

Overview of Electoral Commission research to monitor the introduction of individual electoral registration

1.1 This paper sets out the key aspects of the Electoral Commission's programme of research to monitor the introduction of IER. This paper was updated in May 2012 to reflect changes to the Government's policy around the introduction to IER including the movement of the last household canvass to early-2014 and the plans for the pre-verification of electors during the transition period.

1.2 Under the previous Government's plans for introducing IER, the Commission would have had a formal monitoring role. This role has been removed under the current plans but the Commission still expects to monitor and comment on the transition in its capacity as independent experts on electoral registration research and providing scrutiny of the change. It is likely that the Cabinet Office will produce its own assessment of the transition and so we will be prepared to manage the timing and potentially different conclusions of these separate activities.

1.3 We expect that the following three areas will underpin any assessment of the change to IER and the research programme has been designed on this basis:

- Accuracy and Completeness of the registers, including
 - understanding the nature of any drop in registration numbers during the transition to IER
 - registration levels among target groups
- Levels of registration-related electoral malpractice
- Public attitudes to the system of electoral registration

1.4 We are confident that this programme will also allow us to assess whether the move to IER has met the aims of the government's registration transformation programme. The Commission has also published its own principles which it believes should underpin the move to IER¹. The research programme outlined here also supports these.

1.5 It should be noted that the programme of research set out below does not include details on the plans for monitoring of EROs' performance against the Commission's performance standards during this period. The planning for changes to the standards is now underway but will need to take account of any role for the Cabinet Office in the provision of guidance and therefore in monitoring performance against the standards. These arrangements have not yet been finalised.

¹ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/99788/Electoral-Commission-IER-principles-08-06-2010.pdf

1.6 At this point, the current standards are likely to be used for the final time in relation to the 2012 canvass and the research monitoring plans will take account of any future changes to performance monitoring.

1.7 As the proposed research programme runs over several years until 2016 it is not currently possible to give exact figures for what each activity will cost. However, based on previous experience of similar projects we are confident that the activities can be achieved within planned budgets.

Accuracy and completeness of the registers

An assessment of the April 2011 registers

1.8 The Commission agreed to undertake a national study on the accuracy and completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers, following a request by the Cabinet Office.

1.9 The research was undertaken on the April 2011 electoral registers. The report provided an assessment of the current system (including levels of accuracy and completeness and which demographic groups are currently missing from the registers). However, was not the "before" measure; we will undertake a study closer to the time to provide this.

'Before' and 'after' measure

1.10 The most important question for the research is how to reach a measure for the accuracy and completeness of the registers immediately before the introduction of IER and after the transition to the new system has been completed. Three sources are included in our research proposal as they all deliver different types of findings, at different times and for differing costs:

- a) Census register check – which matches census data against the electoral registers
- b) A national survey – which is a house-to-house survey to check details of residents against the register
- c) British Election Study (BES) – which is a survey (with both house-to-house and online elements) conducted by the BES team after a UK general election

1.11 The Commission is currently working with the Office for National Statistics, General Register Office for Scotland and Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency to plan for a repeat of the previous **census register check** (which resulted in the findings published in the 2005 study *Understanding electoral registration*). We anticipate the findings from this project will not be available until 2012-13 although they will relate to the December 2010 and April 2011 registers². The advantage of the census project is

² The availability of figures on the April 2011 registers is dependent on the Commission being able to provide the registers to ONS. As administrators are not required to send us these registers we hope to voluntarily gather a sufficient number.

that it will provide breakdowns for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as the English regions. It will also allow for demographic breakdowns on registration levels, e.g. for BME communities, by age etc. However, as it requires a census, there will be no comparable 'after' measure until, possibly, 2021.

1.12 In terms of a stand-alone, specifically commissioned **national survey**, the only reliable methodology is a door-to-door survey of households in order to check registration details of residents (as used in our previous case study research). Our proposed programme of research includes a minimum of two national surveys: one baseline survey based on the April 2014³ registers; and one comparable 'after' measure on the December 2015 registers (with fieldwork and results in 2016). This will provide national figures for completeness and accuracy as well as demographic breakdowns on registration levels (as with the census project, above).

1.13 These studies will not provide findings for individual local authorities and it would be prohibitively expensive for them to do as the sample would need to be increased substantially.⁴ If local level estimates are needed the best approach would be a **selection of case studies** as in the Commission's March 2010 report.

1.14 The **British Election Study (BES)** is carried out after each general election with the core work involved in the survey funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. We are currently discussing the possible research options (focused on electoral registration and IER) and costs with academics bidding for the 2015 funding and hope to have further information later in 2012 (the results of the bidding process are not available until December 2012).

1.15 It is possible, depending on the outcome of the bidding process, that the work could produce some useful data both on general levels of registration at the time of the general election and on specific issues relating to the transition to IER. Particularly because the BES research runs across the transition period from 2013 to after the 2015 general election.

1.16 Taking these issues into account our proposal is to conduct the census research in order to have country and regional breakdowns, to commission two national studies (the

³ The autumn 2013 canvass is expected to be moved to early 2014 with registers published on 1st April 2014 rather than 1st December 2013.

⁴ Our experience of commissioning this research to date has suggested that around 350-500 interviews are required in each local authority in order to provide reliable findings for the local area. The cost of conducting this number of interviews in a single area, in a standalone project is estimated at around £30,000 (equating to approximately £11 million for every local authority in Great Britain). Although there would be savings as a result of set up costs being shared across several areas these would not be substantial enough to greatly reduce the costs.

minimum required⁵) in order to provide reliable before / after data and to use any data from the BES to complement these other findings.

The registers during transition

1.17 The Commission will also need to be able to comment on the impact on the registers during the transition period. There are two important periods as shown in the table below, with an accompanying approach to monitoring these.

Issue	Monitoring plan
<p>2014 – 2015: Effectiveness of the compilation of the first IER canvass</p>	<p>Electoral registration data will be collected and used to assess the effectiveness of the first IER canvass. The full range of management information which will be produced by the IT systems put in place to manage the verification of electors is yet to be finalised (and we will confirm details with Cabinet Office officials) but at a minimum we anticipate that it will show:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the numbers pre-verified and not pre-verified • of those not pre-verified: the number written to and asked to provide identifiers and the response rate • of those providing identifiers: the number successfully checked or not (including the number needing the exceptions route) • of those not providing identifiers: the number carried forward or deleted from the register • the number on the register who have provided their identifiers / the number whose identifiers have been successfully checked • the number of new additions/deletions to the register as a result of the canvass (comparison with data from previous years will highlight if the canvass is picking up the anticipated level of changes in the area) • the total number of electors carried forward • the change in the number of electors registered for a postal vote at the 2015 general election compared to the 2014 European Parliamentary elections • changes to levels of registration among special category electors

⁵ Although there would be little added value in carrying out additional studies as they are not an effective method for monitoring how the transition is proceeding (and taking any necessary actions) due to the length of time to set up the project, conduct the fieldwork and analyse the results (approx. 6 months).

	<p>The 2015 BES would also provide a snapshot of the completeness of the registers at the general election but the findings will not be available until early 2016.</p> <p>The Commission’s own post-election public opinion survey will also carry questions related to registration and will provide a measure of public opinion at this point in the transition.</p>
<p>2015 post-UKPGE: Removal of electors who have not registered individually</p>	<p>Under current proposals those electors who have not been confirmed via other data sources or have not had their identifiers successfully checked will be removed before the publication of the 1 December 2015 registers. EROs will know who this ‘at risk’ group are because they will be any record carried forward from the 1 April 2014 registers. We would anticipate that EROs would therefore undertake targeted activities in order to encourage those still resident at the same address to re-register. We would collect data from EROs on the success of these activities – essentially how many of this group re-register before they would be removed.⁶</p> <p>We would also conduct follow-up fieldwork with a sample of those electors removed from the registers in 2015 due to non-provision of identifiers. This may involve drawing a sample of 1,000 – 2,000 from those removed. House-to-house fieldwork would be used to determine how many of those removed were still eligible to be registered at that address. This would also allow for an assessment of the demographic characteristics of those removed from the register but still resident at the property.</p>

1.18 These proposals mean that ahead of the proposed May 2015 general election the Commission will be in a position to comment on how effective the 2014 canvass has been at gathering identifiers and adding new names to the register and how public opinion has initially reacted to the change in the registration system. We will be able to identify any significant problems with the canvass ahead of the general election. However, we will not be able to say simply how accurate or complete the registers are when the election takes place as we have not proposed to undertake a national study of the December 2014 registers. Moreover, even if such a study was undertaken, the time

⁶ Although there would be complicating factors here as many of those carried forward may have moved and cannot therefore be either directly encouraged to re-register or necessarily be tracked through our monitoring exercise. Therefore we would need to report on the success of any activity without knowing how many of those in the at risk group EROs **should** be expected to get back onto the registers.

required to conduct fieldwork means there would be a significant delay between the beginning of the project and findings being available – so reporting would not take place until after the 2015 elections.

1.19 Depending on when the removal of the carry forward takes place there may be a similar problem ahead of the 2016 elections. If those carried forward are removed, as usual, before publication of the December 2015 registers there will again be limited time to conduct the proposed research in order to inform any action needed ahead of the elections. However, we will have early, headline information on the scale of any absolute drop of numbers on the registers.

Levels of registration-related electoral malpractice

1.20 The Commission currently manages, in collaboration with Police National Intelligence and Coordination Centre (PNICC), an annual survey of police forces in the UK to gather information on reported cases of alleged electoral malpractice. We propose to use the data from this survey on registration-related offences in order to assess the impact of IER in reducing electoral fraud.

1.21 However, it is worth noting that there may be an increase in reported cases of electoral malpractice related to registration after the introduction of IER as the more stringent rules could mean that more fraudulent attempts to register are uncovered than previously.

Public attitudes to the system of electoral registration

1.22 The Commission's annual public opinion survey includes questions on public satisfaction with and confidence in the system of electoral registration. Good trend data is therefore available and we propose to continue to run these questions on subsequent winter trackers. This will allow for an annual assessment of any changes in public opinion.

1.23 We also propose to use focus groups and depth interviews (qualitative research) to explore some issues in more depth. For example, if there is poor response to the requirement to provide identifiers we would want to understand the reasons why people are not providing the information and how this could be addressed. The timing of this research will depend on when the additional information is most useful and what research is also undertaken by Cabinet Office.

Reporting on our research

1.24 In line with its normal approach, the Commission plans to publish the results of its reporting programme in full. It is expected that the findings from the Commission's reporting will enable Government, Parliament and others to assess the impact of the move to IER and the wider consequences for the delivery of electoral registration and elections.

1.25 We anticipate publishing regular reports from at least 2014 until at least 2016 on the quality of the registers. These would include reports on:

- the baseline position (in 2014 using national study data),
- the transition period before the general election (2015)
- the outcome of the change (2016).

1.26 Set out below is an indicative timetable for the publication of research on the electoral registers. It is expected that reports on the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers will also include the most recent evidence from public opinion surveys and data collected from local authorities.

Year	Key events	EC reports
2011		December – report on levels of completeness and accuracy of GB’s April 2011 electoral registers
2012	May – Government introduces Bill into Parliament	November – report on the comprehensiveness and accuracy of NI’s electoral registers (tbc)
2013		Spring – report on completeness and accuracy of England and Wales’s December 2010 and April 2011 electoral registers (using Census data)
2014	<p>Spring – final canvass under household registration system</p> <p>June elections – European Parliament and English local government</p> <p>July onwards – pre-verification of electors on registers, new registrations and postal vote applications to be made under IER system</p>	<p>Spring – report on completeness and accuracy of Scotland’s December 2010 and April 2011 electoral registers (using Census data)</p> <p>Spring – report on comprehensiveness and accuracy of NI’s December 2010 and April 2011 electoral registers (using Census data)</p> <p>December – report on levels of completeness and accuracy of GB’s April 2014 electoral registers (the final registers compiled under</p>

		household canvass). This report will also include an assessment of the compilation of the first IER register including the process of pre-verification and the collection of identifiers.
2015	<p>May elections – UKPGE, NI Assembly, NI local government and English local government</p> <p>Autumn – first full IER canvass under IER</p> <p>1 December – publication of first IER registers</p>	<p>March – Performance standards report to be published with or alongside a report on the transition period (using data collected from local authorities, public opinion data, etc).</p>
2016	<p>May elections – London Mayoral and Assembly, Police and Crime Commissioners, English local government</p> <p>TBC - date of elections to Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly</p> <p>Autumn – IER canvass</p>	<p>March – Performance standards report to be published with or alongside analysis of the full move to IER (using data collected from local authorities, public opinion data, etc).</p> <p>July – report on levels of completeness and accuracy of GB’s December 2016 electoral registers (using first IER registers). Report to include assessment of names that have been removed from the register.</p>

1.27 In addition to the reports set out below, the following will also be published:

- Annual reports on Performance Standards for electoral registration each March. These reports could also be used to incorporate broader data on registration and public opinion data.
- Annual reports on allegations of electoral malpractice (PNICC study) each February.
- Analysis of qualitative public opinion research (timing of research still to be agreed)

1.28 The Commission will also respond to the publication – by the Office for National Statistics each February – of the number of entries on the 1st December registers. We may also produce additional ‘exceptional’ reports should the evidence available highlight concerns about the outcomes or processes relating to the changes in the registration system.

Reporting on piloting to change the annual canvass

1.29 Based on information included in the draft bill, it is also expected that the Commission will be asked to report on any pilots set up to trial changes to the annual canvass. Until the exact nature of the proposals become clear it is difficult to set out what work we would need to undertake in order to inform our reporting.

1.30 However, it is unlikely to involve large scale surveying in order to estimate levels of accuracy and completeness. We would anticipate a local authority submitting a bid or application justifying their intention to pilot either changes to the canvass or to stop the canvass altogether. This should include an assessment of what activities would be put in place to replace canvass activities. Our evaluation would then focus on using data produced by the ERO in comparison with data from previous canvass activity in order to assess how successful the new process is at maintaining the register.