The 2015 canvass: planning guidance for Electoral Registration Officers

Background and purpose

1.1 We recognise that planning for the forthcoming canvass presents challenges, particularly as Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and their staff will have work to do in preparing for the May 2015 polls. We also understand that EROs’ planning for this year’s canvass will already be underway.

1.2 This document is therefore intended as a summary of key planning considerations that are specific to this year’s canvass, and has been designed to support EROs in taking decisions and then reflecting them in their final plans for the canvass period.

1.3 This guidance will be incorporated into our guidance manual for EROs, which we are in the process of updating and will make available to EROs immediately after the May polls. While the guidance contained in the manual will remain largely unchanged, the technical details in the individual parts will be updated to ensure they are fully accurate for the specific circumstances of the 2015 canvass.

Throughout this document we use ‘must’ to refer to a specific legal requirement and ‘may / should’ for recommended practice. Any reference to ‘you’ refers to the ERO.

This document is based on the legislation in force at the time of writing. It does not reflect any potential changes to the law, such as those that may result from political commitments that have been made to amend the franchise for local government elections in Scotland and elections to the Scottish Parliament. We will provide further guidance and support to EROs as any changes to the legislation progress.

The 2015 canvass

1.4 Under existing legislation, the transition to individual electoral registration (IER) is due to end in December 2016. At this point, any entries for electors who have not either been confirmed or successfully made individual applications to register to vote will be removed from the registers. However, the legislation also allows UK Ministers to make an Order (during a specified three-month period between June and August 2015) which would end the transition 12 months earlier, in December 2015. A statutory instrument containing such an Order would not need to be debated by the UK Parliament, but could be annulled by a resolution of either House of Parliament.
1.5 Whether or not the end of the transition is brought forward to December 2015, there will still be a need for EROs in this canvass to take action in relation to those existing electors who are not registered individually, in addition to fulfilling their general duties related to ensuring that the registers are as accurate and complete as possible.

1.6 Setting aside the case of existing electors who are not registered individually, the 2015 canvass will be typical of a canvass under IER:

- Household enquiry forms (HEFs) will need to be sent to all households and you will need to send invitations to register to those who have been added to a HEF, as well as follow up with any HEF and invitation to register (ITR) non-responders.
- Where the name of an existing elector is crossed off a HEF, you will use this as a prompt to check that person’s entitlement to remain registered.

1.7 The learning from EROs’ experience of administering the 2014 write-out and canvass, including sending out ITRs and completing the necessary follow-up processes, will provide a good basis from which to develop detailed plans setting out how the 2015 canvass can be successfully delivered.

**Specified steps for existing electors who are not registered individually**

1.8 While the proportion of existing electors who are not registered individually will vary across Great Britain, all EROs will have a number of electors on their register who are not registered individually.

1.9 The legislation sets out specific steps that are you required to take during the canvass in relation to these electors.

1.10 You must send an ITR to an existing elector who is not registered individually:

- if a HEF is completed and returned for the address - on or as soon as practicable after it is returned,
- if it is before 31 October and it appears to you that no HEF will be returned for the property - on or as soon as practicable after you come to this conclusion, or
- on or as soon as practicable after 31 October

whichever of the above comes first.

1.11 The only circumstances in which you would not be obliged to send an ITR to an existing elector who is not registered individually are:

- if, on checking any records available to you, you have reason to believe that the person is no longer resident at that address – in which case you should take steps to remove the elector from the register

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1 This document uses ‘the 2014 write-out and canvass’ to refer to the activity that took place in England and Wales in the autumn of 2014 and in Scotland over late 2014/early 2015.
• if they have made a successful application to register or they have made an
application to register, but you have yet to determine it

Preparations for taking the specified steps for existing
electors who are not registered individually

1.12 You have a duty to maintain the register. To ensure that your register is as
accurate and complete as possible, you should also check, as far as is reasonably
practicable, that those who are registered remain entitled to be registered at an
address. The run-up to the canvass presents an opportunity for you to carry out
checks of records available to you to help you to determine whether electors –
including those who are not currently registered individually - remain entitled to be
registered. Such checks will help you to ensure that you are conducting the canvass
on the most up-to-date information available. However, recognising that the time
between the May polls and the start of the canvass is limited, you should prioritise
these checks in respect of existing electors who are not registered individually, which
should help to ensure that the specified steps outlined above only need to be
undertaken for those individuals that appear to you to still be entitled to be registered
at a particular address.

1.13 If a check of your local records indicates that an elector is no longer living at an
address, you will have one of the two sources of evidence required before you can
delete an entry from the register without a registration review.

1.14 You will also have access to information relating to the administration of the
May polls, which may suggest that someone is no longer be entitled to be registered
at a particular address and which could provide you with one of the required sources
of evidence. If you are not also the (Acting) Returning Officer, you should liaise with
them now to ensure that they keep the information on election stationery that is
returned as undelivered and provide this data to you.

1.15 If you already have one source of evidence and the HEF is then returned with
their name crossed off, this could well provide you with the required second source
of evidence.

See our guidance on deletions supported by information from at least two
sources of in Chapter 9 of Part 4: Maintaining the register throughout the
year.

1.16 If you determine that this particular elector is no longer entitled to remain
registered, you will be able to delete them from the register and, in the case of those
not currently registered individually, you will not need to take any of the specified
steps set out above.

Detailed guidance on deletions and on administering registration reviews is
contained in Chapters 9 and 10 and of Part 4: Maintaining the register
throughout the year.
1.17 Your public engagement strategy should include the actions you will be taking in relation to existing electors who are not registered individually.

Following up with existing electors who are not registered individually

1.18 In practice, the specified steps set out in paragraph 1.10 above and 1.11 above mean that:

- **If a HEF is returned that includes the name of an existing elector who is not registered individually**, you should send them an ITR as soon as possible after the form has been returned.

- **If a HEF is returned with the name of an existing elector who is not registered individually included, but local record checks have indicated that the person may no longer be resident at that address**, you should nevertheless still send them an ITR. While the legislation allows you to not send an ITR in this instance, the information on the HEF is likely to be more current than that one obtained from a check of local records and you should therefore proceed to send them an ITR.

- **If a HEF is returned with the name of an existing elector who is not registered individually crossed out**, you should use this as a prompt to check other records available to you, if you haven’t done so already, as the name crossed out on a HEF could be used as one of the sources of evidence required to remove an elector from the register without a registration review. If the record checks do not reveal any further information, you should initiate a review of that person’s entitlement to remain registered.

  If the checks provide a second source of evidence, you may determine that they are no longer entitled to remain registered. However, even where you have two sources with consistent information you should nevertheless still be satisfied that a person is not entitled to be registered before you make such a determination. If you determine that a person is not entitled to remain registered, you would not need to send them an ITR.

  If you conduct a review, you may, depending on the circumstances, determine on conclusion of the review that the person is no longer entitled to remain registered. If that is the case, you can mark them for deletion and would not need to send them an ITR. However, if you do not determine that the person is no longer entitled to remain registered, you will need to send them an ITR.

  You should ensure that any local checks and/or registration reviews are completed as quickly as possible after receipt of the returned HEF.

- **If no HEF is returned**, you will need to be ready to send out ITRs - and carry out the required ITR follow-up processes as required, either:
  - as soon as practicable after you have completed your HEF follow-up processes or
  - on, or as soon as practicable after, 31 October – whichever is the earlier.

1.19 To ensure that as many HEFs sent to properties with existing electors who are not registered individually as possible are returned at an early stage to maximise the
time you have available to carry out the ITR processes with such electors, you should consider using dedicated canvassers to carry out the personal visits at an early stage of the HEF follow-up processes to encourage a response.

General planning considerations

Public engagement

Updating your public engagement strategy
1.20 You will already have a good understanding of the particular registration challenges in your area, and these will have been reflected in your public engagement strategy. It remains vital to ensure that you have plans in place to target those who are not currently registered in order to maximise registration.

1.21 Throughout the transition to IER, you will have been keeping your public engagement strategy under review and evaluating the success of the activity you’ve carried out to date. Before the 2015 canvass, you should take the opportunity to carry out a full review of your strategy, reflecting what has and hasn’t worked well to date, and decide on an action plan for the canvass and beyond. This will help you to target your resources where they are most needed. Existing partners may be able to give you feedback on how your strategy has worked in practice and may also be able to provide you with suggestions about which areas or demographics may need to be targeted in the canvass period and how this could be done.

1.22 As part of your work to review your public engagement strategy, you should look not only at your existing partnerships but also consider identifying any new partners both inside and outside your local authority that could assist you in targeting potential new electors and/or getting existing electors who are not yet registered individually to make a successful application to register individually.

We are currently updating Part 1 of the ERO guidance manual and will make this available for use immediately after the May 2015 polls in order to support you with reviewing your public engagement strategy for the 2015 canvass period.

Planning public engagement activity to encourage responses during the canvass
1.23 Your detailed canvass plans should reflect your strategy for engaging with the public and raising awareness of the canvass to encourage those who receive a HEF and/or an ITR to respond. The clearer the message and ‘call to action’, the greater the likelihood that people will respond, which in turn will help to ensure that the revised register you publish is as accurate and complete as possible. By providing clear messages to the public, you will also help to minimise the number of enquiries received from electors, thus freeing up staff time to deal with the administration of the canvass.

1.24 Your plans should cover how you will engage with residents during the canvass through direct contact, local advertising and working with internal and external partners, including community groups that could promote registration. You should also consider collaborating with neighbouring authorities with similar challenges to avoid duplicating work and to pool resources.
Part 1: Preparing for Electoral Registration of our guidance manual for EROs also includes guidance on producing clear communications that have an impact and contains a number of links to tactics factsheets for targeting and communicating with under-registered groups, such as young people, BME groups, students and private renters. While we are updating the guidance to reflect the specifics of the 2015 canvass, the guidance currently contained in Part 1 on communications and targeting electors remains relevant.

You can also draw on our resources and templates for your communications. These have been produced by us following testing and have been designed with impact and accessibility in mind. All the templates are available on our website.

The Cabinet Office has also made available a range of democratic engagement resources for different groups of people and settings. They have been developed in collaboration with a number of national organisations. You can view their resources here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/democratic-engagement-resources.

Planning for the required follow-up processes during the canvass

1.25 As was the case in 2014, you are legally required to take specified steps to follow up any HEF non-responses, including issuing two reminders and making a personal visit. Any potential new electors identified will also need to be sent an ITR and a registration application form, and you will need to take the specified steps – issuing two reminders and a personal visit - to follow up with any ITR non-responders.

1.26 These processes will not all be linear and will need to be carried out concurrently. To maximise the time you have available to complete these – as well as the specified steps with existing electors who are not registered individually as set out above - before publication of the revised register you should start sending your initial HEFs as soon as possible.

We have produced a summary sheet that provides key dates for the canvass and summarises the processes you will need to follow depending on whether or not the HEF is returned, as well as the follow-up actions that are required in respect of existing electors who are not individually registered.

1.27 At this year’s canvass, you will be sending HEFs to all properties, meaning the exercise will be taking place on a larger scale than in 2014. As a result there is likely to be more work required to follow up on HEF non-responses, as well as to send ITRs as a result of names being added to a HEF and then to follow up on non-responses to these.

1.28 Building on your experiences of the 2014 write-out and canvass, you should consider:

- The level to which you will need to ‘scale up’ your resources to match the anticipated amount of follow-up activity, e.g. identifying and managing the cost and resource implications of following up non-responses to HEFs and then carrying out ITR processes further to returned HEFs where an initial HEF has been sent to all properties.
• Whether you need to make any changes to existing processes to help you effectively manage the concurrent administration of HEF and ITR processes.
• Whether you have sufficient staff available to deal with any enquiries from electors.

1.29 As part of your planning for the 2014 write-out and canvass and when undertaking the specified steps throughout the year to follow up any non-responses to ITRs, you will already have considered how to deploy personal canvassers under IER. In preparing for this year’s canvass, particular points you should consider include:

• The level to which you will need to ‘scale up’ your canvasser numbers to be able to meet your statutory duties.
• Whether you will be using canvassers to serve multiple purposes, for example delivery of HEFs and/or ITRs as well as personal visits to follow up non-responses to a HEF and/or ITR. For example, given the scale of this year’s canvass and the fact that the HEF and ITR follow-up processes will mostly run in parallel, you should consider how you can make the most effective use of canvassers to encourage a registration application from those whose names have been added to a HEF. You could, for instance, brief canvassers delivering reminder HEFs or making personal visits to HEF non-responders to also encourage those added to a HEF to go online to make an application to register.

For the 2014 write-out and canvass we produced a list of questions to inform your personal canvassing plans, which may again be helpful in supporting you with finalising your arrangements for the 2015 canvass.

Sending HEFs to properties with existing electors who are not registered individually
1.30 The Commission will provide template letters to include with the HEF. In particular, we will provide an additional, new template which you can use to write to those households with existing electors who are not individually registered (see also ‘HEFs and covering letters’ below). This new template letter will be designed to preempt queries which could otherwise be expected should existing electors be sent an ITR following return of a HEF, making clear that those electors will still need to take further action to become registered individually and so ensure they will remain registered. The new template letter will therefore emphasise that these electors still need to apply to register individually or, if they are no longer living at the address, be clear that their details should be crossed out before the form is returned.

1.31 Also, if the HEF is not returned and you need to make a follow up personal visit, you should ensure your canvassers are briefed so that such electors in these properties are given the correct information about what they need to do to become registered individually.

Names crossed off the HEF
1.32 Names crossed off on a HEF must not be automatically deleted from the register. In most cases, you will either need information from two separate sources (one of which may include the returned HEF) or have completed a formal review of the elector’s entitlement to remain registered before you can remove them from the register. The only circumstances where you can delete someone from the register...
without any further action is on notification by the registrar of births and deaths that a person has died, on receipt of a death certificate or following notification by another ERO or the IER digital service that a person has registered elsewhere.

Detailed guidance on deletions is included in Part 4: Maintaining the register throughout the year. We have also produced a summary sheet on deletions that is available for download from our website.

1.33 There are, however, steps you can take even after the initial HEF has been sent out to reduce the amount of work you will need to do in response to any crossed off names.

1.34 The early phase of the canvass, i.e. the period between the sending of the first HEF and the first scheduled reminder HEF, may provide an opportunity for you to check local records to identify electors who may no longer be resident at a particular address and attempt to obtain a first piece of evidence required for deleting such electors.

1.35 In developing your canvass plan, you should therefore ensure that you are able to direct resources towards checking local records once the first HEF has been sent to all residential properties.

HEFs and covering letters

1.36 There are three variants of what you will need to send to properties at this year’s canvass:

- a blank HEF and covering letter for sending to new properties and properties with no existing electors
- a pre-populated HEF and covering letter for sending to households where all existing electors are individually registered
- a pre-populated HEF and covering letter for sending to households with existing electors who are not individually registered

1.37 The blank and pre-populated HEF are those that have been prescribed by the Lord President of the Council and made available by the Commission. While covering letters to be included with the HEF are not prescribed, we are making available letter templates which you can use and will let you know through a future Bulletin once they have been published.

Planning for printing requirements

1.38 You should discuss with your printers the number of HEFs and ITRs that you will require, including the projected increase in numbers as compared to the 2014 write-out and canvass.

1.39 Irrespective of whether you decide to print in-house or are using an external printer, you should satisfy yourself that they will be able to cope with the complexity and volume of IER forms. It will be for you to decide what works best for you taking account of your local circumstances.
We have produced guidance on managing contractors and suppliers, which provides further information on procurement processes and managing relationships with suppliers.

Planning your IT requirements

1.40 You will already have IT in place to deal with the registration processes required under IER, including any follow-up processes. You should review the arrangements you currently have in place and consider what, if anything, may need to be revised in preparation for the canvass.

1.41 For example, you are likely to need to process a higher volume of forms compared to the 2014 write-out and canvass. You should therefore update your project plans and risk registers to reflect the impact of the particular demands of administering the canvass on your IT.