



# Continuous electoral registration in Northern Ireland

November 2012

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# Foreword

Electoral registration in Northern Ireland has undergone fundamental change over the last ten years. Since 2002 Northern Ireland has used a system of individual electoral registration, which means that anyone wanting to have their name included in a register must provide their name, address, date of birth and national insurance number on an individually-signed form. Until 2006, electors were required to provide this information every year in order to remain registered to vote in Northern Ireland.

In 2006 the system was changed to remove the requirement for individuals to provide their personal identifiers each year in order to remain on the electoral register. As part of this system of continuous registration, the Chief Electoral Officer was no longer required to conduct a fresh canvass of electors every year, and the names of electors were retained on the register until the Chief Electoral Officer was notified of a change of name or address. The Chief Electoral Officer was also given additional powers to access information from other public sector organisations, in order to identify new electors or update the details of people who may have moved house.

When the system changed in 2006 the Commission gave a commitment to monitoring the accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's electoral register on an on-going basis. In 2008 we published our first research report and concluded that after one year of continuous electoral registration the Chief Electoral Officer had ensured a high level of accuracy, but that sustained effort would be required to maintain that level.

This second research report considers the impact of continuous electoral registration in Northern Ireland since our last report. It is clear that there has been a significant and worrying decline in both the accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's electoral register. Our research shows that the register in use on 1 April 2012 was 78% accurate; one in five entries related to people who were no longer resident at that address. The register was 71% complete; an estimated 400,000 people were not registered at their correct address.

There is broad support for individual electoral registration from all the main political parties in Northern Ireland, and agreement that it has contributed to a much more secure and robust system of registration. Individual electoral registration has addressed widely held perceptions that the electoral process was vulnerable to fraud, and voters' confidence in the integrity of the electoral process has increased.

Until now, however, the system of continuous registration has not been fully evaluated, and it is clear from our new research that a number of issues need to be addressed urgently. Given the scale of the problem identified in this research report, it is simply not an option to continue with the current approach to maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland. Without immediate and

sustained action the number of people unable to participate effectively in future elections, because they are not accurately registered, will continue to rise.

Our report concludes that the Chief Electoral Officer's use of information generated by data matching techniques is, by itself, insufficient for maintaining an accurate and complete register in Northern Ireland. In order to address the growing problem we have identified, the Chief Electoral Officer should respond urgently to these findings and take immediate steps to implement the recommendations we have made in this report. This will require the commitment and support of the UK Government, through the Northern Ireland Office, and the Electoral Commission. For our part we are ready to provide support and advice, including public awareness work to support registration activity, and advice and evidence drawn from the experience of Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain. We look forward to a strong commitment from the UK Government to help the Chief Electoral Officer tackle the challenge.

This report also highlights the positive impact of the targeted initiatives carried out by the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff – including the schools initiative, for example, which results in thousands of young people being added to the register each year. It will be important for the Chief Electoral Officer to build on these initiatives, and to continue to identify new and imaginative ways to reach out to under-registered groups. The recent agreement by the Chief Electoral Officer to work with the Electoral Commission to establish a performance standards framework for electoral registration will also help to improve the standard of electoral registration in Northern Ireland.

In this report we also identify some important lessons for the implementation of individual electoral registration in Great Britain. As the UK Parliament continues to debate the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill, it is important to recognise that many of the key lessons from the experience of Northern Ireland have already been addressed by the proposals included in the Bill. In particular, retaining annual household registration activity and removing the requirement for electors to provide their personal identifiers each year when they have not moved house will help to avoid many of the consequences for the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers which we have highlighted in this report.

We will continue to monitor the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain. We expect to publish a further update report on Northern Ireland's electoral register in 2014. We will also carry out similar research before and after the implementation of individual electoral registration in Great Britain. The findings from these reports will continue to contribute to a better understanding of how to ensure future elections across the UK are supported by accurate and complete electoral registers.

Anna Carragher  
Electoral Commissioner for Northern Ireland

# Executive summary

This research report relates directly to the Electoral Commission's objective of well-run elections, referendums and electoral registration. High-quality electoral registers underpin the achievement of this objective. If participation in the electoral process is to be maximised and risk of electoral malpractice minimised, it is essential that the register in Northern Ireland used at elections has high levels of accuracy and completeness.

Our definitions of accuracy and completeness are provided in the box below.

## Definitions of accuracy and completeness

Accuracy: 'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'<sup>1</sup>

Completeness: 'every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered'

## Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland

The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) for Northern Ireland is responsible for maintaining the electoral register. Since 2006, this has been achieved through a process of continuous registration, where once an eligible elector has registered, they do not have to re-register unless their details change – for example, if they have changed their name and/or address. The Chief Electoral Officer has access to specified data sources to assist him in maintaining the register.

These data sources include the Business Services Organisation (providing data from general practitioner lists), the Department of Work and Pensions, schools and the Registrar General.

Unlike electoral registration officers in Great Britain, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland has not been subject to the Electoral Commission's performance standards framework, which monitors the quality of electoral registration work undertaken. In November 2012, the Commission agreed a set of draft electoral registration standards for the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. These provide a framework for him to report on the detail of the work he carries out to meet his statutory registration objectives. These will be piloted until 31 March 2013. The Chief Electoral Officer's assessment of how he has met the standards will be included in his annual report from 2013-14 onwards.

This research report aims, among other purposes, to provide information to the Chief Electoral Officer to assist him in making a recommendation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about whether a canvass needs to be conducted to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register.

## Our approach

The approach taken to this research builds on the previous research in Northern Ireland into the December 2007 register, and the 2010/2011 research which looked at the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain. As with those studies, the research involved house-to-house surveying by trained interviewers with the aim of gathering information from residents which could be checked against the details held on the electoral registers.

Due to updated definitions of accuracy and completeness used in this report, comparison with the previous estimates relating to the December 2007 Northern Ireland register should be made with caution.

## Key findings

### Completeness

- The completeness of the April 2012 parliamentary register was 73% and the local government register was 71%
- This equates to approximately 400,000 people not included on the electoral register at their current address in April 2012. However, this does not mean that the register should be larger by 400,000 entries, because many (but not all) of those not accurately registered may still have been represented on the register by an inaccurate entry (for example at a previous address)

Completeness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland has deteriorated considerably since previous estimates.

### Accuracy

- The accuracy of both the parliamentary and local government registers was 78%.
- The majority of inaccuracies are related to entries for people who were no longer resident at the address.
- While not directly comparable, accuracy of the electoral register in Northern Ireland has deteriorated considerably since previous estimates.
- The inclusion of a significant number of inaccurate entries on the Northern Ireland register is inflating the overall size of the register.

## Population differences

- Length of residence is a key variable affecting accuracy and completeness. Completeness levels are 85% for those who have been resident at their property for over five years but drops to only 7% for those who have been living at their property for less than a year
- Those who own their property, either outright or with a mortgage, are more likely to be on the register than those who rent. Completeness is particularly low for those who rent from a private landlord – only 26%
- There is a strong correlation between age and registration. In general older age groups are more likely to be registered, especially those aged 65+, for whom the completeness level is 90%. Completeness levels are lower for all other age groups, and have declined since the previous study, with the exception of 16-17 year olds.
- Completeness varies by nationality; for British and Irish citizens it is 73% whereas for Commonwealth and EU citizens it is 58%.
- Those in higher socio-economic groups are more likely to be registered. Completeness is particularly low amongst the C2 group, at 66%

## Explaining the findings

- Previous research has shown that population movement is the key factor affecting electoral registration and the evidence from this report supports this.
- In particular, it does not appear that the processes currently employed to manage the register in Northern Ireland under continuous registration are able to keep pace with either population change or home movement.
- This means that not all of those becoming eligible to register or moving are being added to the register, and also that where people have moved from a property, a proportion of redundant register entries are not being removed.
- Data matching initiatives have not been able to compensate for a full canvass of all households. The reasons for this require further investigation as the current data matching initiatives have not yet been robustly evaluated. Likely explanations include the quality and volume of data received and how this data is used to target people.
- The failure to remove many redundant entries means that the continued growth in the overall size of the register is not a good indicator of its quality as a proportion of the increase is due to accumulated inaccuracies.

- Initiatives that effectively target particular groups, such as 16-17 year olds via the schools initiative, have a very positive impact on completeness.
- Interest in politics is an important driver of registration and the declining estimates for accuracy and completeness are set against declining interest in politics. Indeed, there was an increase of 25% of the population saying they were not at all interested in politics between 1998 and 2009.

## Recommendations for change

The evidence presented in this report shows a significant and worrying decline in the accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's electoral register, largely as a result of an approach to maintaining the register which has not been able to keep pace with population movement. An immediate and sustained programme of action is required to address and reverse the trend identified in this report. There will be important elections in Northern Ireland over the next four years and there is a risk that they could be held using registers which fail to include hundreds of thousands of eligible electors and contain redundant entries which increase the vulnerability of the register to misuse.

We have therefore identified a series of actions which should be taken by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, with the support of the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Commission to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers in Northern Ireland. These actions are required not only in the immediate short-term to ensure electors are able to participate in the forthcoming elections in Northern Ireland, but also over the longer-term to ensure that future elections are not undermined by poor quality electoral registers.

Before the 2014 elections, we recommend:

1. Household registration activity, involving all necessary steps to identify who is entitled to be registered in respect of a property, to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers
2. Appropriate funding for this activity should be made available to the CEO
3. There should be public awareness activity to support the household registration work

In addition to this household activity, and beginning immediately, we recommend that the CEO should:

4. Review all existing agreements with data holding organisations to ensure that they provide effective support to enable him to meet his statutory registration objectives

5. Review the effectiveness of his existing processes for contacting electors identified through data matching, in order to encourage registration applications/updates/and to review/remove redundant entries

Finally, over the medium- to long-term, we recommend that the UK government introduces legislation to:

6. Extend to Northern Ireland the performance standards framework that applies in Great Britain
7. Amend the statutory framework for the conduct of the canvass in Northern Ireland in order to allow for a more effective and efficient process, more closely aligned with Great Britain

On-going monitoring of the state of the register in Northern Ireland will also be essential. The CEO will assess his performance against the Commission standards for the pilot period up to 31 March 2013 and will provide the Commission with all relevant information/ data to complete its assessment in mid April 2013. We also plan to undertake a further study into levels of accuracy and completeness in Northern Ireland in 2014.

# 1 Introduction

1.1 This report sets out our most recent research into the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland compiled using the system of continuous registration.<sup>1</sup> The research comprised a household survey of the accuracy and completeness of the 1 April 2012 electoral register.

1.2 Electoral registration underpins the democratic process and is the means by which eligible electors can participate at elections and in other important civic functions. Our last assessment of the accuracy and completeness of the register in Northern Ireland is now five years old. It was conducted in 2008 and assessed the register published on 1 December 2007. This was one year after the requirement for an annual canvass ended and continuous registration was introduced (this change is explained in Chapter 2).

1.3 Understanding the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland not only provides important information for the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) but also allows for lessons to be learned for the rest of the UK. This is particularly important given that the UK Government proposes to move to a system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) with similarities to the registration system in Northern Ireland. The Commission supports this move as an important improvement in how people register to vote (see chapter 7 for the lessons from this research for the introduction of IER in Great Britain).

## The uses of the electoral registers

1.4 The electoral register underpins elections in Northern Ireland by providing the list of those who are eligible to vote. Those not included on the register cannot take part in elections. The register is also used for other public purposes. For example, the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland use the register to calculate electoral quotas when they review parliamentary boundaries. Political parties can also access the register for purposes such as organising campaigning around election time.

1.5 The register is used as the basis for selecting people to undertake jury service and for certain law enforcement and crime prevention purposes. Credit reference agencies are able to purchase a complete copy of the register, which they use to confirm addresses supplied by applicants for bank accounts, credit cards, personal loans and mortgages.

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<sup>1</sup> Continuous electoral registration is the system for maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland in the absence of the annual canvass used in Great Britain. For full details on the operation of continuous registration please see Chapter 3.

# Defining accuracy and completeness

1.6 The quality of the registers in the UK is considered in two main ways: their accuracy and their completeness.

1.7 By **accuracy** we mean that ‘there are no false entries on the electoral registers’.<sup>2</sup>

1.8 The accuracy of the electoral registers is expressed as the percentage of entries on the registers which relate to verified and eligible voters who are resident at that address. Inaccurate register entries may relate to entries which have become redundant (for example, due to home movement), which are ineligible and have been included unintentionally, or which are fraudulent.

1.9 By **completeness**<sup>3</sup> we mean that ‘every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered’.

1.10 The completeness of the electoral registers refers to the percentage of eligible people who are registered at their current address. The proportion of eligible people who are not included on the register at their current address constitutes the rate of under-registration.

1.11 These definitions are in line with the registration objectives of the Chief Electoral Officer as set out below.

## Registration objectives for the Chief Electoral Officer

These registration objectives for the Chief Electoral Officer are set out in Section 10ZB of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and are “to secure, so far as reasonably practicable –

- That every person who is entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it,
- That no person who is not entitled to be registered in a register is registered in it, and

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<sup>2</sup> This definition is different from that used in the previous research in Northern Ireland, on the December 2007 register. In that research, the accuracy of a register entry related only to the address, i.e. whether the person on the register was still resident at the address. The Commission’s current definition of inaccuracy includes errors related to the elector’s name although we exclude minor errors, such as slight misspellings of an elector’s name, which would not prevent an eligible elector from being able to vote.

<sup>3</sup> In Northern Ireland, the term comprehensiveness is often used instead of completeness. In our previous research on the December 2007 register, comprehensiveness was defined as the percentage of the eligible population who are on the register regardless of where they live in Northern Ireland. The Commission’s current definition of completeness requires an elector to be registered at their current address in order to be considered ‘complete’.

- That none of the required information relating to any person registered in a register is false.

The Chief Electoral Officer has a legal duty to set out, in his annual report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, an assessment of the extent to which the relevant registration objectives have been met. In each year since the introduction of continuous registration the Chief Electoral Officer has reported that all three statutory objectives have largely been met.

## Producing accuracy and completeness estimates

1.12 There are various methods which can be used to assess the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers, which differ mainly on the frequency with which they can be used, the cost of the research and the reliability of the results. These approaches are set out below, while Appendix A outlines each of the approaches in more detail and considers their strengths and limitations.

**1.13 Using random-sample, door-to-door surveys:** This is the approach that has been adopted in this research to produce estimates of the April 2012 register in Northern Ireland. It was previously used to assess the accuracy and completeness of the registers in Great Britain in 2011 and of eight local authority case study areas in Great Britain in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

**1.14 Comparing electoral statistics (number of entries on the registers) with mid-year population estimates:** these two datasets can be used to provide relatively crude estimates of the annual registration rates (i.e. the completeness of the registers) at national and subnational levels, although they cannot be used to report on the accuracy of the registers. This calculation suffers from the lack of data on the eligible population (taking account of nationality) and from the presence of duplicate and/or inaccurate entries on the electoral registers.

**1.15 Matching Census records against the electoral registers:** a sample of Census returns or data from the Census Coverage Survey can be cross-matched against the electoral registers to derive estimates of accuracy and completeness, although this exercise can only be repeated every 10 years.

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<sup>4</sup> The Electoral Commission, *The completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain: case studies* (March 2010)

The Electoral Commission, *Great Britain's electoral registers* (December 2011)

# Our research programme

1.16 We undertake research into electoral registers in order to:

- provide an overview of the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in the UK
- provide up-to-date information on those groups that are more likely to be under-registered and thereby inform our approach to public awareness activity.
- provide on-going tracking of how electoral registers change in response to legislative developments, administrative change or population change and use this tracking to inform our role in scrutinising proposals and policies to revise the registration system.
- develop an understanding of good practice from across the UK to inform our guidance and advice on electoral registration.
- assist with the identification of types of areas whose registers need to be improved, in order to complement our performance standards work

1.17 Since 2004, we have been the principal body in the United Kingdom undertaking research into the electoral registers. From 2004 – 2008 we published a series of desk research reports about electoral registration in Northern Ireland. These covered issues such as the impact of individual registration on people living in communal establishments, the implications of the reinstatement of electors for the register and the workings of continuous registration. Summary reports are available on our website.

1.18 Following the publication of our 2005 report focused on England and Wales, *Understanding electoral registration*, we focused particularly on the piloting and testing of new techniques for assessing accuracy and completeness. This arose because of our concern that there was limited scope to produce reliable estimates using existing approaches in the periods between the census of population, which takes place every 10 years.

1.19 Initial pilot research was carried out into the accuracy and completeness of the registers in Greater London in 2007. An assessment of the Northern Ireland register was published in 2008. Further research was conducted in 2009 on eight local authority registers in Great Britain and published in 2010. Most recently, an assessment of the registers across Great Britain was published in 2011.

1.20 This piece of research has as one of its key objectives providing information to the Chief Electoral Officer to assist him in making a recommendation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about whether a

canvass needs to be conducted for the purpose of meeting the relevant registration objective<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 inserted Section 10ZA of the Representation of the People Act 1983

# 2 Background to electoral registration in Northern Ireland

## Introduction

2.1 This chapter sets out the background to electoral registration in Northern Ireland. It discusses the franchise arrangements and looks at the introduction of individual electoral registration which replaced the previous system of household registration.

## The franchise for parliamentary and local government elections

2.2 Not every resident in the United Kingdom can register to vote. The entitlement to vote (and therefore to register) differs according to the type of election. There are two types of registers in place – the parliamentary registers and the local government registers (although practically they are held as a single list and differentiated by various markers against names of electors).<sup>6</sup> Since 1999 EU citizens have been eligible to vote at local, Northern Ireland Assembly and European Parliamentary elections and are therefore entitled to be on local government registers. However, as they are not eligible to vote at UK parliamentary elections they are not entitled to be on the parliamentary registers.

2.3 Table 1 sets out entitlement to vote by citizenship. Those not listed here are not eligible to be on either the parliamentary or local government registers.

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<sup>6</sup> The CEO is also required to maintain a register of those citizens of EU states who have applied to vote at European Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland and those peers living outside the UK who have made a declaration to vote at European Parliamentary elections.

Table 1: Franchise for elections.

Citizenship	UK Parliament	Northern Ireland Assembly	EU Parliament/ local government	Register
UK/Irish	√	√	√	Parliamentary and Local government
Commonwealth*	√	√	√	
European Union*	×	√	√	Local government

Notes: \* Commonwealth or EU citizens resident in the UK

2.4 The age at which citizens become entitled to vote is 18, but the electoral registers also include records of ‘attainers’ – those who will turn 18 before the end of the twelve month period starting from the next 1 December after their application for registration is made.

2.5 There are a small number of specific exceptions to these general rules. For instance, all convicted prisoners currently lose their right to vote as do some people detained in institutions due to severe mental illnesses. Anyone convicted of electoral offences will also be disqualified from voting for a specific period.

2.6 Unlike in Great Britain, there is a residency qualification in Northern Ireland. Before a person can be added to the electoral register they have to demonstrate that they have been resident in Northern Ireland for at least three months prior to their application for registration. The evidence requirements vary depending on the information held by the Chief Electoral Officer through the data matching arrangements.

## The introduction of individual registration

2.7 Between 1997 and 2001 a number of reports were produced by the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons and the Northern Ireland Office, about electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. A number of consistent themes emerged from these reports, including a widespread sense that electoral fraud was a major issue, that it was difficult to quantify and obtain conclusive evidence and that it needed to be addressed if confidence in the democratic process was to be maintained. By 2002, the debate generated by these reports had led to new legislation aimed at tackling the perceived problem of electoral fraud. The

Electoral Fraud Act received Royal Assent on 1 May 2002 and individual registration was introduced in September 2002.

2.8 The Act fundamentally changed the voter registration system in Northern Ireland. It replaced the system of household registration with individual registration, whereby all eligible persons have to register individually on an annual basis and provide personal identifiers in the form of date of birth, National Insurance number and signature. The Act also required voters to produce a specified form of photographic identification at polling stations before being issued with a ballot paper. In addition, Presiding Officers at polling stations were given a power to ask potential voters the following statutory question: “what is your date of birth?” The answer could then be verified against the date of birth the voter provided at the time of registration.

2.9 When the first electoral register under individual registration was published in December 2002, it contained almost 120,000 (approximately 10%) fewer names than the final register published under household registration in August 2002. This reduction was the subject of much media commentary and debate. The Commission produced a report assessing the operation of the Electoral Fraud Act after its first year in operation.<sup>7</sup> Our report concluded that the first register compiled under individual registration was less inaccurate than the last register compiled under household registration. It also highlighted, however, that more needed to be done to register specific groups, including young people, people with disabilities and those on low incomes, as research had shown that these groups were more likely to be under registered.

2.10 Our analysis concluded that the reduction in numbers registered was largely explained by the ending of the carry forward facility. Under the system of household registration names were carried forward, i.e. left on the register, for one year even if no response to confirm that entry was received during the annual canvass. Under individual registration this facility was no longer available and each individual would only be included on the register if they returned a registration form as part of the annual canvass. Other factors explaining the reduction included the fact that the number of attainers (16-17 year olds), who were no longer registered by the head of household as had been the case previously, declined substantially.

## Continued decline and reinstatement

2.11 In the period from 2004 to 2007 the Commission produced a series of research reports monitoring the impact of individual registration on the numbers

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<sup>7</sup> The Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, An assessment of its first year in operation, *December 2003*

of people registered.<sup>8</sup> The research demonstrated that the requirement to collect personal identifiers from every elector through the annual canvass every year (even if their registration details remained the same) had a negative impact on the number of forms returned and the numbers of people registered - the numbers declined by approximately 2-3% each year.

2.12 Political parties and other commentators criticised this aspect of the new system. For the vast majority of electors, their personal identifiers did not change from year to year (80% of electors re-registered at the same address during the 2006 canvass).

2.13 In response to these concerns, the UK Parliament passed the Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act 2005 which allowed for the reinstatement of electors to the register. The provisions of this legislation were used twice during 2005.

2.14 On the first occasion, in April 2005, 70,364 people were reinstated onto the register (see figure 1 for an illustration of the effect of this on the register). These were people who had failed to re-register during the 2004 canvass (September to November 2004) but whose names had previously been included on the register published on 1 September 2004. This reinstatement meant that the register used for the UK Parliamentary and local government elections in May 2005 had been increased overall by over six percentage points. It was estimated that over half of those reinstated re-registered during the annual canvass in the autumn of 2005.

2.15 A further reinstatement of electors took place following the 2005 annual canvass. Electors whose names had been included on the register published on 1 September 2005, but who did not re-register over the canvass period (September to November 2005) were reinstated onto the register published on 1 December 2005. Altogether 95,120 names were added to the register on that occasion.

2.16 The reinstatement provisions were not used again before the introduction of the current system of continuous registration. People who failed to re-register during the last annual canvass in autumn 2006 were not included on the register published on 1 December 2006, even if they had been included in the September 2006 register. As a result there was a decline of around 6% in the number of entries on the December 2006 register compared to the September 2006 register.

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<sup>8</sup> Summary reports of The Electoral Commission-PWC research are available on our website.

# The introduction of continuous registration

2.17 In light of the annual decline in the numbers registered (notwithstanding the use of reinstatement), in November 2005 the UK Government announced its intention to move away from the requirement for the electoral register to be fully refreshed every year. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 introduced a range of legislative reforms including the removal of the legal requirement to conduct an annual canvass, improved access for the Chief Electoral Officer to other data sources, the extension of the registration deadline to 11 days before polling day and the setting of registration objectives for the Chief Electoral Officer.

2.18 Under this system, known as continuous registration, once an eligible elector has registered, they do not have to re-register unless their personal details change – for example, if they change their address or name.

2.19 The Act provided for a full canvass of electors to be held in 2010 unless the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland ordered otherwise. The then Chief Electoral Officer recommended against a canvass in view of the level of the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register. Accordingly the Secretary of State was satisfied that the public interest did not require a canvass. The Commission's analysis of the December 2007 electoral register helped inform his decision. This research concluded that the accuracy of the December 2007 register was 94.3 % and the completeness 83.4%.

2.20 The Act, however, requires the Chief Electoral Officer to conduct a full canvass of electors in 2016 if one has not been conducted before the end of 2015. It is also possible for there to be a canvass in any year because the Act gave the Chief Electoral Officer a power to recommend to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that a full canvass be conducted. The Chief Electoral Officer has to date not exercised that power.

2.21 Unlike electoral registration officers (EROs) in Great Britain, the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland has not been subject to the Electoral Commission's performance standards framework. In November 2012, the Commission agreed a set of draft electoral registration standards for the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland. These provide a framework for him to report on the detail of the work he carries out to meet his statutory registration objectives. These will be piloted until 31 March 2013. The Chief Electoral Officer's assessment of how he has met the standards will be included in his annual report from 2013-14 onwards.

# 3 Continuous electoral registration in practice

## Introduction

3.1 This chapter looks at the practices which have been used by the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland to keep the register up to date under the system of continuous registration.

## Provision of data from other authorities

3.2 The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 amended the Representation of the People Act 1983 and conferred on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland a power to make regulations for the provision of information to the Chief Electoral Officer by specified public authorities<sup>9</sup>.

3.3 The provision of this information (about address and other changes) is intended to enable the Chief Electoral Officer to keep the register up to date in the absence of an annual canvass. However, the Chief Electoral Officer cannot amend entries on the register simply on the basis of this information – he must wait until the individual elector responds to an enquiry from him by submitting a registration form confirming the change relating to them. There is an exception in respect of notifications of deaths or of sentencing to terms in prison – in these cases, the Chief Electoral Officer may remove the names concerned from the register without further enquiries.

3.4 Much of the information in this chapter has been drawn from the annual reports produced by the Chief Electoral Officer in the period 2007/08 up to 2011/12.<sup>10</sup> Additional supporting information has been provided by the Chief Electoral Officer.

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<sup>9</sup> The specified public authorities are set out in Regulation 42 of The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2008 and in The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The Annual Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is available from the Electoral Office website at: <http://www.eoni.org.uk/plans-and-reports>

# Specified authorities

## The Business Service Organisation

3.5 The Business Service Organisation (BSO) was established to provide a range of business support services to the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland. It is also responsible for managing key aspects of family practitioner services including maintaining General Practitioner and dental lists of patients. Information on patients registering with General Practitioners is passed to the BSO who issue medical cards, etc.

3.6 The BSO provides information to the Chief Electoral Officer on a quarterly basis. It comprises details of those over the age of 16 who are recorded as having changed their address or name in the previous quarter. In 2011-2012, the Chief Electoral Officer issued over 122,000 letters asking people to confirm for electoral registration purposes the information he had received from the BSO. No follow up letters were issued to those who did not respond.

3.7 Concern last year over the volume of letters issued to those already registered and an increasingly poor level of response led the Chief Electoral Officer to review the methodology for processing information received from the BSO. A pilot exercise involved checking the information provided against that already held by the Chief Electoral Officer, removing records of those already registered and keeping records to enable reminders to be sent. This resulted in a 20% reduction in the number of letters issued. This methodology has since been rolled out to all area electoral offices.

3.8 The Chief Electoral Officer has advised us that from January 2012 follow up letters are issued to those who do not respond to the initial letter. The response rate to an initial letter is around 21%. The second letter is then issued four weeks later and the response rate to this is around 25%. Overall the Chief Electoral Officer considers the activity generated by the BSO is very worthwhile in helping keep the register up to date.

## Department of Work and Pensions

3.9 Each year the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) provide the Chief Electoral Officer with a database showing the National Insurance Number, full name, date of birth and address of all those aged 16 and over with a Northern Ireland postcode. The Chief Electoral Officer uses this information primarily to check the National Insurance numbers given on registration applications and other electoral forms. The information is used to make early contact with those who leave school at 16 years of age, many of whom would be missed during the schools activity highlighted below.

3.10 Information received from DWP is used to verify change of address details for new and existing registrants. Where discrepancies are noted the individual is written to and asked to provide evidence of residence at their stated address.

3.11 The DWP also provides the Chief Electoral Officer with quarterly updates on those attaining 16 years of age and those who have died. The information on deaths is not used by the Chief Electoral Officer because information is received much more frequently from the Registrar General's Office and the Coroner's Office in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer uses the information about 16-year-olds to identify and write to those who have not been reached by the schools initiative (outlined below). However the Chief Electoral Officer has confirmed that the response rate to letters inviting these young people to register is low with an estimated response rate of 16% - a notably lower rate than that achieved through the schools initiative.

### Data transfer issues

3.12 Due to issues related to data security which arose in June 2011 the transfer of DWP data to the Chief Electoral Officer was suspended for a period between September 2011 and March 2012. The Chief Electoral Officer did not receive the quarterly updates from DWP in September and December 2011, or March 2012; nor the annual full database in November 2011.

3.13 The key issue was that DWP required the Chief Electoral Officer to receive and store the data using equipment that was accredited to a higher security level than he had initially used. The issues were resolved in March 2012: DWP then transferred the missing data, and since then the normal sequence of data transfers has been resumed.

3.14 The Chief Electoral Officer reported that these delays made it more difficult for him to verify the accuracy of entries on the register during this period and resulted in an increased administrative burden on staff. For example, while there was no access to the DWP data base (which is used primarily for checking purposes) the Chief Electoral Officer had to write out to those he had been informed had changed address. In these circumstances the registrant had to provide documentary evidence to confirm their new address details. In addition all new registrants were written to and asked to provide relevant documentary evidence to prove their eligibility to be registered.

### Post primary schools/further education colleges

3.15 As noted in paragraph 2.10 above, the move to continuous registration had a disproportionate impact on the number of attainers included on the electoral register. Following the 2006 canvass there were only 244 attainers registered compared with previous volumes in the region of 10,000.

3.16 To address this shortfall, legislation was introduced to allow the Chief Electoral Officer to request post-primary schools to provide him with lists of the

names, addresses and dates of birth of pupils.<sup>11</sup> This information is then used to pre-populate an electoral registration form for any pupil who is eligible to be on the register as an attainer. The young person is invited to add their national insurance number and sign the form. Those who register are issued with a free electoral identity card. This activity usually takes place in the school assembly hall and follows a short presentation from an area electoral officer. Pupils absent on the day are followed up in writing.

3.17 Overall this initiative has proven successful with over 95% of post primary schools participating. In February 2012 the number of attainers on the register was 11,227. A key reason behind the success of this initiative is that most pupils are engaged in school, and complete the forms there, rather than having the forms sent to their homes.

3.18 Further education colleges provide the Chief Electoral Officer with information on all new students aged 16 and over. Since September 2012 he has received details of 6555 students. Unlike through the schools' initiative, one letter is sent to the student at their address registered with the college. Overall the response rate to the letter is in the region of 20-25%. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer has advised that his staff visit all colleges at the start of the academic year to encourage participation in the registration process.

## The Registrar General

3.19 The Registrar General for Northern Ireland provides weekly lists to the Chief Electoral Officer of all deaths registered in Northern Ireland. The Senior Coroner also provides monthly lists of those whose death is awaiting an inquest. An arrangement exists with the Registrar General in the Republic of Ireland who provides six-monthly lists of those who have died in that jurisdiction and whose last address was in Northern Ireland. In 2011/12, 12,046 deceased persons were removed from the register.

3.20 The Registrar General also provided the Chief Electoral Officer with information on 6,704 marriages and civil partnerships that took place in Northern Ireland during 2011/12. Every person identified through this process is written to on one occasion and they are invited to update their registration information. The Chief Electoral Officer has advised that no information on response rates is kept but anecdotally the response rate is poor.

## District councils

3.21 The Chief Electoral Officer maintains a database of approximately 765,000 residential properties in Northern Ireland. To assist in maintaining its accuracy, all 26 local councils are required to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with

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<sup>11</sup> Section 42, The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2008.

information on new residential properties on a monthly basis. However the information relates to planning permission granted rather than the actual construction of a new dwelling. Once the Chief Electoral Officer is made aware that building work in a development is complete and some residents have moved in he will write out to the occupants requesting registration information. In addition, the councils provide information about properties which have been demolished and those where a change of use has been notified. In these circumstances the Chief Electoral Officer removes the name of those registered at that address. On a periodic basis the local Area Electoral Offices will write to void properties on the database requesting registration information. No data is available on the number of letters issued.

3.22 Earlier this year an initiative was undertaken by staff from the Electoral Offices in Banbridge and Newtownards aimed at targeting new developments. Altogether 1,448 addresses were written to but information on response rates is not available. However Area Electoral Officers have advised that the response was poor.

## Northern Ireland Housing Executive

3.23 The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) offer a range of services to people living in socially rented, privately rented and owner occupied accommodation. They act as landlord to over 90,000 dwellings across Northern Ireland and administer housing benefit.

3.24 A data matching pilot using NIHE information on dwellings where householders were in receipt of housing benefit was trialled by the Londonderry area electoral office in 2007. The NIHE data had to be manually cross checked against the register which the Chief Electoral Officer advised proved to be time-consuming and inefficient. Residents at 200 addresses were written to eliciting a response rate of 7.5% (15 responses) The Chief Electoral Officer at the time took the decision to suspend the NIHE pilot because he did not believe it provided a value for money outcome and was not an efficient use of resources when compared to the opportunities afforded by the BSO and DWP.

## Northern Ireland Office

3.25 The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) provides the CEO with a weekly list of information on individuals who have attended a citizenship ceremony. The Chief Electoral Officer then writes to these people enclosing an electoral registration form. In 2011/12, 348 individuals were written to and 83% of them registered to vote.

## Northern Ireland Prison Service

3.26 Information is received approximately once a year from the Northern Ireland Prison Service giving details of convicted prisoners. It is worth noting that

there is no equivalent arrangement to this for electoral registration officers in Great Britain.

3.27 The most recent information received related to 1,029 prisoners who were subsequently removed from the register. The Northern Ireland Prison Service is currently preparing a Service Level Agreement to supply information to the Chief Electoral Officer. It is intended to strengthen these arrangements through legislative arrangements in 2013.

3.28 The Northern Ireland Office intends adding both itself and the Northern Ireland Prison Service as designated authorities that can provide data to the Chief Electoral Officer.

## Other initiatives

3.29 Since the introduction of continuous registration the Chief Electoral Officers have embarked on a number of other initiatives aimed at keeping the register up to date.

### Mini-canvasses

3.30 Between June and December 2008 the Chief Electoral Officer conducted mini-canvasses in nine electoral wards. The areas canvassed were selected because they were known to have either a low level of registration or had substantial new residential development. Four different methodologies were tested. These included:

- Hand delivered/collect by hand
- Post out/post back
- Hand deliver/post back
- Post out/collect by hand

3.31 The Chief Electoral Officer reported that the exercise saw a significant increase in the accuracy of the register although it did result in fewer entries on the register overall. More than 1,000 new electors were added to the register and over 450 amended their personal details. Also, more than 2,600 individuals were removed from the register because they were either no longer present at their registered address or because they had not responded to several reminders requesting the relevant information (the majority of contact with residents was through letters and not door to door canvassing). Overall there was a 8.2% reduction in the number of people registered in the nine wards. The cost of the mini canvass in the nine wards was just over £30,000.

3.32 Another series of mini-canvasses took place the following year. Again nine different wards were selected because of their low levels of registration. This time the only methodology adopted was post out and post back. Altogether 19,348 forms were sent to registered electors and a further 5,225 to properties at which no one was registered.

3.33 On this occasion it was made clear that returning the registration form was voluntary and failure to respond would not result in removal from the register. The outcome of this mini canvass saw 1,255 individuals register for the first time and 790 people amended their address details. No data was available on the number of electors removed. Another outcome of the mini canvasses was that the property database was updated. This mini canvasses cost almost £18,000.

3.34 The Chief Electoral Officer has advised that no further mini-canvasses have taken place since 2010 because of budgetary constraints and due to the poor response rates he perceived that earlier canvasses achieved.

## Reviews

3.35 In 2008/09, the Chief Electoral Officer reviewed the entitlement of all persons registered at addresses where eight or more people were registered. Letters were issued to 2,166 individuals advising them that they would be removed from the register if they did not provide the information requested. As a result of this review 954 individuals confirmed their entitlement to be registered but 1,090 failed to make any response and were therefore removed from the register. When the Chief Electoral Officer obtained the ability to search the DWP database all those who had been removed from the register, but who according to the database were resident at the qualifying address, were reinstated to the register. No data was available on the number of electors reinstated in this way.

3.36 This exercise was then repeated to properties where seven or more individuals were registered. Altogether 5,510 letters were issued resulting in 290 address changes. Those who ignored the letter and who, according to the DWP database, were not resident at their qualifying address were removed from the register.

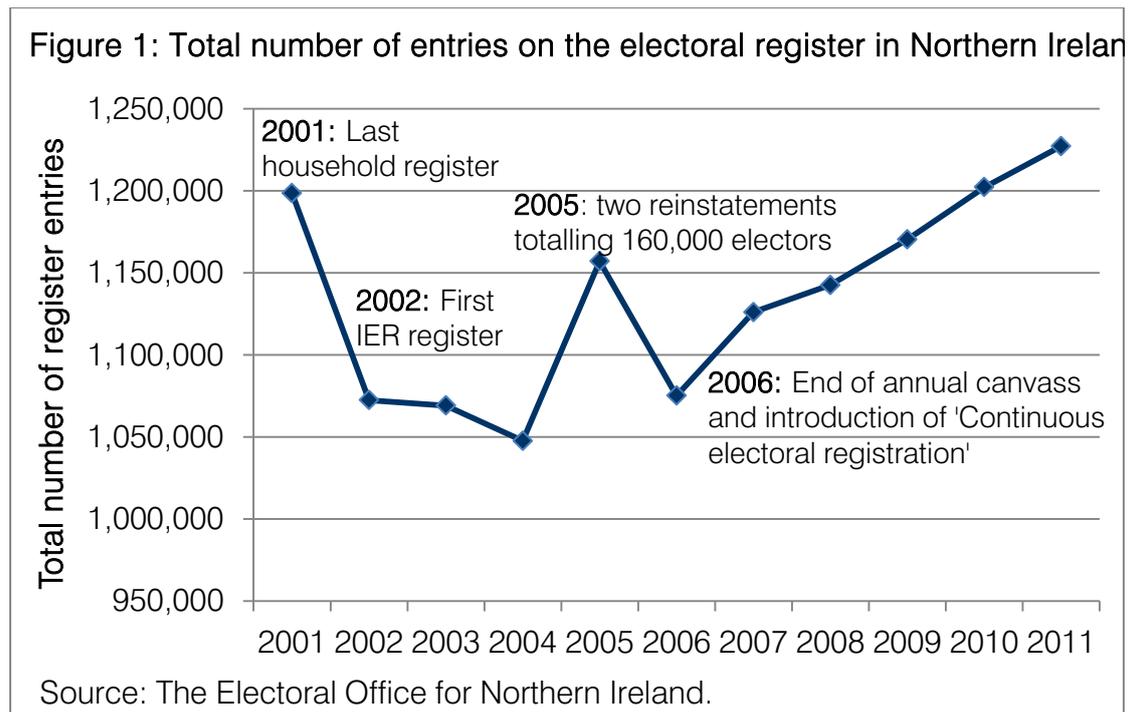
3.37 Between 2008 and 2011 registration surgeries were held at various locations across Northern Ireland. These were generally held in the evenings or at the weekend. Each surgery was evaluated by the local Area Electoral Office and the interest from the public varied depending on the location of the surgery. For example, a surgery at a women's centre in Belfast achieved 90 registrations and 90 electoral ID applications in a two hour period while a surgery setup at the invitation of a political party in a rural area achieved only one registration and 8 electoral ID applications over a three hour period. Overall the costs incurred were considered by the CEO to be disproportionate to the number of new registrations received.

3.38 Other initiatives over the last few years have included prize draws, leaflets inserted with Driver and Vehicle Agency material encouraging registration and writing to nursing homes encouraging residents to register. Although these activities were largely successful in raising awareness of the registration process the Chief Electoral Officer has advised us that no assessment of the value of these initiatives has been made.

3.39 A process map showing the registration process followed by the CEO is included at Appendix B.

# The register under continuous electoral registration

3.40 Since the removal of the requirement to hold a full annual canvass, the Chief Electoral Officer continued to publish a full register of electors in the December of each year. The number of entries on the register showed a year on year increase and reached over 1.2 million in 2010. This was the highest figure recorded since the introduction of IER. Figure 1, below, shows the trend.



3.41 However, the absolute numbers registered is not, on its own, an effective measure of the accuracy and completeness of the registers or the registration process as it does not indicate how many people are accurately registered at their current address. Chapter 4 sets out the detailed findings from the most recent study into the register's accuracy and completeness.

## Conclusions

3.42 This chapter has set out the practices used by the CEO under continuous registration to keep the register up to date. While it is clear that a wide range of data is available to the CEO, there is more work needed to assess the effectiveness of the use that is made of this information. In particular to further examine how response rates vary between data sources and depending on the approach to following up with electors or potential electors.

3.43 This issue and related recommendations are discussed further in Chapter 6.

# 4 Accuracy and completeness

## Introduction

4.1 This chapter sets out the findings from the research conducted across Northern Ireland in order to estimate the accuracy and the completeness of the April 2012 electoral register. It compares the findings of the current study with both the previous research in Northern Ireland (published in 2008) and the more recent findings from Great Britain (published in 2011).

## Methodology

4.2 The approach taken to this research builds on the previous research in Northern Ireland, and the research which looked at the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain. As with those studies, the research involved house-to-house surveying by trained interviewers with the aim of gathering information from residents which could be checked against the details held on the electoral registers.<sup>12</sup> ICM Research was commissioned to undertake the work.<sup>13</sup>

4.3 We are confident that the findings from this study are reliable, but this was a survey, not a census of everyone in Northern Ireland. As with any survey, the results are therefore subject to confidence intervals.<sup>14</sup> Appendix A contains detailed information on methodology, the survey response rate, the confidence intervals and any applied weighting.

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<sup>12</sup> Where a property was found to be unoccupied this was recorded in order that these empty properties could be included in the subsequent analysis. For example, if an address unoccupied at the time of the fieldwork was found to have register entries, they would be classed as inaccurate.

<sup>13</sup> Fieldwork was conducted between 21st May - 24th July 2012. Additional postal returns were accepted until 20th August 2012.

<sup>14</sup> It must be remembered that a sample of addresses, not every address across Northern Ireland, was selected for interview, and that fieldworkers were not able to obtain an interview at every selected address. In consequence, the figures obtained may not be exactly the same as if everybody had been interviewed (the 'true' values). There are two distinct elements to this. (1) The addresses selected might not have been representative of all addresses ('sampling variation'), and (2) within the sample the responses received at those addresses where an interview was achieved might have been different from those we would have received at addresses where there was no response ('nonresponse error'). The size of any non-response error to a survey is unknown, but it can be minimised by achieving a high response rate (this survey achieved a high response rate of 73.5%). The likely size of the sampling variation in a random probability survey such as this one is calculable, however, and is expressed as a 'confidence interval' (CI), sometimes informally referred to as the 'margin of error'. The CIs on the headline figures for this survey are +/- 4.1% for completeness and +/-1.4% for accuracy.

4.4 In addition, these findings represent a snapshot of the quality of the registers at one point in time (April 2012) and should be treated as such. However, given that the same processes are used by the Chief Electoral Officer throughout the year, we have no reason to believe that the register is likely to be substantially more or less accurate or complete at this time than at any other point in the year.

## Context

4.5 The Commission's previous estimates of the accuracy and completeness of the Northern Ireland register were for the December 2007 register<sup>15</sup>. This register was published following the first year of operation of the system of continuous registration (i.e. a full year after the last household canvass). The results of that study were as follows:

- Completeness – 83.4%
- Accuracy – 94.3%

4.6 The methodology for the previous study was similar to that employed this time.<sup>16</sup> However, the definitions of accuracy and completeness in this report differ from those used before in Northern Ireland.

4.7 In this research, a register entry can be inaccurate because the elector is not resident at the address, because their register entry contains a major error in their name (such that could prevent them voting) or where incorrect information is attached to an entry, e.g. an incorrect eligibility marker. In our previous research, on the December 2007 register, only address inaccuracies were measured.

4.8 This means that the reported level of accuracy found in December 2007 was higher than we would have found using the current definition.

4.9 For completeness, the previous research (which referred to comprehensiveness) did not consider a person's entry to be incomplete if they remained on the register at a previous address. In this research, in order to

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<sup>15</sup> The Electoral Commission, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland (September 2008).

<sup>16</sup> The main difference between the 2007 and 2012 studies is in the treatment of non-responding households. In 2007 a non-responding household in the sample could be replaced by a substitute address at an early stage. However, this approach runs the risk of over-estimating levels of completeness as the likelihood of registering could be linked to the likelihood of responding to a door-to-door survey. As a result, in our 2010, 2011 and 2012 studies each address in the sample received multiple call backs and additional addresses were substituted only where the response rate remained so low that the minimum number of interviews had not been completed.

count towards completeness, an elector must be registered at their current address.

4.10 This means that the reported level of completeness found in December 2007 was higher than we would have found using the current definitions.

4.11 The Commission believes that the current definitions of accuracy and completeness are an improvement on those used previously.

## Findings

4.12 The research looked at the local government register and the parliamentary register separately (see Table 1 for an explanation of the difference between these registers).

4.13 The research found the following for the **April 2012 parliamentary register**:

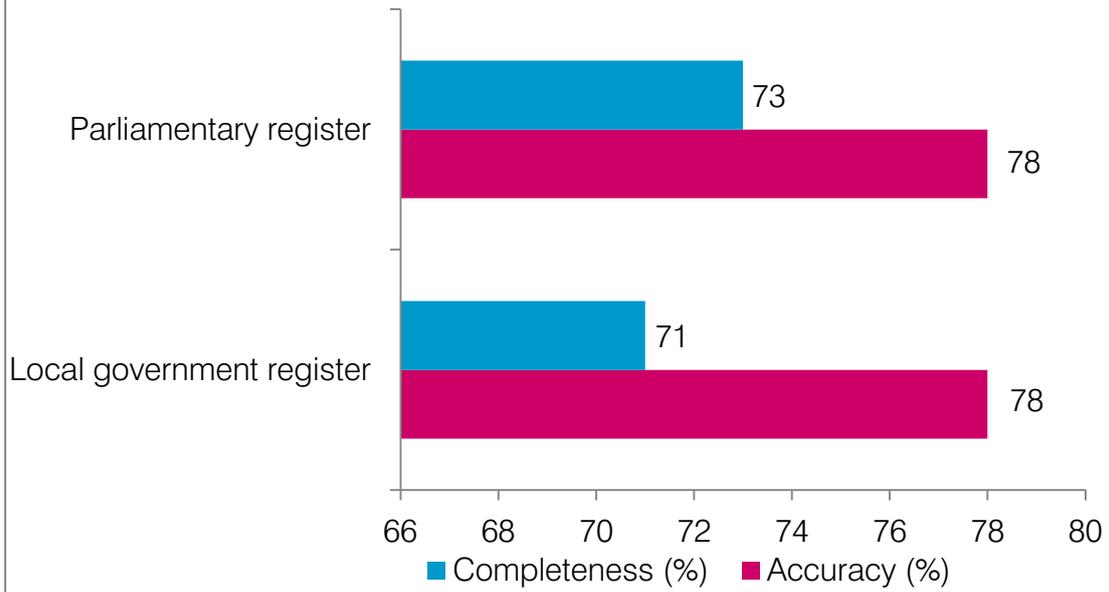
- Completeness - 73%
- Accuracy – 78%

4.14 For the **April 2012 local government register** the results were:

- Completeness - 71%
- Accuracy – 78%

4.15 As the detailed findings below set out, the difference between the completeness findings on the parliamentary and local government registers is explained by a markedly lower registration rate among EU citizens (for more information on registration by nationality see paragraph 2.2). Except where stated, this chapter outlines the figures as they relate to the local government register.

**Figure 2: Accuracy and completeness of the April 2012 registers in Northern Ireland**



Base (unweighted): Completeness - 2,141 for parliamentary register; 2,173 for local government register.

Base (unweighted): Accuracy - 2,036 for parliamentary register; 2,044 for local government register.

4.16 The completeness estimates equate to approximately 400,000 people not included on the electoral register at their current address in April 2012.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not mean that the register should be larger by 400,000 entries, because many (but not all) of those not correctly registered may still have been represented on the register by an inaccurate entry (for example at a previous address).

4.17 The accuracy estimate indicates that approximately 270,000 of the 1,236,825 entries on the April 2012 register were inaccurate.

4.18 It should be noted that the Commission has no evidence from this or other research that any significant number of people have tried to vote and been unable to as a result of an electoral register entry relating to them being inaccurate, although it is less clear what the impact of this is on the other purposes for which the register is used.

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<sup>17</sup> This figure is approximate because it uses the 17+ 2011 census population estimate. This estimate currently does not take account of eligibility and we would therefore expect the eligible population to be smaller.

4.19 As Table 2, below, shows, the estimates for the April 2012 electoral register show a sharp deterioration for both accuracy and completeness in comparison with the estimates produced for the December 2007 register.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 2: Accuracy and completeness of the local government electoral register in Northern Ireland: December 2007 and April 2012.**

	December 2007	April 2012
<b>Accuracy</b>	94%	78%
<b>Completeness</b>	83%	71%

4.20 If the previous definition of accuracy was used in this study it would have yielded a slightly higher accuracy rate of 80% (2% of inaccuracies relate to name or eligibility marker errors which are not counted under the 2007 definition). It is not possible (based on the data available) to say what the level of accuracy would have been in 2007 under the current definition. However, this does not change the overall picture presented by the results: a significant decrease in accuracy levels.

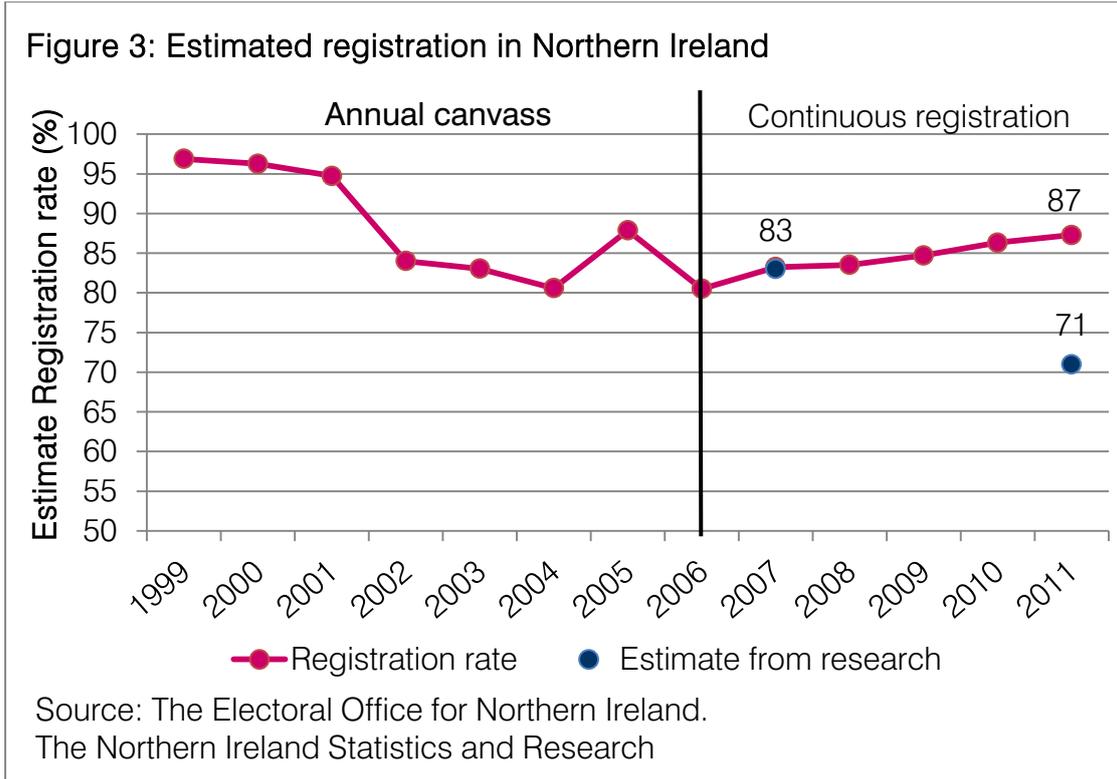
4.21 The completeness rate for December 2007 would have been 81% under the current definition (as 2.4% of those on the register were registered at their previous address). Again, this does not change the trend of a substantial decline in completeness.

4.22 Figure 3 places both sets of findings in the context of the crude registration rate estimated using total register entries and the estimated 17+ population (see paragraphs 1.14 for more information on this calculation). There is a very clear divergence over the course of the period of continuous registration between the estimates derived from our research based on door-to-door surveys and the figures that result from estimating the crude registration rate.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Electoral Commission, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland (September 2008).

<sup>19</sup> As set out in paragraphs 1.14 this calculation suffers from the lack of data on the eligible population (taking account of nationality) and from the presence of duplicate and/or inaccurate entries on the electoral registers. We do not therefore consider it a robust measure.



4.23 It is likely that this difference is a direct result of the level of inaccuracy on the register. The rate estimated using the population estimates and total register entries effectively treats all register entries as accurate, and as a result indicates a higher level of registration than is found in our house-to-house survey where only register entries for confirmed residents are used.

4.24 The Northern Ireland figures are lower than the 2011 estimates for Great Britain where the registers were found to be 82% complete and 85% accurate (both parliamentary and local government registers).<sup>20</sup>

4.25 The sections below look at how levels of accuracy and completeness vary between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and according to a variety of socio-demographic and other factors.

### Length of residence

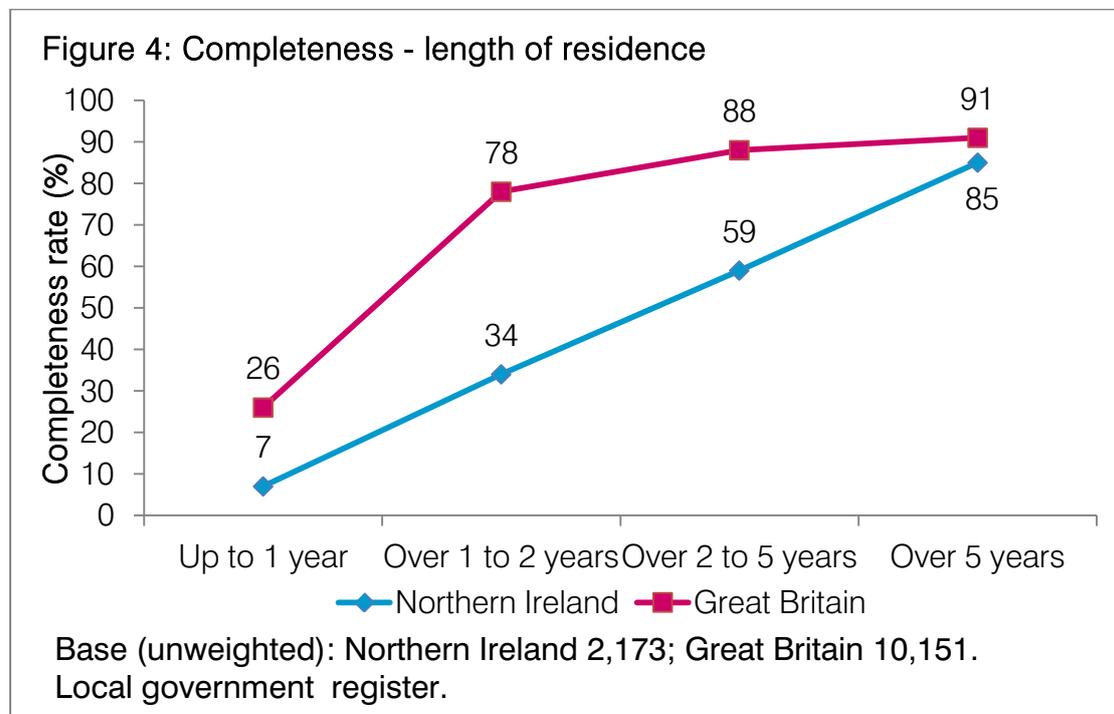
4.26 Past research on the electoral registers in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland has found length of residence to be a key variable affecting accuracy and completeness. The findings from this research confirm this. The less time an individual has been living at a property, the less likely they are to be on the electoral register.

<sup>20</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Great Britain's electoral registers 2011* (December 2011).

4.27 As Figure 4 below illustrates, completeness levels are 85% for those who have been resident at their property for over five years. However, this drops to 59% for those who have been resident for two to five years, 34% for those resident for one to two years and only 7% for those who have been living at their property for less than one year.<sup>21</sup>

4.28 The differences between these figures and those from our 2007 estimates are significant: while the rate for those who have been living at their property for more than five years has stayed more or less the same (88% in 2007 against 85% in 2012), the completeness level for those who have lived at their property for less than one year has reduced from 45% in 2007 to 7% in 2012 and for those resident between one and two years it has reduced from 53% in 2007 to 34% in 2012.

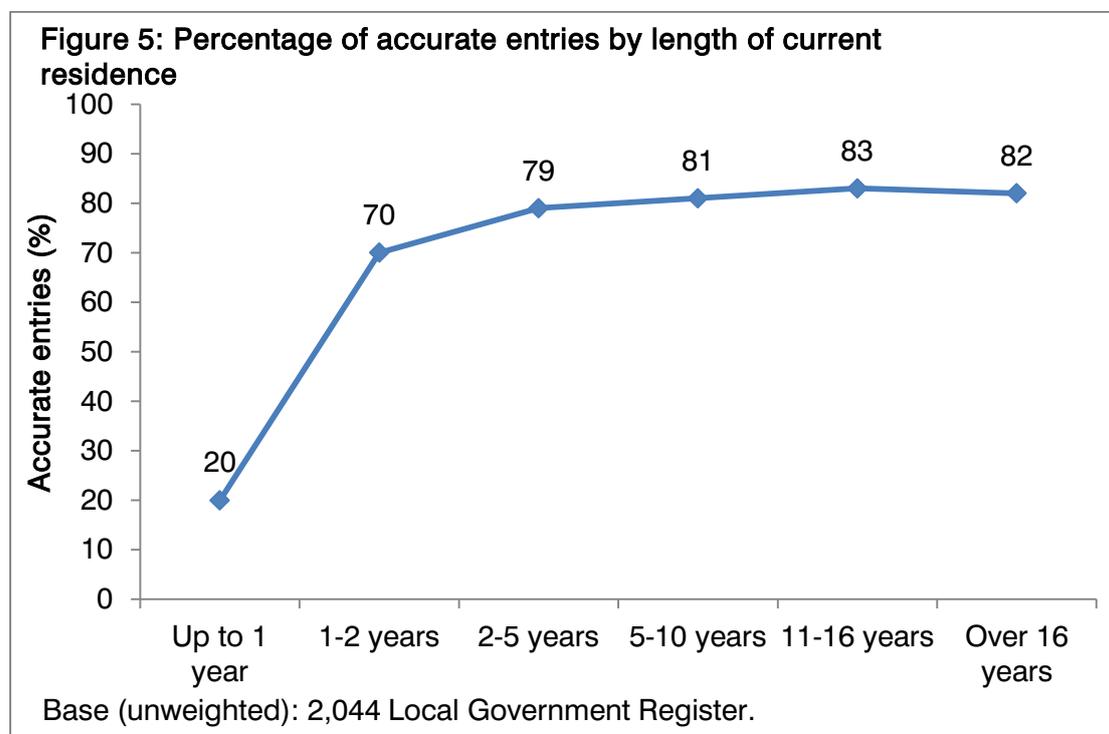
4.29 In Great Britain, the level of completeness for those resident at their property for up to one year is 26%, notably higher than in Northern Ireland.



4.30 A similar picture can be seen for accuracy. Figure 5, below, sets out the accuracy of register entries by the length of residence of the respondent to the survey. As with the longer someone has lived at a property, the more likely it is that the register entries for that address will be accurate.

<sup>21</sup> The base size for some of these breaks is small and as a result large confidence intervals are attached to them. However, there are statistically significant differences between each length of residence category and we can say that completeness increases with length of residence. See Appendix A for more detailed information on the confidence intervals.

4.31 While the trend in Great Britain is in line with Northern Ireland, the percentage of accurate entries in Great Britain at addresses where the current occupant has lived there for up to one year is considerably higher: 72% in Great Britain against 20% in Northern Ireland.



4.32 The differences between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and between the 2007 and 2012 estimates, illustrate the challenges faced by the Chief Electoral Officer in maintaining high levels of completeness among those who move house. Without an annual stocktake, he must rely heavily on other methods to do so. One of the benefits of the canvass is that it provides an opportunity to amend electors' details that have become out-of-date, attract new electors to the register and remove electors where necessary.

4.33 Our 2011 research in Great Britain<sup>22</sup> supports the suggestion that it is difficult to pick up home movement without an annual canvass. 'Rolling registration', used in Great Britain and which relies on individual electors to notify the Electoral Registration Officer that they have moved, is also less effective than a canvass at picking up home movement. For example, it found that for those in Great Britain who moved into their homes after the qualifying date for the 2010 canvass (and were not therefore picked up in it) the completeness rate was only 14%, much closer to the rate seen in Northern Ireland. With an annual 'stocktake' of the register there is less of a need for

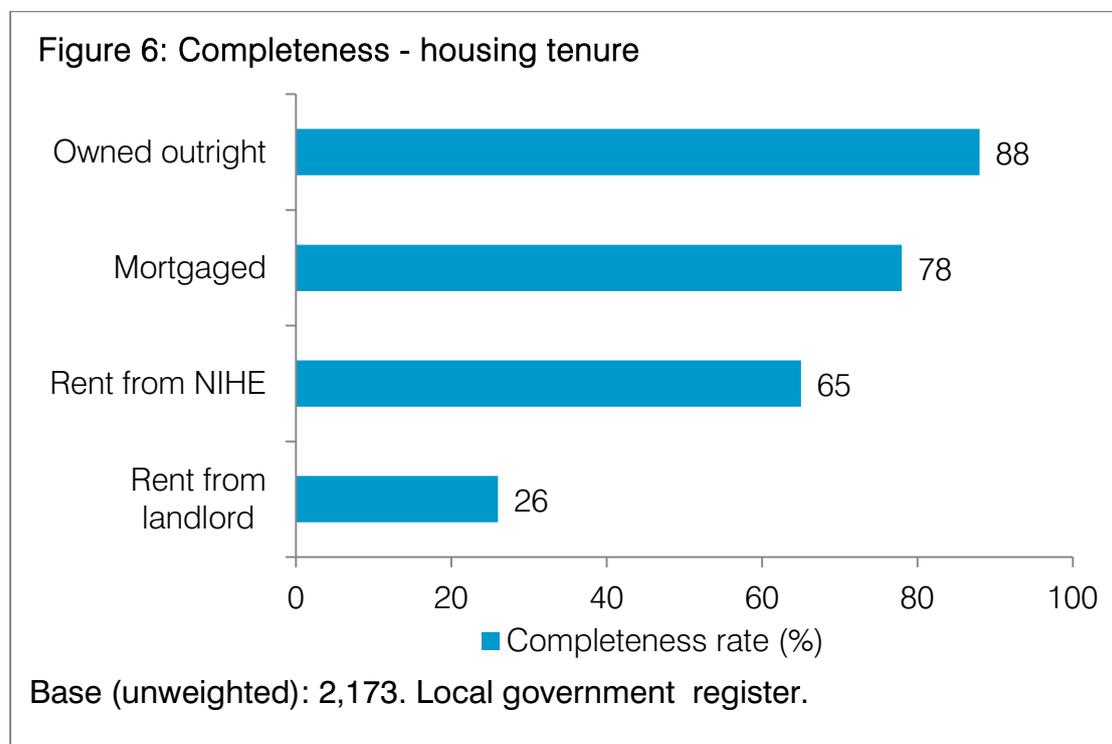
<sup>22</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Great Britain's electoral registers 2011* (December 2011).

EROs in Great Britain to take on-going, proactive action during the year to maintain the register.

4.34 While we were supportive of the move to continuous registration in Northern Ireland we cautioned that appropriate strategies needed to be put in place by the Chief Electoral Officer to maintain the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. We also identified, through our research, that population movements posed a considerable challenge in maintaining the accuracy of the register.<sup>23</sup>

## Tenure

4.35 The findings also illustrate that tenure is linked to registration rates: those who own their property, either outright or with a mortgage, are more likely to be on the register than renters.<sup>24</sup>



4.36 To a large extent, the findings by tenure are linked to home movement because home owners are less likely to move home frequently than those renting from a private landlord. For example, according to the 2009-2010 Family Resources Survey produced by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland, 31% of privately rented households in Northern Ireland have

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<sup>23</sup> Summary reports of The Electoral Commission-PWC research are available on our website.

<sup>24</sup> The confidence interval attached to the finding for those renting from a landlord is large but there is a statistically significant difference between each tenure category.

lived at their property for less than 12 months and 20% for more than 12 months but less than two years<sup>25</sup>. The corresponding figures for home owners are just 2% (less than 12 months) and 3% (12-24 months) Although even when other factors such as home movement and demographics are controlled for there is still a correlation between renting from a landlord and a lower likelihood of registration.<sup>26</sup>

4.37 In our review of the December 2007 register we also found homeowners were more likely to be registered than those renting from a private landlord; but the registration rate for private renters has declined considerably (from 63% in 2007 to just 26% in 2012).

4.38 We see a similar pattern in the findings for Great Britain. However, the percentage of private renters included on the register differs significantly between Northern Ireland (26%) and Great Britain (55%). As those renting privately are likely to move more frequently this difference is, as set out in paragraphs 4.33 above, at least partly the result of there being no annual canvass in Northern Ireland or any replacement system that efficiently picks up home movers.

## Age

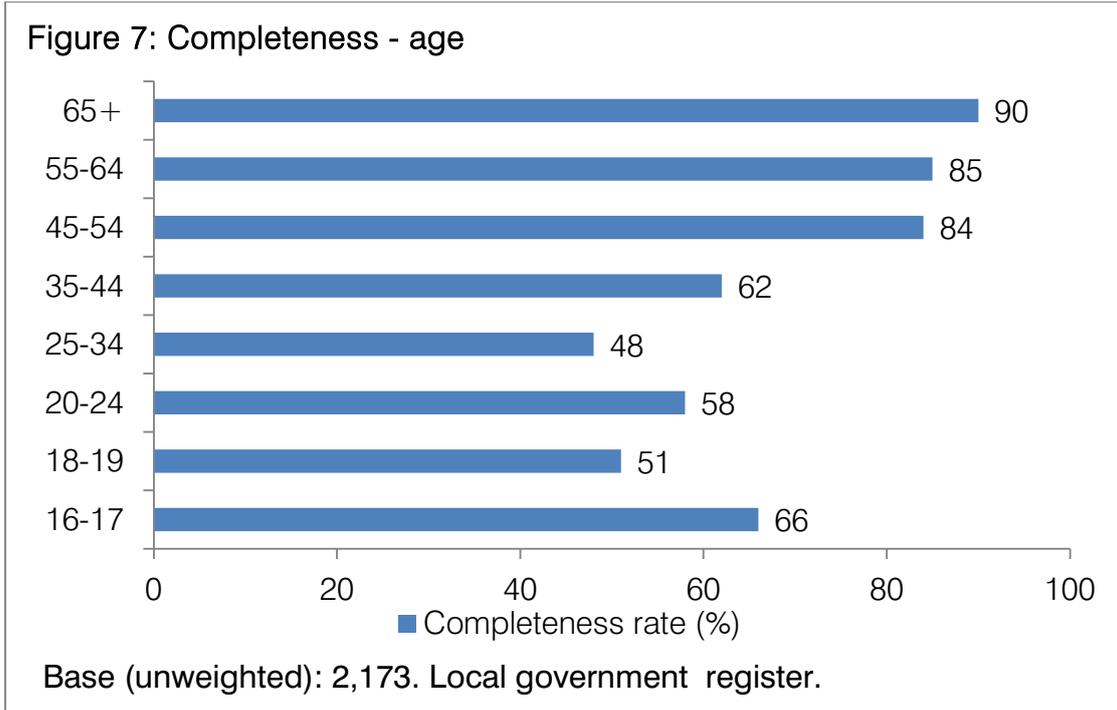
4.39 As in previous research (in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain), the findings indicate a strong correlation between age and registration. In general, older age groups are more likely to be registered, especially those aged 65+ for whom the completeness level is 90%.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Department for Social Development, Family Resources Survey 2009-2010 (November 2011). <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/frs0910.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Regression is a statistical analysis technique which takes a key variable of interest, in this case completeness or accuracy, and measures the correlation this has with a variety of other variables in the data (or the ability to predict the key variable by knowing the other variable), assuming all other variables are constant.

<sup>27</sup> The base sizes for the 16-17 age groups is very small and as a result it is subject to a large confidence interval. These figures should be treated with caution.



4.40 The lowest level of completeness is among 25-34 year olds where 48% are registered. As young people are more likely to be renting from a private landlord and to move home frequently (see above) it is not surprising they are less likely to be registered. Figures from the Family Resources Survey<sup>28</sup> show that 38% of the 25-34 age group rent privately and 49% are home-owners, respectively the highest and lowest for all age bands<sup>29</sup>. However, even when other home movement and other factors are controlled for, there was still a correlation between age and likelihood of being on the register.

4.41 As set out in Table 3, however, the findings show that the level of completeness for all age groups, except for 16-17 year olds, has declined compared to the figures for December 2007. The level of completeness for those aged 16-17 increased considerably (up from 7.7% to 66% in 2012): the increase is likely explained by the Chief Electoral Officer’s work with schools outlined in Chapter 3. Specifically, the fact that this activity does not rely solely on issuing letters to potential electors but involves direct engagement with pupils.

4.42 However, the deterioration for those aged 18-44 is considerably higher than for those aged 45+, with the 25 – 34 age band showing the largest decrease (-29%). The Chief Electoral Officer, having made good progress with attainers will have to develop an approach which more effectively targets those in the 18-44 age groups.

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<sup>28</sup> Department for Social Development, Family Resources Survey 2009-2010 (November 2011).  
<sup>29</sup> The Family Resources Survey provides no figure for 16-24 years-old households.

Table 3: Completeness by age bands – December 2007 and April 2012 register

Age band	December 2007	April 2012
Under 18	8%	66%
18-24	66%	56%
25-34	77%	48%
35-44	79%	62%
45-54	86%	84%
55-64	94%	85%
65+	97%	90%

4.43 The pattern of findings by age in Northern Ireland is broadly in line with Great Britain but there are two notable exceptions. The rate of registration among attainers in Northern Ireland (66%) is higher than in Great Britain (55%). Again, this is likely to be a direct reflection of the targeted work done with attainers through the Schools Initiative. But the sharp drop in the completeness rate between attainers (66%) and 18 – 19 year olds (51%) suggests that while the work in schools is effective, once someone changes address (i.e. moves out of the family home) the Chief Electoral Officer is having less success in picking up those changes and keeping them on the register.

4.44 Second, in Northern Ireland those aged 25-34 are less likely to be registered (48% are registered correctly) than their counterparts in Great Britain where 72% are registered correctly. According to available data, 25-34 year olds in Northern Ireland are no more likely to be private renters than 25-34 year olds in Great Britain so tenure differences cannot explain the variation.

4.45 The more likely explanation is the failure of the system in Northern Ireland to pick up address moves as effectively as in Great Britain. The length of residence data (set out in Figure 4 above) shows that on average the lag time between moving into a property in Northern Ireland and getting onto the register is substantially longer than in Great Britain (for example, the completeness rate for those resident for 1 – 2 years was 78% in Great Britain and 34% in Northern Ireland. They do not come close to converging until people have been resident for over 5 years).

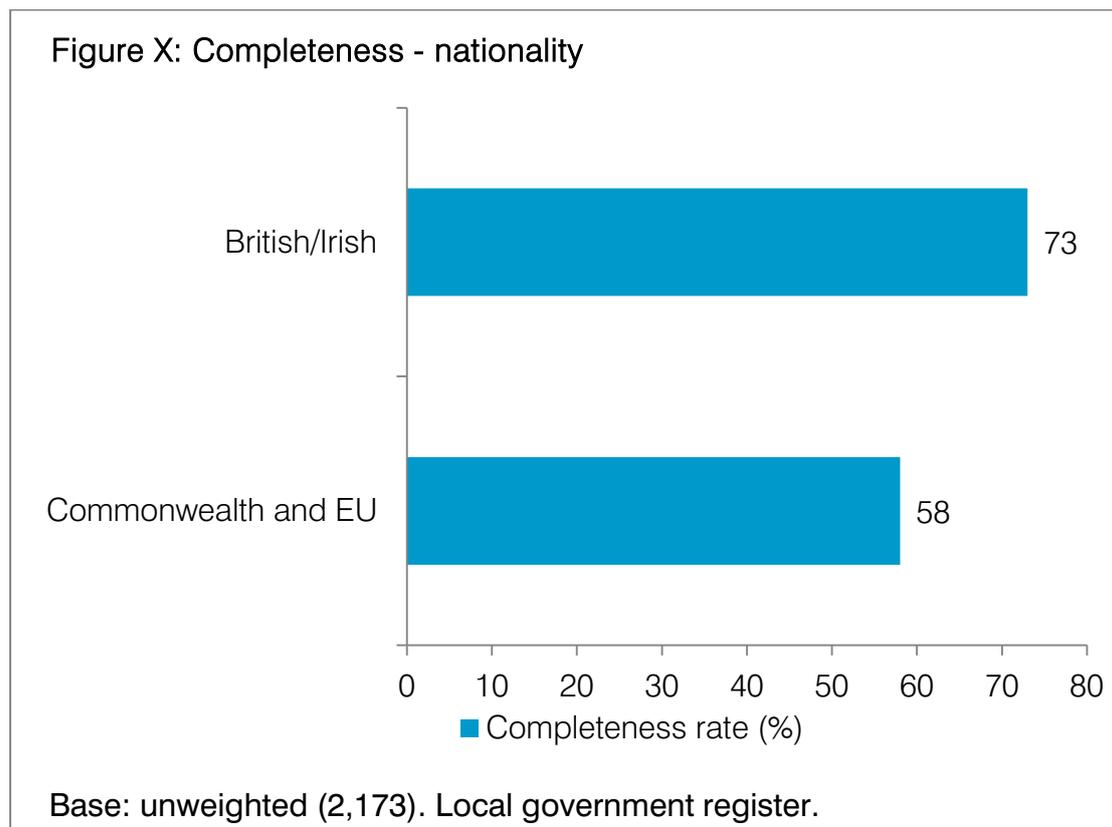
4.46 It is possible that this slows the rate of increase in registration by age (that we observe in Great Britain) because although older people are more likely to live at one address for longer they are not, in Northern Ireland, going onto the register as quickly after the point at which they move into their long term

address. This again underlines the need for the CEO to put effective plans in place for picking up changes of address under continuous registration.

## Nationality

4.47 The breakdown by nationality shows that completeness for British and Irish citizens is 73%<sup>30</sup> whereas for Commonwealth and EU citizens it is 58%.

4.48 As in Great Britain, EU citizens are the least likely to be registered but in Northern Ireland they are considerably more under-registered (just 20% against 56% in Great Britain).<sup>31</sup>



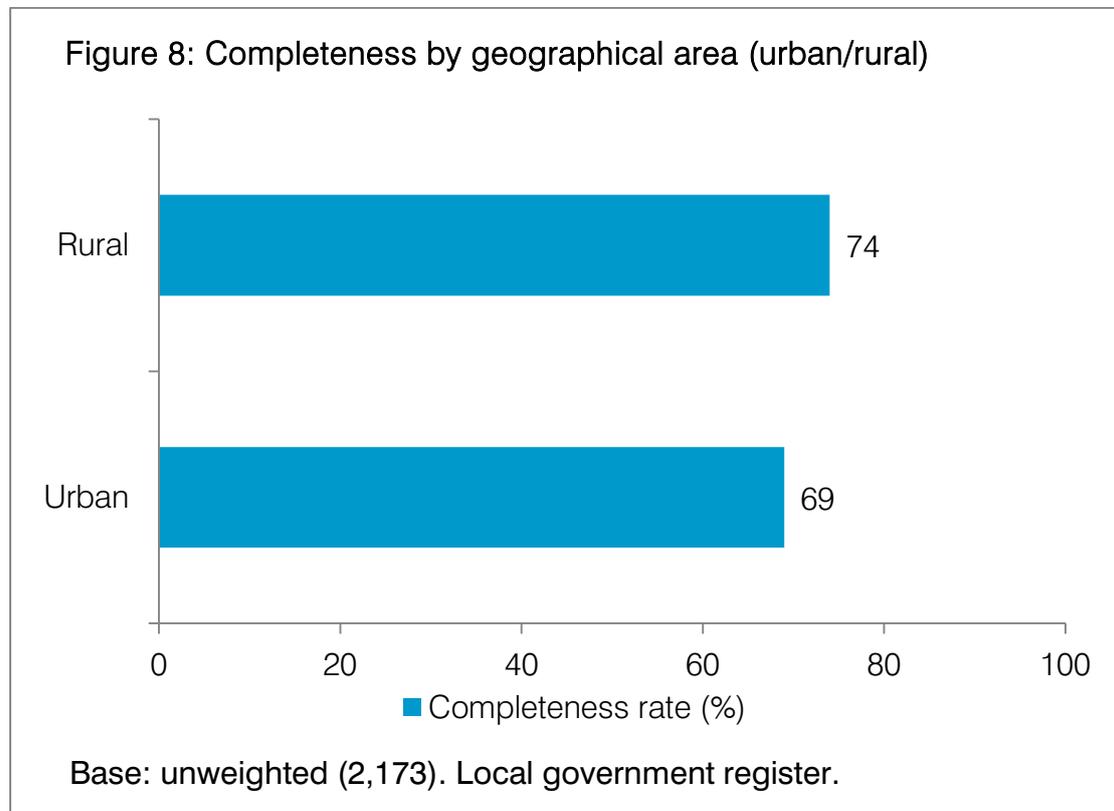
## Geography

4.49 The figure below shows completeness by geographical area (urban and rural<sup>32</sup>): the findings show that those living in rural areas (74%) are more likely to

<sup>30</sup> While eligibility to be on the register in Northern Ireland is not different to Great Britain, unlike in the Commission accuracy and completeness research in Great Britain, British and Irish citizens were grouped together for the NI research due to high number of residents in Northern Ireland with dual nationality.

<sup>31</sup> The base size for EU citizens is small and the figure should be treated with caution. It is included because, although too small for significance testing, the size of the difference makes it likely that EU citizens are less likely to be registered.

be registered than those living in urban areas (69%). These findings are also in line with our research on the December 2007 register where we found individuals living in urban areas to be less likely to be registered (86% in rural areas as opposed to 82% in urban areas).



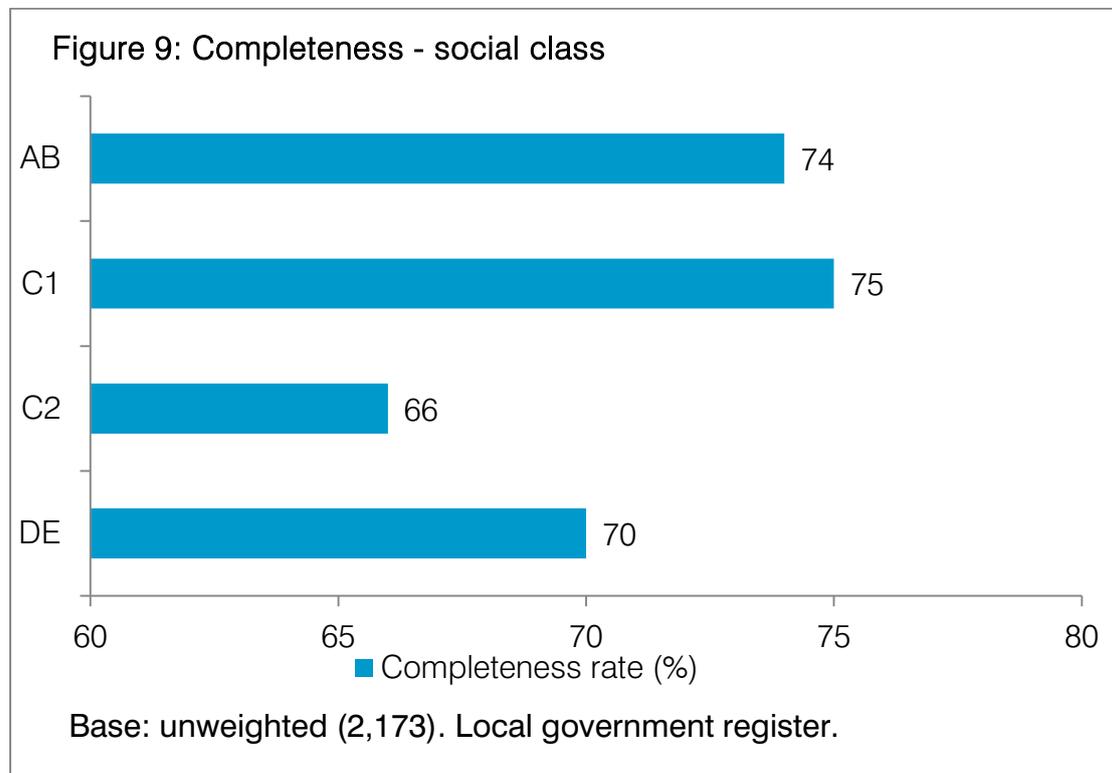
## Socio-economic group

4.50 The breakdown for completeness by socio-economic group<sup>33</sup> shows that those in social classes AB and C1 are more likely to be registered (74% and 75% respectively). Individuals in the C2 group score the lowest level of completeness (66%), with a figure of 70% for the DE group. The findings are in line with those for December 2007 although a clear comparison is not possible due to differing approaches to grouping socio-economic group.

<sup>32</sup> Urban and rural areas were defined as follow: Urban – Belfast metropolitan urban area, Derry urban area, large towns (18,00 to 75,000 inhabitants); Rural – Medium towns (10,000 to 18,000 inhabitants), small towns (4,500 to 10,000 inhabitants), Intermediate settlement, Village, Small village, hamlet & open countryside.

<sup>33</sup> This survey uses the socio-economic classification used by the Market Research and Marketing Industries as follows: AB - Higher and intermediate managerial/administrative /professional; C1 - Supervisory, clerical, junior managerial/administrative/professional; C2 - Skilled manual workers; D - Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers; E - On state benefit, unemployed, lowest grade workers

4.51 The pattern of the most recent results are similar to Great Britain in the sense that most of the differences between the social classes are not significant but with C2 coming out with the lowest registration rate. However, in Northern Ireland the completeness among the C2 group is significantly lower than any of the others (in Great Britain the completeness rate for the C2 group was 82% compared to the next lowest of 83% - for both C1 and DE).



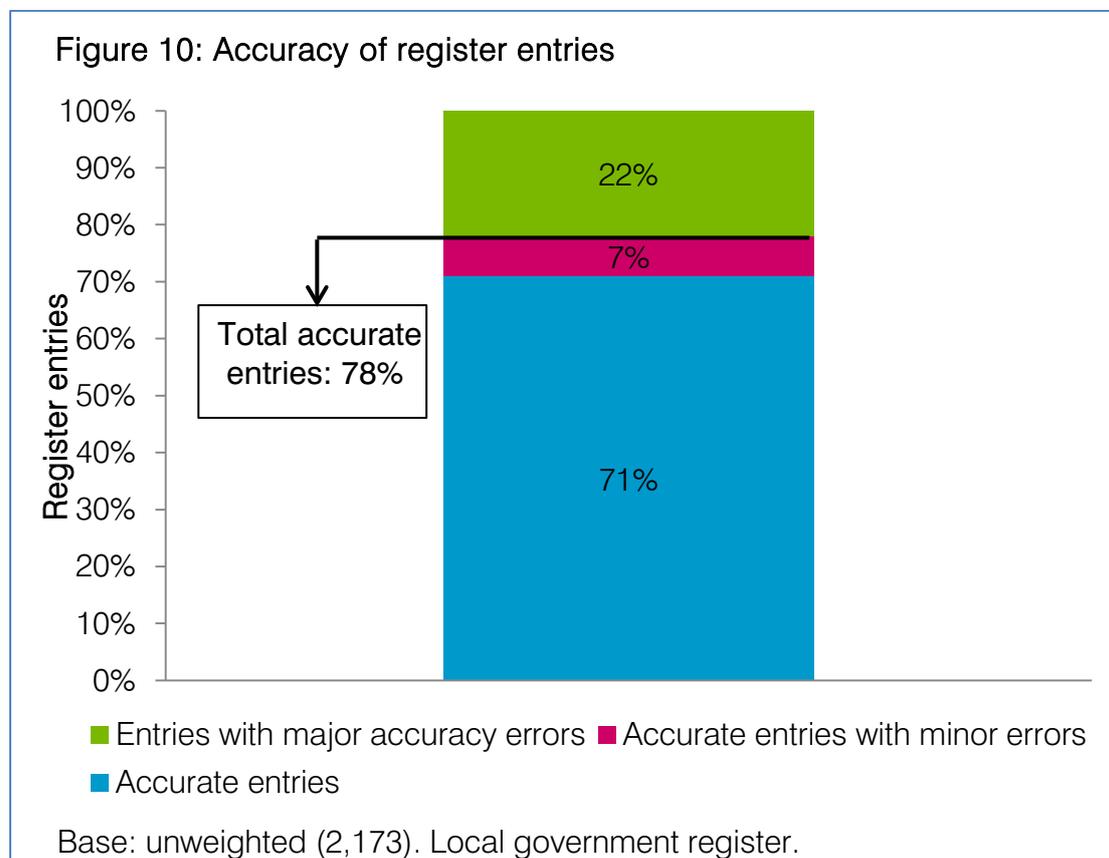
### Political view

4.52 There appears to be some significant differences in completeness levels by political views. Those identifying themselves as either Nationalist or Unionist were found to be significantly more likely to be registered (77% and 87% respectively) than those who indicated they had no political view (62%). This difference is unsurprising as we would expect those with stronger political party allegiances to make more effort to ensure their register entry is up to date (for further information on the likely impact of political engagement see Chapter 5).

### Accuracy breakdown

4.53 The accuracy of both the parliamentary and local government registers was 78%. That means that 22% of the total number of entries on the register had a major error (i.e. one that might prevent the elector from voting) such as a wrong first name or surname. In addition, a further 7% had minor errors (e.g. a spelling mistake in the name on the register that would not prevent someone from voting).

4.54 As in our research on the December 2007 electoral register, the main type of error related to register entries for people who were no longer resident at the address (20% of all register entries).



4.55 The table below shows a breakdown of the reasons for inaccuracy, split between major and minor errors.

4.56 There are limits to the analysis that can be conducted with regard to the accuracy of the register, principally because the main error relating to accuracy refers to people who are on the register but are no longer resident at the address. As the individual no longer lives at the property, it is not possible to collect demographic or other information on the person.

4.57 The table below provides a breakdown of accuracy and the types of errors. As we can see, most major errors refer to individuals whose name is on the register but who are no longer resident at the address shown on the register. The majority of minor errors refer to a missing or misspelled middle name.

**Table 4: Accuracy of the entries on the Northern Ireland register.**

Accuracy <sup>34</sup>	Local government and Parliamentary register	
Accurate with no errors	71%	
Accurate with minor errors	Middle name missing on register	4%
	First name/surname misspelled	2%
	Middle name misspelled on register	1%
	<i>Total accurate entries with minor errors</i>	<i>7%</i>
<b>Total Accurate entries</b>		<b>78%</b>
Entries with major errors	Register contains a name that the respondent does not give at the address	20%
	First name/surname wrong	1%
	Others Attainers date of birth missing; Duplicate name on register	1%
<b>Total entries with major errors</b>		<b>22%</b>

## Conclusion

4.58 The findings set out above show that both the accuracy and completeness of the April 2012 electoral register in Northern Ireland have deteriorated considerably since the previous estimates, conducted on the December 2007 electoral register. In addition, at a headline level and for several sub-groups, levels of completeness are substantially lower than those found in Great Britain in 2011.

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<sup>34</sup> The research recorded more types of errors but we only report those above 1%.

4.59 An analysis of the variables confirms the findings from previous studies in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland with population movement being the key factor affecting registration.

4.60 The CEO needs to take urgent action to address the levels of accuracy and completeness outlined in this chapter. The next chapter will outline the reasons behind such decline by examining public engagement, population changes and registration practices. Later in the report we will set out specific recommendations for action to improve the register.

# 5 Explaining the findings

## Introduction

5.1 This chapter uses other available data in order to place these findings in context and to offer possible reasons for the decline in recorded levels of accuracy and completeness in Northern Ireland.

## Continuous registration and population change

5.2 Previous Commission research, which focused on the introduction of continuous registration, highlighted the need for the system to deal with the expected volume of population change in order to maintain high levels of accuracy and completeness of the register.<sup>35</sup> In the absence of an annual canvass, a successful continuous registration system needs to access and make effective and efficient use of a range of other data sources in order to maintain the register.

5.3 The potential scale of the challenge was detailed in previous Commission research which estimated the changes to the Northern Ireland voting age population within a single year (2003-04). Table 5 below sets out the components of that change. Overall it estimated that, based on the 2003-04 17+ population, over 13% of the population would see a change that would require an alteration to their entry on the register. In real terms this amounted to around 170,000 changes having to be made to the register each year to maintain its accuracy and completeness.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 5: The components of voting age population change in Northern Ireland: estimates for 2003-04<sup>37</sup>**

	%	'000s
Attainers	2.1	27

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<sup>35</sup> Summary reports of The Electoral Commission-PWC research are available on our website.

<sup>36</sup> The Electoral Commission, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland (September 2008).

<sup>37</sup> NISRA, mid-year population estimates; Census of Population, 2001, Electoral registration in Northern Ireland, Summary of research update – May 2006

Deaths	1.1	14
In-migration from:	1.2	16
Rest of UK	0.7	9
Rest of world	0.5	6
Out-migration to:	1.3	16
Rest of UK	0.8	11
Rest of world	0.5	6
Internal population movements:	7.6	98
Within same parliamentary constituency	5.1	66
To a different parliamentary constituency	2.5	32
<b>Total changes</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>171</b>

5.4 The table below sets out the headline data on recorded changes to the register in Northern Ireland under continuous registration in each of the last three years. The figures in brackets are the percentage of the register (from the 1<sup>st</sup> December falling within that year) represented by each volume of changes.

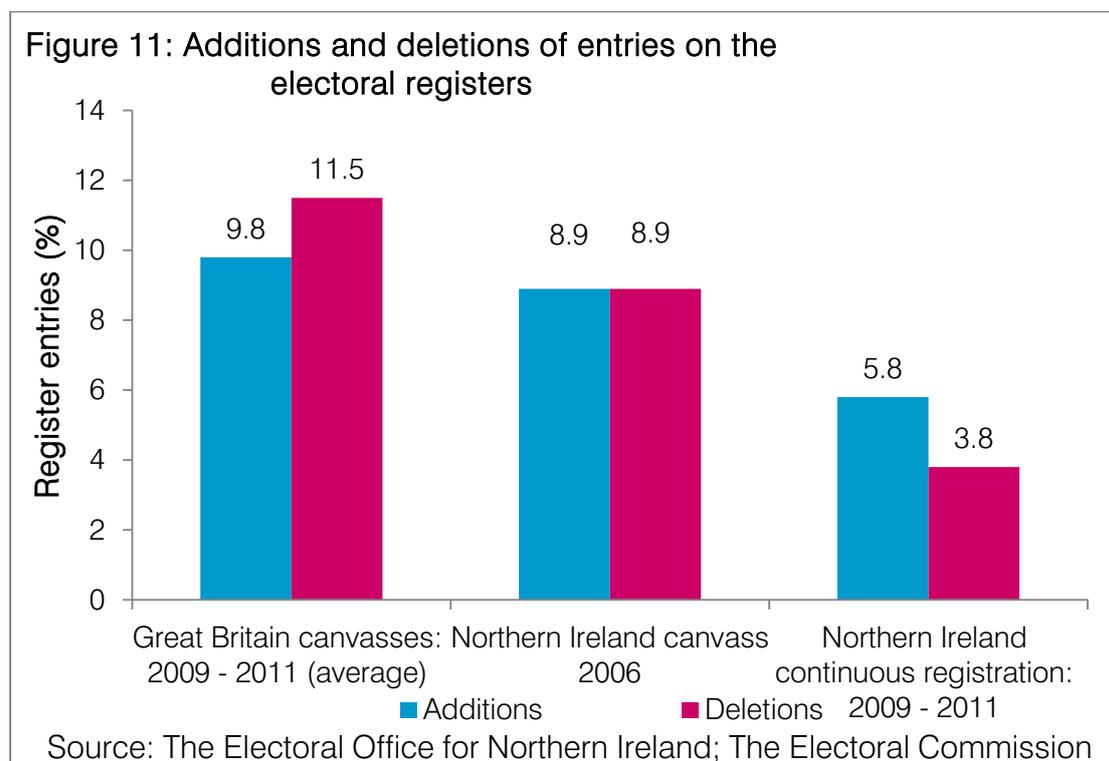
**Table 6: Changes to the Northern Ireland register 2009 – 2012**

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
New registrations	51,298 (3.7)	47,390 (3.4)	43,869 (3.1)
Changes to address	27,051 (2.0)	38,126 (2.7)	33,051 (2.4)
Deletions	21,571 (1.6)	18,031 (1.3)	21,074 (1.5)
Other modifications	7,269 (0.5)	10,093 (0.7)	6,836 (0.5)
<b>Total changes</b>	<b>107,189 (7.8)</b>	<b>113,640 (8.2)</b>	<b>104,830 (7.5)</b>

Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

5.5 The total volume of recorded changes shown above clearly falls short of the 170,000 estimated for 2003 – 2004.

5.6 Figure 11 compares the percentage of additions and deletions of entries on the register in Northern Ireland (for both the last canvass and continuous registration) and in Great Britain.<sup>38</sup>



5.7 The figures for the annual canvass in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland are similar (given the lower level of estimated annual address changes in Northern Ireland (9.3%) compared to Great Britain (12.1%)), suggesting that around 9-10% of the entries on register(s), respectively, are added each year through a canvass while 9 – 12% of the entries are deleted. But the average figures for the period of continuous registration in Northern Ireland are significantly lower, with under 6% of the register added (on average) annually and under 4% deleted.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In order to make these figures comparable between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and to avoid understating the activity within Northern Ireland, changes of address are counted twice – once within deletions and once within additions. This is because the single register in Northern Ireland makes it easier to record the movement of individual people. For example, it is possible to accurately record when someone on the register applies to change their address. In Great Britain this is not the case because someone can move from one register to another, i.e. they can be an entirely new elector in one area and a deletion in another. This should not be the case in Northern Ireland.

<sup>39</sup> The figures for additions and deletions in Great Britain are derived from electoral registration data collected annually from each ERO by the Electoral Commission. The data for the 2006 Northern Ireland canvass comes from previous research for the Commission carried out by Price Waterhouse Coopers. Continuous registration figures for 2009 – 2011 are taken from EONI's annual reports.

5.8 It is worth noting that the figures for Great Britain do not include additions and deletions made outside the canvass period as a result of individuals contacting their Electoral Registration Officer. These add a further 2.6% and 2.0% to the volume of additions and deletions respectively, which brings the difference between GB and NI to 6.6 percentage points (additions) and 9.7 percentage points (deletions).

5.9 These figures suggest that the steps that have been taken to date by the CEO in Northern Ireland to compensate for the absence of an annual canvass are not sufficiently effective, particularly in relation to register changes arising from address moves by existing registered electors and individuals becoming newly-eligible for registration. It is important that the CEO takes urgent steps to address this issue (see Chapter 6 for our recommendations for action).

## Home movement

5.10 Changes of address are the key change that needs to be managed by the registration system. There is no detailed and reliable statistic on the volume of home movement in Northern Ireland for the period of continuous registration. However, the 2001 census results suggested that approximately 9.3% of people in Northern Ireland changed address in the 12 months preceding census day. In addition, the results of the 2005 and 2006 annual canvasses indicated that 5.4% and 5.1% of those on the post-canvass register re-registered during that canvass at a different address.<sup>40</sup>

5.11 However, the figures in Table 5, above, show that only 2.0 – 2.7% of those appearing on the register indicated they had changed address in each of the last three years, suggesting that continuous registration is not keeping pace with population movement within Northern Ireland.

5.12 While it is likely that overall levels of home movement have declined in recent years due to the recession, it is unlikely that this would account for the relatively small number of address changes recorded on the Northern Ireland register. For example, data suggests that recorded home sales in Northern Ireland declined from just over 6,000 in 2006 – 07, to 2,000 – 3,000 per annum from 2007 – 2010 and approximately 1,600 in 2010 – 11.<sup>41</sup> However, recorded home sales are only one part of home movement with the rental market being the other most significant element. Overall statistics on annual address changes will not be available (from the 2011 census) until the end of 2013.

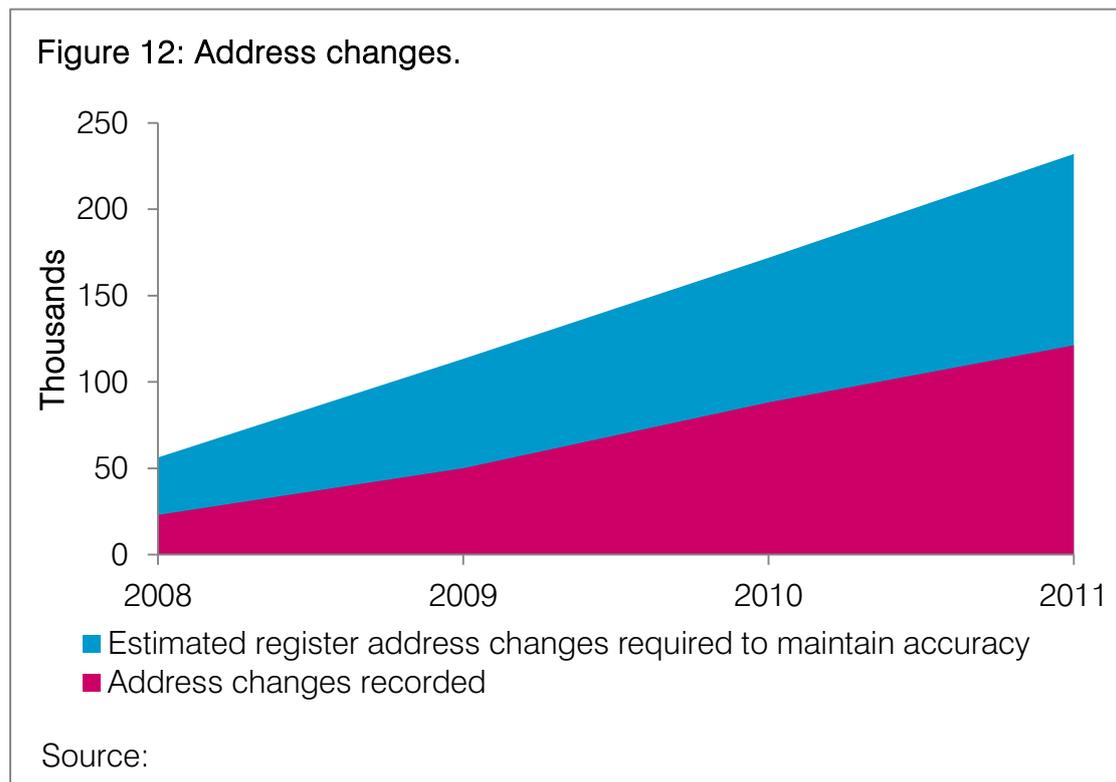
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<sup>40</sup> The Electoral Commission, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland (September 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Department for Social Development, New House Sales and Price, [http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats\\_and\\_research/stats-publications/stats-housing-publications/publications-sales\\_prices\\_maps.htm](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/stats-publications/stats-housing-publications/publications-sales_prices_maps.htm).

Note: these are 'recorded' sales in the sense that the purchasers' solicitors have reported them to the National House Building Council (NHBC).

5.13 Figure 12 illustrates the potential cumulative effect of a registration system that does not capture the expected volume of address changes. This assumes that a flat 5% of the register should change address annually (based on the 2005 and 2006 canvass data). When considered against the actual level of address changes made on the register over time, the chart suggests that approximately 110,000 addresses on the register may contain inaccurately registered electors.<sup>42</sup>



## New electors

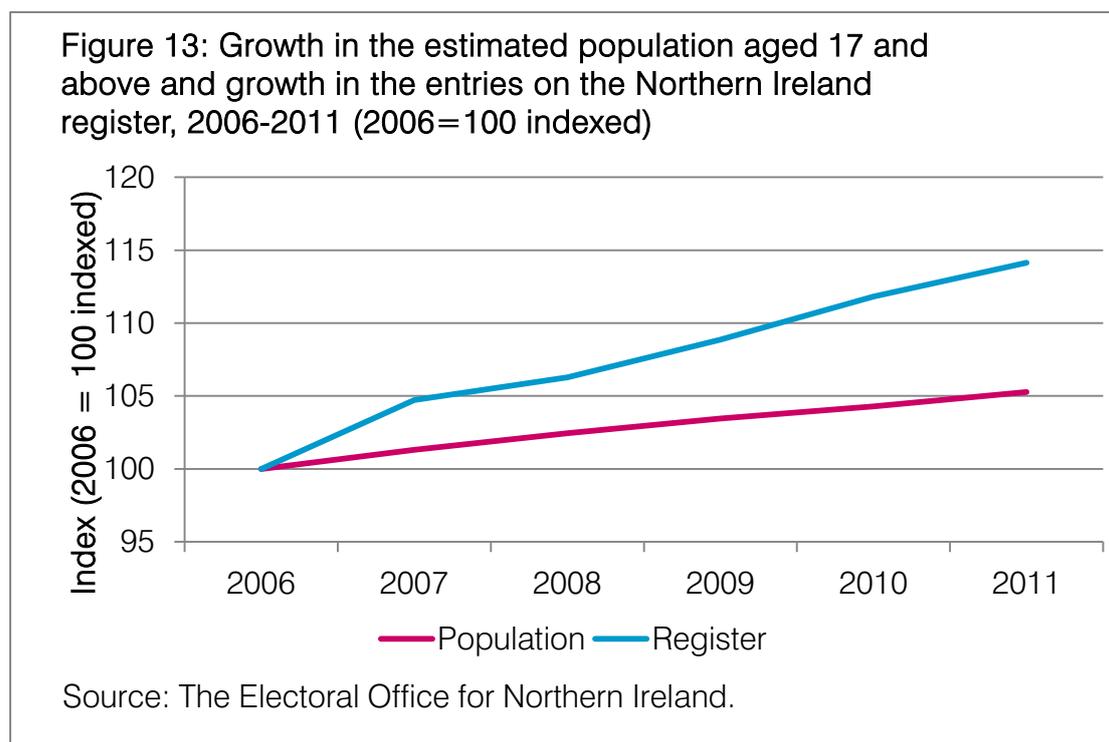
5.14 Figures for the 2006 canvass indicate that approximately 5.5% of the post-canvass register was made up of new electors (i.e. they did not appear on the September 2006 register). However, under continuous registration the numbers of new electors added annually have accounted for only 3.1% - 3.7% of the register.

5.15 As with address changes, over time the shortfall in the expected number of new registrations will have a cumulative, negative effect on the completeness of the register.

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<sup>42</sup> Data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency indicates that there are nearly 750,000 individual properties in Northern Ireland although not all will have an entry on the register.

5.16 Figure 13 below shows the growth in the registers against the growth in population (both indexed to 2006).<sup>43</sup>



5.17 The growth in the register has clearly outstripped growth in the estimated population. However, while this could be seen as a positive development (getting more people on the register), it is likely that the trend is really showing the build-up of inaccurate entries on the register – inflating its size and reducing its accuracy, without increasing levels of completeness. This would be in line with the difference in accuracy levels recorded in our study on the December 2007 register and the present study on the April 2012 register.

## Public engagement

5.18 In our December 2011 report on the accuracy and completeness of the registers in Great Britain, we acknowledged that much of the apparent decline in levels of registration was likely to relate to a decline in interest in traditional party politics and a corresponding decrease in electoral participation<sup>44</sup>.

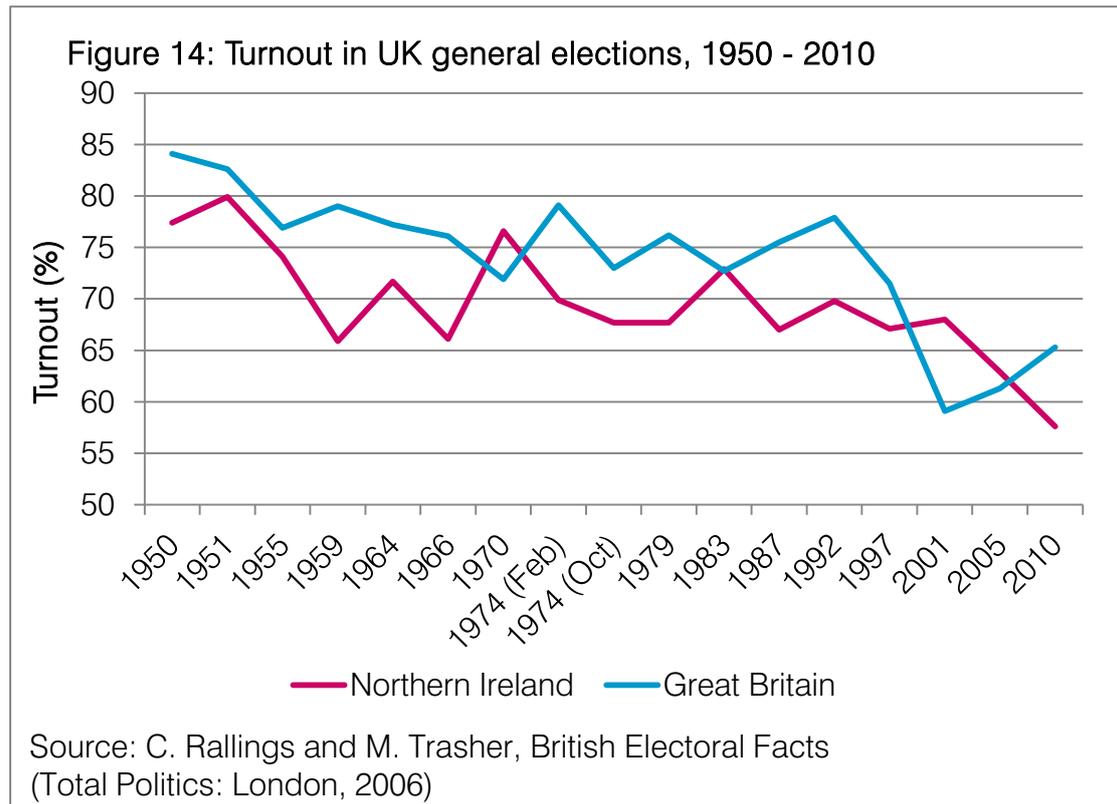
5.19 Figure 14 illustrates the fall in turnout at UK General elections in Great Britain and Northern Ireland over the period from 1950. In both cases there is a

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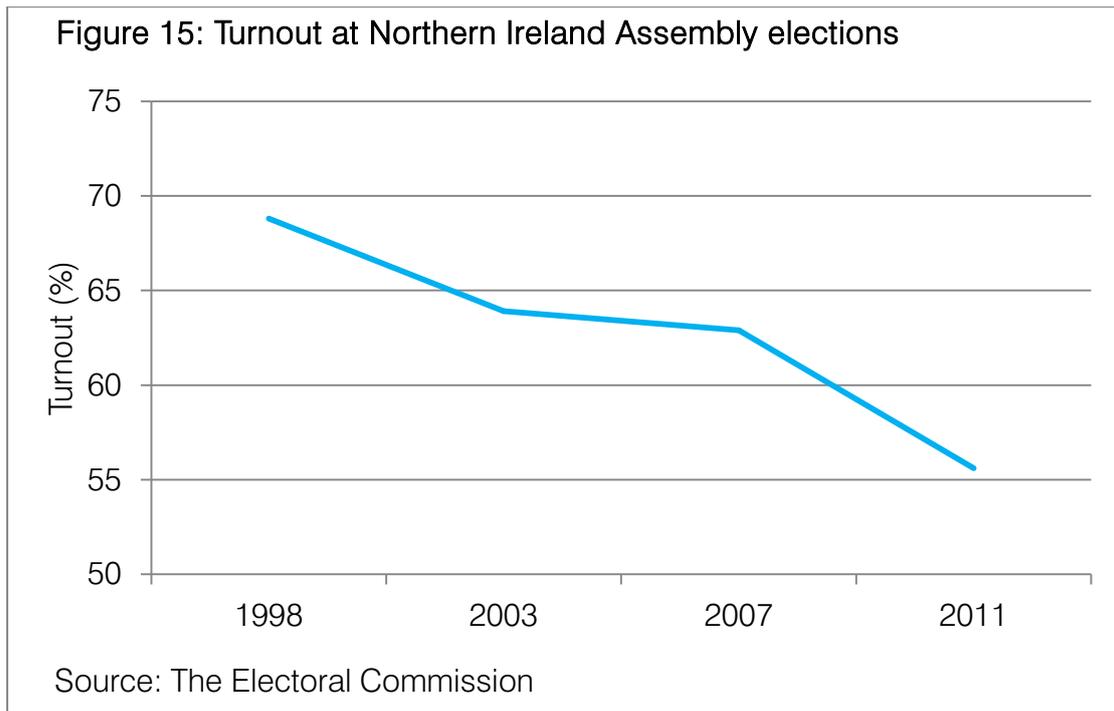
<sup>43</sup> The indexed numbers are calculated by using 2006 as a 'base year', at which both of the two variables are set at a value of 100. The data for each subsequent year then measures the percentage change in each variable against the base year.

<sup>44</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Great Britain's electoral registers* (December 2011).

clear decline and in Northern Ireland it has continued up to the most recent election. The rates are not directly comparable because Northern Ireland has made significant changes to the register from 2002 (including the reinstatement of electors before the 2005 election) which will have an impact on turnout figures (because turnout is calculated as a percentage of the registered electorate). However, unlike in Great Britain, the absolute numbers of people voting in general elections in Northern Ireland has also fallen – from 810,374 in 2001 to 673,271 in 2010.



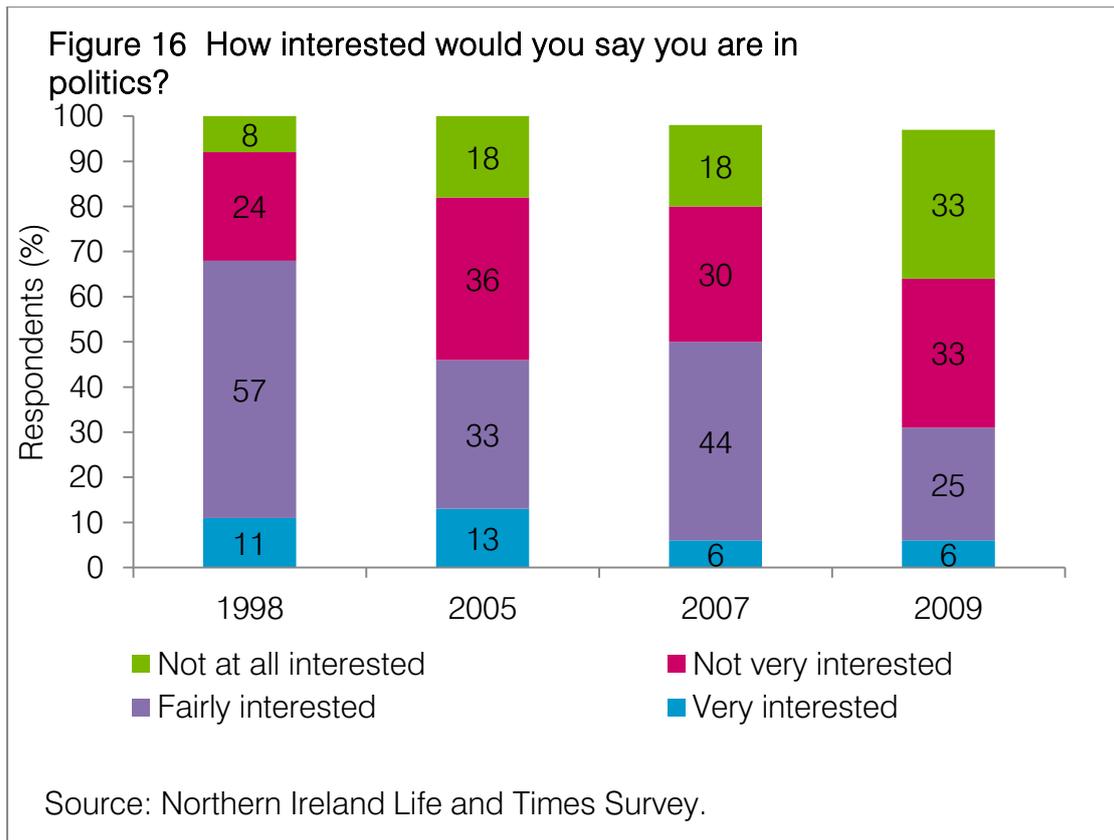
5.20 In addition, as shown in Figure 15, turnout at Northern Ireland Assembly elections has declined from 68.8% in 1998 to 55.6% at the most recent elections in 2011.



5.21 As Figure 16 below shows, there has also been a decline recorded in the percentage of people who claim to have an interest in politics.<sup>45</sup> Between 1998 and 2009 the proportion of the population saying they are not at all interested in politics has increased by 25 percentage points.

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<sup>45</sup> Data is taken from the Life and Times survey although the same question options were not used in each year. In 1998 the question asked was “How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics?” and respondents could choose from the following responses: “A great deal”; “Quite a lot”; “Some”; “Not very much”; “None at all”. The responses have been assigned to the closest category match shown in the figure. In 2007 an additional answer category of “Somewhat interested” was included. This has been included within “Fairly interested” in Figure 16.



5.22 It is not possible to directly quantify the impact on the register of this decline in interest but it is likely to be a contributing factor to the current, lower estimate of completeness.

## Conclusions

5.23 The data above suggests that the levels of accuracy and completeness found in this study, and particularly their decline in relation to the previous findings for the December 2007 register, can be clearly linked to a key problem with the current operation of the system of continuous registration. Namely, the lack of effective procedures to capture population change that compensate for the absence of an annual canvass or any on-going activity targeting households throughout the year involving door to door visits by canvassers.

5.24 The next chapter considers a series of recommendations on tackling this challenge.

# 6 Recommendations for improving the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland

## An urgent need for action

6.1 The evidence presented in this report shows a trend of declining accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's electoral register, largely as the result of an approach to maintaining electoral registers which has not been able to keep pace with recent population movement. This is a worrying trend, and one which could have significant implications for both participation (because people who are not accurately registered may not receive information about elections or be able to vote where they currently live), and integrity (because redundant entries which are left on electoral registers may be more vulnerable to abuse by people who want to manipulate the electoral process.)

6.2 Within the next four years there will be important elections in Northern Ireland which will depend on a complete and accurate electoral register: European Parliament elections in 2014 and likely elections to the new local councils; a UK Parliamentary general election in 2015; and Northern Ireland Assembly elections in either 2015 or 2016. Without an immediate and sustained programme of action to address and reverse the trend identified in this report, those elections could be held using an electoral register which fails to include hundreds of thousands of eligible electors and which contain hundreds of thousands of entries for people who no longer live at the registered address, even while the absolute number of entries on the register increases.

6.3 In the period from December 2007 to April 2012 the completeness estimate declined by ten percentage points from 81% to 71%. If this trend continued, with an annual decrease in completeness of approximately 2.5%, then the numbers of people not (accurately) present on the register in Northern Ireland could be:<sup>46</sup>

- 2014: 470,000
- 

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the continued decline in the completeness of the register described, these figures assume an annual increase in the Northern Ireland 17+ population of one per cent each year (based on the average population growth from 2006-2011).

- 2015: 510,000
- 2016: 540,000

6.4 Given the scale of the current problem, and the potential implications for elections in the next four years, taking no action and continuing with the current approach to maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland is simply not a realistic or credible option.

## Recommendations

6.5 The research presented in this report indicates that the current approach to maintaining the electoral register in Northern Ireland has not been able to keep pace with recent population movement. Previous research carried out on behalf of the Commission also suggests that a canvass carried out under the procedure currently prescribed by law in Northern Ireland would have a significant negative impact on the number of forms returned and the numbers of people registered.

6.6 We have therefore identified a series of actions which should be taken by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, with the support of the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Commission, to improve the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register in Northern Ireland. These actions are required not only in the immediate short-term to ensure electors are able to participate in the forthcoming elections in Northern Ireland, but also over the medium and longer-term to ensure that future elections are not undermined by a poor quality electoral register:

- In the **immediate short-term, before the next elections in Northern Ireland in 2014**, the Chief Electoral Officer must carry out comprehensive household activity to identify people who should be encouraged to apply to be registered and entries which should be reviewed and potentially removed from the register.
- In the **medium term, in time to have effect for a canvass in advance of the 2015 elections**, the UK Government should change the legislative framework for canvass procedures in Northern Ireland to remove the restrictions which currently prevent the Chief Electoral Officer from carrying out the canvass in a way which ensures a complete and accurate register.
- In the **longer-term, from 2015 onwards**, the Chief Electoral Officer should ensure that his registration activities – including general and targeted canvass activities, data-matching and specific initiatives – are supported by clear and publicly-available plans which demonstrate how agreed standards of performance will be met, and which are evaluated on an ongoing basis.

6.7 Our detailed recommendations are set out below.

## Recommendations for immediate action to improve the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register before the 2014 elections

6.8 Immediate action needs to be taken to address the decline in completeness and accuracy of the electoral register in Northern Ireland. Improvements to the effectiveness of data matching arrangements in Northern Ireland are unlikely to be sufficiently advanced in the short term to address the problems identified in this report before the 2014 elections.

6.9 We do not recommend that the Chief Electoral Officer should conduct a canvass under section 10(1A) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983)<sup>47</sup>. On the basis of research findings presented here and in previous reports on electoral registration in Northern Ireland, we do not believe that such a canvass would be an efficient or effective use of resources:

- As explained in detail earlier in Chapter 2 of this report, in conducting a canvass under section 10(1A) of the RPA 1983, the Chief Electoral Officer would be required to request all specified personal identifiers from all potential electors, including a large proportion of people (estimated at 78% of the total current electorate, based on the findings from this research) who are likely to remain accurately registered at their current address.
- The Chief Electoral Officer would need to invest additional resource in following up people who did not respond to the canvass, even where they remain resident and would otherwise be entitled to be registered at the address where they were previously registered.
- People who did not respond to the Chief Electoral Officer's request to provide personal identifiers during the canvass would not be included in the revised register published at the conclusion of the canvass, even if there was no other evidence to suggest that they were no longer entitled to remain registered.

6.10 In summary, we believe that conducting a canvass under current legislation would be likely to result in a more accurate, but significantly less complete electoral register in Northern Ireland. We have recommended below a series of changes to improve the statutory framework for the conduct of the canvass in Northern Ireland, but it is unlikely that these changes could be made in time to allow the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out a canvass in time before the 2014 elections.

6.11 Instead, we believe that a comprehensive exercise to identify the current residents in all households should be conducted. This would enable the Chief

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<sup>47</sup> The RPA 1983 currently provides that a canvass must be carried out in Northern Ireland in 2016 and can be carried out in any year before then.

Electoral Officer to target more effectively his registration activities at those people who are not accurately registered to secure completed registration applications and to identify existing entries which might be redundant and so should be reviewed. Also, unlike under a full canvass conducted under the RPA 1983, the Chief Electoral Officer will have the ability to retain entries on the register at the conclusion of the process wherever he is satisfied that a person is still entitled to remain registered in respect of that address, even where a response has not been received.

6.12 . The Chief Electoral Officer would take whichever steps were necessary – including sending forms to all households and making house-to-house enquiries to secure responses – to build an accurate picture of who is entitled to be registered in respect of each property in Northern Ireland.

6.13 This approach, incorporating personalised information sent to each household about the names of those people currently registered to that address, coupled with a range of response mechanisms (including online, telephone or text message channels for confirming that no information has changed, as well as postal returns for those where changes need to be recorded) and some door-to-door activity to follow up where no response has been received, has demonstrated a high average response rate of 93%.<sup>48</sup>

6.14 This annual household-based canvass process will be retained under the proposals for implementing individual electoral registration (IER) in Great Britain which are contained in the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill currently being considered by the UK Parliament.

#### **Recommendation 1 – Planning for household registration activity to improve the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register before the 2014 elections**

The Chief Electoral Officer should immediately begin preparing a plan for conducting household electoral registration activity across the whole of Northern Ireland in advance of the next scheduled elections in 2014.

This plan should include, as a minimum:

- A comprehensive exercise involving all necessary steps – including sending forms to all households and making house-to-house enquiries to secure responses – to identify who is entitled to be registered in respect of each property, providing accurate and up-to-date information about where there may be eligible people who are not currently registered, and also

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<sup>48</sup> The Electoral Commission, Great Britain's electoral registers (December 2011). N.B.: Response rates have been as high as 93%, although these individuals would still need to complete an individual application in order to complete the registration process. Existing entries would also need to be reviewed before being removed.

where there are current register entries which might be redundant. There should be a particular focus on communal establishments to ensure all residents are reached.

- Comprehensive follow up activity to encourage potentially eligible people identified through the household activity to complete an application form to ensure they are registered at their current address, including sending personalised application forms, reminder letters and making follow-up visits to properties where no response has been received.
- Effective activity to review the status of register entries which may no longer be valid – either because an elector is no longer resident at that address or because of other changes in circumstances – including sending notices to electors giving them an opportunity to confirm the validity of their current entry, using other relevant data to confirm the validity of entries, and ultimately carrying out a formal review of entries where there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that an individual is entitled to remain registered in respect of a particular address.

We recommend that these activities should have concluded by March 2014, in advance of the scheduled 2014 European Parliamentary elections and possible local Council elections. We would be happy to assist the Chief Electoral Officer by providing advice on approaches and techniques, based on our analysis of comparable registration activities in Great Britain.

The Chief Electoral Officer should publish details of his plans by March 2013.

### **Recommendation 2 – Providing funding for household registration activity before the 2014 elections**

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should give a clear commitment to providing funding to the Chief Electoral Officer for the additional costs of conducting household electoral registration activity across the whole of Northern Ireland as recommended above.

This commitment to fund household registration activity should be provided no later than February 2013, to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer can develop a fully costed plan for his proposed activities by March 2013.

### **Recommendation 3 – Public awareness to support household registration activity before the 2014 elections**

The Electoral Commission will, funding permitting and working closely with the Chief Electoral Officer, promote public awareness of the planned household registration activity. It will highlight action electors need to take to ensure they are registered to vote and that their registration details are up to date.

## Recommendations for action to improve the effectiveness of data matching arrangements in Northern Ireland

6.15 The introduction of continuous registration after 2006, and the removal of the annual canvass as a tool for capturing population movement and new registrants, meant that it was necessary for the Chief Electoral Officer to make effective alternative arrangements in order to ensure that Northern Ireland's electoral register is kept up-to-date. As explained in Chapter 3 of this report, the principal mechanism currently available to the Chief Electoral Officer is through his access to data matching from a range of public sector bodies.

6.16 As the evidence presented in this report makes clear, however, the use of data currently provided to the Chief Electoral Officer has not been sufficient to ensure that the electoral register keeps pace with the rate of population movement among potential electors. Given there has not yet been a comprehensive evaluation of the use of data by the Chief Electoral Officer, it is not clear whether or to what extent the decline in the register is caused by the current arrangements not providing a robust level of coverage of the Northern Ireland population; current (i.e. up-to-date) information about population movement. It is also essential that there is a comprehensive strategy for encouraging people who may have moved to update their registration details or potential new electors to apply to be registered, covering management of the data and follow-up of non-responders.

6.17 In addition to the comprehensive household registration activity recommended above, the Chief Electoral Officer will need to ensure that effective on-going arrangements are in place to ensure the completeness and accuracy of Northern Ireland's electoral registers are maintained.

### **Recommendation 4 – Ensuring the range of data sharing agreements provide effective support to enable the CEO to meet his statutory registration objectives**

The Chief Electoral Officer should review all existing agreements with data-holding organisations, to ensure that current agreements provide effective support to him in delivering his statutory duty to maintain the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Northern Ireland.

The review should include an examination of the following:

- The timeliness of the provision of data – how frequently is it provided and how current is it?
- The nature of the data provided and therefore the use that can be made of it – for example, does it include names and addresses, only addresses or, as in the case of DWP data, names, addresses and other personal information?

- The outcomes achieved from activities based on each data source, including the overall response rates as well as any other feedback which indicates the quality of the data
- What other data sources may exist which could be used?

The Chief Electoral Officer should also consider carefully whether there would be benefit in negotiating additional agreements with other data-holding organisations, including both public and private sector organisations. This should include a consideration of whether the current data matching arrangements result in any significant gaps in coverage – for example, people who move house but do nothing else that would currently see their details passed to the CEO, or specific demographic groups.

Where appropriate following the Chief Electoral Officer's review, the UK Government should amend the Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2008 to specify additional data-holding organisations.

#### **Recommendation 5 – Ensuring appropriate action is taken to encourage registration applications/updates/and review/remove redundant entries**

The Chief Electoral Officer should review the effectiveness of his existing plans and processes to contact electors identified through data provided by other organisations, including follow-up action.

The review should include an examination of the following:

- The effectiveness of methods currently used to contact individuals, including an evaluation of the levels of response, and whether this varies by which data source the individuals were identified.
- The level of follow up activities carried out to ensure a response is received in each case, including an assessment of the number and types of cases where the activities have not been successful in eliciting a response.
- The options available to follow up electors who fail to respond to initial letters, and whether alternatives could achieve higher response rates, including evaluating the effectiveness of house-to-house enquiries compared to one or more reminder letters.

The Chief Electoral Officer should use the findings of this review to develop plans which ensure that the most effective contact and follow-up mechanisms have been identified and are being employed by not later than mid-2013. This plan should be updated annually.

## Recommendations for monitoring the effectiveness of electoral registration activity in Northern Ireland

6.18 The Chief Electoral Officer is currently the only electoral registration and returning officer in the UK whose performance against independently-set

standards is not reported publicly to electors. However he has recently agreed to work with the Electoral Commission to pilot a set of registration performance standards.

6.19 The performance standards will provide a framework within which the Chief Electoral Officer will report on the detail of the work he carries out to meet his statutory registration objectives. He will provide evidence in support of his assessment of performance which will help to demonstrate how effective both the data he receives and the action taken in response to it, are in enabling him to maintain a complete and accurate register.

6.20 The Chief Electoral Officer will also maintain a registration action plan detailing his registration initiatives aimed at maintaining the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and setting out how his statutory registration objectives will be met. The process of reporting on performance against the standards and providing the corresponding supporting evidence will support an evaluation of whether the objectives set out in that plan have been met.

6.21 The Chief Electoral Officer will assess his performance against the Commission standards for the pilot period up to 31 March 2013, and will provide the Commission with all relevant information/data to complete its assessment in mid-April 2013. After this point the standards will be reviewed and finalised. It is expected that the Chief Electoral Officer will report from 2014 onwards on how he has met the standards in his annual report to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The lessons learned from setting and monitoring performance against these standards will also help to inform the development of a revised performance standards framework for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain, for use following the transition to individual electoral registration (IER).

6.22 The development of a performance standards framework for Northern Ireland brings the Chief Electoral Officer closer to all other Electoral Registration Officers in the UK, and will enable him to contrast his registration activities and their success with other registration officers, particularly once IER is in operation in Great Britain. It will also help to facilitate the identification and sharing of best practice, both in terms of providing lessons from the Chief Electoral Officer's experiences which can influence activities in Great Britain following the transition to IER, and also learning from Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain, to inform the Chief Electoral Officer's work, for example in targeting under-registered groups.

#### **Recommendation 6 – Ensuring transparent performance monitoring of electoral registration activity in Northern Ireland**

The UK Government should introduce legislation to amend the Electoral Administration Act (2006) so that the performance standards framework that applies in Great Britain is extended to Northern Ireland.

We will continue to work with the CEO to develop an appropriate performance standards and monitoring framework for Northern Ireland.

The Chief Electoral Officer should ensure that his registration action plan detailing registration initiatives aimed at maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register and setting out how his statutory registration objectives will be met, is published and made widely available to stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

## Recommendations for future electoral registration processes in Northern Ireland

6.23 We have highlighted above our view that, on the basis of the findings set out in this report, a canvass in Northern Ireland under the current rules set out in the RPA 1983 would be likely to result in a more accurate, but significantly less complete electoral register. We have not recommended that the Chief Electoral Officer carries out a full canvass under the current rules in the short term, and we do not recommend that the current canvass process should be used again without modifications to address the significant problems associated with that model, which we have identified in previous research reports and highlighted again in this report.

6.24 Subject to the passage of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill currently being considered by the UK Parliament, these changes would align much more closely the respective frameworks for individual electoral registration in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

6.25 Given the concerns highlighted in this report about the use of data currently provided to the Chief Electoral Officer, it will not be sufficient to continue to rely so heavily on data matching arrangements until there is clear evidence that they more effectively capture on-going population change and movement. Instead, once the changes recommended below have been made to the statutory framework for the canvass in Northern Ireland, the Chief Electoral Officer should be required to carry out a canvass much more frequently than at present, potentially each year if data matching arrangements remain insufficiently effective to capture population movement.

### **Recommendation 7 – Ensuring the statutory framework for the conduct of the canvass in Northern Ireland allows effective activity by the Chief Electoral Officer**

The UK Government should introduce legislation to amend the framework for the conduct of the canvass in Northern Ireland to allow more effective canvass activity by the Chief Electoral Officer in future. Legislation should include provisions to align the framework for Northern Ireland more closely with that which will apply in Great Britain, in particular to:

- Extend to the Chief Electoral Officer the current duty under section 9A of the Act for Electoral Registration Officers in Great Britain to take specific steps, both during and outside of the canvass, to maintain the register, including by identifying and inviting potential electors to apply to be registered.
- Ensure that canvass activity, along the lines of the HEF process that is proposed as part of the IER process in Great Britain (outlined in Chapter 7), can take place on a household basis.
- Ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer can retain a person's entry on the register on the conclusion of a canvass if they have not returned a canvass form, providing that he remains satisfied that the person has not moved away or otherwise become ineligible to be registered at that address.
- Require the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out canvass activity every year, at least until it is possible to demonstrate that other methods used to maintain the completeness and accuracy of Northern Ireland's electoral registers are at least as effective as a canvass.

The UK Government should ensure that this legislation is introduced to give effect to these changes in time to have effect for a canvass in advance of the 2015 elections.

## Monitoring the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Northern Ireland

6.26 As outlined earlier, we envisage that the new performance standards framework, monitoring electoral registration activity in Northern Ireland, will provide evidence of the effectiveness of the recommendations proposed above. We will also carry out a repeat study measuring the completeness and accuracy of Northern Ireland's electoral registers in 2014.

# 7 Looking to the future: lessons from Northern Ireland for the electoral registration system in Great Britain

7.1 The introduction of individual electoral registration (IER) in Great Britain will be the biggest change to the voter registration process since the universal franchise. It requires careful planning and implementation and needs to be done in a way that puts voters first. It is clear that there are important lessons to be learned from the experience of implementing IER in Northern Ireland since 2002, and both the UK Government and the Electoral Commission have considered the experience of Northern Ireland as proposals for IER in Great Britain have developed.

7.2 This final chapter sets out the key lessons for the introduction of IER in Great Britain which we think can be drawn from recent research on electoral registration in Northern Ireland.

## Introducing Individual Electoral Registration in Great Britain

7.3 The Electoral Registration and Administration (ERA) Bill, presented for debate before the UK Parliament in May 2012, will provide for the introduction of a system of IER in Great Britain. This section describes the proposed approach to the introduction of IER in Great Britain, as currently provided for in the ERA Bill.

### The registration process in 2014

7.4 The UK Government has indicated that it intends to move the autumn 2013 annual household canvass to spring 2014, with the aim of ensuring that “the register is as up-to-date as possible for the European elections and for the transition to IER”.<sup>49</sup> The Government’s implementation plan, published in July 2012, indicates that the transition to IER in Great Britain will begin either in July

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<sup>49</sup> Cabinet Office, *Individual Electoral Registration: Implementing the Change 2012-2016* (July 2012)

or September 2014 with an exercise to confirm the details of existing registered electors. This will involve matching the name and address details of electors already on the electoral register against information held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). If the information matches, then those entries will be confirmed and retained in the electoral register. Electors falling into this category will not need to take any further action either to retain their registration status or to maintain any on-going absent vote application.

7.5 People on the existing register who cannot be confirmed in this way will receive an individual invitation to register under the new system from the ERO and will be asked to provide their name, address, date of birth and National Insurance Number. Alternative mechanisms for verifying identity will be available for those people who are unable to provide a date of birth or National Insurance Number.

7.6 Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) will be sent from July 2014 to properties where no electors are registered, including new homes, as well as properties where the ERO believes there may be people who are not currently registered. Potential electors identified in this way will then be sent an individual invitation to register by the ERO. Reminders will be sent to people who do not respond to an invitation and, if necessary, this will be followed up by a visit from a canvasser. EROs will have the power to issue a civil penalty to individuals who repeatedly fail to make an application to register when requested to do so.

7.7 A new electoral register will be published in December 2014. This will include all those existing electors confirmed against DWP data as well as those who have successfully applied to be registered individually under the new system. Those electors who have not been confirmed and have not yet applied to be registered individually will remain on the electoral register and be able to vote at the 2015 UK general election. Anyone who has failed to make a successful individual application by December 2015, however, will not be included in the register published at that point.

## The registration process in 2015 and future years

7.8 Registration activity between December 2014 and April 2015 will aim to ensure that as many people as possible are registered under the new system in time for the UK general election, which has been specified under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 as 7 May 2015.

7.9 The 2015 UK general election will be followed by a full household canvass in autumn 2015. Each household will be sent a HEF, which is expected to include pre-printed details of the people currently included in the electoral register at that property. Individuals listed on the HEF whose details have not changed will need to confirm that fact, but will not have to submit a full application to register each year.

7.10 Any new resident identified on the returned HEF who may be eligible to register at an address will be sent an invitation to register. If they fail to respond,

they will be sent reminders and, if necessary, a door-to-door canvasser will visit their address. An ERO can then require a person to make an application for registration. A person who still fails to apply following the taking of these steps will be removed from the register and will have to reapply to be registered. In addition, an ERO may issue a civil penalty.

7.11 Where the returned HEF identifies that the register includes entries for people who are no longer resident at that address, the ERO will be required to carry out a review and then remove the entry.

7.12 The transition to IER in Great Britain will be completed by January 2016. The UK Government has indicated that an annual household canvass will continue beyond 2015 to help ensure an up-to-date electoral register, although the ERA Bill currently includes provisions which would allow the annual canvass requirement to be amended or abolished in future.

## Key lessons from Northern Ireland

7.13 In our October 2011 response to the UK Government's White Paper and draft legislation on Individual Electoral Registration<sup>50</sup>, we recommended that the Government and Parliament should examine the experience of IER in Northern Ireland to determine what lessons can be learnt for the rest of the UK. This section sets out the key lessons for electoral registration in Great Britain that we think can be drawn from the research presented in this report.

### Retaining annual household registration activity by EROs in Great Britain

7.14 Population movement presents a significant challenge for EROs in maintaining the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers. The decision in 2005 to discontinue the annual canvass in Northern Ireland appears to have had a significant impact on the Chief Electoral Officer's ability to track population movement. While access to information from data holding organisations has provided some information to support the Chief Electoral Officer and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, the evidence presented in this report indicates that it does not currently represent a fully effective replacement mechanism for tracking population movement in Northern Ireland.

7.15 While the ERA Bill includes provision for the annual canvass in Great Britain to be amended or abolished in future, a canvass of households using the

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<sup>50</sup> The Electoral Commission, Response to the UK Government's White Paper and draft legislation on Individual Electoral Registration (October 2011).

HEF and individual application process will take place in 2014 and will continue annually for the foreseeable future.<sup>51</sup>

7.16 This household registration activity may, subject to further evaluation of a series of pilot schemes, also be supplemented by access for EROs in Great Britain to information from data holding organisations. EROs should, as far as possible, aim to target their use of data to support identification and engagement with currently under-registered groups, including younger people and people in private rented accommodation.

7.17 EROs in Great Britain will also continue to be under a duty to take specified necessary steps to encourage registration, both during the annual canvass period and also at other times during the year in response to any information which suggests that the circumstances of any elector or property have changed.

### Requiring electors in Great Britain to provide personal identifiers only when their circumstances have changed

7.18 The decision to discontinue the annual canvass in Northern Ireland was prompted by evidence that the requirement for electors to re-submit all their personal identifiers each year – even if their circumstances hadn't changed – was leading to a reduction in the rate of response to the canvass, and a consequent reduction in the number of names included in the electoral register for Northern Ireland.

7.19 The current proposals for IER in Great Britain would not require electors to provide their details every year – they would only be required if they had moved address, or changed their name or citizenship status. Retaining the limited power for EROs to carry forward entries to the new register published following the annual canvass in Great Britain, coupled with the current relatively high rate of response to the canvass, should mitigate the likelihood of such a significant decline in the number of names included in the electoral registers for Great Britain.

### Ensuring on-going evaluation of the effectiveness of the use of information from data holding organisations

7.20 While the Chief Electoral Officer has, since the introduction of continuous registration in 2006, benefited from access to information from data holding

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<sup>51</sup> Clauses 6 and 7 of the ERA Bill provide Ministers with the power to amend or abolish the annual canvass, but any Order making such a change is subject to approval by both Houses of Parliament and must be accompanied by a report by the Electoral Commission on the extent to which such a change would help EROs to maintain the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers.

organisations to assist him in meeting his registration objectives, there has been no systematic evaluation of how effectively that information has been used. Opportunities to refine or improve the use of such information may, as a result, have been missed during the last six years.

7.21 Undertaking comprehensive evaluation of the use of information by EROs in Great Britain is likely to be a more complex exercise, given the decentralised structure of administration by approximately 380 independent officers. Nevertheless, provisions in the ERA Bill would require the Secretary of State to consult the Electoral Commission, the Information Commissioner and any other appropriate person before making regulations providing for information to be shared with EROs, and the Secretary of State may also require the Commission to prepare a report on how data sharing arrangements have worked in practice.

## Conclusions about changing the electoral registration system in Great Britain

7.22 The findings from this research do not undermine the principle of individual electoral registration or mean that the introduction of this system in Great Britain will necessarily lead to similar declines in accuracy and completeness.

7.23 There are some lessons from the experience in Northern Ireland for the plans in Great Britain and these are set out above. However, the findings presented in this report are primarily about the working of continuous registration in Northern Ireland and the difficulties in maintaining the accuracy and completeness of an electoral register without a regular canvass of the electorate.

# Acknowledgements

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The Commission is grateful to those who drafted this report.

The Commission would also like to thank ICM Research for their assistance with this project, in particular Martin Boon.

# Appendix A – Approach to the study

## Methodology

The purpose of the survey was to generate a fully representative sample of the adult (aged 17+) population across Northern Ireland in order to produce reliable accuracy and completeness findings. As such, the survey employed the highest quality form of survey sampling and interviewing: a pure random probability (pre-selection) survey design coupled with face-to-face interviewing in respondents' own homes. There are a number of advantages associated with such an approach. Foremost amongst them was the ability to physically visit selected addresses in order to reliably assess inaccuracies that may have been discovered at an address. The use of the Postal Address File (PAF) to source addresses at random may itself have contributed to inaccuracy, if for example, confusing or derelict addresses were selected – only a face-to-face approach would have proved this to be the case.

In addition, the construction of accuracy findings was dependent upon interviewers being able to cross-check respondent provided data (names, dates of birth etc) against the electoral register during the course of the interview. This implied that full knowledge of electoral records had to be instantly available for each selected address. As this information is sensitive, face-to-face interviewers carried laptops that enabled them to conduct Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) at each address. The electoral records for all selected addresses were directly linked to the interviewing software, thus providing register information live during the interview to facilitate the completion of questionnaire.

## Sampling

The sample was based on a multi-stage probability sample, with a probability of selection proportional to population density and urbanisation level - which were considered to be key variables in the analysis of accuracy and completeness.

Northern Ireland is split into eight settlement types, ranging from the most populous “Belfast Metropolitan Area” to the most rural, “Small village, hamlet and open countryside”, as defined by the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) 2005. The classification structure is shown in the table below, details of which were included in the definition of target geography within the sample stratification.

**Table A1: Settlement type by population of Northern Ireland**

Label	Name	Settlement Population Size
Band A	Belfast Metropolitan Area	c.580,000
Band B	Derry Urban Area	c.90,000
Band C	Large Town	18,000-75,000
Band D	Medium Town	10,000-18000
Band E	Small Town	4,500-10,000
Band F	Intermediate settlement	2,250-4,500
Band G	Village	1,000-2,250
Band H	Small village, hamlet & open countryside	<1,000

Northern Ireland is also split into administrative units in much the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom – at the lowest level the base units of Census (2001) about which complete socio-demographic data is known are called Output Areas (OAs). OAs were constructed with size equality in mind (there are 5,022 OAs in Northern Ireland), with an average of 125 households (350 people) estimated to reside in each.

Output Areas are grouped by full postcode and fit within the boundaries of electoral wards – which number 582 across the Province. The use of Output Areas as base unit in a sampling frame does introduce a level of ‘clustering’ within the process that reduces the cost of interviewing but widens the margins of errors associated with a specific sample size. However, there is another advantage of using OAs. There is a perceived social uniformity about the occupants of each OA, which implies that an ACORN code (a classification of neighbourhoods by relative affluence) associated with each one is an excellent random indicator (strata) variable that can be incorporated into the construction of the multi-stage sampling frame to ensure double-lock representative coverage. IrishACORN is segmented into seven groups and 33 types each of which were incorporated into the sampling frame as a level of strata.

Our survey design was premised on the achievement of 1,000 interviews. To achieve this, we selected 50 Output Areas, with each interviewer tasked with achieving a minimum of 20 interviews from 30 randomly selected addresses within each selected OA (i.e. the survey success being contingent upon the successful achievement of a minimum 67% response rate).

The following process was involved in the random selection of the Output Areas.

1. All Output Areas within each independent target geography (Level 1 strata) were eligible and listed in descending order of ACORN type (Level 2 strata) to

place the most affluent OAs at the top of the list and the least affluent at the bottom.

2. The total number of eligible adults aged 17+ in each OA were then cumulated down the list. Using a random start and fixed sampling interval the required number of OAs (50) were selected. This process produced a sample of OA's with a probability of selection proportionate to size and produced a representative sample by ACORN type.

3. A total of 30 addresses within each OA were then selected at random from the full list of eligible OA addresses as listed out on the PAF. The random selection of addresses was achieved through the Systematic Analysis System (SAS) via simple random sampling, which selects address units with equal probability and without replacement. This implies that a total of 1,500 addresses were selected at random. (A further five addresses were also selected for each sampling point, but were withheld from interviews and would only be released if an interviewer failed to achieve the target response rate in their OA sampling point and put in a request for extra addresses upon the expectation of failure).

4. Interviewers were provided with their full list of 30 eligible addresses. It was made clear to them and that the overall success of the survey depended on their achievement of the necessary response rate. They were required to visit each address on multiple occasions until they achieve the interview or receive a flat refusal.

It is at this point in the survey process, however, that the methodology (by necessity) had to depart from the pursuit of a fully random sample of people. Interviewers were tasked with reaching the head of the household or some other household member if the head was unavailable. Typically, random surveys seek a randomly selected member of each household but this survey simply depended on reaching anyone who resided there if the head of the household was unavailable.

This implication was that we sought a representative sample of addresses, rather than a representative sample of people, and material information on all residents within a property – NOT in this case a classic representative sample of respondents.

A key implication of this approach was the extent to which we could trust the information given to us by members of a household who were not at its head. For example, multiple occupancy shared households to be less knowledgeable about the personal details of other occupants if their ties to each-other were limited – student households were a case in point.

This problem related to specific questions only. We expected there to be more missing data, for example, in the provision of other household members' full names (missing middle names) and inaccuracy in actual age (although not so much in the offering of age bands).

## Pre-survey electoral register analysis

In order to be able to cross-check during interviews the details of persons living at selected addresses against the electoral register, ICM had to first check the electoral register records for persons associated with that address. This yielded the following:

1. A total number of 2,366 people were found on the electoral register at the 1,500 addresses selected at random, and thus eligible to vote in at least some UK elections (or due to attain the register at the age of 18 and become eligible. (A further 385 people were found on the electoral register at the 250 'extra' addresses that were held in reserve in case of low response rates at specific sample points).
2. A total of 333 addresses were selected at random from the PAF for which the electoral register held no information i.e. nobody was registered to vote there. (This applied to a further 65 'extra' addresses). These addresses still had to be visited by interviewers.

All details of persons registered to vote at selected addresses were linked to the interviewing software on the CAPI machines. At a specific point during the conduct of the interview, details of such persons were automatically pulled through to facilitate the interview questions.

## Field methods and outcomes

Prior to interviewers commencing fieldwork, a number of protocols were adopted to help facilitate a high response rate and smooth survey progress.

1. A letter was sent to every household informing household members that their property had been selected to participate, the purpose of the survey and contact details should they not wish to be contacted. As a result of communication, ICM received a total of 19 requests for their property to be withdrawn from the process.
2. All interviewers were given a one day training session in Belfast on use of the CAPI machine and its software, in addition to survey purpose, questionnaire rationale and general requirements.

3. Interviewers were required to make one plus five re-visits to each address in order to maximise the response rate. Rules for visiting were defined as:

- a. Visit one had to be on a Saturday or a Sunday (with sensitivities around Sunday interviewing is unwise and worship taken into account);
- b. At least one further visit had to be on a Saturday or a Sunday;
- c. At least one visit had to be on a weekday evening, after 6pm;
- d. No more than two visits were permitted during workday hours;
- e. The time, date and outcome of every visit had to be recorded on a contact sheet. This formed part of the process for assessing rule compliance;
- f. Appointment making was encouraged at every opportunity. Contact with any household member brings the opportunity to obtain contact phone numbers for eligible household heads etc. Interviewer details were also posted through letterboxes where no contact was made;
- g. Addresses where 'soft' contact was made but no interview achieved were re-issued to a different interviewer. The expectation was that 88% of completed interviews would result from 'first' issue contact, but the remaining 12% would be achieved where a different interviewer successfully makes contact;
- h. No incentive was offered to respondents to participate on the survey;

4. All households where an interview did not take place, but where no refusal was received (426 addresses) were sent a post-fieldwork abridged version of the questionnaire. ICM received a total of 53 self-completed postal questionnaires, each of which were then manually entered as an interview record and thus included in the full and final dataset.

Table A2 shows the outcomes at all the addresses that ICM interviewers visited, and the associated implications.

**Table A2: Interview outcomes.**

Original Addresses visited	1,500
Extra addresses visited	20
<b>Total addresses visited</b>	<b>1,520</b>
Quit during interview	2
Failed appointment	8
No contact	154
Contact – no interview	5
Withdrawn addresses by office	16
Unspecified refusal	49

Non English speaking	1
Away during fieldwork	4
Too ill to participate	2
Property not found/doesn't exist	21
Institution	1
Property under construction	1
Property demolished	1
Property vacant	85
Holiday home	4
Business address	13
Status uncertain	23
Entry to block refused by warden	12
<b>Failed addresses total</b>	<b>402</b>
Completed interview at address	1,065
Completed interview by post	53
<b>Total interviews</b>	<b>1,118</b>
<b>Response rate</b>	<b>73.5%</b>

The total number of achieved interviews (1,118) yielded data on 2,173 people (a number which corresponds to the "Completeness base"). Field interviews were conducted on 21st May – 24th July 2012. Additional postal returns were accepted until 20th August 2012.

## Confidence Intervals

It should be remembered at all times that a sample of 1,118 adults aged 17+ and not the entire population of Northern Ireland has been interviewed. Consequently, all results are subject to sampling tolerances, which mean that not all differences are statistically significant.

The variation between the sample results and the 'true' values (if everyone in the population had been interviewed) can be predicted from knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times answers are given. The confidence with which this prediction can be made is chosen to be 95% - that is, the chances are 95 times out of 100 that the 'true' value will fall within a specified range. The table below illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and the percentage results at the 95% confidence level.

**Table A3: Sampling tolerance.**

Sample size	Sampling tolerances applicable to %'s at or near		
	10% or 90% + / - (percentage points)	30% or 70% + / - (percentage points)	50% + / - (percentage points)

100 interviews	5.9	9.0	9.8
250 interviews	3.7	5.7	6.2
500 interviews	2.6	4.0	4.4
1,118 interviews	1.8	2.7	2.9

For example, with a sample size of 2,000 interviews where 50% give a particular answer, we can be 95% certain that the 'true' value will fall within the range of 2.2 percentage points from the sample result.

When results are compared between separate groups within a sample (say, between men and women), different results may be obtained. The difference may be 'real' or it may occur by chance (because a sample rather than the entire population has been interviewed). To test if the difference is a real one, i.e. if it is 'statistically significant', we again have to know the size of the samples, the % giving a certain answer and the degree of confidence chosen. At the 95% confidence level again, the differences between the results of two separate groups must be greater than the values given in the table below:

**Table A4: Difference required to be statistically significant.**

Sample sizes to be compared	Differences required to be statistically significant at or near		
	10% or 90% + / - (percentage points)	30% or 70% + / - (percentage points)	50% + / - (percentage points)
100 and 100	8.3	12.7	13.9
200 and 200	5.9	8.9	9.8
500 and 500	3.7	5.7	6.2

While these confidence intervals apply to simple random samples, the sample in Northern Ireland was clustered by strata, and weighting was also required to bring sample profiles into line with population profiles. Both of these factors imply there a necessity to revisit confidence intervals in order to take account of Design Effects in the survey process, meaning that the effective sample size becomes lower than the actual sample size.

The Confidence Intervals associated with the main completeness and accuracy findings are as follows.

**Table A5: Confidence intervals.**

	Completeness		Accuracy	
	Local Govt Register +/-%	Parliamentary Register +/-%	Local Govt Register +/-%	Parliamentary Register +/-%

Overall:	4.1	4.1	1.4	1.3
Gender:				
Male	6.1	6.0	1.6	1.5
Female	5.6	5.6	2.1	2.1
Age:				
16-17	30.9	31.0	18.5	18.6
18-24	14.3	14.3	3.9	3.9
25-34	13.4	13.4	4.4	4.4
35-44	11.4	11.6	3.6	3.1
45-54	7.3	7.3	3.8	3.7
55-64	7.9	7.9	4.2	4.2
65+	5.8	5.6	1.9	1.9
Tenure:				
Owned Outright	4.5	4.5	5.5	5.5
Buying with mortgage	7.2	7.3	5.8	5.8
Rent from council	12.6	12.5	13.5	13.5
Rent from landlord	16.9	18.0	19.6	20.0
Length of residence				
Up to 1 year	22.3	22.8	30.9	30.9
1-2 years	25.8	26.3	8.1	8.1
2-5 years	14.8	15.4	7.7	5.4
Over 5 years	3.6	3.6	1.4	1.4
Nationality:				
UK/ROI	4.2	4.3	1.4	1.4
Non-UK/ROI	18.2	16.6	7.8	2.8
Urbanisation level:				
Belfast Met area	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.3
Derry urban area	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.0
Large town	1.6	1.6	1.5	1.5
Medium town	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Small town	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.8
Intermediate settlement	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8
Village	0.9	1.0	0.6	0.6
Small village, hamlet & open country	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.8

## Data Weighting

Nearly all population surveys require some form of data weighting. This is often necessary to ensure that there is a match between the geo-demographic profile of the sample and that of the target population as a whole. Other considerations apply, but the uniqueness of this survey design limited weighing requirements.

This sample is a probability sample of households in which all household members are enumerated. It is thus, in effect, a clustered probability sample of

individuals. As the sampling method did not require the selection of a specified individual within each household there was no reason to expect sampling bias (as opposed to variance) in the sample composition at the individual level. (In contrast, in surveys where we only acquire information about one person per household those living in large households are less likely to be included, and thus weights have to be applied accordingly).

The theoretical approach to the dataset was that only basic weighting schemes were required. Two layers of weights were applied – one for basic household level characteristics (urbanisation, household size and tenure for which updated Census information was available) which were applied to each person about whom full information was collected, and individual level weights for age and gender based on Northern Ireland Census 2011 source data.

## Regression modelling

The purpose of regression modelling is to identify which characteristics are associated with a particularly (and statistically significant) high or low level of incidence after taking into account the impact of all of the other associations accounted for in the model, and thereby help pinpoint the circumstances which give rise to a particularly high incidence of incomplete or inaccurate entries on the electoral register.

The modelling is undertaken using logistic regression, which is the appropriate regression technique to use where the dependent variable consists of just two possible outcomes. Thus in the case of our analysis of completeness we are analysing whether an eligible person is or is not on the register at the sampled address, while in the case of inaccuracy we are analysing whether a person whose name appears on the register is or is not an eligible person currently living at that address. All of the independent variables are regarded as categorical variables. In the case of completeness the coefficients for each category show the impact of being in that category as opposed to the baseline category (indicated in the tables in brackets) on the probability that an eligible person is on the register. In the case of accuracy the coefficients show the impact on the probability that an entry in the register is that of an eligible person currently living at that address. A positive coefficient indicates that membership of that category is associated with a higher level of completeness/accuracy while a negative coefficient indicates a lower level. To aid the readability of the tables, those coefficients that are statistically significantly different from zero at the 5% level of probability are emboldened.

The analysis for completeness is confined to those variables for which we have information for each household member plus those that pertain to the address/household rather than the individual. Three key findings emerge:

1. People who have been resident at an address for five years – and especially those who have been there for no more than a year – are less likely to appear on the register.
2. Younger people are less likely to appear on the register than are older people. Though the pattern is evident up to the age of no less than 44, the phenomenon is most marked amongst those aged under 25.
3. Those living in rental accommodation, and especially those living in private rental accommodation are less likely to appear on the register.

These findings are in line with those that have previously been uncovered for Great Britain. In addition, however, it also appears that even after taking into account the above pattern men are slightly less likely to appear on the electoral register than women.

The analysis for accuracy reveals that entries are less likely to be accurate at properties where:

1. The current occupants have been living there for less than a year
2. A larger number of people are living there
3. Under 65s live
4. C1, C2 and/or DE social groups live
5. Non-NI, non-Irish or non-British people are resident

Full data tables on the regressions analysis are available from the Commission on request.

# Appendix B

The flowchart overleaf sets out the process of continuous registration. This has been provided by the Chief Electoral Officer.

# Continuous Registration

## INFORMATION RECEIVED

### ADDITIONS & AMENDMENTS

#### BSO DATA

- ♦ Data cleansed to ensure only those who need forms receive them.
- ♦ Initial Mail Shot carried out by FCS Lasermail and reminder sent to non-responders within approx 6 weeks.

#### SCHOOLS/FE COLLEGES

- ♦ Data from schools used to populate registration forms.
- ♦ School visit – forms checked and completed by student.
- ♦ Photograph taken for Electoral ID card.
- ♦ Letter & forms issued to non attendees.

#### DWP DATA (Attainers)

- ♦ Data cleansed to ensure only those who need forms receive them.
- ♦ Office completes Mail Shot.

#### RM DATA

Each office writes out to individuals on marriage and civil partnership lists provided by Registrar.

#### NEW PROPERTIES

- ♦ Data received from Local Authorities.
- ♦ Check to determine if property already on EROS database.
- ♦ Target properties not on database.

#### CITIZENSHIP

- ♦ NIO forward information to Headquarters.
- ♦ Letters and forms issued centrally.

#### PUBLIC

Telephone calls, office visits, e-mails, letters requesting forms, website, politicians.

#### OTHER INITIATIVES

Conducted In House and has included:  
Void Properties, Recently Vacated Properties, Nursing Homes, Service Voters, Home Alones, Mini Canvass, Housing Executive, Duplicate Records, Incorrect or no National Insurance Numbers, National fraud Initiative, information from Polling Stations.

### REMOVALS

#### DEATH/CORONERS' LIST

- ♦ Check on EROS.
- ♦ Remove from database – current and history.

#### LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- ♦ Information received from GB in relation to individuals who have moved to their area.
- ♦ Check on EROS and remove.

#### ROYAL MAIL RETURNS

- ♦ Investigate and act upon as necessary.
- ♦ Follow Removal of Electors as per EONI procedure.

#### PUBLIC

- ♦ Investigate and act upon as necessary.
- ♦ Activate removal process as per EONI procedure.

#### LEFT NORTHERN IRELAND

- ♦ Data cleansed and removal process instigated.

## PROCESSING PROCEDURES CARRIED

**PROCESSING**  
*(Initiative forms are coded to assist in completion of statistics).*

**ADDITIONS & AMENDMENTS**

Forms received in office are checked against EROS and other databases, i.e. DWP, BSO, Schools, etc.

Information Validated

If information provided can be validated against the above databases, forms are approved and added to the register.

Information Not Validated

**Information not authenticated EONI procedure must be followed.**

A letter and checklist requesting specific evidence is issued to applicant allowing 21 days for a response.

If no response after this time a further letter and requisition is issued, reminding applicant of evidence required.

Application to be deferred for 6 months, if during this period applicant submits ALL the required evidence the application can be approved.

If requested, forward papers to CEO.

**REMOVALS**

**To be initiated when information is received which may lead us to believe that an elector may no longer be entitled to be registered at the registered address, or that any of the information provided at the time of registration is no longer correct ie:**

Registration forms received from a family unit to register at an address where another family are still registered – notices to be sent to the second family who have in all probability moved.

Electors believed to be in prison (usually as a result of information from the Prison Service).

An irregular number of electors registered at an address. What is “irregular” depends on the circumstances of each case. Whilst 25 would not normally be dubious for a nursing home or hostel, 8 would normally merit enquiry at a typical home.

Newly identified discrepancies in signatures on registration and/or absent vote applications.

Notified by one member of a family unit that the family have moved house.

A letter and form is issued allowing 21 days for response. If no response is received within 21 days from the date of the notice the elector will be removed from the register.

Where possible a check is made against data held to find possible alternative addresses for removed electors. Blank forms are issued.

**Area Electoral Officers are encouraged to use the procedure in any case in which they have doubts about whether any registration is not accurate.**

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