



REPORT TO: Grampian Valuation Joint Board on 5 February 2021

SUBJECT: Register of Electors

BY: The Assessor & ERO

1. Reason for Report

1.1 To update the Board on current developments in electoral registration

2. Recommendation

2.1 **The Board note the content of this report.**

3. Background

3.1 During the period November 2020 to January 2021 the 2020 canvass was concluded revised registers published, legislation relevant to the Scottish Parliamentary election passed, the postal voter signature refresh has been launched and contingency measures implementation has progressed relative to the Parliamentary election scheduled for 6 May.

4.0 Electoral registration update

4.1. 2020 Canvass

4.1.1 The 2020 canvass was the first canvass that used data to determine the appropriate approach to be taken on a household by household basis. This has been a most welcome and long-awaited development in the delivery of the annual canvass.

4.1.2 By the conclusion of the canvass on 31 November 2020 the service had issued 328,224 canvass communication letters to 286,999 residential addresses in the Grampian area. This compares to 475,153 canvass forms and reminders issued during the 2018 household canvass.

4.1.3 By-elections in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were serviced during the canvass period and the Electoral Commission report on the Autumn 2020 by-elections concluded that the administration of elections during a pandemic required additional resources in terms of time and costs. It also identified the potential for an increase in demand for postal voting and also a potential increase in emergency proxy applications due to isolation requirements.¹

4.2 Revised registers published 1 December 2020

4.2.1 During the period from 1 February 2020 to 31 November 2020 48,848 additions and deletions were made to the registers and 21,017 initial invitations to register were issued along with 24,142 first and second reminders. The table below provides summary details for the last three revised registers for local government and Scottish Parliament elections.

| Revised registers | 1 December 2018 | 1 February 2020 | 1 December 2020 |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Number of electors | 432,135 | 445,690 | 448,331 |
| Number of postal voters | 87,422 | 91,070 | 88,494 |

4.3 The Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2020

4.3.1 This order updates the 2015 Scottish Parliament elections conduct rules and widens the criteria for applications to be made on polling day or up to 6 days beforehand for emergency proxy voting. The new criteria permit applications to be made where an elector suffers a disability before the normal proxy application deadline of 5pm on the sixth day before the poll but could not have reasonably made an application to vote by proxy before that deadline passed. The order also extends the emergency proxy provisions to those electors required to self-isolate following Scottish Government or medical advice. A similar provision was implemented in relation to the by-elections that took place in autumn 2020.

¹<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/conducting-elections-under-coronavirus-restrictions>

4.4 Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill

4.4.1 This Bill was passed in Holyrood on 23 December 2020 and will come into force the day after Royal Assent is granted, which is expected to be by the first week of February.

4.4.2 The Bill will:

- bring forward the deadline for postal vote applications from 19 April to 6 April to give more time for EROs to process an anticipated high level of requests to vote by post;
- make “dissolution” (the time before the election when MSPs no longer hold office) last 1 day, allowing the Parliament to make decisions if the election needs to be postponed;
- give the Scottish Ministers power to hold an all-postal election and to hold polling over multiple days, if appropriate;
- allow flexible timing for the first meeting of the new Parliament and the election of a new Presiding Officer and First Minister;
- give a reserve power to the current Presiding Officer to postpone the 2021 election by up to 6 months in certain circumstances.

4.5 Postal voter signature refresh

4.5.1 Postal voters are required to provide a refresh to their signature every 5 years. The procedure involves the service sending a signature refresh letter and reply-paid envelope to all postal voters whose signature is due to be refreshed. 21,645 letters were issued to postal voters that required to refresh their signatures on 11 January 2021. Reminders are due to be issued at the start of February and where an elector fails to respond we are obliged to cancel their arrangements to vote by post and provide them with a cancellation notice and fresh application form should they wish to re-apply to vote by post. Cancellation notices are scheduled to be issued on 22 February 2021.

4.6 Contingency measures for the Scottish Parliamentary election – 6 May 2021

4.6.1 Research carried out by the Electoral Commission during November² was used to inform the Convenor to Scotland’s Electoral Management Board’s directions that were issued to Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers on 18 December 2020³.

4.6.2 Contingency planning by EROs across Scotland includes the issue of a household notification letter to all households during the first week of February indicating who is registered at their address and whether each elector has a postal vote or not. This ‘write-out’ will also be supported by a jointly funded national campaign on television and seeks to encourage early engagement by electors to ensure that their registration details are up to date and that any applications to vote by post are made as early as possible.

² <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes-towards-voting-context-covid-19/public-attitudes-towards-voting-scotland-context-covid-19>

4.6.3 Modelling also indicated that additional temporary mail handling and processing capacity would be required with the corresponding technology where home working is now required. Recruitment and secondment arrangements are currently being made with a view to increase processing capacity by up to 24 full time equivalents during the months of March and April.

4.6.4 Funding for these contingency arrangements is being provided by the Scottish Government.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Despite the ongoing difficulties of maintaining operations during the pandemic, the service has met all operational requirements and is currently addressing the immense challenges presented by a major election being held during the pandemic.

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Background Papers:

³ <https://www.emb.scot/downloads/file/482/sp2021-directions>