

Background information for Electoral Canvass Reform 2020

August 2020

What is the annual canvass?

The purpose of the canvass is to identify everyone who should be on the electoral register. This means confirming existing electors and inviting those who should be registered but aren't currently to make an application to register. This is in addition to identifying electors who are no longer at a property and should therefore be removed from the register.

The canvass started on 31 July and a revised version of the electoral register must be published by 1 December each year, following the conclusion of the annual canvass. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments are looking to implement legislation that extends the deadline for publication of the register to 1 February 2021 allowing more time to collect the information.

Previous years

In previous years, Electoral Registration Offices (EROs) in Great Britain were required to send every household an annual canvass form, which required a response regardless of whether there have been any changes to electors with the household.

EROs were also required to follow up any non-responding properties with a further two reminder forms and carry out a household visit, if required.

Why did the canvass need to change?

The old canvass process was widely recognised to be outdated and cumbersome. The one-size-fits-all approach, incorporating numerous prescribed steps, took little account of differences within registration areas. It was heavily paper-based, expensive, complex to administer and it restricted a change in processes which would best suit local environments. It was also clear that the processes led to confusion for electors. As a result, the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments passed legislation to update the canvass process. This project is known as 'canvass reform'.

What is the purpose of canvass reform?

Given the previous limitations of the canvass process, the purpose of canvass reform is:

- to make the process simpler and clearer for citizens.
- for EROs to have greater discretion to run a tailored canvass which better suits their local area.
- to reduce the administrative burden on EROs and the financial burden on taxpayers.
- to safeguard the completeness and accuracy of the registers.
- to maintain the security and integrity of the registers; and
- to include the capacity for innovation and improvement, with a model that is adaptable to future change.

What support will be required?

To successfully implement the new reform support will be required with teams across the local authority including IT, communications and teams holding local data, such as Council Tax, Housing and the Register Office.

How is the reformed canvass different?

The reformed canvass process incorporated a 'data matching' exercise at the start in which registered electors were compared against external 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) followed by 'local data matching' against local data sources such as council tax data if time and resources allowed.

The results of these processes then informed the EROs whether the elector(s) living in each property were likely to have changed or not. If the results show 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 is only required if there is a change to report.

Brentwood had a large proportion of properties sent down this Route known as CCA (canvass communication A) resulting in us not having to 'chase' these Route 1 properties for a response. However, these properties will still generate a work chain if the details have changed or required updating.

This allows us to concentrate on the properties where the data matching indicated that a change was likely ('Route 2'). This 'unmatched' group of properties are required to respond to the canvass communications they receive from us known as a CCB (canvass communication B). Properties in this Route 2 group are required to respond even if there are no changes and we are required to make a minimum of three contact attempts where we do not receive a response.

Finally, the canvass reform allows us to canvass care homes and similar criteria establishments in a streamlined approach with contact made with a 'responsible person' at the property who will be able to assist with the information required to ensure all residents are registered. This is known as Route 3.

New ways of communication

The reformed canvass enables us to modernise our ways of conducting the canvass with the ultimate aim of it becoming efficient, streamline and cheaper to conduct, without compromising accuracy, through the use of telephone and email canvassing together with the paper forms and household visits.

These additional communication channels will hopefully promote increased volumes of communication and online registration. This is particularly important for the 2020 canvass as it may reduce the need for household visits, which presents challenges due to the coronavirus pandemic and the need for social distancing.

What does this mean for electors?

Canvass reform will make the process simpler and clearer as electors in properties where a change is unlikely based on data matching results are not required to respond.

The reform also continues to ensure that everyone entitled to register to vote has the right to participate in the democratic process by requiring EROs to contact every household in Great Britain at least once within the canvass process.

What does this mean for electoral administrators?

The reform to the annual canvass is important in allowing EROs to adapt and tailor their canvass process to best suit their registration areas. Brentwood will be concentrating resources on properties where a change in electors at a property has been identified or is more likely and using new means of communication with householders and electors.

All this has major implications on the training of staff, recruitment of temporary staff, team resources and updating the processes during a time of increased pressure on working environments caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Processes and working practices will be adapted in these changing environments and updated as the canvass progresses. A review will be undertaken at the end of the year or at publication to learn what worked best and how improvements can be made for the following year.