

COUNCIL SEMINAR 7th January, 2014

Present:- Councillor Akhtar (in the Chair); The Mayor (Councillor John Foden), Atkin, Beck, Dalton, Dodson, Ellis, Gosling, Goulty, J. Hamilton, N. Hamilton, Kaye, McNeely, Pickering, Pitchley, Rushforth, G. A. Russell, P. A. Russell, R. S. Russell, Sangster, Sharman, Sims, Smith, Watson, Swift, Vines, Wallis, Wootton and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ali, Barron, Clark, Hoddinott and Jepson.

THE NEW UK VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM AND HOW INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION WILL IMPACT ON ROTHERHAM.

Councillor J. Akhtar, Deputy Leader of the Council, introduced Mags Evers, Electoral Services Manager, Michelle Mellor, Senior Electoral Services Officer and Jacqueline Collins, Director of Legal and Democratic Services to the Seminar. A presentation had been prepared in relation to the New UK voter registration system that was due to come into effect on 10th June, 2014. The presentation also included an assessment of the likely impact of the changes in Rotherham.

The presentation included: -

- An overview of the current 'dual system' in operation, including how canvassing worked;
- The new individual system was designed to enable everyone eligible to vote to have control over their registration and take more ownership of the process;
- Under the new system, individuals would be required to provide identifying information when they registered (date of birth and National Insurance number) to allow their identity to be verified before they were added to the register;
- The aims of the new system were to: -
 - Reduce electoral fraud and increase the public's confidence in the system;
 - Make individuals responsible for their own registration;
 - Modernise electoral registration by allowing individuals to register on-line.

The 'key dates' leading up to implementation were considered. From 10th June, 2014, all new applications would be required to produce personal identifiers. On 1st December, 2014, the new register would be published. Transitional arrangements would mean that most people already registered would be automatically transferred to the new system. In addition a carry forward provision would ensure that no existing elector would lose their vote at the 2015 elections, the next elections following transition.

- A prescribed exemptions process would exist for people who could not provide their NI number or date of birth;
- Signatures would not be required;
- Verification process for the personal identifiers.

An exercise had been undertaken whereby the existing electoral register was matched against the Department for Work and Pensions' records and local data. A trial-run had been completed and the average match rate across the nation was 78%. Rotherham's match rate was 85.47%, and this increased to 91.76% when matched against local data.

The match rate for each of Rotherham's Wards was shared. All of the Wards were above the national average match rate.

The transitional arrangements that would be in place included: -

- Confirmation letters would be sent between July and November 2014 along with Invitations to Register (ITR) to any existing electors who could not be automatically transferred (confirmed);
- By law the ITR had to be followed up by two reminders and at least one follow-up visit;
- Household Enquiry Forms (HEF) to properties where no-one was registered – also followed up by reminders and visit(s);
- There was the potential for a small number of proxy and postal voters to lose their preference to vote and they would have to attend a polling station to vote;
- A process of public engagement planned after the 2014 election;
- Autumn 2015 would be the first full canvass undertaken using Individual Electoral Registration with a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) being sent to each property with an Invitation to Register (ITR) sent to each new individual identified by the HEF;
- The system brought about the need for year-round reminders and personal canvassing outside the annual canvass period;
- Government funding of £108 million had been committed to funding the additional burdens caused through Individual Electoral Registration transition period, with approximately £64k coming to Rotherham in 2013/14 on top of the existing allocation;
- A recent announcement had stated that forms would have to be in a standard prescribed A3 size and funds for the additional costs caused by this decision would be announced separately.

The impact of Individual Electoral Registration in Rotherham: -

- Electors – the vast majority would transfer to the new system and new applicants would be able to apply on-line for the first time;
- Finance – under watching brief;
- Staffing – an emerging picture was being gathered relating to increased work-loads. A requirement may arise for some year-round posts which had previously existed on a casual, short-term

basis;

- Registers - would be more secure and some of the new requirements should help keep them more up-to-date all year round;
- Elections – for the 2014 election there would be no impact, for the 2015 election some absent people could lose their proxy/postal vote and by 2016 the Individual Electoral System would be the norm and all registers should be accurate and up-to-date.

Discussion ensued on the following points were raised: -

- **Would there be penalties for deliberate non-registration?** – Yes, the Electoral Registration Officer would have the power, subject to following certain prescribed procedures, to impose a fixed penalty in certain cases.
- **Specific household circumstances were raised:** -
 - Would multiple forms be received by each individual eligible to vote in a household
 - Registering young people who were due to become eligible to vote;
 - Sharing information between different agencies, including Council Tax;
 - Requirement to issue an invitation to register (ITR) within 28 days of the Electoral Registration Officer becoming aware of the changed circumstance;
 - The developments required in the software systems used by Electoral Services to track registrations and ensure statutory reminders and follow ups at the right time.
- **Were there any changes to students' rights to vote at home and their University address or students' registration process?** – No changes to their right to register at both addresses. Electoral Registration Officers in towns/cities with student populations were developing processes to ensure students have the opportunity to register at their term-time address.
- **The registration of other potentially vulnerable groups, including people living in residential homes and people in the Armed Forces, especially those posted abroad** – In its public engagement strategy Electoral Services has identified people in residential homes as one of the groups that may need additional support and was developing the appropriate services. People in the Armed Forces would not be affected until the expiry of their current 5 year registration period. Electoral Services would contact them by post and by email in good time to allow them to reapply. The availability of online registration was likely to be particularly welcomed by this group.
- **The ability to opt-out of the edited register that was published** - This option was to remain available under the new system and it was likely that there would be a change to the rules so that once an individual had opted-out, they would remain opted-out unless they should actively choose to opt in to the edited register.

- **Potential for fraudulent activity to be detected under the new system, including identity theft** – The new requirement that personal identifiers must be verified before an application may be granted would significantly reduce the opportunity to register fraudulently as a step towards identity theft.
- **Registration of postal votes.**
- **Government funding model to reflect the new system** – Rotherham was in a good position following their high match rate in the trial run and the anticipated outcome of the real exercise. This meant that less follow-up work would have to be undertaken in Rotherham. Councils that had lower match rates would have more work to do to ensure that all non-matches were followed-up and rectified.
- **Registration levels compared to Population figures** - The population aged 17+ in 2012 was 205,526 of which 196,396 were registered so 9,130 were not on register (4.4%).

Councillor Akhtar thanked the Officers for their attendance and informative presentation and contribution to the discussion. The Elected Members present were also thanked for their attendance and contribution to the discussion.

Resolved: - That the information shared be noted.