

## DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES WORKING GROUP

6 July 2020

Commenced: 4.00pm

Terminated: 4.30pm

**Present:** Councillors Cooney (In the Chair), Billington, Fairfoull, Feeley, J Fitzpatrick, Kitchen, Reid, Ryan, M Smith, Ward and Warrington.

### 1. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

#### RESOLVED:

**That the minutes of the meeting of the Working Group held on 17 February 2020 be approved as a correct record.**

### 2. ANNUAL CANVASS OF ELECTORS

Consideration was given to a report of the Director of Governance and Pensions, which reminded Members that the purpose of the canvass was to identify everyone who should be on the electoral register. This meant identifying citizens and inviting those who should be registered but were currently not to join the register, as well as identifying electors who were no longer at a property and should therefore be removed from the register.

It was explained that previously, Electoral Registration Offices (EROs) were required to send every household an annual canvass form, which required a response regardless of whether there have been any changes in the household. EROs were also required to follow up any non-responses with a further two reminder forms and carry out a household visit, if required. Most returned forms contained no changes but still had to be returned and processed.

The Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019 introduced changes to the way in which the annual canvass of electors was conducted. The changes removed the requirement to canvass all households in the same way.

The reformed canvass process incorporated a 'data matching step' at the start in which registered electors were compared against datasets to see if they matched. EROs were required to conduct 'national data matching' against data held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and had the option to conduct 'local data matching' against local data sources such as council tax data. The results of this process then informed EROs whether the elector(s) living in each property were likely to have changed or not. If the results showed that the elector(s) in a property matched the national or local dataset, then EROs had the discretion to canvass that property through a streamlined canvass process (Route 1) where a response was only required if there was a change to report. As a result, EROs did not need to 'chase' these Route 1 properties for a response.

Members were informed that based on the outcome of the data match step, the reformed canvass included three different ways of canvassing properties:

#### **Route 1: The matched property process:**

This route was for properties where the registered electors had matched against other data, which indicated the household composition was likely to have remained the same since the previous years' canvass was conducted. EROs were able to send an e-communication (such as email or text message) to those electors registered at the property to confirm who is living at the property.

If no response is received or no e-communication is sent (for example because the ERO does not have the relevant contact details) then the ERO is required to send a paper Canvass Communication A to the property. It will contain all the current elector details held by the ERO at that address. If there are no changes to report at an address, the resident is not required to respond.

**Route 2: The unmatched property process.**

This route was for properties where results of the data match indicated that the household composition was likely to have changed since the previous canvass was conducted. This was considered the default process and required the ERO to make at least 3 contacts with the property in order to gain a response from the residents to update their details. If the ERO obtained the information at any stage in the cycle they were able to stop contacting the property.

**Route C: A tailored route for properties with multiple occupants who do not form a single household**

Under the revised arrangements EROs could now canvass properties such as care homes or student accommodation using a more effective and streamlined approach, by working with a 'responsible person' at the property to obtain data and invite the occupants to register to vote. Discussions would be held with Director of Adult Services about how best to carry out this exercise for care homes prior to any canvassing taking place with care homes.

The revised approach to the canvass allowed EROs to concentrate their resources on the properties where the data matching indicated that a change was likely ('Route 2'). This 'unmatched' group of properties were required to respond to the canvass communications they receive from the ERO, and the ERO was required to make a minimum of three contact attempts where they do not receive a response.

In addition, the reformed canvass enabled EROs to use modern communications channels. In contrast to the old canvass process, in which the law only allowed for paper forms and household visits within the chasing cycle, EROs could now conduct telephone canvassing instead of household visits and send e-communications (e.g. emails and text) instead of using paper forms. Whilst we have some information to enable email, phone and text communication we will use the canvass to continue to gather contact information for future use.

It was stated that the annual canvass would still require some physical processing of registration forms returned by post. This presented some practical difficulties as most office based staff, including all of the elections team, were currently working from home. It was proposed that for the required period during the annual canvass, scanning and other equipment required to process returned canvass forms be set up in a suitable space at Dukinfield Town Hall where the Council's post was being sorted and scanned under the supervision of the Director and Elections staff attend Dukinfield Town Hall as required. This would be subject to a strict health and safety assessment to ensure compliant with requirements for working Covid safely.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the revised arrangements for conducting the annual canvass, including arrangements for processing returned canvass forms, be noted and endorsed.**

**3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY REVIEW**

Consideration was given to a report of the Director (Governance and Pensions), which reminded Members that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) had decided to undertake an electoral review of Tameside Council in 2020/2021. There were a number of other GM Authorities who will be subject to the same review in the same timeframe and it is the intention of the LGBCE to review all authorities previously reviewed before 2004.

On 12 February 2020 there was an all Member briefing by representatives of the LGBCE, which explained the process and timetable. At the time of the 12 February the timetable for the review was set out as follows:

### Council Size

Activity	Involvement		Key Dates
	Council	LGBCE	
Develop council size proposal	Council Political Groups	Officers will be available to answer any technical queries on making a submission.	February – June 2020
Submission of council size proposals	Council Political Groups	Officers will acknowledge receipt of submissions	9 June 2020
Commission Meeting: Council Size	Not required	Commission	21 July 2020

### Warding Patterns

Activity	Involvement		Key Dates
	Council	LGBCE	
Consultation on warding patterns	Council Political Groups General Public	Run consultation, collate & analyse responses.	28 July – 5 October 2020
Commission Meeting: Draft Recommendations	Not required	Commission	14 December 2020
Consultation on Draft Recommendations	Council Political Groups General Public	Publish draft recommendations. Run consultation, collate & analyse responses.	5 January – 15 March 2021
Commission Meeting: Final Recommendations	Not required	Commission	18 May 2021
Final Recommendations published	Not required	Commission publishes final recommendations	1 June 2021

### Order

Activity	Involvement		Key Dates
	Council	LGBCE	
Order laid	Not required	Commission	Summer 2021
Order made	Not required	Commission	Autumn 2021
Implementation	Council	Not required	May 2022

Clearly the Covid-19 Pandemic had impacted significantly on the ability to meet the above timetable. The Council's resources remain focussed on dealing with the pandemic and consultation would be difficult. The LGBCE in recognising the difficulties in meeting the timetable agreed that, other than where the Council itself had indicated it wished to continue as scheduled, that there would be a three month pause for those authorities in the preliminary review phase i.e. the stage up to and including, the submission of council size proposals and electoral forecast data. This meant that the new deadline for submission would be 16 September 2020. At the time of communicating this change the LGBCE stated that they would keep the length of the extension under review. There was no reference to the any changes to other parts of the timetable.

These changes to timetabling were the same for other Greater Manchester Councils at the same stage of their reviews. There was concern across Greater Manchester that the only consideration that the LGBCE had given to the impact of Covid was a three month extension when the staff who will be undertaking the necessary work would be running humanitarian aid and generally

supporting services including testing. Of greater concern is that with the postponement of 2020 Local and GM Mayoral Elections the LGBCE revised timetable will mean that consultation will take place when some Covid related restrictions are still likely to be in place, Councils were focused on recovery and in the run up to the postponed Local and Mayoral Elections now in 2021 (this would have been a fallow year).

Members were informed that on behalf of the GM Authorities the Director of Governance and Pensions had written to the Chair of the LGBCE on 18 June with regard to the extension. The letter, a copy of which was attached to the report, set out the concerns of the GM authorities at the short extension not properly reflecting the severe nature of the impact of Covid and the practical implications of the proposed change to the timetable. All GM Leaders and Chief Executives had supported a proposal to for a more significant change to the timetable, with a proposal that the overall timetable be move back one year. A response was received from the LGBCE on 22 June 2020, a copy of which was appended to the report advising they would discuss with individual Councils, the Leader and Chief Executive would be meeting with the LGBCE in the near future.

It was further stated that given the concerns of the approach by the LGBCE, the LGA had been asked to assist by Cllr Howard Sykes, in his role as Leader of the LGA's Lib Dem group and that Andrew Gwynne MP had raised questions in the Houses of Parliament.

**RESOLVED:**

**That Members note the update and agree to work with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to find a sensible and pragmatic way forward in the interests of residents given the significant impact that Covid was having and likely to do so for the foreseeable.**

**4. ELECTORAL COMMISSION BULLETINS**

Consideration was given to a report of the Executive Director (Governance and Pensions) that provided Members with recent copies of the Electoral Commission news bulletin, which set out current issues affecting the democratic framework for local government.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the report be noted.**

**CHAIR**