

# **Report to the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference: REVISED  
FED-023-2011/12**

**Date of meeting: 24 January 2012**

**Portfolio: Support Services**

**Subject: Electoral Registration – Review Report**

**Responsible Officer: I Willett (01992 564243)**

**Democratic Services Officer: R Perrin (01992 564532)**

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## **Recommendation:**

**To consider this review report on the electoral registration service and associated costs.**

## **Executive Summary:**

This report responds to the request made by the Committee on 17 January 2011 for a review of costs in respect of electoral administration. At the meeting the Committee considered that the cost quoted at the meeting was too high (£166,010).

This review report submits (a) an outline of the service; (b) an analysis of costs; (c) cost comparisons with other authorities of equivalent size as requested by the Committee; (d) performance information; (e) comments on likely future developments.

No recommendations are submitted. The Committee is invited to indicate any further action which members wish to pursue.

## **Reason for Proposed Decision:**

To respond to the Committee's previous request.

## **Other Options for Action:**

None.

## **Report:**

1. At the meeting on 17 January 2011, the Committee considered Directorate budgets for the year 2011/12. Under Minute 36 of that meeting, the Committee:

- (a) commented that £166,010 was a high cost for electoral registration; and
- (b) called for benchmarking to compare this Council's costs for the service with other Councils of equivalent size.

2. The report which follows responds to the request for a review and sets out the following:

- (a) legal background;

- (b) service operations;
- (c) cost analysis;
- (d) performance
- (e) future issues.

### Legal Requirements

3. For a local authority in England, electoral registration is governed by the following legislation:

(a)	Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended)	Relates to the voter franchise and its exercise and the appointment and duties of the Electoral Registration Officer.
(b)	Representation of the People Act 1985.	British Citizens overseas. Voting at UK/GB elections.
(c)	Representation of the People Act 2000 (Schedule 4).	Absent Voting.
(d)	Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.	Establishes the Electoral Commission and its powers to give advice and set performance standards.
(e)	European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002.	Various provisions relating to European Parliamentary elections.
(f)	Electoral Administration Act 2006.	Further provisions relating to registration of electors and retention of information by Electoral Registration Officers.

4. These statutes are supported by several sets of Government regulations. The statutory framework has been developed cumulatively over many years. There has been no consolidating legislation in this area.

5. In the future, the current Government has commenced the process of adding a further significant piece of legislation relating to single voter registration (SVR).

### Statutory Duties

6. These can be summarised as follows:

- (a) every district council must appoint an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO);
- (b) EROs must maintain a register of Parliamentary and local government electors which must be combined as much as is practicable;
- (c) Section 9 of the 1983 Act requires that the only eligible persons should be on the

register and that the information is accurate;

- (d) EROs must conduct an annual canvass and maintain the register throughout the year by means of the “rolling registration” process (i.e. monthly updates);
- (e) EROs are required to produce an edited register which includes only those persons who have not opted out of appearing in the public register;
- (f) EROs must make arrangements to the edited register to be available for sale;
- (g) EROs must ensure that full copies of the register can be viewed “under supervision” and supplied or sold to certain organisations including credit agencies;
- (h) the proper expenses of ERO in connection with these responsibilities must be met by the appointing Council;
- (i) the appointing Council is required to provide officers who are suitably trained to assist EROs in compiling and updating the register including the annual canvass and the rolling registration process;
- (j) the budget for electoral registration must be agreed between the ERO and the Council and must be sufficient for all of these responsibilities to be met.

### **Entitlement to Register**

7. The statutory framework sets out rules governing entitlement to register in terms of age, nationality and residence criteria. The law also establishes the legal incapacities which prevent registration.

8. These registrations carry either a full or restricted entitlements to vote. All registration is based on a canvass date of 15 October each year. Other conditions are as follows:

- (a) a qualifying address;
- (b) residence at that address;
- (c) special conditions relating to certain categories of electors (e.g. service voters, students, persons working away or on holiday etc);
- (d) legal incapacity to vote – e.g. members of the House of Lords, detained convicted prisoners, offenders under medical care, persons guilty of certain corrupt or illegal practices under the Representation of the People Acts for 5 years after conviction, persons with learning difficulties and mental illnesses and questions of nationality for various kinds of elections.

### **Annual Canvass**

9. A timetable is attached as Appendix 1.

10. Delivery of canvass forms is achieved by post in the first instance. Two postal reminders of increasing formality are used to deal with voters who do not respond. In 2011, door to door visits by canvassers have been used as a final way of reaching non responders. Canvassers are appointed by the ERO who pays a fee for their services. This fee is at local discretion. Canvassers can be Council staff, non-Council staff (including former employees) and, as in 2011 for the first time, commercial agencies. Canvassing duties can be undertaken at various times but usually in the evening or at weekends.

11. These measures are designed to ensure that the maximum number of eligible persons are registered. Other actions undertaken include data-matching with Council Tax records for which the ERO has a statutory duty to inspect. New voters and deceased voters are monitored through similar procedures.

12. Non responders will remain registered for one further year until the next canvass. If there continues to be no response to the canvass, the person's name will be removed from the register.

13. The annual canvass is conducted with a view to publishing the new register on 1 December each year.

### Performance

14. The Electoral Commission monitors national performance in respect of electoral registration. This is carried out on an annual basis in respect of the following standards to which are detailed in Appendix 2. The performance for this Council in 2010 is as follows:

(a)	Using information resources to verify and identify electors.	Exceeds standard.
(b)	Monitoring Property Database.	Meets standard.
(c)	House to House Inquiries (Canvass)	Below standard *
(d)	Maintaining Integrity of registration/ Absent voters.	Exceeds standard.
(e)	Supply and security of register and absent voter lists.	Exceeds standard.
(f)	Public awareness strategy.	Meets standard.
(g)	Working with partners.	Meets standard.
(h)	Accessibility and communication of information.	Meets standard.
(i)	Planning for rolling registration and the annual canvass.	Meets standard.
(j)	Training	Meets standard.

\*NOTE: This Council failed to achieve the required standard in respect of house to house visits in the years 2008, 2009 and 2010. In 2011, the canvass was augmented by door to door visits both by the Council's own canvassers and a private company.

15. Electoral Commission data shows that for this Council the annual canvass return rate over recent years was as follows:

<b>Canvass</b>	<b>Return (%)</b>
2008	95.7%
2009	95.8%
2010	94.8%
For 2011, the figure is 97%.	

16. Performance at 97% suggests limited scope for performance improvement without significant investment in resources. The remaining 3% of non-registering residents is well below the national average and could be said to be those that choose simply not to register given the opportunities to do so under rolling registration.

### **Budget Provision**

17. Appendix 3 to this report sets out comparative costs for electoral registration in respect of the 2008/9 financial year. Unfortunately, no more recent data has been published by the Electoral Commission. This report has been delayed in the expectation that data for 2009/10 would be available during Autumn 2011 but this has not proved to be the case.

18. Appendix 3 shows District Councils with electoral register totals of between 90,000 and 100,000 electors. For this Council, these cover the following:

- (a) employee costs – includes core team and casual staff plus N.I. and superannuation costs;
- (b) premises, transport and supplies – postage, stationery, advertising, training;
- (c) third party payments – this is not a heading used by this Council these appear under support services;
- (d) support services – office accommodation, in-house printing, central computer; and
- (e) income – sales of registers etc.

19. These expenditure totals are offset by income and the overall net cost expressed in net cost per elector. There are 20 Councils listed and EFDC would be ranked 11 of 20 with a cost per elector of 1.565p.

For 2007/8, the cost per elector was 2.83p.

20. As indicated above, there is no comparative data after 2008/9. Budgets for this Council in the subsequent years are set out in Appendix 4. The position regarding cost per elector is as follows:

<b>Register</b>	<b>Net Budget</b>	<b>Electors</b>	<b>Cost Per Elector</b>
2009	£157,586	97,125	1.62p
2010	£149,133	97,618	1.53p

## Staffing

21. Core staffing for the Electoral Services Section equates to 2.75 FTE. Three staff are involved:

Senior Electoral Services Officer (Grade 8) (F/T)  
Senior Electoral Services Assistant (Grade 4) (P/T)  
Electoral Assistant (Grade 3) (P/T)

The two assistants work at certain times of the year linked to (a) elections – February to June; and (b) the electoral canvass: Sept-Dec. The staffing costs shown in Appendix 3 include the cost of casual and temporary staff employed as canvassers.

22. No comparative data on staffing numbers is available after 2007/8. At that time, the staffing numbers (FTE) for those Councils listed in Appendix 4 were as follows:

Horsham	2.2	Eastleigh	2.2
Reigate & Barnstead	2.0	Pembrokeshire	3.0
Stafford	2.0	Elmbridge	3.0
Newcastle-Under-Lyme	2.5	Vale of White Horse	2.5
Epping Forest	2.2	Havant	2.2
Swale	2.4	Vale of Glamorgan	N/D
Amber Valley	N/D	Halton	N/D
East Ayrshire	4.4	Wycharon	3.5
Stratford Upon Avon	2.1	Waveney	2.5
South Norfolk	1.7	Ashfield	3.1

N/D = No data.

These figures relate to core electoral staff not other casual and temporary appointments.

## Future Issues – SVR

23. The most significant single item will be single voter registration. This will involve a number of key changes to the electoral registration process:

- (a) registration will no longer be on the basis of households forms but individual elector forms;
- (b) evidence of date of birth, signature and national insurance number will be checked as part of the registration process;
- (c) planned transitional arrangements for the change from household to voter registration;
- (d) no longer a criminal offence not to register.

24. There are currently households in the District, each of which receives a registration form. Under SVR, the number of individual forms will increase to 99,060, based on the current register (2011). The introduction of checks on identity will add to the complexity of the process and the need for progress chasing with voters so as to maintain current return rates.

25. Undoubtedly, after the full effect of SVR is felt following the next general election, registration rates could fall significantly as the effect of personal choice is felt. There are alternative methods of registration that could be employed (for example internet, SMS or phone registration) but these would require a cost/benefit analysis to be undertaken to establish whether they would reduce or add further costs. Targeting new technology at the non-registering residents may not be successful. Improvement in performance may also prove difficult.

26. Costs are likely to rise, especially in terms of printing and whether existing staffing is sufficient is still to be fully assessed.

### **Future Issues – Door to Door Canvassing**

27. The Electoral Commission's performance measures are based on an interpretation of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 that requires EROs to arrange door to door visits in respect of all non responders. This has been undertaken for the first time in the 2011 canvass at a cost of £1,509 (visits by canvassers) and £960 (visits by commercial concerns). This cost has been accommodated within other budgets by utilising underspends.

28. With the advent of SVR, door to door visits will be more time consuming and therefore costly in that several forms relating to individuals may be involved. This may reflect in canvassing costs, once SVR has come into operation in 2014.

29. The improved return figure for the 2011 register has been achieved mainly by new process for cross checking the register against Council Tax and housing information and is a policy which must be pursued in the future. This has reduced the need for forms in the final stages of the canvass and thereby printing and postage costs. Although work by canvassers has assisted with follow ups, the benefits have been less marked.

### **Resource Implications:**

See report.

### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

Various statutory duties are set out in the report.

### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

None.

### **Consultation Undertaken:**

Portfolio Holder for Support Services.

### **Background Papers:**

None.

### **Impact Assessments:**

#### Risk Management

N/A

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?

N/A

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?

N/A