

Stephen Twigg MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

3 December 2014

Dear Stephen

Transition to Individual Electoral Registration

Thank you for your letter of 2 December, which we received electronically that evening shortly before the Shadow Justice Secretary's article was published in the Huffington Post covering similar issues to those you raised.

We have set out repeatedly to both you, and to Parliament, our detailed plans for monitoring the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER), including our approach regarding the registers that were published locally on 1 December 2014.

My letter to you of 21 October, copied to the Shadow Justice Secretary, specifically covered this latter point. It also provided you with information about the detailed, ward level data that we published that day on the results of the Confirmation Live Run (CLR) process run by electoral administrators in England and Wales over the summer during the first phase of the implementation of IER. We published similar information for Scotland in November as a result of their transition not starting until after the referendum on independence. I have also discussed our plans for monitoring the transition with both yourself and the Shadow Justice Secretary in previous meetings.

I was therefore surprised that your letter suggested that you were only made aware of our plans following your office's phone call to the Commission on 1 December. This is not the case. Nor is it the case that we have failed to publish national data in relation to the transition so far. In the case of England and Wales, this data has been public for over a month, and in the case of Scotland it was published last week. This data was

The Electoral Commission
3 Bunhill Row
London EC1Y 8YZ

Tel: 020 7271 0500
Fax: 020 7271 0505
info@electoralcommission.org.uk
www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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uploaded into a new data visualisation tool, which is available on our website, to help Parliamentarians and others understand it more easily.

Monitoring the transition

Since the last Labour Government passed the legislation initially providing for the move to IER, the Commission has taken its role to support and monitor this historic change extremely seriously. We are committed to ensuring that Parliament receives the detailed and accurate information it will need to inform any decision it is asked to make by the next Government to bring forward the end of the transition to IER from the current date provided for in the legislation at the end of 2016.

With that aim in mind, the Commission had already issued a briefing to all MPs as well as a press release for journalists before we received your letter, cautioning against drawing conclusions based simply on the snapshot picture from the registers published on 1 December in England and Wales. We will do the same in Scotland when their registers are published on 2 March 2015.

Every Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) faces different challenges locally and the purpose of the Commission's detailed analysis is to understand what the overall picture is across the country as the transition to IER continues. For this national level analysis to be robust and reliable, we need to collect and collate detailed data from those, approximately, 340 EROs across England and Wales that have published their registers in December. It is not enough just to know the overall size of the electorate without the detailed data to sit behind and explain any changes in the absolute level of registration.

This data needs to be checked, quality assured and analysed in order to ensure that we have reached a sound assessment of the registers which clearly sets out the impact of IER transition to date and the work that remains to be done. I do not consider that it is "complacent" to take the time to do this work properly. Parliament deserves nothing less than the most accurate picture that we can give.

The reports we will publish in February (for England and Wales), and in April (for Scotland), and then next summer, are designed to do this. As I have previously said to you, if we feel that an early end to the transition is not appropriate we will make this clear.

Working with administrators

The work we are carrying out to produce a national picture does not mean that other work stops during this period. EROs will be closely analysing their data locally and using it to inform the detail of the activities they will be carrying out in early 2015 to ensure their registers are as accurate and complete as possible before the UK Parliamentary General Election. The publication of our analysis will then provide a further opportunity to highlight any remaining challenges in advance of the May polls.

I know that many MPs are keen to do what they can to encourage registration. To support this approach, we have provided Parliamentarians and others with suggested questions to ask their local EROs so that they can discuss what the plans are in their area to raise awareness of the transition to IER. Before we provided these, you are aware that we also inspected the public engagement strategies of every local authority in advance of the transition starting to ensure that they were properly targeted and included, for example, specific plans for engaging with large student populations where this would be needed.

The Commission's public awareness work

No-one who is currently registered to vote will be removed from the register before the UK Parliamentary General Election as a consequence of the change to the registration system. This is an important safeguard. But we also take extremely seriously the need to target all those existing electors who are not yet registered individually, as well as those who are not already registered at all.

The press release and briefing we issued yesterday announced that the Commission will once again be running a national, mass media public awareness campaign from 16 March next year. We are also supporting National Voter Registration Day on 5 February 2015 and are working to ensure that EROs and others participate in this initiative. We are already working with a range of partners (who you can find on our website) to help get people registered and published this week a pack that we have produced for them and others to use, providing ideas and activities to support voter registration drives. This was informed by the feedback that we have received from some our partners so far about the type of information they would find useful.

The Government's funding plans

Finally, you ask about the Government's plans for making available extra funding and whether we will produce guidance on how this should be allocated.

While we are aware the Government are considering providing additional funding to EROs to support them in their work to ensure their registers are as accurate and complete as possible before the UK Parliamentary General Election, we have not yet received confirmation as to when or how this will be provided. The activity EROs will undertake in early 2015 is likely to include sending every household a letter with information on who is registered at that address, with instructions to inform the ERO of any incorrect details or anyone who is no longer resident, and for anyone not included to register to vote online. We are already working to support Electoral Registration Officers in preparing for and carrying out local activity in early 2015, and will be providing specific guidance and templates to support the proposed household notification letter activity.

I hope that you find this response helpful and I am of course always happy to meet to discuss any of the issues that it raises. I am copying this letter to the Shadow Justice Secretary and also making a copy available on our website.

Yours sincerely, *and best wishes as ever,*


Jenny Watson
Chair