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**REPORT TO:** Grampian Valuation Joint Board on 18 June 2021

**SUBJECT:** Register of Electors

**BY:** The Assessor & ERO

**1. Reason for Report**

1.1 To update the Board on 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 Since early February the main focus in electoral registration has been preparation for and delivery of the Scottish Parliament election. Boundary changes arising from a review of polling districts and polling places within the Moray Council area were implemented with the consequential publication of a revised register for the Moray UK Parliamentary constituency on 1 March 2021.

3.2 Following the Scottish Parliamentary election, postal vote rejection notices are being issued, planning for the 2021 annual canvass has commenced and by-elections are scheduled in Aberdeenshire Ward 12 (East Garioch) on 17 June and Aberdeenshire Ward 8 (Mid Formartine) on 19 August.

3.3 Future legislative changes were introduced in the Queen's speech in relation to voter ID and registration of overseas electors as well as the proposed abolition of the fixed term parliaments Act. Following the cancellation of the implementation of the 2018 Parliamentary Boundary review, a further review is due to be implemented in 2023.

**4. Electoral registration update**

Scottish Parliament election 6 May 2021, contingency measures and delivery

4.1 Household Notification Letters were issued to 287,684 households on 8 February 2021, with the main aims being:

- To advise householders of the names of those currently registered at the address and aged over 16
- 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

In addition individual letters were sent to young registered voters not yet aged 16 but who would attain the age of 16 on or before 6 May 2021, confirming their status as postal voters or in person voters, along with details of how to apply for a postal vote. The letters prompted an immediate and significant increase in contacts, both by telephone and email. The cost of the letters has been recovered from the Scottish Government i.e. £121,250.02 excluding VAT.

- 4.2 Significant updating of our website was implemented, consisting of detailed, election focussed messaging linked to subject specific contact forms, along with the provision of absent vote type specific email return options. This allowed channelling of contacts into dedicated work streams and provided the facility to bulk upload postal vote requests.
- 4.3 Following a recruitment exercise, staffing levels were scaled up throughout February to a peak of 24 additional staff engaged in mail handling and processing. Temporary staff were primarily engaged in processing postal vote applications. The projected “worst case scenario” of an uplift to 40% postal voting with a 15% surge of applications in the final 2 weeks did not occur. The number of postal voters did increase significantly by 34,110 in the period between the revision of the register on 1 December 2020 and the election on 6 May 2021, representing an increase from 19.9% to 27.7% of electors voting by post.
- 4.4 The challenge of responding to a major election during a pandemic with a high level of voter engagement was met. This would have been difficult to achieve without the alteration to the postal vote deadline and the increase in staff resources.
- 4.5 Following the postal vote and registration deadlines, contacts from voters continued at a high level through to polling day. Under the emergency proxy provisions a total of 140 emergency proxy appointments were approved, with 63 being dealt with on polling day. The reasons for the emergency proxy requests were:
- Covid provision 92
  - Employment 35
  - Medical/disability 13

#### Moray Boundary Changes

- 4.6 A review of polling places and polling districts in the Moray Council area was approved at a Special Meeting of the council on 16 December 2020. This involved a major restructure of the boundaries in Lossiemouth, significant changes in both Elgin and Forres, along with a number of other minor changes. Statutory notice of intention to revise the register was published 14 days prior to publication followed by notice of publication on the date of the revised register coming into force on 1 March 2021.

#### Postal Voter Rejection Notices

- 4.7 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. These notices are issued by the Electoral Registration Officer and are currently in the process of being issued.

#### 2021 Annual Canvass

- 4.8 Preparation for the 2021 annual canvass is in progress. This is the second canvass that will use the reformed canvass model and, as in 2020, the canvass will commence in first week of August. The issue of initial communications will be phased throughout August, with reminders being issued in late August to households where a response remains outstanding. While follow up of non-returns by door to door canvassing did not take place last year due to Covid 19 restrictions, it is anticipated that in person canvassing for the final reminder phase of the canvass will take place in October and November 2021.

#### Local Government by-elections

- 4.9 The final stages of preparation for the Ward 12 East Garioch by-election, which will take place on 17 June 2021, are currently in hand. A by-election will be held on 19 August 2021 to fill the vacancy in the Mid Formartine Ward of Aberdeenshire Council following the election of the incumbent to the Scottish Parliament. Preparation in support of this by-election is underway.

#### Legislative Changes

- 4.10 The frequency of legislative change continues to contribute to the complexity of electoral law, with new legislation being bolted on to decades or even century old legislation. With more new legislation proposed in the Queen's speech on 11 May, the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) has again called for a single Electoral Administration Act to be drafted which "would introduce logical and manageable change to deliver the elections and service electors expect and deserve".
- 4.11 The Election Integrity Bill is intended to deliver the UK government's manifesto pledges to tackle electoral fraud, prevent foreign interference and make it easier for British expatriates to participate in elections. The main elements of the Bill are:
- Improving the absent ballot process by increasing protection on postal and proxy voting, including banning postal vote 'harvesting'.
  - Strengthening the laws on intimidation and undue influence.
  - Requiring identification to vote in a polling station, as already required in Northern Ireland.
  - Improving access to voting for electors with disabilities.
  - Removing the 15 year limit on the voting rights of British expatriates and making it easier to cast their vote.
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- 4.12 The Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill seeks to repeal the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011 and was introduced to the House of Commons and given its First Reading on 12 May.

#### Parliamentary Boundary Review

- 4.13 The 2023 review of UK Parliament Constituencies began in January 2021. Changes arising from the review would have to be implemented prior to the next UK Parliamentary election.

**5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 The service continues to meet all operational commitments while the majority of staff continue to work from home.**
- 5.2 Without the timetable changes and the availability of increased resources, the successful delivery of the Scottish Parliament election during the pandemic would have been extremely challenging.**
- 5.3 With more legislative changes ahead, electoral administrators face ongoing challenges in service delivery which can only be met with the ongoing commitment and dedication of staff.**

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