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To Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

Date: 8 February 2017

**Subject** Electoral Registration and Voter Engagement

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**1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 To advise Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee of the Annual Canvass 2016 outcomes, the Canvass Pilot for 2017 and on the year round work which is conducted in relation to the register of electors.

**2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 That Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee notes the contents of the briefing note and provides any feedback to the Electoral Registration Officer on the processes.
- 2.2 That Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee suggests ideas for Councillors to be involved in engagement work within their Wards.

**3 Background – Annual Canvass**

- 3.1 The Representation of the People Act requires the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to conduct an annual canvass. The legislation is very specific about the process which has to be followed. It states that the ERO has to send to all properties in their area a Household Enquiry Form (HEF).
- 3.2 The HEF is an information gathering form which provides the ERO with information of who is currently residing at the property aged 16 and above. It is not a method of voter registration for new electors or for removing people who are no longer residing at the property. Those potential electors (also known as pending electors) identified on the HEF are sent an Invitation to Register (ITR) (if they haven't already applied online).
- 3.3 The ITR requires the information to register to vote (including national insurance number and date of birth). The HEF asked any new electors to go to the government website and complete their registration details in the hope that they will do this before the ERO has to send an ITR.

**4 2016 Annual Canvass**

- 4.1 From the end of July 2016, each property in the City received a HEF, information was pre-printed on the form as to who if anyone was registered at that property. These were hand delivered by our Canvassers.
- 4.2 Households that did not respond to the initial HEF were sent a reminder at the end of August. Households that did not respond to the initial or reminder were sent a second reminder from mid September. Both these forms were hand delivered by our Canvassers.
- 4.3 Any non-responders to the reminders received a personal visit by one of our Canvassers during October.
- 4.4 This overall response rate to the HEF was 86.5% (85.7) which is a slight increase on last year. It is important to note that the response rate to the canvass does not reflect whether or not residents are registered as it is only an information gathering exercise and to register the resident has to either go online or return the ITR they have been sent. Also most authorities saw a slight increase in response rates which has been put down to the fact that the register was at its most accurate with people having registered for the EU Referendum.
- 4.5 ITRs are continually sent out to any potential elector identified on the HEF that had not already applied online. This process also continues throughout the year as we are notified of people moving or potential new electors.
- 4.6 If the ITR is not returned by a potential elector then the ERO is required to send two reminders and make a personal visit, the same as the HEF process. Personal visits for non-responding ITRs continues through-out the year. The ERO is required to send an ITR to a potential elector within 28 days of becoming aware of them this is through-out the year.
- 4.7 On publication of the Register on 1 December 2016 there were 230,530 electors registered. Since then the electorate has changed 231,244 (221,884), people are continually registering or being removed from the register. There are currently approx. 16,000 pending electors. The pending electors figure are the people who have been identified during the canvass and since as potential electors but have not yet submitted an individual application.

## **5 Canvass 2017**

- 5.1 The Cabinet Office is undertaking a review of the annual canvass process for electoral registration as they have identified that the requirements of the legislation that govern the operation of the canvass is very labour and cost intensive. In June 2016 they asked authorities to bid to be pilot authorities to trial different canvass methods. As we applied to be a pilot authority in 2016 we applied again this year and have been successful in being selected.
- 5.2 The aim of the 2017 Canvass Pilots is to test whether alternative approaches to the canvass can significantly lower the cost of the process without reducing the volume and quality of information gathered. If the outcome is positive, the Cabinet Office hope to have sufficient evidence to make a case to Parliament for permanent change. Any change to the canvass would require primary legislation.

## **6 The Pilot Process**

- 6.1 Within each ward of the City 15% of the households will be randomly allocated to the 'intervention' group who will receive the new canvass model, another 15% will be allocated to the control group which will be canvassed in the existing manner. Together this 30% of the households will be the pilot sample. We are able to decide then whether the remaining 70% are canvassed in either the pilot or existing way. We have opted to use the pilot method of canvass for these properties.
- 6.2 The new canvass model will see those in the **intervention** group receiving an email version of the Household Enquiry Form (HEF) rather than a hard copy through the letterbox. The email will be sent to at least one of the residents of the property. If email addresses are held for a number of residents in the property the email HEF will be sent to each of them. The email will encourage the completion of the HEF online. This initial email will not contain any details about who is currently registered at the address but will provide the web address and their security log on codes.
- 6.3 If the online HEF is not been completed within 14 days of the original email a 1<sup>st</sup> email reminder will be sent to the same email addresses. The reminder email will contain the details of those currently registered and then require them to log onto the web site to confirm or amend the details. If no response is received to these two contacts then the households will receive a 2<sup>nd</sup> reminder by post, giving them options to respond by internet, SMS, telephone or post with a reply paid envelope.
- 6.4 If no email address is held for a property they will receive a letter advising that they need to go online and check the information which is currently held for their property. If no response is received to this they will then receive a 1<sup>st</sup> reminder which will include information as to who is registered and give them the option of responding by SMS or telephone if the details are correct, or alternatively by internet if they need to be changed. If no response is received to these two contacts then the households will receive a 2<sup>nd</sup> reminder by post, giving them options to respond by internet, SMS, telephone or post with a reply paid envelope.
- 6.5 Finally in both cases above if there is no response to the second reminder a personal visit will be conducted.
- 6.6 The **control** group will receive the household canvass in the usual way with initial HEF's being hand delivered by canvassers followed by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> reminders and, if needed, a canvasser visit.
- 6.7 We are currently working with ICT to conduct some data matching with other council data to maximise the number of email addresses that we hold.
- 6.8 The new pilot process links into the Council's current proposals for cost savings with potential savings on both printing costs and canvassers staff time. It also follows the Council 'Do it Online' initiative as more residents will be encouraged to complete the HEF via the website.
- 6.9 The benefits of any costs savings may be limited however, as currently the Government are funding the additional costs if the implementation of Individual Registration and are expecting these proposals to reduce this additional funding. The other issue is that as legislative changes are required to make any changes permanent it is anticipated that the canvass in 2018 will have to be conducted in the existing manner with any changes being implemented in 2019 at the earliest.

## 7 Year Round Work

- 7.1 Registration is a continuous process applications are received from the website, paper ITRs. Where someone new has moved in the team are checking Council Tax to establish if the other occupants have moved out and if we have a forwarding address where we can then send them ITRs to register.
- 7.2 We have been working with Council Tax and Housing Benefits to improve communication and establish better facilities for data sharing around changes at properties.
- 7.3 We have also been working with the Universities and have reached an agreement where they will include registering to vote on their online enrolment systems. This will give the student the facility to either advise they do not wish to register at their term time address or provide all the necessary information when they enrol to register to vote. The data will then be transferred to the ERO to register them.
- 7.4 There is also a public engagement strategy which will enhance the work carried out by the Electoral Commission to encourage registration. As part of this we will be developing tool kits which we will provide to faith and community groups, schools and colleges to help communicate the messages.

**AUTHOR'S NAME, DIRECTORATE AND TELEPHONE NUMBER**

**Liz Read, Electoral Services Manager, Resources - 024 7683 3177**