

Cragg Ross Dawson

**Individual Electoral Registration:
Research on draft letters**

Report

Prepared for:

The Electoral Commission
3 Bunhill Row
London EC1Y 8YZ

February 2014

274 rp

Contact at
Cragg Ross Dawson: Tim Porter

Cragg Ross Dawson
Qualitative Research
81 Oxford Street
London W1D 2EU

Tel +44 (0)20 7437 8945

Fax +44 (0)20 7437 0059

research@crd.co.uk

www.craggrossdawson.co.

CONTENTS	PAGE NUMBER
A. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY	1
B. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES	5
C. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE	7
D. DETAILED FINDINGS	9
1. Contextual points	9
2. The IER letters overall	11
3. The Welsh versions of the letters	28
4. The individual letters	29
5. The envelopes	33
E. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	37
APPENDICES	

A. SUMMARY

Background

1. Qualitative research was commissioned to explore response to four draft letters intended to inform people about the change to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the obligation to provide information if requested. 48 individual interviews, 10 paired interviews and 2 focus groups were conducted in two stages.
2. The interviews and groups began with an exercise in which participants were given three letters, including one of the IER letters, and asked to open them in order of perceived interest and importance. The IER letter was then discussed in detail and, in first stage fieldwork, compared with another of the four letters.
3. An interim debrief was given between the two stages and changes made to the letters for the second stage. The research took place in January 2014.

Main findings

Voting and registering

4. Attitudes to voting represented a spectrum, from the committed and enthusiastic to the apathetic. Most of our sample said they would vote in elections, and there was particular interest in voting in Scotland, where the independence referendum was high on the agenda.
5. This range of opinion was reflected in feelings about registering to vote. In the absence of knowledge that providing the information to register is compulsory, the general feeling was that it was sensible to be registered. A minority were less concerned and gave the impression that registering was not a high priority for them.

Response to the IER letters

6. Overall reactions to the IER letters were broadly favourable. In the initial letter sorting exercise they were all generally opened second, and were read at least reasonably carefully.
7. On first sight all the letters came across as accessible, easy to read and to follow. Almost everyone said they would comply and complete the form. On

closer examination the invitation to register letters generated some uncertainty: it was not clear to everyone why they were being asked to provide information; and those who were sure they were currently registered were surprised that they might be asked to 're-register'.

8. Intention to comply with the invitation to register letters was driven by three things: the fact that the letters came from the local authority, which suggested they were important; the clear link between completing the form and being able to vote, which was significant to many; and the fine, which communicated that providing the information will be compulsory.
9. Key elements of communication in the letters were that the electoral registration system is changing, people who are asked will have to provide information about themselves in order to register or stay registered, and they can do this online.
10. Some misunderstandings of the letters' content arose: that the change to the system flagged in the letters was the introduction of online registration; or that people can now vote online.
11. The inclusion in one of the Stage 1 letters of a reference to improving credit ratings appealed to a few, but generated questions and uncertainty. It was removed from the letters used in Stage 2.
12. The references to the websites as sources of further information about the change were noted, but there were often demands for more detail in the letters themselves, especially at Stage 1
13. The Q&A section on the back of the letters used in Stage 2 was helpful in spelling out the key element of IER, and in addressing the possibility of individuals in a household receiving different letters. It needed to be clearly signposted on the front.
14. A minority with more cynical and suspicious views than the bulk of the sample wanted to know how information from the new registration process was going to be compared with existing information, and what the source of the existing information was.
15. The general preference was for registering online, for its speed and convenience; this was a welcome development for many. Others wanted to

use the paper form because they were not confident using the internet or because they had worries about security of information sent online.

16. Most people expected to complete the form within a week. Some said they would do it sooner, others later. The use of a deadline by which it had to be submitted was thought sensible; a month was regarded as a reasonable length of time to allow.
17. The headlines in the letters and on the envelopes, *Your Vote Matters, Make Sure You're In, So Don't Miss Out*, were largely accepted, though there was some feeling that they were not sufficiently motivating. In tone they were believed to clash with the mention of the fine – they seemed friendly but the fine smacked of compulsion and authority.
18. The fine was a surprise to all and prompted mixed reactions. Some accepted it and said it was an effective means of ensuring compliance. Others regarded it as heavy-handed and unreasonable. Separating it out in the letters (in Stage 2) was helpful in giving it prominence.
19. The possibility of members of one household receiving different letters did not seem to be a major issue once people had grasped the principle of IER. The Q&A section used in Stage 2 achieved this effectively.
20. In language, tone, layout and design the letters generally performed well. They came across as clear, accessible, free of jargon and conversational in style. Those with visual impairments, low literacy and English as a second language all found them readable and usable.
21. Of the different versions of the invitation to register letters, the overall preference was for those with the box and visuals encouraging online registration. This was perceived as more succinct and more immediate. The alternative design, with steps 1, 2 and 3, was also thought acceptable, but a little cumbersome.
22. The form was not explored at length but on a brief look was regarded as unexpectedly short and easy to complete.
23. The Welsh translations of the letters drew similar responses to the English versions. In relation to the language used there were a number of specific issues which caused Welsh speakers some concern, but none jeopardised the clarity or usability of the letters.

24. Letter 1 – *invitation to register – unconfirmed* was well received overall. At Stage 1 it generated some confusion about whether people were or were not already registered. It worked most effectively in its Stage 2 design and in the version with the box and visuals emphasising online registration.
25. Letter 1 – *invitation to register – unconfirmed, postal voters* was also improved in Stage 2. At Stage 1 it conflated the issues of registration with retaining a postal vote, which caused uncertainty. This was resolved effectively in the Stage 2 version.
26. Letter 3 - *Confirmation* was invariably liked. It made clear that nothing needed doing, and did this in a way that was reassuring. The Q&A section used at Stage 2 dealt with any questions arising about people receiving different letters.
27. Letter 4 – *invitation to register – unregistered* drew a similar response to letter 1. The mention of the fine in the first paragraph in the Stage 2 versions attracted immediate attention. Mention of the *right to vote at elections* in the first paragraph was appreciated.
28. The envelopes tended to be less well received than the letters. Though they were sufficiently engaging to be opened, they were thought to lack weight and urgency. Of the two, the version with two lines by the window worked better because it offered more information and a clue to the content of the letter.

B. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The system of electoral registration in Great Britain is changing from household to individual electoral registration (IER). In England and Wales this process will begin after the European parliamentary elections in May/June 2014 and in Scotland it will be introduced on or around 1st October, following the referendum. IER was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2002.

The transition will begin with the confirmation of existing electors using information held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Once successfully matched, the entry on the register will be confirmed, the elector will be informed and they will not need to take any further action.

Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) will write to those who have not been confirmed individually to apply to register under the new system in summer 2014. This includes those who are on the existing electoral register but have not been matched with the DWP data, and those who are not currently on the register but whom the ERO thinks might be eligible.

The Electoral Commission will be providing EROs with template letters relevant to people in a number of different situations in relation to registration.

Qualitative research was commissioned to examine response to 4 draft letters about IER, inviting people to provide information to enable them to be registered to vote, or to confirm their details. The letters considered in the research were as follows (numbered for ease of reference):

- 1a Invitation to register – general non-confirmed audience
- 1bw Invitation to register – general non-confirmed audience with online message in black on white
- 1bb Invitation to register – general non-confirmed audience with online message in white on black
- 2 Invitation to register – general non-confirmed audience, postal voters
- 3 Notice of confirmation (don't need to take action)
- 4a Invitation to register – unregistered
- 4b Invitation to register – unregistered with online message

In addition to the letters there were two alternative designs for envelopes, differentiated by the information they carried:

- one with one line by the address window:
 - *Important documents enclosed*
- one with two lines by the address window:
 - *Important documents enclosed*
 - *Registering to vote is changing. Open this letter to find out what you need to do*

The research explored response to the letters among people who might receive them. It examined the letters against the following criteria:

- the extent to which people understand what action they need to take, and whether they are motivated to do it
- whether the ordering and flow of the letters is logical and easy to follow
- any additional information, help or support required to register
- what changes would make the letter content easier to understand
- the scope for any improvement to the design of the letters, including layout, text, fonts
- how effective the letters are in encouraging people to use digital channels to complete the forms

We evaluated the envelopes in terms of:

- the extent to which their design encourages the recipient to open them
- the clarity and ease of understanding of the statements on them

We also examined related issues:

- feelings about voting and about registering to vote
- whether people prefer to fill in a paper form or submit an application online

C. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

1. **Overall approach**

There were two stages of fieldwork:

- Stage 1: 20 individual interviews lasting c60 minutes, 10 paired interviews lasting c75 minutes; 7th – 10th Jan
- Stage 2: 28 individual interviews lasting c 30 minutes, 2 focus groups lasting c90 minutes; 16th – 21st Jan

We provided findings from Stage 1 in an interim debrief to The Electoral Commission on 14th January 2014. In light of this, changes were made to the letters, and the revised versions were used in Stage 2 fieldwork. The same envelopes were used at both stages of fieldwork.

The sample comprised people in 3 broad categories:

- the general audience who believed they were currently registered
- postal voters among the general audience who believed they were currently registered
- those who believed they were not registered, in 4 sub-categories
 - university students
 - private renters
 - young adults
 - recent movers

Respondents were given three letters at the beginning of the interviews, in envelopes: one of the IER letters, one from DVLA, one from Premium Bonds. They were asked to sort them by order of interest, then to look at the IER letter in detail. IER letters 1, 3 and 4 were rotated for even coverage, but letter 2 was only shown to postal voters. The two versions of letters 1 and 4 were also rotated.

The two envelope designs were rotated across the interviews.

2. Sample structure

A1 General public	Age	SEG	Gender	Location
6 depth interviews	1 x 17-19 2 x 20-29 1 x 30-45 2 x 46-65	3 ABC1 3 C2DE	3 Male 3 Female	2 SE; 1 North 2 Scotland; 1 Wales
7 short interviews	1 x 17-19 2 x 20-29 2 x 30-45 2 x 46-65	3 ABC1 4 C2DE	3 Male 4 Female	2 SE; 2 North 1 Scotland; 2 Wales
A2 Postal voters				
4 depth interviews	1 x 20-29 1 x 30-45 1 x 46-65 1 x 66+	2 ABC1 2 C2DE	2 Male 2 Female	1 SE; 1 North 1 Scotland; 1 Wales
5 short interviews	1 x 17-19 1 x 20-29 1 x 30-45 1 x 46-65 1 x 66+	3 ABC1 2 C2DE	3 Male 2 Female	1 SE; 2 North 1 Scotland; 1 Wales
B1 Uni students				
1 depth interview	17-19	ABC1	Male	SE
3 paired depth interviews	1 x 17-19 2 x 20-29	1 ABC1 2 C2DE	1 Male 2 Female	1 SE; 1 North 1 Scotland
3 short interviews	2 x 17-19 1 x 20-29	2 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 2 Female	1 North 1 Scotland; 1 Wales
B2 Private renters				
1 depth interview	20-45	C2DE	Female	Wales
3 paired depth interviews	1 x 20-29 2 x 46-65	2 ABC1 1 C2DE	2 Male 1 Female	1 SE; 1 North 1 Wales
3 short interviews	1 x 20-29 1 x 30-45 1 x 46-65	2 ABC1 1 C2DE	2 Male 1 Female	1 SE; 1 North 1 Scotland
B3 Young adults				
1 depth interview	25-29	ABC1	Female	Scotland
2 paired depth interviews	1 x 20-24 1 x 25-29	1 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 1 Female	1 North 1 Wales
2 short interviews	1 x 20-24 1 x 25-29	1 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 1 Female	1 North 1 Scotland
B4 Home movers				
2 depth interviews	1 x 25-29 1 x 46-65	1 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 1 Female	1 SE 1 Scotland
2 paired depth interviews	1 x 30-45 1 x 46-65	1 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 1 Female	1 North 1 Wales
2 short interviews	1 x 20-29 1 x 30-45	1 ABC1 1 C2DE	1 Male 1 Female	1 SE 1 Scotland

D. FINDINGS IN DETAIL

1. **Contextual points**

1.1 Attitudes to voting

There was a wide spectrum of attitudes to voting. These ranged from those who had a keen interest in politics and felt strongly about casting their vote, to those who did not feel engaged with the voting process, and were indifferent or sceptical of its value.

Those with the lowest levels of interest often had little awareness of politics in general and felt uncertain about how the voting system worked. Others were cynical about the competence and motivations of politicians and did not trust political parties.

"It doesn't mean much to me because I'm not up to date with these sorts of things like voting."

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 student Wales

At the other end of the spectrum were those who took an active interest in politics. This was particularly prevalent in Scotland, where the upcoming referendum appeared to be encouraging higher levels of political engagement. Voting was important to these people and they took it seriously.

"I definitely think this is a real politically aware time and I think people are aware they have the option to vote."

Stage 1 male ABC1 20-29 students Scotland

Those who sat in the middle often recognised the importance of voting but were not highly engaged with politics or elections. They often had reservations about voting, but felt duty bound to have their say in elections and made sure to vote whenever possible.

"I think everyone should have a say and should vote, regardless of whether you're maybe a bit disenchanting about who you're voting for. You should still do it."

Stage 1 female 46-65 private renter North

1.2 Attitudes to registering

Attitudes to registering to vote correlated to a large degree with attitudes towards voting more generally. The more enthusiastic people were about voting, the greater the importance they placed on ensuring they were registered. Keen voters were more likely to want to understand how

registration worked and find out about any changes that might be occurring. This was partly due to interest in the topic, but also to make sure they avoided errors when filling in registration forms.

Low awareness of or interest in voting registration usually reflected a lack of engagement with the voting process itself. In turn, this had an impact on how likely people were to spend time reading and understanding any communications regarding registration. Those with little engagement with politics and voting were the most likely to discard a letter about registration, sometimes saying they might throw the letter away before opening it. Others would skim read the letter and pick up on the main points.

"The reason I don't vote is because I don't know enough about politics and I'd be going on other people's opinions so there's no point in me registering to vote. So I don't suppose it would really matter."

Stage 1 male ABC1 20-29 private renter Scotland

"I suppose you'd only care about registering if you vote. Some people are not bothered"

Stage 1 female C2DE 46-65 recent mover Wales

Those who regarded voting and being registered to vote as a higher priority were more likely to pay attention to the detail of communications about registering read them carefully.

"A lot of people just chuck stuff like this in the bin but I'm really into politics and really enjoy that and I would definitely make sure that I gave my information across properly. Because I do want to vote and have a say."

Stage 2 general audience group 30-65 C2DE Scotland

Irrespective of engagement with politics and voting, and interest in being registered to vote, understanding of how the current registration system operates was patchy. Most of those who thought they were currently registered knew that someone in the household filled in a form with the names of those who were eligible to vote, and posted it somewhere, probably to the local council. But few had thought through the implications of this.

"No, I know I've voted so I obviously must have done it. I assume I did it by post if this is the new way to do it! But I don't remember!"

Stage 1 female ABC1 25-29 young adult Wales

"I don't even know how registering to vote works. I didn't know that it used to be just a single registration for just one person for the whole household..."

Stage 2 general audience group 30-65 C2DE Scotland

Awareness of IER was very low. Of our total sample of 86 people only one had heard of it, from an item on Radio 4's PM programme. When they learned about it from information we gave them in their interview or group, most regarded the change as a good thing. The key perceived advantage of it was that it would improve accuracy of the registration records and might reduce the chance of electoral fraud.

2. The IER letters overall

2.1 The envelope sorting exercise

When respondents were given the three envelopes at the beginning of their interviews (the voting registration letter, the DVLA letter and the Premium Bonds letter), behaviour and attitudes were broadly consistent.

The DVLA letter attracted immediate attention from almost everyone because it was brown. Invariably brown was believed to indicate mail that was from an 'official' source such as a government department or agency, or other public body, and whose content is important and will need dealing with urgently. It also put people in mind of demands for money because it was associated with HMRC and DVLA.

"I tend to think of things to do with tax with brown envelopes...you get a lot of spam mail in white envelopes."

Stage 1 female 46-65 C2DE private renter North

"The DVLA comes through in a brown envelope and straight away I know that's business but all my other correspondence comes in a white envelope. I could come home and have half a dozen of them there. There's only one or two of them that are important."

Stage 2 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience Wales

"I wouldn't enjoy opening it but I'd think it was something important."

Stage 2 respondent with English as a second language North

"It's 'oh no I've been caught speeding on the M4' with a brown envelope."

Stage 2 Welsh speaker

The Premium Bonds letter was usually opened last, except among Premium Bonds holders and parents of children who had received a Child Trust Fund which was now in Premium Bonds. It was often thought reminiscent of junk mail because of the colour – mainly white with a large pink flash.

"I would throw that away. I don't like that cold calling thing."

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience postal voter Wales

The IER letter prompted a range of responses. It was generally thought important enough to read, and was typically opened second. It came across as less urgent than the DVLA letter because it was not brown, but more important than the Premium Bonds letter because it mentioned voting/registering to vote. Reactions to the envelopes are described in section 5 below.

"I'd definitely open this as well because it's to do with voting and it means that there's some sort of election or something coming up. I like to be on the electoral roll and stuff so I'd open it and have a look."
Stage 2 male 20-29 C2DE general audience North

"I'd probably open this one (IER) first. Because I feel like if you do vote that means you're trying to make a change in the government and you're voting for someone who you feel should be your representative in your area."
Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE South East

"I would definitely do something about it because it seems important."
Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 general audience South East

2.2 General findings on the letters

Reactions to the letters varied between letters and between sample segments, but were broadly similar.

At both stages the letters communicated that the recipient needs to respond in some way, or that in the case of letter 3 (confirmation letter), no response is required.

However, for those who saw one of the invitation to register letters (1, 2 and 4), it was less clear *why* they were being asked to respond, largely because they knew nothing about IER. Often the assumption was that the change was a move from paper to online registration. This uncertainty could generate misunderstanding, and get people looking for clues.

Letters 1, 2 and 4 prompted uncertainty about why it might be necessary to register again, which the letters seemed to be saying. A number of our sample were sure they were currently registered; some had registered in the last few months and had clear recall of completing a form. If this were the case they wondered why they would be asked to provide more details about themselves. At worst, some thought they might discard the letter without finding out what they needed to do.

"Then I think 'Well I've already registered so do I have to re-register?' So the way you register is changing but what if you've already

registered? So I might think 'Well I'm already registered so is this relevant to me or just a circular that's going to everybody?'"

Stage 2 male 20-29 C2DE North

"So I would get that and think it's for people that have never registered to vote yet, and put it in the bin."

Stage 2 female 20-29 ABC1 general audience Scotland

"I don't know what it's asking me to do. It says 'the way you register is changing' but if I'm already down on the register and if we've checked our details are correct every year, I wouldn't expect to have to do it again."

Stage 1 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience South East

"I'm already registered, so I'd wonder what was going on here. To be honest, I'd be tempted to ignore it. I might possibly visit the website just to see if they'd got my details."

Stage 1 male 20-29 ABC1 private renter South East

This was especially the case among those in the general audience. People who had moved recently, including some students, were less likely to be concerned about receiving an invitation to register letter.

In spite of this, all the letters seemed likely to prompt the right response from most people. In response to letters 1, 2 and 4 virtually everyone said they were willing to complete the form with little or no question. Those who were unconfirmed would provide the information to stay registered and the unregistered would do so in order to register. There were three reasons for this.

First, the letter was addressed personally and the letterhead made clear that it came from the local authority. The feeling was that if the council was writing to people individually it must be important information, and worth reading. Second, the fact that the information needed to be provided in order for people to be able to vote was a significant carrot, especially to those who wanted to vote, or thought it was important to. Conversely, the stick of a possible £80 fine was a compelling reason to comply.

"Anything like that I wouldn't ignore. There's a reason for it. They're not just writing to you to say that they are changing the way you register for nothing."

Stage 1 male 46-65 C2DE general audience Scotland

"It would obviously be Borough of Richmond. It would make me think it's official, it's going out to all the people in Richmond."

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 general audience South East

"I think I'll do it as a matter of course because I want to vote, but I would like to know why it's changing."

Stage 1 male visually impaired North

"I'd try and do it once I got the letter, like immediately probably. I'd probably log on straight away so I wouldn't forget. If I don't do it straight away then I will forget and I really wouldn't want to get fined £80!"

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 general audience North

A few parents of children who lived at home and were voting age worried that their children would forget to complete a form. Either they had not done it before or they were used to a parent providing their details on a current household registration form, and would not regard it as a priority.

"[My sons] would be blasé about it. I'd be worried. 'There is an £80 fine!' I end up taking all of the responsibility for them because they wouldn't really care that much.

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience postal voter Wales

2.3 Perceived communication

We asked respondents what they thought the key pieces of communication in the letters were. Most perceived these as...

- something is changing in the electoral registration system
- people have to provide information to keep their details up to date and to register, or stay registered
- they can do this online
- where information is provided, the sender will receive confirmation of being registered

"It is saying the way you register is changing. Don't miss out. I would clock the internet site. 'Oh well I'd better go on and have a look'."

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 Wales

"It seems to me they just need to update my records. They're just making sure that the details they've got are correct. They don't seem to want any other information."

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE general audience South East

"I didn't know how you used to register but I guess from this that it's now online."

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 general audience North

"'Simpler, clearer and faster online'. To me that's the instant message, as if they're getting it online now. The old way is done away with."

Stage 2 male 20-29 ABC1 recent mover South East

“That’s important, they send you a confirmation letter. That means that I won’t get fined 80 quid.”

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE student North

Not everyone saw the communication in quite this way. Those who saw the B versions of letters 1 or 4 (with the box and computer and smartphone visuals) often first mentioned the change to registering online. Several respondents who saw letters 1B or 4B first did not read them through fully and assumed that they were about voting online; they focused on *Vote* in the headline and in the box, and the online message, and came to the wrong conclusion. On re-reading the letters they realised that they were about registering to vote.

One other aspect of communication arose from Stage 1. The invitation to register letters (1, 2 and 4) mentioned that being registered to vote can improve a credit rating. This appealed to a small number of younger people, who felt it was a benefit. But for most it was puzzling and occasionally worrying. It made them wonder how the information was being used and whether it would be sold to businesses. It was dropped from the letters we used at Stage 2, with no apparent loss.

2.4 Demands for information

The expectation was that other sources, particularly the websites mentioned in the letters, would provide more detailed information about what was changing. Some noted the reference to advertising in letter 3 and assumed they would learn something about it from this. There was also an expectation of news coverage about it.

For many, this did not seem enough: they wanted at least a little more information about what the change was on the letters, along with an explanation of why the information was needed and how it would be used, and why people who were already registered might need to provide information.

“Well are they asking me to fill in from scratch or just to update the details? They obviously have my details because they sent me the letter but I’m having to go in like a new registry, as a new customer.”

Stage 2 male 46-65 C2DE general audience Wales

“I don’t really understand it, it isn’t saying what the changes are and what is changing so I don’t really know why they are changing it.”

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience postal voter Wales

“The bad thing about this letter is that it doesn’t give you more information about what the new system does or how it works so I

would probably go on their website and look at why they're changing to the new system and what this new system includes."

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE general audience South East

"I'm hoping I'd find a bit more explanation about why I'm having to fill it in again, given I'd just registered recently."

Stage 1 male 20-29 ABC1 South East

We gave respondents a background information sheet near the end of the interviews to help them understand more about IER. This was useful in explaining why some people would be asked to register 'again' (as they interpreted it) and in overcoming (low-level) resentment at and barriers to having to take time to provide their details again.

"Now I know the reason – that the current system is out of date and they're wanting to make it more accurate – it makes me a bit more willing to help out. They're not just doing it for the sake of doing it."

Stage 1 20-29 ABC1 male South East

The value of this information was in setting out the key features of IER, and in particular the move from registration being done by one person in a household on behalf of others to individuals each having to register themselves. In other respects, this material was less helpful, especially the references to DWP's database as the source of information, and the mentions of National Insurance Numbers and pensions.

In the Stage 2 fieldwork the Q&A section was included on the back of the letters. When they saw it, the Q&A helped people understand that they would need to respond even if they thought they were registered, particularly the point about the need for individuals to register themselves.

2.5 The Q&A section

At Stage 1 we used a separate Q&A sheet titled *Why have I had a different letter to my partner or housemate?* For Stage 2 this was amended, with the title *How is the way I register to vote changing?* and the section was on the back of the letter/form. Both sheets contained largely the same information, though the Stage 2 sheet omitted any mention of DWP records.

The Stage 1 Q&A alerted people to the prospect of different letters for different household members. This was useful but raised some questions that were not fully answered by the content. Response to this is covered in section 2.10 below.

At Stage 2 the Q&A came across differently because its title communicated more general information about IER. In relation to the content, its opening sentence *Rather than a single registration form being compiled by the head of the household, individuals will be asked to register themselves* contained the key change involved in IER. When they saw this, most respondents understood what IER was about, and why the change was significant. This reinforced reasons for completing the form.

“What that is saying to me is your right to vote and your eligibility to vote is down to you. It's not down to you dad or your landlord, it's down to you.”

Stage 2 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience Wales

The Stage 2 Q&A was placed on the back of the letter/form. This meant it was rarely noticed unprompted; given its importance, almost everyone felt it should be signposted on the front page.

A few people did not initially understand the implications of IER, and felt that the information did not give them any further encouragement to complete the form. And among a more cynical minority the Q&A prompted further questions. They wanted to know how information from the new registration process was going to be compared with existing information, and what the source of the existing information was.

“So behind the niceness of the way it's written my fear is that they're just wanting all of your information, they want to know everything about you.”

Stage 1 male 25-29 ABC1 male recent mover SE

“They want to know who is in the country and who isn't. It's like a census really.”

Stage 2 male 20-24 ABC1 young adult North

“The government, I don't trust them. They sell all these things on and they're allowed to and I feel as though they're making it compulsory but they're allowed to sell it and there's nothing we can do.”

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE recent mover Scotland

“That's rich that they want to fine us £80...Why do they care so much? It's just because they want to stay in power and so they coerce you into voting.”

Stage 1 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience South East

2.6 Registering online vs using the paper form

The general preference was for online registration. This was partly to do with the emphasis on online registration in some of the letters (1, 2, 4, especially the B versions), which were seen as overtly encouraging people to do it

online. If they looked at the www.gov.uk/register tov ote website in the interview, some felt this made registering online seem easier than some had expected: the form was not long and it looked as though it would only take a few minutes.

Those who preferred the online option tended to be (but were not exclusively): under about 50 years old; and frequent users of the internet and confident with computers. They liked the idea of registering online principally for its convenience and speed: getting it done there and then without having to post a form. Some said they might refer to the paper form while registering online, as a guide. They expected to register on computer or tablet but probably not on a smartphone, which they thought would be too small to use for form filling.

“Straight away it says I can do it online on my phone, on my computer. That's great, I don't have to write forms out and post it.”

Stage 2 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience Wales

“Very often you get these letters and think ‘Oh I've got to fill in a form’ whereas at least with this straight away you can see a computer, a tablet, so I can do it online.”

Stage 1 female 46-65 C2DE general audience Wales

“It makes it more accessible to everyone, gives you more options depending on your lifestyle.”

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 general audience South East

People who imagined they would register using the paper form were typically over 50 and less confident doing things online. Some were simply not at ease using computers and expected the process to be complicated, and felt the paper form would be simpler. Others were comfortable with computers but had concerns about internet security, especially if they were providing information about their personal details, and were happier with the idea of posting a paper form.

“We have got a computer but I'm not very happy on it, and it would be quicker for me to fill this form in and send it back than to turn on the computer and type all that in.”

Stage female 1 46-65 ABC1 general audience SE

“I wouldn't trust the information not to go missing, you know, get hacked or something, so I'd do it with the [paper] form.”

General audience group 30-65 C2DE Scotland

“It's a lot easier (on paper). If you're sat there thinking ‘I need to do that letter’ and it's here, the form is there and you just fill it in”

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE student North

Four respondents thought they would provide their details by 'phone. They were generally over 40. One had very poor eyesight and one had low literacy. They preferred personal contact and talking to someone rather than filling in a form, and felt they would be more confident that the process had been completed if they spoke to someone.

"Although I go on the internet I am a bit of a phone user. I like talking to a person."

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 Wales

2.7 Speed of response

The speed with which people expected to respond to the invitation to register letters depended on their usual behaviour with requests for information.

At one end of the spectrum a minority expected to reply almost immediately, within two days of receiving the letter or earlier. These seemed to be people who by nature were organised in dealing with admin, and who disliked putting off tasks. Alongside this they were also keen voters and did not want to miss a request to register. It was important to them to get something like this done without delay.

"If I wasn't that busy I would probably go straight on the website and fill it all in then I'd know I'd done it. I would pretty much do it straight away."

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Wales

"I'd try and do it once I got the letter, like immediately probably. I'd probably log on straight away so I wouldn't forget."

Stage 2 female 20-29 ABC1 general audience Scotland

The majority said they would reply within a week. The behaviour they described in response to this sort of request was similar: they would put the letter aside until the following weekend, along with other household business such as utility bills or credit card bills, and deal with it then. For them it was important to reply to the letter but there was no sense of urgency.

"It would sit in the pile till the weekend then it would be one of the first ones I did."

Stage 1 male 46-65 ABC1 recent mover Scotland

"Seeing that I'd think 'What is the date I've got to do this by?' 'Do I have to do it straight away or can I just leave it when I can be bothered?' If I've been in work all day I don't want to do it in the night. I'll do it on my day off."

Stage 2 female 20-29 C2DE general audience postal voter South East

At the far end of the spectrum was a further minority who were not organised and/or not highly motivated to vote. By their own admission they did not get personal admin done quickly, partly because they had busy lives and partly because they were not good at it. On top of this they did not see voting as a high priority and so would not rush to get the form completed and sent.

Some of the letters we used in Stage 2 included a date by when the form had to be completed (31st July). This came across as a good way of getting people to respond; there were no objections to this. A deadline of one month from the date of the letter being sent was considered reasonable – long enough to allow for absences but short enough to motivate.

2.8 Headlines: *Your vote matters, Make sure you're in and So don't miss out*

The headlines were largely accepted, though some respondents felt they were not motivating, and they caused irritation among the cynical minority.

Your vote matters, which was also on the envelope, clearly signalled that the letter was in some way about voting. For many this was a reason to open the envelope and to read and respond to the letter. They wanted to be able to vote, and knew they had to be registered to be able to vote. This line introduced the topic of voting and invited them in. The idea that everyone's vote matters seemed to resonate with some.

"It does play on my conscience slightly, 'Your vote matters.' Because I'm thinking that I'm not registered to vote, I should be."

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Scotland

"In the past I chose not to vote and I felt quite bad about that then but my mindset is that why isn't a middle aged bloke in a responsible position voting? So yes my vote does matter."

Stage 2 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience Wales

"'Your vote matters. The way you register is changing.' That would maybe catch my eye and then I would read the rest of it and know I have to do it...or be fined £80."

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE recent mover Scotland

Make sure you're in was not always understood at first, but in retrospect was seen as an encouragement to register. *In* was interpreted as meaning involved, being in the pool of voters for elections. In the context of voting there was little doubt that it meant being able to vote, ie being registered.

"Make sure you're in to vote. It's cool to vote. Maybe in years gone by it would have been 'Make sure you mark your X.' Now it's 'Make sure you're in.'"

Stage 1 male 46-65 C2DE general audience Scotland

So don't miss out communicated that someone receiving one of these letters should act and respond to it, but it seemed to lack urgency. It was not highly motivating to those who felt ambivalent about voting. Also it reminded some respondents of junk mail slogans and so invited scepticism.

"Not powerful enough. You get all these texts and emails, 'Save 15%, don't miss out!' The fear of missing out isn't strong enough."

Stage 1 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience North

The cynical minority felt that the headlines did not fit with other aspects of the letters (1, 2 and 4). They believed that, in contrast with the headlines' apparent attempt at inclusiveness, the real purpose of the letters was to gather information. Though voting was being presented as the reason for completing the form, effectively it was being used as bait to persuade people to provide the information: it was the carrot in the letters.

"They're not persuading you to vote, they're just making you register...I wouldn't read that and think 'Oh yeah it really does matter. I'd better do this'. You're going to do it anyway because of the fine."

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE student North

"It says 'Your vote matters' at the end but I just don't think that's relevant. It's just a bit random. This is about registering, it's not about voting."

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE general audience South East

2.9 The fine

The £80 fine (referenced in letters 1, 2 and 4) stood out and was a significant element of the content. There was much surprise at the prospect of a fine for not providing the information, though it tended to be seen as a fine for not registering.

Two respondents who had registered to vote recently said they remembered mention of an £80 fine in the letters they had received. Otherwise the fine was news: most respondents were surprised and bemused by it. It clearly influenced perceptions of the letters and of the change to the registration process.

The fine was occasionally misunderstood on first reading of the first letter seen, as a fine for *not voting*. This raised hackles until the correct interpretation became clear.

"If I don't want to vote, why should I be fined? I can't understand why I could get a fine."

Stage 1 male 20-29 ABC1 general audience postal voter South East

On initial consideration of the fine, there was much surprise. Some respondents, particularly those who were sure they were registered and who had no doubt that they would respond to one of the invitation to register letters without reservation, felt it was not unreasonable and would be effective in getting people to comply. They also felt that if the fine means that registering is now compulsory, this needs to be flagged explicitly.

"It's a bit strict but it's government I guess, it's the law really."

Stage 2 respondent with English as a second language North

"I just thought if the government says I need to do this then I will do it, otherwise they're going to take £80 and that's quite a lot of money."

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE student North

"That is a shock – I can see 'face a fine of £80.' That would frighten me a little. I would do it sooner then."

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience postal voter Wales

"I think people immediately think 'I don't want to vote so it doesn't matter.' They need to tell you right away that it's compulsory and then go onto say 'And it would be nice if you voted as well.'"

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE recent mover Scotland

Otherwise there was resentment at the idea of a fine. It came across as heavy-handed, almost bullying, and verging on intrusion into private lives: if anyone did not want to vote, they should not have to register. It generated anxiety: some were worried that they would forget to respond, or make a mistake, and receive a fine; several said they would call the phone number to ask about it.

"I don't think you should be penalised for not wanting to register to vote. I believe everyone should vote but I don't think you should be penalised for not voting."

Stage 1 46-65 female C2DE private renter North

"£80 is a lot of money to some people, to me. 20 quid short of 100 for not filling in the electoral roll form. I'm a bit bemused by it."

Stage 1 respondent with low literacy Scotland

In tone, the reference to the fine was thought to clash with the headlines. *Don't Miss Out* and *Make Sure You're In* gave the impression of an invitation to register, and seemed friendly in tone. The mention of a possible fine clearly indicated that registering is compulsory, and came across as authoritarian and anything but friendly.

"It's like's someone invites you out and then when you tell them you can't make it they say 'well you owe me 80 quid then'."

Stage 2 male 20-29 ABC1 private renter Scotland

"If you read it, it's saying it's your choice, voluntarily, but then at the bottom you've got this bit about being fined £80 and that suddenly makes it seem that it is something that you have to do."

Stage 1 male 20-29 C2DE student Scotland

It also prompted further questions from the negative minority because it suggested that whoever is behind the letter was really keen to get the information. They wanted to know why this was, who was after the information and why it was so important to them.

There was some scepticism about whether fines would really be imposed. This was based largely on expectations and perceptions. Since it was apparently a new law, some respondents assumed that it would not be policed actively, and that fines would only be a last resort, imposed after all else had failed, or possibly not used at all. Others believed that if fines were mentioned, they must be a possibility and it was not worth risking one.

"I would assume they would send me a couple of reminders and maybe a letter saying you have to register by this date before I got fined."

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Wales

Our overall impression was that mentioning the fine added weight and gravitas to the letters. It communicated that this was serious and that recipients of the letters needed to respond to them.

2.10 Different letters for different household members

In Stage 1 fieldwork we raised the possibility of members of one household receiving different letters, which could happen if they were in different circumstances. It did not appear to be a major concern.

The Q&A which we used at this stage flagged this up, with the headline *Why have I had a different letter to my partner or housemate?* which explicitly alerted respondents to the chance of this happening. The remainder of the content did not answer this question clearly enough to explain the issue. Nor did it explicitly describe what the change to the registration process is.

Consequently at Stage 1 there was some uncertainty about their registration status among the general audience. Those who were sure they were currently registered, particularly if all household members were and had been

for some time, were puzzled at the idea that someone might need to do something different in response to one of the letters.

“I’d want to know about the difference, because we’re in the same household and none of us have moved house.”

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 student South East

“I assume I’d have a couple of these coming through for each of the adults in my house. So I’d be looking for them then for my older boys.”

Stage 2 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience postal voter Wales

As a result of this uncertainty, the Q&A was amended for Stage 2 so that it was headed *How is the way I register to vote changing?*, and it included the opening line *Rather than a single registration form being compiled by the head of the household, individuals will be asked to register themselves.*

This worked well to deal with the issue without causing confusion. It spelled out the key feature of IER – that it involves everyone registering individually. It answered questions about IER and the change to it that was mooted in the letters. The fact that the headline focused on registering, not on the possibility of receiving different letters, meant that the issue was not raised directly, so it did not generate questions. But the explanation of IER in the first sentence of the content helped address it if it did come to mind, particularly in mixed households.

2.11 Language and tone

The language of the letters attracted little unprompted comment, which was a positive sign: anything which stood out as difficult to follow would have drawn criticism. Instead, the letters came across as straightforward and accessible in the language they used. There was almost no problem in understanding individual words or phrases, apart from two respondents being unfamiliar with *smartphone*. Those with low literacy were able to read and follow the letters, albeit more slowly than others.

“I think the letter is about as simple as you can make it. It’s not got much jargon in it. It’s straight to the point. It’s got what you need to know in bold so you can bypass the unimportant stuff”

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Scotland

The tone of the letters was also well regarded, with exceptions. They were perceived as direct and straightforward in the way they communicated; and for the most part, approachable and friendly, with a conversational style which made them easy to read.

Less positively, as described above, the reference to the fine did not fit with the general tone of the letters: there was a perceived conflict between the approachable style of most of the content and the unexpected mention of a fine.

2.12 Design and layout

In appearance the letters generally worked well. Though they varied in the way they looked, they all had plenty of white space, which helped them seem accessible. The one exception was the white on black B version of letter 1, which was used in the Stage 2 fieldwork. Though a few people liked this it generally came across as too dark.

The fonts were clear and legible, and the use of bold in certain areas was thought appropriate. The main font was large and clear enough to read easily, and the larger font at the beginning of the letters attracted attention without making this part seem too dominant.

“Yeah really easy. It takes less than a minute to read the letter. The bold is telling you everything you need to know.”

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Scotland

“I think it's a pretty good layout. The important bits stand out. The first line...”

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 student Wales

“This letter is plain and bold and gets your attention straightaway.”

Stage 1 respondent with English as a second language South East

One respondent who was dyslexic praised the use of black and white for its clarity; he was pleased at the absence of colour.

2.13 A and B versions of letters 1 and 4

The overall preference from the two stages of fieldwork was for the B version, which had the box containing the visuals of a computer screen and mobile phone. A minority were keener on the A version.

Response to Version A focused on the use of steps to spell out the different stages of responding to the letters. This was liked by many for explaining the registration process and making clear what the recipient needs to do to register in simple terms. For some it was more straightforward than version B, more understated and more ‘grown up’ because it did not use visuals.

"I think people need things spelling out to them and if it can be done in step by step form, very logically, I think more people would respond to that. You can see when you see step 1, step 2, step 3, even without reading the small print below, that you need to do something."

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 general audience North

Otherwise reactions to it were less favourable. Many people felt that the steps made the letter unnecessarily long and clumsy. It suggested that the registration process itself was protracted. The steps approach could also seem patronising, as if the letter were talking a child through what they had to do. The headline in the A version looked rather wordy because it included the website URL.

"They've tried to break it down but in breaking it down they've actually made it more complicated than it needed to be. Apart from the opening sentence there's no focal point for the letter. You're sort of scrolling down waiting for this important bit of information"

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Scotland

"It's almost patronising. Fill in the form, send it back. No we'll fill in the form and leave it in the corner!"

Stage 1 male 20-29 C2DE student Scotland

"This one is a bit patronising as well with the steps. People don't need steps. People like my gran who is never going to use a computer, she doesn't need the steps. She's perfectly well aware that she can't do it online so she's perfectly well aware that all she needs to do is fill this out and send it."

Stage 2 General audience group 30-65 C2DE Scotland

In Version B (black on white) the box with the visuals had strong stand-out and dominated first impressions.

The box created a visual focus which drew attention and a balance with the headline. Those who wanted to register online appreciated the emphasis on this option and felt it was appropriate, given the benefits of registering online rather than on paper. This version also made the registration process seem simple and quick: it looked as though registering were one step. When compared directly with version A it appeared more concise and easier to negotiate.

"It's screaming out you can use the internet."

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 student South East

"I think it's a pretty good layout. The important bits stand out. The first line. I think the box is good with the pictures, that's what draws your eye straight away."

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1 student Wales

"I prefer the first one (B) because it's just instant with the wee computer. I just think it's more visual."

Stage 2 female 30-45 C2DE recent mover Scotland

"I feel better about this letter (B). It wouldn't change my mind about not doing it on the computer, but I certainly wouldn't be so inclined to phone the council if I got this."

Stage 1 female 46-65 ABC1 general audience South East

There was some feeling that the visual approach of the version B letters gave it a slightly less serious look than it warranted, given the subject matter, and might make recipients think at first sight that it was commercial direct mail.

"Even though this (B) is still directed to you, you kind of open it and go 'Oh it's not that important because it's got like an advert in the middle of it'."

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE student North

On first reading version B letters occasionally gave the impression that registering online was the only option: they missed the line immediately below the box. Most respondents felt that *If you don't have access to a computer* was sufficiently clear and did not see the letter in this way.

The alternative Version B of letter 1 (white on black) that we used in Stage 2 was generally rejected, particularly when compared with the black on white version. A few people felt it was appropriately bold and striking, and was a good way of drawing attention to the online option for registration. Otherwise it was generally seen as too dark, clumsy in appearance and off-putting.

2.14 The form (letters 1, 2 and 4)

The research was not intended to explore the form in detail but we asked respondents to look at it briefly to get an idea of what information was wanted. Almost invariably the form came across as simple and short, and not likely to take more than a few minutes to complete. This was reassuring because it suggested first that completing the form would be quick and easy to do; and second that it was not demanding much information.

In the Stage 2 fieldwork the invitation to register letters (1, 2 and 4) were reconfigured to integrate the form into the letters on A3 paper. This worked well to keep the different components together and made it more likely that the form would be read. The downside to it was that it could make the Q&A seem a little distant from the letter itself; this problem could be addressed by flagging the Q&A clearly on the first page – the letter.

3. The Welsh versions of the letters

We conducted three interviews with Welsh speaking people in Stage 2 of the research. They had largely the same views as the rest of the sample on the content and layout of the letters.

Overall the Welsh translations were reasonably well received, and there were not significant concerns about their accuracy or comprehensibility. A number of specific issues came up in relation to the translations which, though not likely to undermine them, did prompt requests for changes.

Gwnewch yn siwr eich bod chi mewn (make sure you're in) was believed to be poor Welsh because it was too vague. This reflected findings from the mainstream sample, some of whom were initially a little unsure what was meant by 'in'. In Welsh its vagueness seemed slightly amplified.

In relation to the timeline, the use of the past tense was confusing - *wedi newid*; they felt it would be better to use *yn newid* or *yn mynd I newid* instead.

One respondent was unhappy with the linguistic tone of headline and the change half way through from the familiar to the formal pronoun - *ti* and *chi*. She also complained that *ti* is too informal to be used by an official body.

"If you start with one form of address you have to carry on with it. People don't like officialdom addressing them as 'ti'."
Stage 2 Welsh speaker

There was some concern about certain terms being old fashioned or regional. *Yr ydych yn* was dated; a more modern usage would be *rydych chi'n*. And *gennych chi* was regarded a North Wales style (the interviews took place in Bridgend, South Wales); *gyda chi* would be more universally used.

"That's somebody doing their A level second language Welsh in the seventies."
Stage 2 Welsh speaker

One respondent guessed, but was not certain, that *llechen* means tablet, and wanted clarification on this.

4. The individual letters

4.1 Letter 1 – Invitation to register – general non-confirmed

Overall this was thought acceptable and broadly clear on first sight. The amended model, tested in Stage 2 fieldwork, was better received than the original used at Stage 1.

In version A this letter created some initial uncertainty when seen first among people already registered. Some wondered whether they would or would not need to respond if they received it: if they were sure they were registered, it seemed that this was asking them to re-register. If this were the case, they wondered why, and how this connected with the fact of the registration process changing.

In version B, which featured the box with computer and mobile visuals, there was greater clarity because 'stay registered' was mentioned in the first sentence; this point was important to grasping the change, and helped those who believed they were registered understand what they were being asked to do.

"This letter is the best. 'To make sure you stay registered', on this one to make it clear you need to re-register even if you are registered already. If any of them come through the post I'd fill it in. But this one is just clearer."

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 recent mover Wales

There was some feeling that letter 1 seemed a little brusque in comparison with other letters, especially the confirmation letter (3). Given that it is aimed at those who are currently compliant it could come across as telling people what to do.

In version A there appeared to be a risk of people not reading the 2nd and 3rd steps. Some respondents reached as far as step 1 – filling in the form – and then stopped because they felt this was all they needed to know about.

At Stage 2, this letter was amended to move the reference to the £80 fine from step 2 to after step 3. This appeared to be an improvement: it separated the fine from the process of responding and it gave the fine greater prominence.

4.2 Letter 2 – Invitation to register – postal voters

This letter was also largely accepted, but it raised some questions among postal voters.

As with the other letters, most of those who saw it first believed it would prompt them to respond as intended: they would fill in the form with little hesitation.

At Stage 1 the first paragraph included the sentence *To make sure you stay registered and can continue to vote by post, you will need to fill in the form at...* Two respondents who saw this letter at Stage 1 were confused about whether, if they did not complete the form, they would stay registered but could not have a postal vote. Though they currently had a postal vote they did not feel strongly about retaining it, and if this interpretation were correct they were less concerned about taking action.

At Stage 2 this sentence was changed and the reference to retaining a postal vote was moved to a separate sentence. Separating the issues of registering and having a postal vote in this way eliminated any risk of misinterpretation, and did not prompt thoughts of letting the right to a postal vote lapse.

There was no version B of this letter: respondents saw it only in the A guise, with steps. The use of steps, as in the A versions of letters 1 and 4, attracted less attention. The impression was that if there was no alternative to the steps approach it was usable and acceptable.

Response to the mention of the fine was similar to reactions to it in other letters.

4.3 Letter 3 – Notice of confirmation

This was well received, in part because it communicated that recipients need not do anything in response to it. The content was largely clear.

The fact that *you... do not need to do anything else* was welcomed. It meant there was nothing to think or worry about; this pleased those who believed they were currently registered. The point was reiterated in the final paragraph, in bold, which confirmed it; again this was liked.

"If I didn't receive this letter and all my friends and family were talking about it I'd maybe think 'I wonder what's happening with mine?' So it would give you a bit of peace of mind to receive it and think 'Oh

good, I don't need to worry about that.' It would be a nice letter to receive."

Stage 1 female 25-29 ABC1 young adult Scotland

"It makes you feel more comfortable and accepting, it's all about reassuring you."

Stage 1 female 20-29 ABC1 student South East

"It also reassures you to say that you don't need to take any further action on it. And it tells you if you have any more questions or FAQs you can go to the website. It's short and sweet, that's what I like about it."

Stage 2 female 17-19 C2DE general audience South East

The reference to publicity material about letters or other people receiving different letters prompted some questions at Stage 1, to the extent that a few of those who saw it first said they would log in or ring the council phone number to check that they were registered.

Another issue here was the slightly different wording used in the Stage 2 model of the letter, which mentioned *Some people may need to provide additional information...* rather than Stage 1's *some people may need to fill out a form*. This change seemed to help bypass concerns because it did not explicitly mention the form, though on its own it did not provide complete reassurance until the Q&A on the back was seen

In tone, this letter was well regarded because it felt reassuring, personal and friendly. There was no mention of the fine and the letter came across as adult to adult in tone. For some it felt like a pat on the back for doing the right thing, ie registering.

4.4 Letter 4 – Invitation to register - unregistered

Initial reactions to this letter were similar to response to letter 1, primarily because their content overlapped. Some significant differences were picked out.

The mention of the fine in the first paragraph in the Stage 2 versions attracted immediate attention. It stood out clearly, and signalled the importance of providing the information: there was no doubting that recipients of the letter had to respond as asked. As noted above, the fine was perceived as heavy-handed by some, but on balance seemed an effective way of helping encourage compliance. The second mention of the fine in the in version B of the letter irritated the cynical minority, but was otherwise accepted.

The point that *being registered could also improve your credit rating* in the Stage 1 version surprised and puzzled some. There was no mention of it in Stage 2 and there was no sense that it should be included.

Mention of the *right to vote at elections* in the first paragraph was appreciated. It was an effective reminder of why registering is important to those who valued voting. In tone it was perceived as more direct and less sales-y in tone than *Your Vote Matters* or *Don't Miss Out*.

5. The envelopes

We discussed envelopes at the beginning of the interviews when we first gave respondents one of the letters concerning registering, then towards the end when we asked them to compare the two envelopes.

We labelled them as follows:

- Envelope X = one line next to the window:
Important Documents Enclosed
- Envelope y = two lines next to the window:
Important Documents Enclosed.
Registering To Vote Is Changing. Open this letter to find out what you need to do

The envelopes initially attracted little comment.

On first sight of the letter and envelope, when we asked what the envelopes suggested the letters might be about, reactions varied depending on which design people saw first. Both envelopes communicated something to do with voting, perhaps a polling card, but the Y design, with an additional line, said more. Envelope X put people in mind of a flier from a political party, or a vote for something other than elections, eg on a local issue or a vote organised by a trade union. Because envelope Y suggested something to do with registering to vote, it came closer to hinting at the content of the letters.

The fact that both envelopes were white generated discussion about the implications of white and brown envelopes. Given that most respondents opened the DVLA envelope first because it was brown, and brown signalled important, some felt that the IER envelope should be brown. This would more clearly signify something that needed opening and dealing with, and there would be much less risk of it being mistaken for junk mail at first sight.

When the significance of the content was read and understood, particularly the change to IER and the possibility of a fine for not complying with what was requested in the letter, the envelopes were often thought lacking, particularly the X version. They did not communicate sufficiently clearly that the letters needed reading and dealing with, and they were less compelling than the letters themselves.

"I think it needs to be more official. This is from your local government. You have to open this letter otherwise it could possibly cost you 80 quid."

Stage 2 male 30-45 ABC1 general audience Wales

"It doesn't have the air of importance that certainly reading other letters does, particularly tax and stuff when you're scared when you open it. It feels too much like it's trying to be your friend when I don't think it should be like that"

Stage 2 General audience group 30-65 C2DE Scotland

Part of the reason for this was that there was no clue to the provenance of the letters. Envelope Y was more likely to suggest an official source, possibly the local council; a few knew that councils deal with electoral registration. If the letters arrive with a council logo or franking, this would probably encourage people to open them.

On both envelopes *Your vote matters* attracted attention. It stood out, and it encouraged some respondents to open the letter, though it also put off a few who were cynical about politics. There was some resistance to the visual X device: it lacked gravitas and because it was a visual element on an envelope it was reminiscent of junk mail.

Important Documents Enclosed, which featured on both envelopes, drew mixed reactions. Some felt it demanded attention and was effective in getting them to open the envelope. Others regarded it as junk mail device, used by direct mail companies to get people to read letters.

"That used to be a Readers Digest thing, 'Important documents enclosed'."

Stage 2 male 30-45, ABC1 general audience Wales

Of the two envelopes, the clear preference was for **version Y**, with the additional line (*Important Documents Enclosed. Registering To Vote Is Changing. Open this letter to find out what you need to do*).

This design was perceived as more informative because the second line gave a clue to the content – that the letter was about registering to vote. This gave it more weight, and meant it did not rely on *Important documents enclosed*. It had a message about registering online on the back. And it contained a call to action (*Open this letter...*), which encouraged recipients to open it promptly.

"It's telling me there's something important inside."

Stage 2 male 20-29 C2DE general audience North

"Obviously you don't want to have loads of writing on it but I think it's important to have that bit about registering to vote is changing."

Stage 1 female 66+ ABC1general audience postal voter North

“It's a political one about voting. It's from the government or the council or something.”

Stage 2 respondent with English as a second language North

Version X, with one line by the window, was less well regarded. There was less information about the content of the letter; it could come across as generic voting information/communication because there was no mention of registering to vote. As noted, it relied on *Important Documents Enclosed* which for some was associated with junk mail. Overall there was less reason to open it than there was with envelope Y.

“That's more like a political party handout. There's a good chance that in a lot of households that one would just be in the bin. It's saying “Important documents” but that doesn't go. It's got to be a bit more detailed than that.”

Stage 1 male 46-65 C2DE general audience Scotland

“A party leaflet, one of the leaders from my area writing to me.”

Stage 1 male 17-19 ABC1student Wales

E. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Perceptions of the letters and envelopes**

There appears to be virtually no awareness of IER. In the absence of any publicity about it currently, this is to be expected, but it means that when people are presented with requests to provide information about themselves they are taken aback.

Once letters about IER are opened and their content absorbed, compliance with the request to provide information in order to stay/be registered to vote seems likely to be high, for several reasons. This is an 'official' request if it comes from the local authority. On the basis of the form, the task does not appear demanding and will not take long to complete. And there are good reasons to comply: the carrot of being able to vote and the stick of the fine.

This dual approach of offering the right to vote in exchange for completing the form, and the risk of a fine for failing to do it, seems appropriate. Many people want to vote and will be content to respond to a letter so they can keep voting. Those who are less motivated to vote and/or diffident about responding will be encouraged to by the prospect of a fine.

There is a general willingness to respond to invitation to register letters even without full understanding of IER and its implications, but a grasp of IER, and reasons for need to comply, will encourage compliance. Explanation of IER and the reasons that some people will need to provide information can help overcome resentments about it, and reduce prevarication.

The tendency will be to respond to letters online because it is quick and convenient. It is clearly important to offer paper and phone options for those who cannot or do not want to provide information online, or have reservations about it. Letters can play a part in encouraging online use.

In their current form (as used in the Stage 2 fieldwork) the draft letters are largely effective. The letters offer sufficient information on their front pages for people to grasp the need to respond. The overall layout and format is sufficiently inviting to get people reading. There are no design features which cause problems. And the language is everyday and accessible.

Of the A and B versions of the letters, both will work: they are clear enough and sufficiently motivating to elicit a response. The B version, with its visual

emphasis on responding online, will probably result in a higher number of online applications than version A. If the B version is used, it will of course be important to signal the availability of other response options clearly.

The envelopes are crucial in affecting likelihood of the letters being read. Currently they lack urgency and substance. They are likely to be opened but few people will rush to open them, and there is a slight risk that they will be seen as junk mail.

2. **Recommendations**

There are several ways of increasing the likelihood of compliance with the requests for information in the invitation to register letters.

For the envelope, changing from white to brown would add a sense of importance and encourage earlier opening. The Y design, with the second line on the front, will communicate the content of the letter more clearly. If local authority logos were used on the envelopes this would add weight.

As far as the letters are concerned, it would help to signpost the Q&A on the front page, to make it easier to find the explanation of IER. It would be worth retaining a deadline date, to encourage quicker responses. If the B letter design is used it would be sensible to give more prominence to the paper option.

It may be worth considering an alternative format for the letter and form:

- put the letter and Q&A on pp 1 & 2
- have the form on pp 3 and 4 as a perforated tear-off which can be separated easily from the letter

This would allow people to send off the form, or discard it if they respond online, and keep the letter for reference, at least until they had received a confirmation letter/email.

APPENDICES

TOPIC GUIDES

INFORMATION SHEET USED IN THE FIELDWORK

IER Letters

Topic Guide Stage 1

Background

- Name, age, household size, working/studying status

Letter exercise

- Which envelopes stood out and which would they open first and why
- What were their views of the IER envelope:
 - what about it attracted their attention, if anything
 - would they open and read it; why/why not
 - what would they expect the letter in it to be about
 - who did they assume it was from
 - what did they make of the colour of the envelope

Test of first letter (the letter in the envelope they have seen)

Observe and note responses

- *Ask respondent to respond to the letter as if reading it home and note what he/she does*
- *Ask respondent to **circle** on the letter the most important pieces of text, and to **underline** any parts they are not clear about*
- *Ask respondent to write down the one thing that the letter is asking them to do write down:*

Discussion of the first letter

- Initial reactions:
 - what would they do if they received this
 - would they take the action the letter is asking them to take

- Communication: what is it saying; what is the single most important message or piece of information
- Understanding of response required to the letter:
 - what is the letter asking them to do
 - if they believe it is asking them to respond in some way, would they respond and why/why not
 - thinking again about what the letter is asking them to do, do they now believe they would do this; why/why not
 - if not, how could the letter be changed to make it more likely that they would do it
 - if they share with other people (not family) or have moved in the last year, or are students, do they feel the letter has any particular relevance to them, or requires a different response
- Means of responding
 - if they did respond to the letter, how would they respond
 - was it obvious to them that they could respond online
 - whichever option they prefer (ie online or on paper) why do they prefer this
- Comprehension: what do they understand of the detail of the letter (*each respondent to note any uncertainties on their letter, then discuss*); is there anything they are not sure about

Specific features of the letter

- **Headline (*Your vote matters...*):**
 - what are their views on this
 - what does it mean to them – what is it saying
 - what does it make them expect in the letter

- Information:
 - what do they see as the most important information
 - what, if anything, do they feel unsure about
 - is there anything in the letter that they feel is not necessary
 - what, if anything, is not covered that they feel should be covered
- For those seeing the notice of confirmation letter (letter 3):
 - what else would they want to know, if anything
 - do they feel confident that they know whether or not they need to take any action in response to the letter
 - do they imagine they might call their local authority or any other organisation to get answers to any questions they had
 - what would they think if, at the same time as they received this letter, someone they lived with received a different letter asking them to provide further information
 - *Probe on whether they would take any specific action/have any particular concerns/become confused*
- Order and structure of the letter:
 - does it seem to cover issues in the right order
 - does it flow, does the structure make sense to them
- Design and layout:
 - how do they feel about the way the letter looks – how inviting is it, would it encourage them to read it
 - what do they make of the layout; does it help make the content of the letter clear
 - what about the fonts used
 - what do they feel about the use of steps (Step 1, Step 2...)

- Alternative design
 - what do they make of the alternative design
 - does it affect how they would respond (ie online vs on paper)
 - which of the two works better and why
- Keeping and using the letter:
 - if they received this letter at home, what would they do with it
 - would they refer back to it later
 - where would they put it; what do they normally do with letters from official bodies, government departments or the council
 - when/how would they do something about it
 - how likely would they be to act on it immediately vs. putting it off
- How could the letter be improved: what changes would make it...
 - more likely to be read
 - clearer and easier to understand
 - more likely to make people respond to it

Perceptions of registering to vote and IER

Use prompt material as necessary

- How do they feel about being registered to vote or not registered; how important is this
- Does the letter make them feel any differently about this and if so why
- Have they heard anything about IER; what do they make of it and where have they heard about it
- *Note any comments on how information is gathered and/or matched by Electoral Registration Officers*

Response to second letter

- Reactions to second letter in relation to...
 - communication
 - comprehension
 - likely response
 - order
 - design/layout
- What do they see as the aim and function of this letter (*explain if necessary*)
- What would they do in response to getting a letter like this
- How does it compare with the first letter in terms of how clear it is, and how likely it is to prompt the right response (which might be to do nothing)
- Which do they feel is more effective and why

Response to second envelope

- How do they regard the other envelope:
 - initial perceptions
 - comments on design and appearance
 - comparison with first envelope and other envelopes re likelihood of opening first

Summing up

- Considered views on the issues
- Having thought about the first letter for some time, how do they now feel about whether it will get people responding as they are supposed to
- Any other thoughts

IER Letters

Stage 2 Topic Guide

Background

- Name, age, household size, working/studying status

Letter exercise

- Which envelopes stood out and which would they open first and why
- What were their views of the IER envelope:
 - what about it attracted their attention, if anything
 - would they open and read it; why/why not
 - what would they expect the letter in it to be about
 - who did they assume it was from
 - what did they make of the colour of the envelope

Test of first letter (the letter in the envelope they have seen)

Ask respondents to focus on the letter, not the form

Observe and note responses

- *Ask respondent to respond to the letter as if reading it home and note what he/she does*
- *Ask respondent to **circle** on the letter the most important pieces of text, and to **underline** any parts they are not clear about*
- *Ask respondent to write down the one thing that the letter is asking them to do*

Discussion of the first letter

- Initial reactions:
 - what would they do if they received this
 - would they take the action the letter is asking them to take

- Communication: what is it saying; what is the single most important message or piece of information
- Understanding of response required to the letter:
 - what is the letter asking them to do
 - if they believe it is asking them to respond in some way, would they respond and why/why not
 - if not, how could the letter be changed to make it more likely that they would do
 - if they share their home with other people (not family) or have moved in the last year, or are students, do they feel the letter has any particular relevance to them, or requires a different response
- Means of responding
 - if they did respond to the letter, how would they respond
 - was it obvious to them that they could respond online
 - whichever option they prefer, why do they prefer this
- Comprehension: what do they understand of the detail of the letter (*each respondent to note any uncertainties on their letter, then discuss*); is there anything they are not sure about

Specific features of the letter

- **Headline (*Your vote matters...*):**
 - what are their views on this
 - what does it mean to them – what is it saying
 - what does it make them expect in the letter

- Information:
 - what do they see as the most important information
 - what, if anything, do they feel unsure about
 - is there anything in the letter that they feel is not necessary
 - what, if anything, is not covered that they feel should be covered
- Q&A section on the back:
 - did they see this
 - what did they make of it
 - how helpful was it
 - did it answer any questions they had
- For those seeing the notice of confirmation letter (letter 3):
 - what else would they want to know, if anything
 - do they feel confident that they know whether or not they need to take any action in response to the letter
 - do they imagine they might call their local authority or any other organisation to get answers to any questions they had
 - what would they think if, at the same time as they received this letter, someone they lived with received a different letter asking them to provide further information
 - *Probe on whether they would take any specific action/have any particular concerns/become confused*
- Order and structure of the letter:
 - does it seem to cover issues in the right order
 - does it flow, does the structure make sense to them

- Design and layout:
 - how do they feel about the way the letter looks – how inviting is it, would it encourage them to read it
 - what do they make of the layout; does it help make the content of the letter clear
 - what about the fonts used
 - what do they feel about the use of steps (Step 1, Step 2...)
- Alternative designs for letters 1 and 4:
 - what do they make of the alternative designs
 - does it affect how they would respond (ie online vs on paper)
 - which of the three works better and why
- (For people with visual impairment) views on the logo in letters 1B and 4B:
 - how helpful is the logo
 - what difference does it make
 - which of the two works better for them (ie white on black or black on white)
- Keeping and using the letter:
 - if they received this letter at home, what would they do with it
 - would they refer back to it later
 - where would they put it; what do they normally do with letters from official bodies, government departments or the council
 - when would they do something about it: how likely would they be to act on it immediately vs. putting it off
- How could the letter be improved: what changes would make it...
 - more likely to be read

- clearer and easier to understand
- more likely to make people respond to it

Perceptions of registering to vote and IER

Use prompt material as necessary

- How do they feel about being registered to vote or not registered; how important is this
- Does the letter make them feel any differently about this and if so why
- Have they heard anything about IER; what do they make of it and where have they heard about it
- *Note any comments on how information is gathered and/or matched by Electoral Registration Officers*

Response to second envelope

- How do they regard the other envelope:
 - initial perceptions
 - comments on design and appearance
 - comparison with first envelope and other envelopes re likelihood of opening first

Summing up

- Considered views on the issues
- Having thought about the first letter for some time, how do they now feel about whether it will get people responding as they are supposed to
- Any other thoughts

Individual Electoral Registration

- Individual Electoral Registration (IER) will be introduced in Britain in 2014
- It will replace the existing system of electoral registration which has become outdated
- Rather than a single registration form being compiled by the head of the household, individuals will be asked to register themselves
- Electoral registration officers (EROs) in all parts of the country will write to inform people about the change
- During the transition from the old to the new system, the information on the existing electoral registers will be matched against information on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) database
- Those people who match will be automatically transferred to the electoral register and will not need to do anything else
- Many people are on the DWP database because DWP has information concerning their National Insurance Number, their working status, the pension they are due to get when they retire, or benefits they receive
- Those people who can't be matched with the DWP database will be invited to apply to be on the electoral register
- Anyone who currently has a postal vote will need to re-apply for their postal vote if they fail to match or do not apply to register individually
- However, they will still be able to vote in a polling station as, even if they take no action, they will be retained on the electoral registers until the transition to the new system is completed in December 2015