

Information/Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

28th February 2022

Encouraging Voter Participation at Local Elections

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

1.1 At the 19th July 2021 Council meeting, Members approved a [motion](#) asking the council to *'work with scrutiny to investigate ways the Borough Council can encourage more people to participate in future elections in Cheltenham – with a particular focus on the next Borough Council elections in 2022 and 2024'*.

1.2 It was agreed that the Electoral Services Officer would bring a paper to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to address these issues and respond to Member queries.

2. Summary of the Issue

2.1 This paper outlines how the Council seeks to improve participation in local elections and future participation in all elections.

3. Summary of evidence/information

3.1 The Electoral Registration Officer carries out an annual canvass of all residential properties in the Borough between July and November in preparation for the

publication of the revised register on 1 December. Residents are contacted via email, text or post. For properties where a response is required but has not been received, a canvasser is sent to visit the property. The canvasser will make a minimum of three visits to a non-responding property.

- 3.2** All potential electors identified are sent an invitation to register, by email (if held) or post. This process occurs throughout the year, but the bulk of the forms are sent during the annual canvass period. Where the potential elector does not register, a canvasser will make a minimum of two visits to encourage and /or collect the registration form.
- 3.3** Household notification letters are sent in February to all properties that were unoccupied during canvass and are still empty to notify and encourage new occupants to register. The letter to include the election details and details about absent voting.
- 3.4** Potential electors are identified using CBH lettings lists. When information is received that an elector is no longer resident at a property, Council Tax records are checked, and if new potential electors are identified, they are sent an invitation to register which triggers the process in paragraph 3.2.
- 3.5** For student registration, we have access to the Jisc system used by the University of Gloucestershire for student enrolment and information. Students are encouraged by the University to register to vote using the system, we then receive the registration files and add them to the electoral register. Unfortunately, we do not receive many registrations via this medium. We have arranged for an encouragement article in the student newsletter, which every student will receive via email.
- 3.6** For comparison, we requested registration levels from several Local Authorities with

Student Halls. At the time of writing this paper, only one response received from Worcester City Council who informed that 37% of students in Halls of Residence are currently registered. The percentage of students registered in Halls for Cheltenham is currently 37.5%.

- 3.7** Press releases, Facebook posts and tweets scheduled at various stages of the year to encourage registration and voter participation.
- 3.8** The Council Tax page of the council's website features a 'register to vote' link, and text encouraging registration will appear on the footer of the insert included with Council Tax bills. Encouragement piece in February/March issue of CBH newsletter.
- 3.9** Please see appendix 1, which is a table of percentage turnout at Borough Council Elections held from 2012 to 2021 including the turnout for returned postal votes and the percentage return for the annual canvass for the register of electors published before each year of elections. There are no statistics for the 2020 canvass. Canvass Reform has changed the way we canvass, as there is no longer a requirement for every property to return the canvass form, also due to Covid-19 a light touch canvass was undertaken. However, because a full canvass was not undertaken a household notification letter was sent to every property in February 2021 ahead of the elections.
- 3.10** It is likely that Voter Identification will be in force for the elections taking place in May 2023. The elector will have to produce photographic ID at the polling station. Electors who do not have the required ID will need to apply for a Voter Card. The Voter Card will be provided to the elector free of charge. There will be national awareness campaigns ahead of the 2023 elections and in Cheltenham we will ensure that voters are aware of the new requirements including engaging with local community groups. The requirement for ID at the polling station will be included on the poll card.

4. Next Steps (possible next steps for the committee to consider, e.g. potential witnesses, further report, site visit etc.)

4.1 Work with Engagement team

Background Papers

[19th July 2021 Council motions \(Motion B\)](#)

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Accountability

Cllr. Flo Clucas, Cabinet Member Safety and Communities