



**Sandwell**  
Metropolitan Borough Council

## **Chairman's Report of the Select Committee for Electoral Participation**



**Tuesday 16 July 2019**



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## Introduction

Councillor Steve Melia

Chair of the Select Committee for Electoral Participation



At the meeting of the Council on the 22 May, the Council established the Select Committee for Electoral Participation. Changes in electorate numbers had been highlighted and the Committee was established to examine the current processes employed in Sandwell to maximise electoral registration, engagement and participation within the Borough.

The purpose of the Committee is to work collaboratively with Members, officers, other council departments and partnership groups to discuss and investigate the current mechanisms in place to actively engage and promote electoral participation and registration.

In 2013 a Committee looked at the specific challenges associated with the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). This review is timely now that IER has been in place for a number of years and the appointment of a new Electoral Services Manager who is reviewing all office practices and processes to ensure that all the legal requirements and Electoral Commission performance standards are being met.

The Committee held four meetings this year and some excellent results have been achieved. Guest speakers from schools and faith organisations provided the Committee with information from their perspective and also highlighted some key areas of engagement to be focused on moving forward.

I am extremely pleased as the Chair of this Committee with the dedicated work that has been undertaken this year. It is clear that Sandwell has produced some excellent results in ensuring all eligible residents are engaged and able to participate in the electoral process.

Voter apathy in the current political climate is a problem and generally turnout levels for voting are low. However, I believe this Committee has identified and adopted many new innovative ways to enable electoral participation and engagement and has seen some excellent results particularly the increase in electorate levels.

The focus of the Committee going forward will be to continually review and monitor the Council's electoral services, electoral participation and engagement strategy.

Finally, as Chair of the Select Committee for Electoral Participation I would like to thank all the members who served on the Committee during the year, the officers who have made a significant contribution and our external partners including many schools and faith organisations across Sandwell who have all contributed to its success.

**Cllr. Steve Melia**

## Background

The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) has a duty under Section 9A of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013) to take all necessary steps to comply with their duty to maintain the electoral register, and to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that all those eligible are registered in it.

In addition to the statutory requirements for electoral registration and participation, the Electoral Commission's performance standards framework details the objectives that all EROs should be delivering.

The overall objective of the performance standards framework is to ensure that EROs plan for and deliver well-run electoral registration services. The framework was developed around key outcomes from the perspective of ensuring that all eligible people are able to participate in the electoral process, should they wish to do so, and of achieving electoral registers that are as accurate and complete as possible.

The most significant change that there has been to electoral registration is the move to Individual Electoral Registration in July 2014. Each elector must now register to vote individually compared to the previous system where one member of the household registered on behalf of all residents.

The main rationale behind the new system was to help tackle electoral fraud and improve confidence in the electoral register. The new system enabled a more modern approach with online voting facilities. This, however, required a cultural shift in behaviour for people to take responsibility for their own registration.

Registration needs to be supported by a strategy robust enough to ensure levels of registration are maximised across all demographic groups. Whilst the new system is convenient and as efficient as possible for the vast majority of users, there is concern that the new system risks a drop off in registration numbers from those who are currently under-represented on the register.

The ERO has a duty to promote participation in the electoral process within the borough of Sandwell. Maximising the number of voters registered relies on an effective engagement strategy with robust processes sitting behind it.

This report examines the current processes and initiatives in place to maximise electoral participation and identify any areas where more action is required.

## **Examination of existing current engagement strategies**

Since the introduction of IER in 2014, Sandwell has developed a comprehensive programme of activities and methods to facilitate participation and engagement. The Committee has discovered that there has been a lot of work done to build relationships with partners and stakeholders as well as developing a school democracy programme across the borough.

The Committee was tasked with examining the current processes and methods in how Sandwell currently engages with citizens and to explore other ways in which the Council can make sure we are meeting all our statutory requirements, whilst ensuring that anyone who is eligible to vote, can vote.

At the first meeting held on the 19 July the Committee agreed a number of initiatives to be explored, specifically how we engage with schools and young voters, ethnic minority groups and the traditionally hard to reach groups such as, home movers, people in houses of multiple occupancy and people living in deprived communities disengaged from the process.

This document sets out the investigations that have taken place and details the findings of the Committee where new initiatives need to be put in place to drive the success of Sandwell's participation and engagement strategy.

### **Engagement with Schools**

There are 22 schools in the borough of which 8 have student ambassadors in place. Events undertaken have built very good relationships with schools but a more targeted approach is needed with the use of data sets obtained from the Local Authority Education Department. Below is a list of the current activities that have taken place since the introduction of IER in 2014.

- Student democracy programme
- Currently have 25 ambassadors in 8 schools
- Voter ID cards for 16 year olds.
- College democracy events – surgeries to assist with registering to vote
- Some schools having their own “your vote your choice social media accounts”
- Interactive workshops which include mock elections, question time with Elected Members and school leadership elections.

The engagement with schools' programme has been very successful in terms of raising awareness of democracy and educating students about the importance of voting.

The current programme also includes work with Colleges in Sandwell and Dudley. Dudley College has a very active Student Union that is keen to promote all activities. Activities currently include; attending fresher fairs, voter registration surgeries and attending parents' evenings.

Interactive workshops have been rolled out across some schools and colleges. The workshops focus on providing information on how democracy works, how important it is to be engaged and have your say, and how individuals can participate in areas of democracy and

participation which include student school leadership elections. Mock elections are a good way to introduce young people to voting. The elections are set up with a polling station and actual ballot papers which show the students just what “real voting” is like.

Voter ID cards are also produced for students and these have been very well received. Ambassadors from within the school promote these cards to students. This has been more successful in some schools than others.

At the meeting of the committee on the 14 December 2018, ambassadors from the following schools attended the meeting; George Salter Academy, Woodensborough Academy, Q3 Academy Langley and Holly Lodge.

The Select Committee was informed about the workshops that have been undertaken and how they have helped students to understand the importance of democracy. As part of the Council’s commitment to Vision 2030, students from Q3 Academy received a presentation on the Vision 2030 and took part in a voting process relating to matters that were important to them in their lives. The students fed back very positively about the work but commented on how there were many students that were still not engaged.

As part of the student feedback, Members were informed of cultural barriers that prevented some female students being unable to engage due to meetings or conferences being held in the evening.

It was evident from the student feedback that the work that has been undertaken to promote awareness and teach young people about the importance of participating in democracy was positive. It was also clear that students felt so many of their peers were not engaged.

Members of the Select Committee suggested the following activities for young people; visits to the Big House, shadowing Councillors and MPs and students observing Cabinet meetings. Moving forward this type of engagement work would benefit from a wider Council approach and be linked in to the Council’s framework for Vision 2030.

### ***What has the Committee discovered?***

The activities around engagement with schools have been very positive. Engagement with young people can be broken down into two areas. Firstly, building the awareness of democracy and showing students how democracy works and the benefits of taking part. Secondly, it is how we translate that to numbers of students on the electoral register

The Government’s changes to school curriculums mean that democracy is now included as part of PHSE lessons. The Committee would like to see all schools expand their programme and utilise the range of Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission resources available to enable students to be engaged in democracy.

In assessing the benefits of our current range of activities, officers liaised with the Local Authority’s Education Department to obtain the number of 16/17 year olds on their student database. Currently in the borough there are over 8,000 students, this number being a combination of 16 and 17 year olds.

If we look how that translates to the electoral register, an analysis of the register showed that currently there are only 2,458, 16 and 17 year olds registered in Sandwell. Compared to last year's figure of 2,327.

The figures show that whilst Sandwell has had a very successful democracy in schools programme, this has not translated into numbers of young electors on the register.

To combat this, it is a recommendation of the Committee for the entire list of the Local Authority Education data to be made available to the Electoral Services team. Individuals can then be targeted and invited to register. This is a crucial element of engagement and participation.

The Committee would also like to see the excellent relationships that have been built with school and colleges continue and the Young Ambassadors programme be taken up by all schools and colleges.

The Select Committee recommends that a quarterly meeting of Ambassadors take place. This would enable officers and students to work together in developing an engagement plan that includes a programme of events designed at getting more young voters involved in the process but equally as important, is increasing the numbers of students that are registered.

### **Community Engagement**

The community engagement programme is required in order to build awareness of the importance of electoral participation. To enable people to register as simply as possible and ensure messages are received by all areas of the community. Effective community engagement needs to be specifically targeted to the audience and communications delivered via appropriate channels. Current engagement activities that have been used are:

- Voter registration surgeries based in faith centres
- Advertising, use of radio and newspapers, social media
- Promotion from within the Council Inc. Sandwell Herald
- Citizenship ceremonies
- Neighbourhood Housing Officers promoting registration

The Committee has examined current initiatives. Voter registration surgeries are held at times of the year and target the harder to reach parts of the community. This involves officers attending various faith based organisation's meetings and being available to assist citizens with completion of their Household Enquiry Forms and registering to vote. This method is very community based and its success does rely on how many people attend the surgeries.

The borough of Sandwell has many BME communities who are recognised as one of the hardest to reach groups to engage with. In several wards within Sandwell, English is not the first language. In some areas over 50% of the electorate are of BME origin, which can present a challenge and the right method of communication needs to be used. The use of Raj FM and New Style Radio to advertise is an example of a new initiative that has proven very effective.

In terms of community engagement one of the key recommendations will be the introduction of "all year round" canvassers who specifically target outstanding Invitations to Register. This

is a measurable way of targeting key wards and non-responding areas and also assists with language barriers in wards where English is not the first language.

Whilst the surgeries that are held during the canvass period assist those that are already engaged, the focus needs to be on people that are not engaged. We need to be able to identify and target individuals who are not currently engaged in the electoral process.

### **Partnership and Collaborative Working**

The Select Committee recommends a whole council approach to this to utilise the resources from other council departments. Local Authority “outreach” Neighbourhood Officers visit many properties across the borough, in particular households who are disadvantaged and therefore could be disengaged. This resource could be utilised more effectively. Importantly this should be a year-round approach and not limited to the strategies put in place to support the Annual Canvass.

The Select Committee also identified that across the six towns of the borough there are a variety of community events that can be linked into the Council’s engagement strategy. The Safer Six Programme is an example of how a partnership approach can be used. Officers who are out in the community could be utilised to raise awareness and promote electoral registration.

The Select Committee would like to see a “Democracy Lead” appointed in each of the six towns. Again, this gives Officers the chance to meet one another and work collaboratively. The Electoral Services Manager has discussed this with Neighbourhood Managers who are very keen to assist with the Council’s public engagement strategy.

The Select Committee has also identified other channels and targeted methods of communication to be explored.

Other initiatives include:

- Voluntary Sector Council who place articles in their newsletters regarding electoral registration.
- Use of social media including Twitter and Facebook to raise awareness of both elections and the annual canvass.
- Mailshots in the main community languages.
- YouTube videos to show people how to complete and return their Household forms.
- Posters and messages in key community places such as doctors, dentists and libraries.

It is clear that current initiatives and activities that have been used are successful and Sandwell can demonstrate that it uses proactive methods and different channels to engage and target citizens.

Elected members engage with the electorate on a daily basis, The committee have put forward a recommendation that if an elector contacts their Councillor with a query that the electoral roll is checked to see if the individual is registered.

The introduction of a Council wide approach and effective partnership working will only enhance the work streams currently in place, but using methods that are more targeted will maximise the Council’s ability to engage with the electorate and increase registration levels.

## **Data Matching and Data Mining**

A key element of electoral participation is identifying individuals who may be eligible to be registered and invite them to register where they are. Data sets available from within the Council provide officers with data that can be cross referenced against the electoral register. This enables officers to then target potential electors.

There are a wide variety of data sources available to EROs that may be suitable for local data matching. These could include, but are not limited to:

- Adult Social Care data
- Local Authority billing and payments data
- Blue Badge data
- Customer Service database
- Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit database
- Housing (inc. arms-length management organisations) data
- Leisure database
- Libraries data
- Parking Permits database
- Payroll data
- Penalty Charge Notice data
- Registrar data on births, deaths and marriages
- Schools admissions data

Previously there have been barriers to using all Local Authority data in terms of accessing the data and the legislation that supports it. To enable ERO to carry out their duty the following regulations are in place to allow access to Local Authority data.

Regulations 23 and 35 Representation of the People Regulations 2001 are the relevant regulations that allow the ERO to use all Local Authority Data sources.

Regulation 23 allows the ERO to require any person to supply them with information required for purposes of the EROs duties in maintaining the Register of Electors. The ERO is therefore entitled to request data sets from organisations where the ERO deems it necessary for the purpose of verifying the identity of an applicant.

Regulation 35 allows the ERO to inspect any data held by the council which has appointed the ERO.

Effective data matching enables new potential electors to be identified and highlights any household changes. There are many benefits to data matching including:

- the reduced reliance on obtaining information about potential electors from the annual canvass
- decreased volumes of changes to households at canvass time which will mean a reduction in the resources needed at this time.
- Year-round registration activity and at times when the ERO considers most effective.
- Targeted registration activity which then maximises the chance of success.

The Select Committee has discovered that there are a limited number of data sets currently being used. Currently the Council's Council Tax data is used to "data match" and identify potential electors by interrogating the Council Tax movers list. Per the list above, this is only a tiny proportion of the data available to the ERO that is currently being utilised. Utilising all of the data available would mean that the ERO could check the accuracy of the electoral register more effectively and identify new electors that need to register. It is important that data sets are used all year round to target new electors and not isolated to the Annual Canvass.

It is essential though that Council Tax data relating to properties that qualify for single person discount is used at the Annual Canvass to match properties that we already hold the information for. This not only helps to make the register more accurate but it also drives efficiency as it reduces the number of properties that require a "door knock" by a personal canvasser during the Annual Canvass.

The Select Committee have seen some significant results from effective use of the council tax data base; this will be detailed in the Annual Canvass section of this report.

Given the number of data sets available the Select Committee recommends that the following data sets are accessed and used.

- Housing List of all New Tenants
- The Blue Badge Scheme.
- Complete list of all school leavers aged 16 and 17.

Using Local Authority data gives the Electoral Services team the opportunity to measure the success of some of the engagement strategies and methods. When individuals are identified they can be added directly to the electoral management software and therefore the process can start to "invite a person to register". For example, comparing the list of the new tenants from the housing data set to the register will demonstrate how many new tenants have actually signed up to the electoral register when they have met with housing officers to complete their housing application.

To ensure the Council is meeting all its statutory requirements in relation to the Data Protection Act 2018, a revised annual Data Sharing Agreement between the ERO and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council as a whole will be incorporated into any engagement strategy going forward.

### **Annual Canvass**

In order to effectively deliver well run electoral registration services, the Annual Canvass needs to be underpinned by robust project planning and an effective public engagement strategy that identifies the challenges in the registration area.

The Annual Canvass involves sending a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) from to all residential properties across the borough, and subsequently sending Invitations to Register (ITR) to any new potential electors that have been added to the HEF. Should a response to the HEF not be received the ERO is required to send reminders and conduct a personal visit. The Annual Canvass is a huge challenge for EROs since the introduction of IER.

The Select Committee are very pleased to report that the Annual Canvass in 2018 was very successful. The service achieved a 93% response rate to the Household Enquiry Form compared to last year's 86%. This significant increase in response rates was achieved whilst also reducing the overall cost of the canvass by £28,000. These results were achieved by the introduction of telephone and email canvassing of properties and maximising the data set received from the Local Authorities Council Tax department. This assisted in reducing the "door knocking" costs whilst increasing response rates.

The new channels of communication and canvassing methods also produced an increase in the electorate. At the end of 2017 there had been a reduction in the electorate and the introduction of the Select Committee was timely to consider ways in which the electorate could be increased.

The strategies and engagement activities adopted at last year's canvass helped to substantially increase the electorate. This included specifically targeting empty/void properties and interrogating the Council Tax database to data match. The strategies were not isolated to the Annual Canvass and officers continued to use the new methods of chasing pending electors by telephone and email until the start of the Local Elections in May 2019.

Individual Electoral Registration requires a response from a household but each individual must then register. The results achieved this year show that we need to maximise our resources and efforts to follow up any invitations to register that are issued. This should not be isolated to just the annual canvass.

The table below shows the increase in Sandwell's electorate from April 2018 to July 2019:

Ward	Electorate 2017	Electorate 2018	Electorate 2019
Abbey	8490	8178	8490
Blackheath	9369	9073	9247
Bristnall	9172	8834	9093
Charlemont with Grove Vale	9495	9124	9325
Cradley Heath and Old Hill	10292	9849	10164
Friar Park	9006	8593	8818
Great Barr with Yew Tree	9723	9518	9820
Great Bridge	9796	9215	9610
Greets Green and Lyng	8754	8493	9004
Hateley Heath	10077	9504	9958
Langley	9336	8933	9412
Newton	8841	8532	8732
Old Warley	9267	9049	9164
Oldbury	9842	9032	9763
Princes End	9318	8992	9247
Rowley	9208	9074	9633
Smethwick	9610	9149	9572
Soho and Victoria	9825	9309	9982
St. Paul's	9773	9557	10129
Tipton Green	10230	9966	10527
Tividale	9170	9004	9236
Wednesbury North	9267	9031	9238
Wednesbury South	9841	9690	10066
West Bromwich Central	9735	9474	9800
	227437	219173	228030

This increase demonstrates the success of the Committee's work and the positive results that effective use of internal datasets can have.

### Care homes

Residents of care homes are entitled to be registered to vote in the same way as any other eligible residents. EROs are required to take the same steps to canvass care homes and issue ITR's as any other residential property. Reaching care home residents can present a number of challenges and difficulties. These challenges range from getting care home managers to engage with the process, to the fact that some residents may not easily be able to provide the required documentation to register.

Currently Sandwell has 63 registered care homes across the borough; the number of electors registered is 1,110. Across the UK 4% of people aged over 65 are resident in care homes which equates to 416,000 people.

Given the challenges, it proves more beneficial to canvass and target care homes separately and engage with them on an individual basis. The approach currently adopted is for a canvasser to contact the care home by telephone and obtain any information regarding changes to residency.

#### ***What did the Select Committee discover?***

The method in which we canvass care homes needs to be as robust as the method we approach any other property. Telephone Canvassing is hugely successful and an effective method of engaging. However personal visits are also effective and to ensure that the

information held is as accurate as it can be, the Select Committee has recommended that at least every other year a personal visit is conducted to all care homes. This will help to build relationships with care home managers. Changes happen frequently in care homes and it is important to capture the changes accurately.

### **Enforcing Registration**

At the meeting of the Select Committee on the 14 December, Members suggested that to increase engagement and participation across the borough, the legal penalties around the registration framework should be imposed.

Under IER, a civil penalty may be imposed on those who have been issued with a requirement to register notice and failed to register by a certain date. The amount of the civil penalty is £80. Any costs that are associated with the enforcement of the notice are paid by the Local Authority. Any monies that are collected as a result of such penalties are then forwarded to Cabinet Office to be paid into the Consolidated Fund.

By law, a person who has received a HEF must provide that information to the ERO. Whilst there is no requirement for the form itself to be returned, there is a criminal penalty of a fine of up to £1,000 for not responding to request for information. Again, any legal costs associated with pursuing the prosecution are paid by the Local Authority.

The Select Committee concluded that the potential costs in pursuing any civil penalty could be significant to the Local Authority with there being very little benefit as a result of the action.

### **Future Changes to the Annual Canvass**

The Annual Canvass is currently both expensive and heavily paper-based, requiring each residential property in a local authority area to receive up to three paper Household Enquiry Forms. Where there is no response to the paper forms, a personal visit by canvasser is required in order to gain a response during the canvass period. This causes additional burdens on EROs.

Having piloted alternative approaches to the canvass during 2016 and 2017 with a range of local authority areas, the Government have evidence that improvements can be put in place to streamline the process, reduce reliance on paper and target the properties which require activity without reducing the accuracy or completeness of the electoral registers. The proposal for the new Annual Canvass blends together elements of each of the pilots and are outlined below.

The new model has a data discernment step (where the electoral register is matched against existing data) using both national and local data, at the start of the canvass. This will enable EROs to identify those households where the individuals living at the household remain unchanged, and are therefore advised they do not need to take any action, allowing them to target more resources at those households where changes are most likely to have occurred, canvassing the same way as now.

The new model will allow a mixture of communication methods (email, telephone and paper) where most appropriate and gives greater flexibility to EROs to shape their canvass to activities which best suit their local circumstances.

These changes are welcomed by Electoral Administrators because it allows time and resources to be focused on any new potential electors. The scheduled implementation date is July 2020, which means that Sandwell will need to review and adapt its Strategy for maximising engagement now and ensure that the process of local data matching is implemented fully before the start of the new canvass.

## Summary of Findings and Conclusions

From reviewing all the current methods and activities for engagement, the Select Committee considers that there are several mechanisms that are in place to ensure that the ERO is meeting their duty to encourage voter participation and engagement.

The five areas where the Committee has identified new methods and approaches that need to form part of Sandwell's Public Engagement Strategy are listed below. The Committee has made 19 recommendations related to these areas which are detailed in Appendix 2.

- Effective use of Local Authority data

The use of all Local Authority Data to identify new electors enabling a targeted, measurable approach.

- Democracy in schools and young voter engagement

Widen the number of schools who participate in the programme and extend this to all schools in the borough.

- Whole Council approach to partnership working

Engage all council departments in ensuring that registration is promoted at every customer contact.

- Streamline the Annual Canvass

To drive the digital agenda with the use of new techniques that utilise all channels of communication with the electorate.

- Targeted Community Engagement with under registered groups

To summarise, the Select Committee has identified a number of ways in which engagement and participation can be increased. The critical part of any participation and engagement strategy is to monitor, review and evaluate activities to ensure that the Council's strategy remains effective and inclusive. This means refining the profile of the registration area, checking the audience and confirming target groups, and reviewing the channels available for engaging with residents.

It is fair to say that democracy in the United Kingdom has faced unprecedented developments over the last few years and will continue to meet new and unpredictable circumstances in future. Despite significant changes to make registration easier and more accessible than it has ever been there are still many barriers in place.

The continued work of the Select Committee moving forward will help to steer and drive continuous change and facilitate new and innovative approaches to engagement. This will not only help with the completeness and accuracy of the Electoral Register in line with statutory requirements, it will ensure that all eligible residents of Sandwell are engaged in the electoral process and exercise their democratic right. In line with Ambition 10 of the Council's Vision 2030 it is essential that democracy remains relevant to people's lives and at the very heart of the community.