



REPORT TO: Grampian Valuation Joint Board on 26 August 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 From February through to early May the main focus in electoral registration has been the preparation for, and the delivery of, the local government elections across the 3 employing authority areas.

3.2 Following the local elections, postal vote rejection notices were issued. Planning and preparation for the 2022 annual canvass took place in June and July and the initial canvass communications have been issued throughout August.

3.3 We provided registration data in support of Community Council elections in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, with 3 small boundary changes being implemented in Aberdeenshire.

3.4 The Elections Bill 2021-22 received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 and we now await detailed regulations on how the legislation will operate in practice.

4. Electoral Registration Update

4.1 Local Government elections 5 May 2022

4.2 The expectation was that these elections would be significantly quieter than the Scottish Parliamentary elections held in 2021. However, there continued to be uncertainty because of the pandemic and it was therefore necessary to put measures in place to ensure delivery, including the issue of Household Notification Letters (HNLs), with the overall aim being to “flatten the curve” of incoming postal vote and registration applications.

- 4.3** HNLs were issued on 31 January 2022 to 290,993 households across Grampian, with the main aims being:
- To advise householders of the names of those currently registered at the address and aged 16 or over
 - To provide information on how to register for those not already registered
 - To provide early notification of the postal vote deadline and how to apply
- 4.4** The issue of the HNLs was complemented by a national advertising campaign co-ordinated by the Scottish Assessors Association Electoral Registration Committee (SAA ERC).
- 4.5** The cost of the HNLs was covered by funding remaining from that provided by the Scottish Government for the Scottish Parliamentary elections, and that resource has now been exhausted.
- 4.6** As in 2021 our website was updated with messaging around the elections and the HNL issue in particular, while the subject specific contact forms and dedicated email response channels developed for the Scottish Government elections are now used as Business as Usual to ensure the smooth handling of contacts at peak times.
- 4.7** The HNLs did prompt an increase in contacts, both by telephone and email, regarding both postal voting and registration and we saw a distinct uplift in applications, but these increases were managed comfortably by reallocation of core staff for a relatively short time period.
- 4.8** The table below shows that the enhanced level of postal voting uptake experienced at the Scottish Parliamentary elections has largely been maintained, which meant that there was no major surge.

Date/Event	Postal Voters
1 December 2020	88,494
Scottish Parliamentary Election 2021 Polling Day	123,467
5 January 2022	117,607
Local Government Elections 2022 Polling Day	121,550

- 4.9** One aspect of the election process which requires more resource at local government elections is the provision of registers and lists of absent voters to candidates. In all we dealt with requests to receive the register and/or lists of absent voters from 99 candidates or their agents. The information is provided in csv, pdf or paper format. This compares with only 5 requests at the Scottish Parliamentary election.
- 4.10** One unexpected element of these elections was that the Buckie Ward of Moray Council was uncontested, with the number of validly nominated candidates matching the number of vacancies. While the expectation might be that this would result in less work, the opposite was the case, with different and previously untested procedures having to be carried out in our Electoral Management System, Eros.

4.11 Uncontested wards also arose in the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (3), Inverclyde (1), Shetland Islands (2) and Highland (1) council areas. Staff in the Shetland ERO office had anticipated that they may have uncontested wards and, being new users of the Eros system, had sought advice early from the software providers (Idox) on the procedures to be followed. By liaising with Shetland staff we were able to benefit from their knowledge of the required procedures and quickly implement the additional actions on the system. This demonstrated the great benefit of the cooperation and sharing of experience which is common practice between members of the SAA ERC.

4.12 The final eligible electorate for the 2022 elections was;

Council Area	Eligible Electorate	Number of Postal Voters
Aberdeen City	165,847	43,999
Aberdeenshire	204,633	57,563
Moray	74,494	19,988
Total	444,974	121,550

4.13 Under the emergency proxy provisions, which are in force from 5 pm, 6 working days prior to the poll, a total of 41 emergency proxy appointments were approved, with 20 being dealt with on polling day. A total of 8 applications were rejected as being invalid, with 2 of these on polling day.

4.14 The reasons for the emergency proxy requests at the elections held in 2021 and 2022 were:

Emergency Proxy Type	Scottish Parliamentary 2021	Local Government 2022
Covid	92	32
Employment	35	9
Medical/Disability	13	0

4.15 Volumes were clearly much reduced this year, but interestingly Covid remained a major factor.

4.16 Ongoing co-operation with the 3 council election teams was a major priority, with meetings taking place in January and February. A post election catch up meeting with the Aberdeen City team has already taken place with a high level of satisfaction expressed and no negative issues raised. Meetings with the Aberdeenshire and Moray teams will take place on 21 June and we hope for similar feedback.

4.17 Postal Voter Rejection Notices

4.18 Where the Returning Officer has rejected an elector's postal vote due to the details provided on the postal voting statement failing to match the details provided on the original postal vote application, a rejection notice must be issued to the elector within 3 months of polling day.

4.19 These notices are issued by the Electoral Registration Officer and were dispatched on 20 May 2022 for all 3 council areas. Where the rejection reasons include a mismatched signature, the elector is required to provide a new signature to avoid the cancellation of their postal voting arrangement. Reminders are issued at the 3 week point and where no response is received within the period of 6 weeks, the postal vote is cancelled. This is confirmed in writing, and another postal vote application form is provided along with the cancellation letter.

4.20 2022 Annual Canvass

4.21 Planning and preparation for the canvass took place in June and July. In this third year of operating the reformed canvass model we have made some progress in utilising more of the methods which are now permitted, such as local data matching and E-Communications. As in 2020 and 2021 the postal canvass will commence in the first week of August and the first stage will be phased over 3 weeks.

4.22 In addition to the National data match relative to Department for Work and Pensions records, local data matching of occupied properties can also be carried out with a view to increasing the elector match rate, which should translate to a higher percentage of properties being eligible to progress down the matched properties route. We carried out some testing of local data sources and have gained some experience in the procedures. However there remains work to be done with respect to the specific content and format of these local data sources in order for them to be fully utilised and this will be followed up prior to the 2023 canvass.

4.23 We must take follow up actions to obtain a response from unmatched properties where they have not replied to the initial communication sent by post. We are planning to utilise E-Communications for the first time, by issuing emails to matched electors registered at these properties, in order to increase the response rate and avoid the issue of further paper communications.

4.24 At least 2 further contact attempts must be made and at least one of these must be a personal contact, which can be by phone (where we hold a phone number for a confirmed elector) or by door to door canvass.

4.25 Follow up action will take place from September onwards and continue until the canvass is complete (no later than 30 November 2022). We have continued to build our canvass team and following a successful recruiting campaign we will be employing around 20 additional canvassers across all areas of Grampian.

4.26 In 2021 a small amount of door to door canvassing was carried out as the second contact method, with most visits being carried out as the third contact. With this approach, the canvassing continued right up to 30 November and core staff across our service were utilised to complete the task, at times in inclement weather. This year we intend to carry out a much greater percentage of personal contacts as the second contact, with all rural and some urban properties being telephoned or visited at this stage. The aim is to spread the visits across an extended period, using only canvassing staff (permanent and temporary) and to hopefully avoid conflicts with any major weather events by completing the task earlier.

4.27 In contrast to the 2021 campaign, where the action on the doorstep was to encourage a response, we will be reverting to the pre-Covid approach of obtaining a completed form during the canvass visit where possible.

4.28 Finally, we intend to carry out a trial of tablet canvassing.

4.29 Community Council Elections

4.30 We provided electorate data to Aberdeen City Council for a polling date of 31 March 2022 in the City Centre, Nigg and Rosemount and Mile End areas.

4.31 In Aberdeenshire, polls are scheduled on different dates across the area. We provided electorate data for nomination checking and received a request for further data in support of a poll being held on 26 May for Rosehearty Community Council. We also processed some small boundary changes as follows:

Areas moving:

From	To
Cluny, Midmar and Monymusk	Echt & Skene
Inverurie	Kintore and District
Deer	Mintlaw and District

4.32 Legislative Changes

4.33 The Elections Bill 2021-22 received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 becoming the Elections Act 2022.

4.34 The elements of the Act which will have most impact on our services are:

4.35 The restriction of the period for which a person can apply for a postal vote. In Scotland this provision applies only at a UK Parliamentary election, with a new application being required every 3 years. The period in relation to a postal vote for Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections remains at 5 years.

4.36 Voter identification – voters will be required to produce identification in order to be able to vote at a UK Parliamentary election in Scotland. No identification is required to vote at Scottish Parliamentary or local government elections in Scotland. Applications for the issue of an Electoral Identity Document must be made to, and determined by, the Electoral Registration Officer.

- 4.37** The introduction of an online service for applying for an absent vote, including an identification checking process.
- 4.38** The removal of the 15 year limit on the voting rights of British citizens living overseas, along with changes to the registration process including how an applicant's identity and connection to a UK registration address will be verified.
- 4.39** These are clearly major changes which will require new administrative processes, amendments to our software package and, crucially, very clear messaging to electors in respect of the divergences between the rules between the different types of elections.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1** This was another set of elections delivered with the majority of staff still based at home. While in most respects these elections were quiet, there are processes which must be carried out in order for each event to be a success and which require a high level of commitment from key staff.
- 5.2** With another raft of changes to be implemented prior to the next UK Parliamentary election we must maintain a high degree of adaptability in order to successfully deliver all types of future elections, while putting the voter first.
- 5.3** Moving forward with adopting more of the provisions of the reformed canvass is our immediate priority and we look forward to seeing the results which can be produced.

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