

## Report of the Strategic Director

**CANVASS REFORM**1. Purpose of report

To inform members of the new arrangements which will be introduced this year for carrying out the annual canvass.

2. Background

The annual canvass has, until this year, been carried out by all councils on a “one size fits all” approach. This has included a number of prescribed steps, has taken very little account of the differences between local authority areas, has been heavily paper based and time consuming to administer. It allows Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) little scope to innovate or adapt the process to best fit the needs of their local residents. While this means that all properties across the UK are canvassed in the same way, it does not acknowledge that some property types and individuals may require a more tailored approach, nor does it allow EROs to explore and use more efficient ways of canvassing, including the use of technology. The success of the online registration service has demonstrated that there is a clear public acceptance of moving to a more digital approach. The only part of the current system in which online responses can be made is where there is no change to the occupiers of a property, but this is after a paper form has been sent out.

Pilots of four alternative models were carried out in 2016 and 2017 to help identify a more appropriate and modern approach to the canvass. Based on the evidence from the pilots a new model has been developed which allows a mixture of e-communication as well as paper contact. The new approach is less prescriptive and will allow EROs greater flexibility on how they carry out the canvass, for example, the use of e-mail and telephone contact is permitted and in some cases a paper form will not need to be sent to households at all. The pilots showed that the composition of the majority of households does not change. The new model will not therefore require every household to respond when there is some confidence that there has been no change in the composition. Further details of the reformed canvass model are set out in the Appendix.

3. Financial implications

The 2019 canvass cost approximately £45,000. It is estimated that the new approach will cost in the region of £26,000, although this may increase when the cost of the online system (for set up and responses) is known. In previous years a grant has been received from the government to support the budget allocated by councils to meet the cost of registration. However, this has now ended as it is considered that councils’ budgets should be adequate to meet the lower cost of the reformed canvass. It is anticipated that Broxtowe’s budget for 2020/21 will be sufficient. Underspending from previous years will be used to top up if necessary.

**Recommendation**

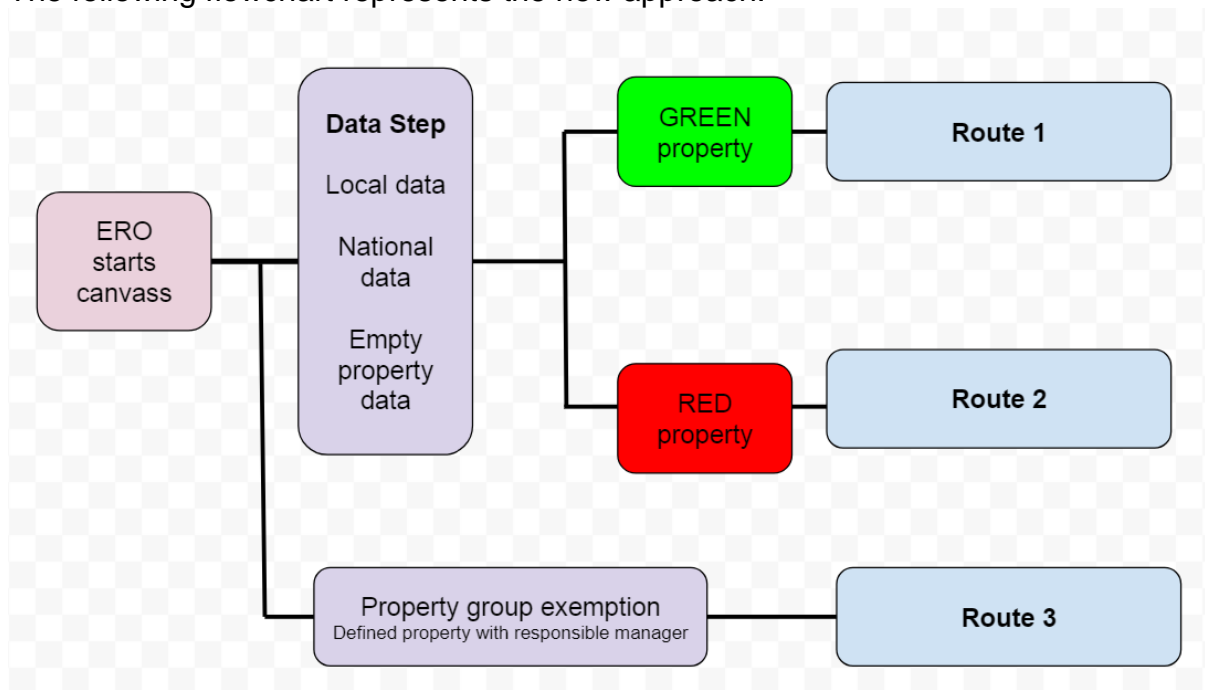
**That the Committee NOTES the new approach to carrying out the annual canvass to be introduced this year.**

Background papers

Nil

Reformed Canvass Process

The following flowchart represents the new approach:



At the start of each canvass the electoral register will be uploaded to the online registration digital service and data matched against records held by the Department for Work and Pensions. This process will match at an individual elector level their name, date of birth and where held, the Unique Property Reference Number of their house. At the same time a local data matching exercise will be carried out against council tax records as these may be more up to date than national datasets. Where an elector matches a record held in either the local or national dataset they will be deemed to be “matched” and marked green. If they do not match they will be “unmatched” and marked red. As the canvass is based on households, the results of the data matching will then be aggregated by the Elections Management System (EMS) to give either a green or red match for each property, green indicating that all occupiers match and red showing where one or more do not.

A data test was carried out in March and based on that, it is likely that 84% of households in Broxtowe will be green matched, 15% red and 1% will be dealt with down route 3 as explained below.

The canvass will be carried out by taking properties down a particular “route”:

route 1 – a letter confirming the names of occupiers will be sent to the green properties but unless there has been any change since the previous canvass, no response will be required. It is intended that this communication will be e-mailed to properties for which an e-mail address is held in the EMS in the first instance. This will be to around 25,000 households in Broxtowe. A response is required to e-mail contact to ensure that the notification has been received. The response will be made through the online system provided by the EMS supplier and will be similar to that used in previous years, requiring the property codes to be entered to confirm the household details. If a response is not received to an e-mail, or where an e-mail address is not held for any property, a letter will be posted out.

It is hoped that the majority of households contacted by e-mail will respond and the number of letters which need to be posted out will be reduced considerably. It is expected that around 31,500 A4 letters will need to be sent compared to the 50,000 A3 forms and return envelope under the existing system, reducing the cost of both printing and postage considerably.

route 2 – this will be similar to the current canvass process with red properties being sent an initial paper communication listing all occupiers and being asked to confirm and/or amend those details. Up to two further contacts are required if there is no response to the initial paper communication. One of these, as with the current canvass, must be a personal contact either through a visit to the property or by telephone if a number is held in the EMS. Although this route will be time consuming to administer there will be fewer properties to contact, follow up where households do not respond and visits to arrange than under the existing arrangements.

It is expected that there will be around 7,500 properties in route 2. An A3 form or an A4 letter version and return envelope will need to be posted out to these. However, the form must be sent at either the initial or reminder stage. The final letter has not been made available and a decision has not yet been taken as to which would be most appropriate for the initial contact. As in previous years it is not expected that the online response will be available to deal with changes to households.

route 3 – the current canvassing process does not work well for certain types of property such as care homes, military establishments and university accommodation. Under the reformed model these will be dealt with under a separate route 3 where a letter will be sent to a single responsible person where one can be identified, such as a landlord or care home manager, requesting a list of eligible residents. This will not “block” register those residents, but will enable the ERO to identify any who are not currently registered so that they can be sent an Invitation to Register. If a list cannot be obtained, the route 2 process will need to be followed.

Discussions are currently taking place between Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators on the implications of the current situation with coronavirus for the canvass. If lockdown continues until the summer there is some concern that EROs will not be able to fulfil their statutory responsibility in terms of carrying out the canvass. It is expected that provision will need to be introduced to cover this as has been done with elections, but in any event, it is not expected that the existing canvass process will be continued this year. An update will be provided to members when further advice has been received from the government. However, if lockdown is relaxed by the end of July, it is intended that the canvass timetable will be:

- data matching will start in August;
- e-mails will be sent to route 1 properties towards the end August, followed by letters towards the end of September;
- the initial communication to route 2 properties will be sent out early September, with reminders at the end of the month and the visits to properties starting at the end of October;
- contact with route 3 properties will start with care homes and Chetwynd Barracks in August and with the university in late September.

A Communications Strategy will be developed to inform residents of the changes to the canvas process and timetable in due course.