

AGENDA ITEM 5

VALUATION JOINT BOARD FOR CENTRAL SCOTLAND

Subject: Elections Report
Meeting: Central Scotland Valuation Joint Board
Date: 9 February 2012
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1.0 Introduction

This report outlines the planning and procedures in place for the forthcoming election on May 3rd 2012.

2.0 Report on Electoral Work

The ERO & Depute ERO has met with Returning Officer (RO) staff in each council to agree procedures necessary for the council elections on May 3rd.

RO staff are responsible in law for running the election, however local practice has evolved so that some of those duties are undertaken by the Depute ERO and his staff. This report is to highlight the arrangements made and the current situation in regard to Electoral Registration and Absent Voting.

3.0 Election Details

The electoral registration staff have used the Halarose (EROS) electoral registration and management system since it was purchased in 2006. RO staff, prior to an election, add their elections, polling scheme, etc to the system which integrates with the registration process to allow poll cards, postal votes, registers and statistics to be extracted when required. Clackmannanshire and Stirling Councils also add all their staff to the system and use it to manage staffing in polling places and at the count.

Joint working is essential to ensure that the election is added at the correct time to the live system and that it has the correct eligible dates and the correct eligible electors are able to vote in that type of election (European citizens, Lords and Overseas Electors have restricted voting rights). Only Overseas Electors are not eligible to vote on May 3rd.

4.0 Polling Scheme

RO staff add their polling scheme for each election to the computer system and, once checked by them, poll cards can be extracted and sent to the printers for posting at the agreed dates.

Where polling places have changed this can be highlighted by the RO by adding text to the relevant polling places.

5.0 Poll Cards

Although the production and issue of poll cards is a designated RO function the Depute ERO arranges, with our selected printer, for the printing and postage of all poll cards and postal poll cards for an election. Because of the smaller volumes the ERO arranges for the in-house printing and local posting of poll cards or letters to postal proxy voters, proxy voters and anonymous electors.

This year the Depute ERO has secured agreement of the ROs to use TNT to collect the poll cards from our printers before passing to Royal Mail for delivery. This arrangement is expected to result in an estimated saving of over £1,500.

The printers have been sent the draft poll cards which contain the variable contact data for each RO and the statutory last dates for registration and applying for postal and proxy votes. The postal poll card also lists the dates and arrangements for replacement ballot papers which have been directed by the Electoral Management Board (EMB).

The poll cards list the ERO's contact details on all the types of poll card and it is his staff who receive the majority of telephone calls, emails, etc in regard to registration and absent voting enquiries.

Test files and then live data are sent to the printers by the Depute ERO at the agreed dates.

The data cannot be sent until RO staff have added the polling scheme to the database (EROS) and checked that each street and address is included in their polling scheme as any omissions will not receive a poll card.

All the printing costs, plus the postage costs of the poll cards sent locally, require to be identified for each RO as the ERO arranges payment and then has to arrange for an invoice to be sent for payment to each RO.

Poll cards are created and posted before an election register is finalised. (For May 3rd election this year our poll card data will be sent to the printers on 13th March for posting no later than 30th March but the last date for registration is 18th April).

Electors who will be added to a new address between 10th March and 18th April receive a letter notify them that they have been added at their new address (and removed from their old address). The letter advises electors to contact the ERO if they need to know their new polling place.

Should a change to a polling place be made after the poll cards are printed then RO staff can make the database change and, if time permits, contact the ERO or their printers to request that new poll cards are printed and posted or that letters are issued to electors notifying them of the change.

6.0 Absent Voting

This includes voting by post, proxy and postal proxy.

All applications to vote by post are dealt with by ERO staff. Any forms received by RO staff must be forwarded to the ERO to check and action as necessary.

The receipt of “duplicate” postal vote forms for existing postal voters can impact detrimentally on processing new valid applications due to the time spent checking these forms. (Legally they must replace the previous application therefore they must be scanned and updated in order that the latest form is available to check against the returned security statement).

For the May 3rd elections all ballot papers will be printed by Logica/Opt2Vote as a national contract was negotiated by the Scottish Government and agreed by ROs.

In this area only Stirling Council has an agreement with Opt2Vote to issue their postal ballot packs. Clackmannanshire and Falkirk have a contract with Adare who will receive the printed ballot papers from Adare and will then require to check, fold and envelope before posting the ballot packs. This is the first time these arrangements will have been used and a number of critical points of failure have been identified as risks to a successful election. The EMB have raised their concerns with Logica/Opt2Vote and the Scottish Government.

ERO staff will keep details of any cancellations or amendments to existing postal voters from the original date information is sent to Adare until 18th April, to notify the printers to withdraw or amend the ballot packs before issue. As the RO employs the printer it is the responsibility of the RO staff to ensure that the printers carry out their instructions as required and the Electoral Commission (EC) has recommended that each RO sends staff to their printers to check the output prior to mailing.

All new successful applications for a postal vote are sent an acknowledgement letter by the ERO.

All applications received too late for an election must be advised, in writing, by the ERO as soon as possible. Letters are issued which, if appropriate, advises electors of their entitlement to apply to vote by proxy before the relevant closing date.

7.0 Issue of Ballot Papers

This is an RO function which they arrange with their appointed printers.

Replacement ballot papers are issued locally by RO staff.

8.0 Registration of Electors

All applications to register to vote are processed by ERO staff. Applications have been accepted by post, in person, by fax and by scanned email attachments for a number of years provided that they contain all the relevant data and can be read.

Applications received by midnight, 11 working days before polling day, must be included in the Register of Elector being used on polling day (18th April for 3rd May 2012 elections).

Any incomplete applications or refused applications are contacted as soon as possible to enable the elector to supply the required information. Where electors have supplied a contact email address and/or telephone numbers this is beneficial when there is little time left to receive a replacement application.

9.0 Supply of Registers and Absent Vote Lists

As legislation allows candidates and political parties to obtain copies of the register of electors and absent vote lists prior to an election, the Depute ERO has created a combined application form to request these.

The ERO, through the Scottish Assessors' Association, has agreed the dates nationally when they would be made available.

Candidates and parties are encouraged to obtain the lists as soon as possible and so ensure that existing postal voters are not contacted with new applications when they are not required.

The ROs are also supplied with the relevant registers and absent vote lists that they require.

10.0 Polling Station Registers

ROs require these prior to the election in order that they are available for Presiding Officers to collect at their training sessions. The ERO has agreed to supply a copy of the ballot box register and absent vote lists for each polling station to each RO by 27th April 2012.

The registers will reflect the data from the polling scheme entered by RO staff and will highlight or "score through" electors not eligible to vote on May 3rd or who are postal voters. Proxy voters are marked in the ballot box register with a 'P' for the benefit of polling staff.

11.0 Training

The Depute ERO has supplied information for training polling staff and has agreed to attend Stirling Council training sessions to highlight registration and absent voting issues. Falkirk and Clackmannanshire have also been offered this service.

12.0 Enquiries

Registration staff are made aware of the relevant dates for issue of ballot papers replacement ballot packs as well as the statutory last dates for registration and absent voting. This is essential so that electors are given the best advice when they contact us by email, telephone, by letter and by calling at our office. The relevant dates are also quoted, where possible, on letters and forms being issued by the ERO prior to the election.

The ERO has agreed that forms received by the RO at his/her office will be accepted as received if in time, however, if they contain errors they must still be rejected when they are received by the ERO.

13.0 Polling Day

ERO staff provide a service to the electorate and ROs from 7am to 10pm on every polling day.

As part of their training staff in polling stations are given the ERO contact details to allow them to contact us with any questions on behalf of electors regarding registration entitlement.

Forms are provided to ROs for each polling station to enable electors who want to request registration changes or future postal votes to easily notify us.

Any clerical errors identified have to be granted by the ERO and communicated to the polling staff, RO and elector.

Any applications for an Emergency Proxy must be received before 5pm and again the ERO must communicate his/her decision to the RO & polling station staff as well as the elector.

ERO IT staff are also available from 7am to 10pm to ensure that advice on the database is available to all staff, if required.

14.0 Publicity

The Depute ERO has been issuing press releases regarding registration and postal voting options since January. He has also sent emails to all identified housing

associations and numerous community groups and charities to promote registration and postal voting in time to vote on May 3rd. Visits have been made to some community groups, where invited. Suggestions for posters and initiatives have also been sent to Councils' communication staff and the Electoral Commission following a December 2011 local meeting.

15.0 Timetable for 3rd May 2012

9 th March	Last date for registration for 1 April update to Register of Electors.
13 th March	Data file to printers for poll card printing.
14 th March	Start of nominations process.
2 nd April	Date by which EMB requires poll cards to be posted.
18 th April	5pm last date & time for receipt of valid postal vote application. Postal vote data to be issued to Opt2Vote as soon as possible after all registration and postal vote applications approved and updated after 5pm.
18 th April	Midnight last date and time for receipt of valid applications to register to vote in time for May 3 rd election.
23 rd April	Date by which EMB has instructed ROs and printers to issue postal vote packs to valid postal voters.
25 th April	5pm last date and time for receipt of a valid application to vote by proxy on May 3 rd .
25 th April	Last date for receipt of any objection to an application to register to vote prior to May 3 rd election.
27 th April	Ballot box registers and AV lists to ROs.
3 rd May	Polling day 7am to 10pm.
7 th May	Public Holiday.
10 th May	Last date for registration for 1 st June update to Register of Electors.

16.0 Post Election

Rechargeable costs are identified and invoices prepared for RO's.

Applications which were too late to register for May 3rd and valid postal vote applications for all future elections are updated.

Electors are deleted from information received and application forms issued to potential new electors from information received.

Letters sent to postal voters to review their signatures, dates of birth if applications were rejected by ROs and these are notified to ERO.

Within 6 weeks a post election meeting with RO and ERO staff is held to discuss the election and lessons learned.

ERO staff finalise arrangements for the annual canvass which starts in June/July with emails to electors requesting confirmation of no changes prior to the printing of forms.

Depute ERO renews efforts to request co-operation of Chief Executives and relevant council staff in identifying databases for checking against the register data and to assist in promoting procedures to assist in registration.

17.0 Canvass 2012

The email confirmation of registration is continuing to grow in numbers annually which assists in limiting registration costs due to the savings in postage and printing. The option to respond by internet, telephone, text, fax or scanned email attachment will be highlighted and encouraged.

To help reduce the increasing costs due to the postage increase expected, of 12% in April, RO staff have agreed, in principle, to allow returns to nominated council offices. Detailed arrangements will be finalised in order that these are printed on the canvass forms and/or inserts.

A pre paid envelope will not be sent with the forms this year in an attempt to encourage responses by any of the offered options. Should initial responses drop then an option to include a reply envelope at reminder stage will be retained.

Building on the contacts identified so far requests will be sent to community groups, housing associations, sheltered housing, etc for visits and meetings at which registration details can be checked with electors. Again this will hopefully be before forms are printed and posted.

The electors in household who have not returned a form for over two years will be deleted in July and notified with a deletion letter and an application to re-register. By doing this early in the canvass period this will save the costs of any further registration form and reminder being posted.

18.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Valuation Joint Board is asked to note the report.

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