



Information Sheet for elected members and senior leaders: The Annual Canvass and Canvass Reform

June 2020

What is the annual canvass?

The purpose of the canvass is to identify everyone who should be on the electoral register. This means identifying citizens and inviting those who should be registered but are currently not to join the register, as well as identifying electors who are no longer at a property and should therefore be removed from the register. A revised version of the electoral register must be published by 1 December each year, following the conclusion of the annual canvass. 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.

Previously, Electoral Registration Offices (EROs)¹ 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 in the household. EROs were also required to follow up any non-responses with a further two reminder forms and carry out a household visit, if required.

Why did the canvass need to change?

This previous canvass process was widely recognised to be outdated and cumbersome.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 and between registration areas. It was heavily paper-based, expensive, complex to administer and it stifled innovation. It was also clear that the process led to confusion for citizens. 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.

¹ As an ERO's duties may, in practice, be carried out by deputies and/or appointed staff, we use the term 'ERO' throughout this guidance to mean the ERO and whoever is carrying out the ERO's functions on their behalf.

What does this mean for elected members?

For elected members, the most important message is to understand the nature and purpose of the reforms and their impact on the public and the ERO for your local authority, as outlined in the different sections below. This should enable you to manage any questions you might receive about the reforms specifically as well any questions about the canvass in general.

To best equip you for any questions from the public, we would recommend speaking to your ERO to understand how the canvass is being run in your area, as the canvass is tailored to each area and timings and contact methods will vary.

What does this mean for senior leaders within the council?

Likewise, if you are a senior leader, you should make sure you have a solid understanding of the reformed canvass process and what it means for the public and your electoral services team.

Beyond that, your ERO and their team will be best placed to advise on how you can help. We anticipate they will need your support in working with teams across your authority including IT infrastructure and communications teams, plus teams holding local data, such as Council Tax, Housing and the Register Office. This will not only support EROs this year when faced with the challenge of coronavirus, but subsequent years when they continue to deliver the reformed canvass.

Canvass reform is designed to enable EROs to modernise the canvass process; reduce administrative burden and include the capacity for innovation and improvement. Future change will be easier if EROs can access the datasets they need to conduct local data matching; to source relevant contact details; and also to data mine for new additions and deletions to the register. Your influence and support could be incredibly useful in enabling them to meet their most fundamental statutory requirement: safeguarding the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers.

How is the reformed canvass different?

The reformed canvass process incorporates a 'data matching step' at the start in which registered electors are compared against datasets to see if they match. EROs are required to conduct 'national data matching' against data held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and have the option to conduct 'local data matching' against local data sources such as council tax data. The results of this process then informs EROs whether the elector(s) living in each property are likely to have changed or not. If the results show that the elector(s) in a property matches the national or local dataset, then EROs have 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. As a result, EROs do not need to 'chase' these Route 1 properties for a response.

This allows EROs to concentrate their resources 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 their ERO, and the ERO

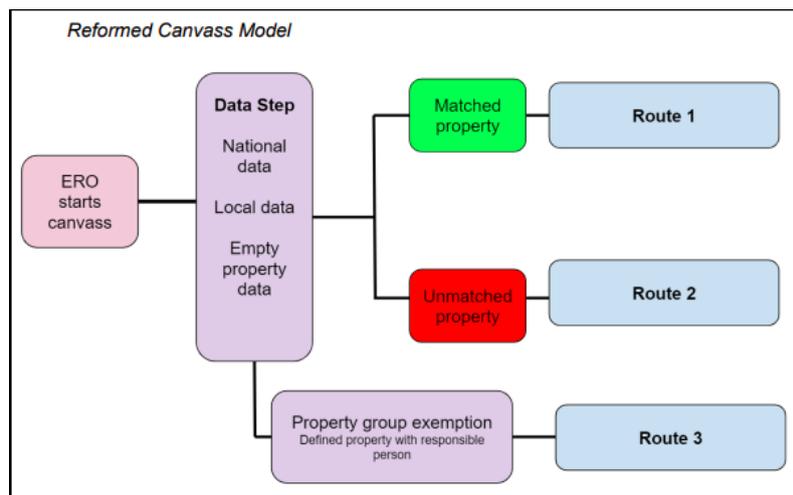
is required to make a minimum of three contact attempts where they do not receive a response.

In addition, the reformed canvass enables EROs to use modern communications channels. In contrast to the old canvass process - in which the law only allowed for paper forms and household visits within the chasing cycle - EROs can now conduct telephone canvassing instead of household visits and send e-communications (e.g. emails and text) instead of using paper forms.

These additional communication channels will hopefully promote increased volumes of online registration.

Further changes to the canvass include but are not limited to:

- **A tailored route for properties with multiple occupants who do not form a single household ('Route 3').** EROs can now canvass properties such as care homes or student accommodation using a more effective and streamlined approach, by working with a 'responsible person' at the property to obtain data and invite the occupants to register to vote. While many EROs already have good contacts with these types of properties and work with them to deliver the annual canvass, they now have a clear framework for doing so.
- **New IT functionality:** EROs are administering the reformed canvass on updated Electoral Management Systems (EMS) with new functionality and have received training, both procured by the Cabinet Office.



Through these changes, the reformed canvass provides a more modernised, efficient and streamlined approach. It moves away from the one-size-fits-all process and allows EROs to adapt their canvassing process to suit the needs of their registration areas and to concentrate their resources on the properties that are likely to benefit most.

Moreover, canvass reform is expected to see significant savings for taxpayers in future years, providing an average saving of over £20m annually, over a ten year period, across Great Britain.

What does this mean for electors?

Canvass reform has made the process simpler and clearer for citizens as electors in properties where a change is unlikely - based on data matching results - now only have to respond to canvass communications if they have a change to report. In addition, through the introduction of e-communications and updated messaging on paper forms, electors who do need to report a change are encouraged to provide their response online, rather than having to fill out and post back a paper form.

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.

Some local authorities and valuation joint boards in Scotland will be running public awareness campaigns to highlight the changes and encourage people to respond to email and telephone canvassing. 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 your 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. Whereas EROs may have previously been able to update and adapt last years' canvass plans, in 2020 EROs will create a new canvass plan based within the new legal framework.

This new plan will differ from before by treating some property groups differently, based on the results of data matching, and so it should enable EROs to concentrate their resources on properties where a change in electors at a property is more likely.

The plan will also differ by requiring EROs to choose communication methods from a wider range of options based on the needs of their area. Depending on what decision is made, EROs may then need to go through a data gathering exercise to ensure they have the contact details they need to conduct the canvass in the most appropriate way.

These canvass plans will then need to be reviewed year by year as EROs learn what works best in their area.

In 2020, EROs will also need to conduct national data matching for the first time in a live environment and then continue to go through this exercise annually before starting their canvass. Each year they can also choose to conduct local data matching to supplement the results of the national data match. By opting to do local data matching, EROs may be able to 'top up' the results of the national data matching, which would enable them to canvass more properties using the streamlined route.

All this has major implications on the training of staff; recruitment of temporary staff; team resources and updating the processes in place for managing responses to canvass communications.

It is worth highlighting that EROs are having to manage all this change at a time of the increased pressure placed on working environments caused by the coronavirus pandemic. This creates a particular strain for the requirement to conduct household visits where telephone canvassing is not possible.

The Cabinet Office and our partners have been working with EROs to prepare them for the changes needed to implement canvass reform including training, advice and guidance. This includes working with the Electoral Commission and others on guidance to help administrators with the decisions they may need to take to manage the particular challenges faced locally and nationally as a result of the current public health situation. You can find this Guidance online here: [England](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#).