



Renfrewshire Valuation Joint Board

Report to: Renfrewshire Valuation Joint Board

Meeting on: 26th February 2021

Subject: Electoral Update Report

Author: Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer

1. Introduction

This report is to inform board members of any changes, new legislation or updates to Electoral Registration.

2. Canvass

- 2.1 The new canvass has been completed and we published our new register on 1st December 2020
- 2.2 As reported to the November Board I had taken the decision not to carry out Door to Door canvassing due to the pandemic restrictions in force at that time. I did say that I would hope to run a mini canvass in the Spring of this year, which would mean “non-responding” households would receive a personal visit from us. Unfortunately, the situation has changed and we are in another lockdown so in effect that decision is out of my hands as it is against the current Covid legislation to canvass households at present. There are however other events which have happened which have assured me that these and all households in the joint board area have been in receipt of communications about the forthcoming May election. Please see paragraph 4.0 below.

3. Scottish Parliament Election - May '21

- 3.1 Internal Preparations - The forthcoming election in May is presenting myself as the ERO and all my colleagues and staff with a unique set of challenges. We have prepared a project plan and are holding regular meetings with our three Returning Officers and attending Renfrewshire Council's Election Board meetings. We have prepared/updated our election specific risk register and scheduled all internal election team meetings.
- 3.2 Because of these challenges the Scottish Government have passed and now received royal assent for the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Act 2020 which includes the moving of the cut-off date for postal vote applications to the 6th of April 2021, to help ERO's cope with an anticipated surge in postal vote applications.
- 3.3 The Scottish Government also asked ERO's to submit a plan for extra funding which we have now received, to cover items such as those listed below;
- Employing of temporary staff
 - Purchase of extra scanning machines
 - Employ external scanning bureau
 - Increases in printing and postage
 - Increasing IT costs

3.3 Summary of Actions taken:

- Employing temporary staff – We advertised in January and interviewed this month and have appointed 7 temp staff who will start during the next few weeks.
- Permission for an increase to the Robertson Centre's capacity for staff to work within the office, ensuring compliance with Covid-H & S protocol, has been obtained from Renfrewshire Council's CMT.
- The Clerical Elections team (including the temporary staff) will be divided into several teams working in two scenarios either in isolation in small teams in the office or at home. This is to minimise any effects should there be a COVID outbreak in the office.
- The teams are designed to work in task orientated jobs with a view to being proficient in the area in which they work and increase productivity as they become more proficient in the particular task they have been allocated. Overtime is programmed to deal with normal electoral deadlines e.g. absent vote cut off.
- Purchase of extra scanning machines has now been completed and these have been located throughout the small teams in the office to ensure we have coverage for an increase in postal vote applications.
- I have also employed the services of an External Scanning Bureau (linked to our Electoral management system) should we find ourselves overloaded with applications, this way we have a back-up service we can call on at short notice.
- Our IT department has the capacity to increase our servers capabilities should we find volumes of work require this. During the UKPGE in Dec 2019 we increased capacity and we know we can do further increases immediately if this is required for this election.
- Should extra resources be required I can call on a number of staff in my valuation and technical teams who have experience with working in electoral registration and specifically in elections. Virtual training is programmed for these staff members supplemented by a Guidance Note.

4. External Activities/preparations

The Scottish Government (following the changes to postal vote application deadlines) requested that ERO's contact all households in their area with a letter informing those electors in the household, who we had registered and of those who we had as registered postal voters. The letter also gave details of the deadline for both registration and postal vote applications and invited electors to apply early if they wished to change their voting preference. These letters were issued week commencing 8th February and early indications are that we are seeing an increase in Postal Vote requests.

- 4.2 To coincide with this letter going out all Scottish ERO's contributed to a TV Advert which was aired for the first two weeks of February, again with the message about electors having a choice to make between voting in person or voting by post and informing people about the postal vote application cut off date.
- 4.3 The Chief Medical Officer for Scotland also proposes write out to all people who are currently in the "Shielding" category, again informing them in particular about their option to keep safe and vote by post if they so wish. This letter is scheduled for mid-late February '21.
- 4.4 The Electoral Commission is promoting a "Welcome to your vote week" promoting activities in an educational establishments running from 22nd Feb to 28th Feb. This campaign has supplied schools with various resources teacher could use to raise awareness and political literacy and encourage young people to take part in the May Election. Unfortunately, we have not been able to run our usual school activities due to the pandemic, however, we have carried out checks from education lists and where we have identified a young person who has not registered we have written to them individually to invite them to register. So hopefully, we have captured as many as possible of these young first time voters.

- 4.5 A joint event led by the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board (EMB) was held on 5th February. This included all ERO's and RO's and their deputies attending a seminar looking at a number of issues, in particular issues which have arisen due to the current pandemic.
- 4.6 Cyber Security is also a priority and we are attending a seminar on 17/02/21 organised by the Scottish Government with presentations by security experts to ensure we are fully compliant with recent upgrades to security services and practices.
- 4.7 Working with the three Returning Officers, Election and Communications Teams we have been targeting the newly enfranchised groups who can vote in this election such as, residents of Scotland previously not allowed to vote, refugees and prisoners. As a representative for ERO's I will attend a meeting organised by the Electoral Commission on 18th of this month which is aimed at bringing various refugee organisations and refugees together to explain and encourage registration and participation in the forthcoming SP Election in May.

5. Future Elections

- 5.1 At the time of writing there are no other elections scheduled, however, as always this will be kept under review and should circumstances require, our staff will be able to deliver.

6. Ongoing Projects

- 6.1 I am on both the Westminster and Scottish Government Accessibility Groups, these groups are still meeting virtually and it is beneficial to be a member of both to help understand and find solutions for electors with various needs to ensure we are as inclusive as possible when creating our registers and inviting electors to participate in electoral events.

I am also on various Cabinet Office working groups which consider various aspects of electoral registration such as Overseas Electors, making the online registration/applying for a postal vote process easier and contingencies for elections held under Covid restrictions.

General Conclusions

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff for their continued hard work and professionalism in continuing to deliver all electoral services during these exceptional circumstances.

Recommendations

- i. The Board notes the contents of this report.

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17th February 2021

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