



REPORT TO: Grampian Valuation Joint Board on 3 November 2023

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 Major changes to absent voting rules at reserved polls, as introduced by the Elections Act 2022 take effect on 31 October 2023, including the introduction of an online absent vote application service (OAVA).

3.3 Several major upgrades to our electoral management system are required to enable this latest tranche of Elections Act changes.

3.4 Further Elections Act changes in relation to the Overseas Electors' franchise will take effect on 16 January 2024.

3.5 We are working with the election teams from the 3 constituent authorities in order to implement the changes to Westminster constituency boundaries.

3.6 The Electoral Commission (EC) and Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) held an event for Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers in Scotland at which we were represented.

4. Electoral Registration Update

4.1 Annual Canvass 2023

- 4.2** The canvass has been underway since early August with letters being issued to unmatched properties across the whole of Grampian on 1 August, to matched properties in Aberdeenshire on 15 August and to matched properties in Moray and Aberdeen City on 22 August. All households received a flyer providing information about the new voter ID requirements, including a link to details on the types of acceptable ID and how to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate if needed.
- 4.3** E-communications were sent to electors in just over 82,000 matched properties, prior to the write out. Electors were invited to use the online response method to make a return. In most cases this will complete the canvass for the property and avoid the need for the issue of a paper form. The response rate to these emails was just over 29%. A link to the voter ID flyer was included in the email.
- 4.4** There was further success in expanding the canvass team which has now increased from 37 to 44, including the 4 permanent Electoral Registration Assistants.
- 4.5** The strategy for the personal contact aspect of the canvass is the same as in 2022, consisting of 2 phases. The first phase covering all properties in rural areas along with some of the towns in Aberdeenshire and Moray and parts of Aberdeen City and amounting to just over 28,000 visits concluded in mid-October. 2,866 properties in those areas were eligible for phone canvassing as we hold a telephone number for a matched elector at the property. This exercise commenced on 23 October with around a third of calls completed by 26 October.
- 4.6** A further phase of personal contact commenced in early October, taking in the remainder of Aberdeen City along with the remaining towns of Aberdeenshire and Moray. Currently 2,531 of these properties are eligible for telephone canvass, while 21,618 properties have been selected for a visit by a canvasser. A further 2,344 student properties will be visited by a canvasser. These visits and phone calls must be completed by 30 November.
- 4.7** The Elections Act 2022
- 4.8** 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.
- 4.9** The Business Change Network (BCN) is overseen by the Business Change Team (BCT) within DLUHC. The BCN enables two-way flow of information between electoral administrators and the BCT through Regional Leads and Change agents.

- 4.10** On 5 October 2023 confirmation was received that the Online Absent Voting Applications (OAVA) site would launch on 31 October 2023. This is despite concerns being raised at ministerial level by electoral administrators that the system is not ready or fit for purpose. The Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators has written to the Minister to reiterate that view and released a public statement detailing the objections;
<https://www.aea-elections.co.uk/2023/10/05/comment-on-online-absent-vote-applications-being-launched-from-31-october-2023/>.
- 4.11** Concurrent with the launch of the OAVA we have the introduction of significant changes to the rules around absent voting applications for UK level elections including a new requirement for electors to pass an identity check by comparison of name, date of birth (DOB), National insurance number (NINO) and address relative to DWP records. Where a NINO cannot be provided and a reason is given, or the details of the application do not match, the identity can be verified by the production of accepted forms of identification or attestation.
- 4.12** Changes to the duration of a reserved postal vote to introduce a maximum period of 3 years, as well as to the limits to the number of electors for whom a person may act as proxy, also come into force on 31 October 2023.
- 4.13** With all of these changes introducing significant divergence between the rules for reserved and devolved absent vote applications, electoral administrators have a great deal to do in a very short space of time to develop messaging which can be used consistently across all of Scotland to enable electors to be able to take the action they need to take to secure their chosen voting method at all types of election. The risks around this divergence in the rules are numerous and a considerable amount of work is being carried out at a national level to identify the risks and mitigations and to communicate these to EROs.
- 4.14** Resources such as web content, form and letter templates, FAQs and procedures are being developed by the Scottish Assessors' Association Electoral Registration Committee to assist EROs with the considerable challenges posed by the introduction of this raft of changes.
- 4.15** Senior administration staff have attended training on the new rules delivered by Association of Electoral Administrators trainers and on new software functionality provided by our software provider, Idox. We will shortly deliver training sessions to the whole admin team.
- 4.16** Familiarisation with the new public facing application sites will be necessary for frontline staff so that they can understand and deal with any difficulties raised by callers.
- 4.17** A test facility for the new portal where ERO staff will process the online applications has only just been opened, giving very little time for senior staff to assimilate the functionality and train the core team.

- 4.18** An upgrade to our Electoral Management System (EMS) was recently installed to enable testing of the link from the processing portal to the EMS, and a further upgrade will be installed imminently which will make major changes to system functionality to allow handling of absent votes under the new rules, including all the divergence aspects.
- 4.19** On 16 January 2024 the legislative change to remove the 15 year limit in relation to overseas electors' registration will come into force. Senior administration staff will attend training in December on this significant change which will enfranchise additional electors who will be eligible to vote at the UK Parliamentary General Election which is expected to take place in 2024.
- 4.20** UK Constituency Boundary changes
- 4.21** Work is ongoing with the election teams within the 3 constituent councils to assist with preparation of their reports to their respective councils on the impact of the UK Parliamentary constituency boundary changes on their constituencies and polling districts.
- 4.22** The revised register will be published on 1 December 2023 based on the new boundaries. However, we also require to hold the existing boundary configuration within the EMS in order to be able to supply the electoral register to the sitting members of the current constituencies and to output the register for use at a UK Parliamentary by-election should one occur before the next UK General Parliamentary election.
- 4.23** Currently 6 parliamentary constituencies fall wholly within the boundary of the area of responsibility of the Grampian ERO. As a result of the boundary changes the Grampian electorate will still be contained within 6 constituencies, but one of these, Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey County Constituency, lies partly within the area of responsibility of the Highland and Western Isles ERO.

4.24 In the main the new constituency areas comprise whole council wards, but there are some cross boundary issues – summarised in table below.

Existing constituency	New constituency	Changes
Aberdeen North	Aberdeen North Burgh Constituency	Takes in polling districts currently in Gordon constituency but which lie within the city council boundary. Some movement of polling districts and part polling districts to and from Aberdeen South
Aberdeen South	Aberdeen South Burgh Constituency	Some movement of polling districts and part polling districts to and from Aberdeen North
Banff and Buchan	Aberdeenshire North and Moray East County Constituency	Takes in wards 2 and 3 and the ward 4 polling districts east of the Spey from Moray Council area. Also comprises large part of former Banff and Buchan constituency
	Gordon and Buchan County Constituency	Comprises parts of the former Gordon and Banff and Buchan Constituencies
Gordon	Gordon and Buchan County Constituency	Comprises parts of the former Gordon and Banff and Buchan Constituencies Aberdeen City council parts of Wards 1 and 2 move from former Gordon Constituency to Aberdeen North Burgh constituency
Moray	Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey County constituency	Moray Council Wards 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 and ward 4 polling districts west of the Spey join areas within Highland
	Aberdeenshire North and Moray East County constituency	Moray Council Wards 2 and 3 with polling districts of ward 4 east of the Spey join parts of former Banff and Buchan constituency
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine County constituency	Unchanged

4.25 We are carrying out the work needed to update the polling district coding, set up the moves of properties and streets where there are split polling districts and to create an additional “new constituency” level within the EMS, before populating both the existing and new layers with the correct configurations of polling districts. This work must be completed prior to commencing year end procedures in late November.

4.26 Preparing for a UK Parliamentary General Election – Electoral Commission Event held at Caird Hall, Dundee, 6 October 2023

4.27 This event was attended by Gavin Oag and Linda Smith. Through a series of presentations and workshops, attendees considered issues which all Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers need to address while planning for the next UK General Parliamentary election, including changes arising from the Elections Act 2022, such as the application of photographic Voter ID, as well as issues relating to devolved Scottish elections.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The main operational task throughout the period of this report has been delivery of the annual canvass. The overall strategy is similar to the previous two years, with the notable and successful addition of the E-communications option. The canvass is on track to be completed prior to revision of the register on 1 December 2023

5.2 With the short timeframe between release of EC guidance and implementation of the new rules, and the need to develop new forms, correspondence and messaging to enable clear communication with electors, administrators nationally have felt that everything is very compressed. Strongly held opinions that systems are not ready, and just in time delivery of EMS upgrades are also contributing to administrators’ concerns around being able to deliver the changes effectively and to provide the level of service to which we aspire.

5.3 This is a very challenging period in which to operate particularly as major boundary changes must also be delivered and the next UK Parliamentary election is looming on an as yet unknown date. It is with the ongoing commitment and hard work of the whole team that we will deliver all of our objectives while adhering to the constant underlying mantra of “putting the voter first”.

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