute “on request” copies, with current UK Parliament members provided with registers covering their existing constituency, while other recipients received copies based on the new boundaries. The usual requests to purchase the register made by credit reference agencies and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals service were processed.
- 4.6 Arrangements have been made for the printing of paper copies of the register for distribution to local and national libraries.
- 4.7 A summary of the current number of local government electors and postal voters is shown below along with the two previous years:

|                                | <b>1 December<br/>2021</b> | <b>1 December<br/>2022</b> | <b>1 December<br/>2023</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Number of electors</b>      | 448,607                    | 448,915                    | 452,084                    |
| <b>Number of postal voters</b> | 119,213                    | 119,691                    | 117,258                    |

- 4.8 The Elections Act 2022
- 4.9 The Elections Act 2022 introduces the UK 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.
- 4.10 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.
- 4.11 Following the introduction of the Online Absent Vote application (OAVA) public facing service on 31 October 2023, along with the live launch of the corresponding ERO processing portal (EROP), the level of uptake has been relatively low.
- 4.12 The introduction of the OAVA was a “soft launch” and has therefore alleviated some of the anxiety around the introduction of the new rules, with staff having time to provide clear explanations to a limited number of contacts and build their confidence levels.

- 4.13 As previously reported, there were significant concerns raised by senior electoral administrators regarding the readiness of the public facing application site (OAVA) as well as the functionality provided to administrators through the ERO Portal (EROP) which allows staff to process applications. There have already been improvements introduced to the processing portal and a Digital Roadmap has been circulated to electoral administrators as part of the ongoing work of the EIP.
- 4.14 Further improvements to the OAVA site have been requested, in particular to allow a user journey for an elector in Scotland to apply for their reserved postal vote on line and also request a form to apply for the devolved postal vote.
- 4.15 With effect from 16 January 2024, the public facing Register to Vote site has been amended to allow British citizens who have been living overseas for more than 15 years to apply to register to vote at UK Parliamentary elections.
- 4.16 Overseas applications received through the Register to Vote site become available for processing in the EROP site in a similar way to the online postal and proxy applications.
- 4.17 In contrast to the launch of OAVA, the extension of the overseas franchise has seen an immediate and significant level of response in terms of applications, with 70 applications received by the Grampian ERO within the first 36 hours of launch.
- 4.18 This level of response may have been prompted by publicity on mainstream media <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67993306> .
- 4.19 Any significant surge in applications will present challenges for staff processing them in both the EROP and in our Electoral Management System (EMS) as these are new and unfamiliar tasks. However, we would certainly prefer that any elector who wishes to apply, whether they are renewing a previous overseas declaration which has lapsed, or are registering for the first time, do so at the earliest possible time. This will ensure that their registration and any accompanying absent vote will be in place well in advance of the next general election.
- 4.20 Working with Returning Officers and Election Teams
- 4.21 The importance of building and maintaining strong working relationships with the Returning Officers (RO) and their election teams is fundamental to the successful delivery of elections. Discussions were held with election teams in 2023, mainly in relation to the UK constituency boundary changes but also in relation to the forthcoming UK general election and possible impacts of the Elections Act 2022
- 4.22 A meeting with all three ROs and their teams is scheduled for 24 January to look in detail at the challenges and risks associated with the delivery of the UK parliamentary general election and in particular any specific concerns and risks that the ROs have and how the ERO and RO teams can address and mitigate them. Any concerns that are unique to one RO will be discussed at

separate meetings with that particular RO. As is the case for any electoral event, regular contact and communication will continue in the run up to and throughout the election period.

#### 4.23 Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

4.24 As specified in the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, the next compulsory review of polling districts and polling places must take place between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.

4.25 We were asked to comment on draft proposals by both Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire council election teams and would expect a similar request from Moray Council in due course.

#### 4.26 Boundary Changes

4.27 Prior to publication of the revised register on 1 December we completed the project to apply the new UK Constituency boundary changes within the Eros system. This project had the added complication of having to retain a separate breakdown of polling districts based on the current boundaries in order to be able to output registers to sitting MPs or to run a by-election should one arise. The project drew on the skills of IT, technical and administration staff and was used as a training opportunity to build knowledge and resilience for future projects.

4.28 Work is continuing on the review of Scottish Parliamentary boundary changes. Local enquiries have taken place in areas where representations were made in response to the provisional proposals. A further consultation on revised proposals will take place in the Spring of 2024. The final report is due with Scottish Ministers by 1 May 2025.

#### 4.29 Annual Signature Refresh and Proxy Voters write out

4.30 The annual refresh of signatures now relates only to devolved absent votes where the applicant must provide a new signature at the 5 year point. Under the new rules introduced by the Elections Act 2022, electors who hold a reserved postal vote will be required to reapply before their postal vote expires, with the maximum duration being 3 years. We will write out to electors at the appropriate time.

4.31 A further change introduced by the Elections Act 2022 requires all proxy voters to reapply on or before 31 January 2024 in order to retain their proxy arrangements. Electors were contacted in December, many by email as they are overseas electors, and we are currently processing responses made in the new OAVA site and on paper.

### 5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Despite there being no major electoral events, 2023 was another challenging year with multiple changes to rules and procedures accompanied by alterations to existing IT systems and the introduction of completely new platforms. All of this required external and internal training in both theory and the use of IT systems.

- 5.2 A major round of boundary changes was an additional task, but represented a training opportunity and was successfully delivered in time for revision of the register at the conclusion of another successful annual canvass.
- 5.3 The year ahead will be immensely challenging, not least due to the continued speculation around the timing of a general election. All of the new rules around Voter ID and absent voting will be implemented for the first time and at scale and early planning on resourcing will be key to success, as will timely and effective communication with partners and robust messaging provided to electors.

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