

AGENDA ITEM

CENTRAL SCOTLAND VALUATION JOINT BOARD

Subject: ELECTORAL REGISTRATION REPORT
Meeting: CENTRAL SCOTLAND VALUATION JOINT BOARD
Date: 18TH JUNE, 2008
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REGISTRATION OFFICER**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report deals with the recent collection of Personal Identifiers for absent voters

2.0 LEGISLATION

The Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2008 were eventually enacted on 8th February after a number of delays. The legislation was originally planned for 1st January. Similar legislation is currently progressing in the Scottish Parliament for local government elections.

The Regulations required that the Electoral Registration Officer write to all current postal, proxy and postal proxy voters and advise them of the new requirement to provide their signature and date of birth.

If electors did not provide the details on either the original form or a reminder form within 49 days the ERO must cancel the current absent vote arrangements of every elector who failed to supply their personal identifiers.

Any elector who was unable to sign their application, due to a disability or inability to read or write, could apply for a waiver. Waiver application forms were designed and posted to electors or their agents who indicated that electors would not be able to sign in a consistent manner.

3.0 POSTAL VOTES

After discussion with our software suppliers and our selected printers we decided to issue a fresh application form to every absent voter each time we sent a letter. An initial issue letter, a reminder and a cancellation letter were created as well as the form and notes. These forms were also added to our electoral system software to allow in-house production for new applicants and when re-issues are required in future.

A data file of 21, 851 postal voters' names and addresses was supplied to our selected printers and the letters and forms were posted on 12th March

By 1st April over 12,000 had been returned and each return form had been scanned

On 8th April 7572 forms were outstanding and a data file was sent to our printers to produce reminder letters and a further form. These were posted on 16th April.

We allowed slightly longer than 49 days for the return of forms however 4252 electors were issued with postal vote cancellation letters and yet another application form on 13th May by our printers.

Since the cancellation letters were issued hundreds of forms have been received and are being updated daily as received.

As at 28th May we currently have 17,548 postal voters including 104 who have been granted a waiver (all waiver applications have been telephoned or visited to confirm the applicant cannot sign their form)

Our return rates and number of cancellations issued is similar to other ERO's who issued in these timescales.

4.0 PROXY & POSTAL PROXY VOTERS

As we had only 149 proxy voters and 29 proxy voters who had a postal vote, forms and letters to electors who had appointed a proxy were issued directly from our office.

As many of these proxy voters are service electors and overseas electors, more time has been allowed for the return of the forms and reminders have been sent this month to 62 proxy voters and 14 postal proxy voters.

Cancellation letters will be sent in July if no replies are received

5.0 PUBLICITY

Press releases were sent to local newspapers and Central FM to help publicise the fact that forms were being issued and the need to return them or electors would risk losing their absent vote.

A further press release was sent at the time of the cancellation letter

All major retirement homes with absent voters of more than 10 residents were informed by letter of the new requirements and an offer to come and help the residents to complete forms was made. Only one residential home (in Dunblane) took up the offer of help.

6.0 EXPERIENCES

Over 1200 application forms had to be re-issued as numerous electors did not sign the forms in black ink in the box provided on the form and/or supply their date of birth in the required format.

Because of the delays in legislation the clerical staff's workload increased considerably during March, April and May, dealing with the returned postal vote forms and batching, scanning and checking these forms. They also had to deal with forms returned undelivered by Royal Mail, printing and re-issuing over 1200 forms and dealing with telephone calls asking for assistance and enquiries and making over 200 calls to electors to clarify information on forms or explain why forms were being re-issued.

It was to the staff's credit that they managed to maintain the tight timetable as well as dealing with all other aspects of Electoral, valuation and Council Tax work.

7.0 ELECTIONS

For any election after 7 August 2008, Returning Officers will require to verify (currently at least 20%) of all postal votes returned at each election to ensure that the signature and date of birth "match" the personal identifiers on the latest form held by the ERO.

Should they not match the RO must disregard the ballot paper returned by that elector.

Returning Officers are now purchasing software, hardware, and the training necessary, to ensure that they can view and carry out a match on the personal identifiers that we supply.

Liaison will be required as soon as possible to ensure that any queries on the images scanned and information supplied can be resolved quickly to minimise problems at future elections and to ensure electoral canvass workload is not affected.

8.0 FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

As every application needs to be reviewed and new applications made before 5 years expire, future work in this area can be spread over several years and timed to avoid election dates. This exercise need not be repeated on this scale.

The Electoral Commission intends to review the system for effectiveness, and further changes are possible.

Although numbers of absent voters are down, it is as yet not known whether the new arrangements with the added identifiers will encourage or deter electors from applying for absent votes as elections approach. Experience from England where the collection of identifiers began in January 2007 has been that by the following elections the postal vote numbers returned to approximately the same level as before the collection notices were issued.

9.0 RECOMMENDATION

The Joint Board is asked to note the report.

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Russell Taylor
Depute Electoral Registration Officer