

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 25 January 2017 at 7.00 p.m.

CR1, Mulberry Place, 5, Clove Crescent, London E14 2BG

SUPPLEMENTAL AGENDA

This meeting is open to the public to attend.

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3 .5 Electoral Services Update

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To receive feedback on the annual canvass 2016, the Whitechapel By-Election, 1 December 2016 and the Government's response to Sir Eric Pickles' Review into Electoral Fraud.

<p>Non-Executive Report of the:</p> <p>General Purposes Committee</p> <p>25 January 2017</p>	 <p>TOWER HAMLETS</p>
<p>Report of: Will Tuckley, Chief Executive</p>	<p>Classification: Unrestricted</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Annual Canvass feedback 20162. Whitechapel by-election update – 1 December 20163. Government response to Sir Eric Pickles' Review	

<p>Originating Officer(s)</p>	<p>Louise Stamp, Head of Electoral Services</p>
<p>Wards affected</p>	<p>All wards</p>

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report outlines:

The position at the end of the annual canvass 2016 and provides statistics upon publication of the revised Register of Electors 2017;

The conduct of the Whitechapel by-election held on 1 December 2016

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Committee note the content of this report.

3. ANNUAL CANVASS 2016

- 3.1 Since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in 2014, the annual canvass in 2016 was the second full canvass conducted under IER.
- 3.2 The canvass commenced on 24 August 2016. A total of 129,581 Household Enquiry Forms (HEF), confirming information currently on the register, were sent to all residential properties in the borough. A dedicated website, telephone confirmation line and SMS text services were set up for residents to confirm or update their details using unique property security codes. Any names added to a returned HEF were included on the register as a 'pending elector' and an Invitation to Register (ITR) form was sent out, asking the resident to then provide their personal identifiers (NINO and DOB).
- 3.3 Any returned ITR forms were processed and the residents' information sent to DWP for verification. If the information was verified, the elector would be added to the register effective from 2 December 2016. If the information failed the verification stage, the resident was asked to provide further evidence to support their application.
- 3.4 A total of 36,615 (28.26%) of HEF forms were returned at the end of the initial posting stage of the canvass.
- 3.5 For stage two of the canvass, 96 canvassers were recruited to cover 107 areas from 22 September 2016 for a seven week period, to knock at the non-responding properties to assist with completing the reminder HEF. An additional 3 canvassers were employed to cover the university blocks and elderly persons' homes.
- 3.6 The second stage of the canvass was conducted using mobile tablet devices to capture the information directly onto the tablet, then synchronise the information direct into the register software system. The tablets were loaded with HEF and ITR forms for the properties in the canvassers' area(s).
- 3.7 The return rate for both HEF and ITR forms using tablets to capture the information at the doorstep were:
- HEF return = 70,942 (84%) of the total number of properties for stage two
- ITR outstanding forms loaded for canvassers = 1,242, the number of ITR's completed at the doorstep = 12,472 (90% increase)
- 3.8 Using the mobile tablet device allowed any new residents and any residents who had moved to another address to be actioned on the doorstep. Information added for new residents would be sent to DWP for verification.
- 3.9 Any HEF or ITR forms received by post, internet, text or SMS would be processed in the office and removed from the canvassers' tablet devices on a daily basis. This process ensured canvassers were working with 'real time' information.

3.10 The overall return statistics at the end of the canvass were as follows:

1. Overall return = **83.78%** (an additional 449 properties were added during the canvass period)
2. New electors added = 17,944
3. Removed electors = 21,006
4. Changes to details = 30.13% (32,818 of responded properties)
5. Postal response = 31.57% (34,384 of responded properties)
6. Telephone response = 3.30% (3,592 of responded properties)
7. Internet response = 14.12% (15,374 of responded properties)
8. SMS response = 3.32% (3,610 of responded properties)

3.11 Advantages of using tablet devices –

- Real time information for canvassers, office staff and residents
- Eliminates need for canvassers to return work to the office weekly
- No printing and outgoing/inward postage costs for reminder HEFs, ITRs and follow up reminders
- No scanning and processing of reminder forms
- Visual dashboard to check on canvassers progress
- Health and Safety issues eliminated
- Professional service introduced for residents
- Higher return rate for stage two leading to fewer forms to print for the final reminder stage

3.12 Cost Analysis –

- Fee for purchase, 4G Licenses and maintenance = **£32,452.50**
- Estimated cost of all reminder printing, postage and evidence forms = **£70,000.00**
- Saving in excess of **£37,000.00**

There were also additional staff savings – no temporary staff required, no Saturday working for office staff and reduced overtime hours.

3.13 The final stage of the canvass involved hand delivering final reminder forms to all those properties where canvassers could not gain a response. The letter explained the importance of returning the HEF form, responsibility to register individually and for Whitechapel ward, information about the by-election to be held on 1 December 2016.

3.14 One of the issues still to resolve is residents registering directly on the Government website and not returning the HEF form. The requirement is for residents to confirm people living at an address, then for any new residents to register individually. We managed to identify some of these properties and contacted the residents by phone or email, plus used data mining with other council databases. It is essential to ensure we captured all residents

living at a property before we could confirm the household data information was accurate.

Following the annual canvass period and publication of the revised Register of Electors 2017 on 2 December 2015, registration continues on a monthly basis to add, amend or remove residents on the revised Register.

Publication Figures

3.15

Upon publication of the Register of Electors 2017 – the electorate figures were as follows:

- Electorate: 185,977
- Postal Voters: 31,106 (16.73%)
- Properties: 130,030
- Opt Outs (Open Register): 150,284 (80.81%)

4. WHITECHAPEL BY-ELECTION – 2 DECEMBER 2016

4.1 The GLA elections in May 2016 and EU Referendum in June 2016 were delivered successfully and without challenge.

4.2 Planning and delivery for the Whitechapel by-election coincided with the annual canvass process and it was important to separate the two functions.

Conduct of the Election

4.3 Preparations were based on best practice and lessons learnt from the two elections conducted in 2016. A number of successful initiatives used in previous elections were employed for the by-election and a number of other initiatives introduced i.e. internal staff checks to confirm no-one is part of any investigation.

4.4 An Election working group was in place, chaired by the Returning Officer, with officers from across the Council, the Electoral Commission, Commissioners, Met and local Police and Agilisys.

4.5 A detailed election planner and risk and contingency register was prepared for the by-election and acted as a working document for the team throughout the timetable. All statutory deadlines were met.

4.6 A work package agreement was set up with Agilisys to ensure any IT system failures will be responded to within 24 hours and an engineer was available to cover postal vote opening and the count.

4.7 The Electoral Commission, Met and local Police are closely involved in the election planning process. A senior police officer with previous elections experience in Tower Hamlets was the Single Point of Contact (SPOC).

Postal vote opening

- 4.8 Three postal vote opening sessions were organised for the by-election. The work package agreement with Agilisys was in place to set up the postal vote opening equipment and ensure an engineer was on call for all sessions in the event of IT failure.
- 4.9 The personal identifiers and all postal voting statement received were checked and verified. All candidates and agents were informed of the opening figures after each opening session.
- 4.10 The final opening figures were as follows:
- 968 envelopes received – Return rate = 55.63%
 - 863 ballot papers put forward to the count
 - Rejected due to mismatch on postal voting statement = 105 (10.85%)
- 4.11 The opening process has been improved to ensure staff downtime is reduced.

Polling Stations

- 4.12 Five polling places and six polling stations were used on 1 December 2016. One presiding Officer and three poll clerks assigned to each polling station.
- 4.13 A polling station inspector made an initial assessment of the layout of each polling station, checked all equipment was in place and visited again throughout the day.
- 4.14 All staff employed on the poll received dedicated training and were asked to look at the layout set up in the room, to be used at each polling place. The Commissioner, Max Caller, attended the training session and commented that the session was very detailed and covered all processes to be observed for the poll.
- 4.15 An Electoral Commission observer was assigned to each polling place from 7am – 10pm and their observations were fed back after the election.
- 4.16 A local police officer was assigned to each polling place to ensure there were no crowds and voters were not intimidated when entering the polling place. An exclusion zone was marked outside each polling place for campaigners to observe.

The Count

- 4.17 The Whitechapel by-election count took place on the Ground Floor, Mulberry Place, commencing at 10pm.
- 4.18 12 count staff were employed to count the postal votes and and votes case at the polling stations.

- 4.19 Candidates, election agents, counting agents, guests, members and observers were present to observe the count proceedings.
- 4.20 The result of the by-election was declared by the Returning Officer at 12:02am.
- 4.21 The final electorate for the ward was 10,502. A total of 2,572 ballot papers were counted, with a turnout of 24.49%.

Post-Election Observations and Feedback

- 4.22 No official complaints were received during or after the conduct of the election.
- 4.23 The Electoral Commission provided feedback following their observations at all polling places as follows:

'Overall we thought that the poll was conducted very well and with particular attention to ensuring the integrity of the process both within the polling station and at the count. Staff at the polling stations were professional and authoritative in their management of the process, and did their utmost to make sure that there was no voter or campaigner behaviour that could give rise to complaints. We noted also that the police presence at the polling places was constant and that they supported the polling station staff at all times, ensuring that they kept records of their presence and any incidents that might have occurred. Overall we were very pleased with the conduct of the poll and are grateful for all of the hard work that you and your team clearly put into the planning and delivery of this important event.

- 4.24 A few comments for consideration from the Electoral Commission:

(1) Folding Ballot Papers – staff did not fold ballot papers on issue and did not advise electors to fold before placing in the ballot box. This is due to allegations made in 2014, where staff were accused of folding the ballot paper through the middle of a candidates' name, thereby influencing the vote for that candidate.

Action – Folding the ballot paper will be included in all future poll staff training.

(2) Postal Ballot Papers – EC staff witnessed ballot papers being handed in at the polling station and being placed in the postal vote wallet. To ensure the integrity of the postal votes, it was recommended that staff record the name of the person handing in the pack(s).

Action – This will be include in future training and staff will be advised where multiple packs are handed in, staff will be required to check the

names of each elector against the postal voters list. A separate form will be provided for this purpose and enclosed with the postal vote statement.

- (3) Advice to Electors – although staff were very helpful in trying to advise electors on the process to be followed in marking their ballot paper, but it might be helpful for staff to have a set form of words to use as the message was not consistent across all stations.

Action – This will be included in future training for staff.

- (4) Ensuring secrecy of the voting – Presiding Officers were very clear in ensuring that electors were directed clearly to a particular and separate polling booth, particularly when they had arrived together in a group. There are always instances where some electors feel the need to talk about some aspect of voting with their friends or family, but staff did their utmost to prevent such conversations taking place and making sure that people voted completely separately. With a low turnout in the polling stations and multiple polling booths available, managing this process was possible.

Action – for borough elections, this needs to be considered with the staff resources available.

- (5) The register – staff had difficulty finding electors' names and addresses due to multiple large blocks within a road.

Action – we are aware of this issue and with a fallow year in 2017 we will be revising the property database to ensure all historic blocks are numerically listed within each road name.

- (6) The Count - The venue at the Council Offices allowed space for the both the count and the announcement, although the count room itself was a little cramped and didn't allow much space around the outside of the tables. On the plus side, it was easy to see the central tables and what was happening to the ballot papers at all times.

Action – A larger count venue has been identified for the combined elections in 2018.

4.25 Observation feedback from Max Caller, Commissioner, for consideration:

- (1) Staff Training – are we using the correct techniques to train staff?

Action – we are revising the way polling staff are trained to include e-training and face to face training.

- (2) Anonymous registration – some PO's unsure where to find other electors and anonymous voters.

Action – detailed training to include content of the polling station register

- (3) Checking ballot paper number on back of ballot paper – due to PO checks, the secrecy of the ballot could be compromised as the ballot paper was not folded.

Action – possibility of pre-folded ballot papers issued to polling stations. Look at different colours for postal voter ballot papers.

- (4) Count Layout – RO and Accountant to be sited on a platform area for clear visibility.

Action – this will be looked at part of the count layout for 2018 elections.

- (5) Media pack – to be updated to include control of the count and new information required.

Action – Comms team have been made aware of this issue.

5. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO SIR ERIC PICKLES' REVIEW INTO ELECTORAL FRAUD

5.1 The Government produced their response to Sir Eric Pickles' review in December 2016. Government supported Sir Eric's suggestion that pilot schemes should take place in local authority areas which had previously experienced significant cases of electoral fraud or which are considered to be at high risk of fraudulent activity. Tower Hamlets is one of the authorities identified in the response.

5.2 The pilots will look at how ID at polling stations could be implemented to test the impact of voter ID schemes on protection against fraud.

5.3 The Returning Officer has arranged a meeting at the end of February with Cabinet Office officials to discuss the pilot schemes for the combined elections in Tower Hamlets in May 2018.

6. OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1 This is a noting report which provides the general purpose committee with an update on the 2016 annual canvass and conduct of the Whitechapel Ward by-election in 2016.

6.2 The Council's electoral services section conducts the annual canvass, IER process and all elections. The service costs £642k per annum and is funded through general fund resources. Budgets of £123k and £68k are also set aside to manage the annual canvass and IER costs.

6.3 The Annual Canvass cost was £232,838.34 and the Whitechapel by-election cost was £32,604.67.

6.4 There are no additional financial commitments arising from the recommendations within this report.

7. LEGAL SERVICES COMMENTS

7.1 The annual canvass 2016 was conducted satisfactorily in compliance with sections 10ZC and 10ZD of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

7.2 The Whitechapel ward by-election was conducted in compliance with The Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006 as amended.

7.3 There are no other immediate legal implications arising from this report.

6. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 The Electoral Registration Officer has a duty to conduct an annual canvass of all residential properties in the borough. Translations in 16 different languages were available for canvassers to use and two Bengali Officers were on duty evenings and weekends to assist canvassers working in the borough.

7. BEST VALUE (BV) IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Use of mobile tablet devices in 2015 for 50% of the non-responding properties in the borough showed a marked improvement on the return rate against those canvassers using paper forms. A decision was made to use mobile tablet devices for all canvassers in 2016 and included additional visits to universities and elderly persons' homes. A total of 107 tablets were used by canvassers, the return rate improved greatly and savings of around £37,000 were identified.

8. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

8.1 There are no direct SAGE implications arising from this report.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

9.1 All mobile tablet devices were insured for loss or theft. The devices were password protected by canvasser name and unique password. Canvassers would sync completed information back to the register regularly to ensure those properties visited and confirmed were removed from their tablet. If the device was lost or stolen the data could be wiped from the tablet within minutes, ensuring any data held on the device was not compromised.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no direct Crime and Disorder implications arising from this report.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended) List of “Background Papers

- NONE

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- NONE

Officer contact details for documents:

- N/A