Annual canvass reform: pilot scheme evaluation

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Context

The need for canvass reform

1.1 Historically, the annual canvass has been the main method by which Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) have maintained their electoral registers.

1.2 Currently, EROs are legally required, from 1 July each year, to send every household in their area a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) which says who is registered at that address and asks for changes to be indicated where necessary. When they do not receive a response to that initial form they must send two postal reminders and carry out a household visit in order to encourage a response. This means that, depending on when or if a household responds, they can be contacted up to four times during the canvass.

1.3 Following the introduction of individual electoral registration and online registration, it has become clear that the traditional household canvass, as prescribed by law, has becoming less efficient and more expensive for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to conduct. The Commission has highlighted the risk of continuing with the costly current approach to the canvass at a time when local authority budgets are tight. In July 2016, our assessment of the accuracy and completeness of the registers concluded that the current system is not sustainable in the longer term. This is a view supported by many EROs and other key stakeholder groups such as the Association of Electoral Administrators.

1.4 Some form of contact at a household level is likely to remain a key method by which EROs audit their registers, review the accuracy of their records and remove redundant entries, at least in the short to medium-term. However, there is potential for changes that will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the annual canvass. Most people do not move address every year, and EROs should not need to spend considerable sums of public money to confirm this. They may also be able to use savings from more efficient canvassing processes to target activity to help people who are less likely to register to vote.

Pilot set up

1.5 The UK Government has a programme of work focusing on how to ensure that the electoral registration system can deliver better outcomes for citizens. As part of this programme the Government set up a series of pilot schemes in 2016 and 2017, to test changes to the current annual canvass processes, using provisions in the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (ERA Act).

1.6   The pilots were set up by Cabinet Office and individual EROs. In all cases they included a 'treatment' group of households subject to the amended canvass process and a control group of households subject to the current normal canvass process. Households were assigned randomly to each group. This is the preferable method for testing interventions in order to allow the results from the treatment group to be compared to those from the control.

The Electoral Commission's evaluation

Approach

1.7   The Commission is required to evaluate any pilots run under the provisions mentioned above.[1] We reported our findings from the 2016 pilots in a previous report.[2] The ERA Act sets out, in section 8(2), that the objective of any changes to the canvass should be "to assist registration officers in Great Britain to ascertain: (a) the names and addresses of persons who are not registered in a register but who are entitled to be registered; (b) those persons who are registered in a register but who are not entitled to be registered."[3]

1.8   We have gathered a range of information to inform our evaluation of the 2017 pilots, most importantly data from and interviews with EROs. In assessing each model below we consider the extent to which they contributed to these two areas set out in the legislation – the completeness and accuracy of the registers. We have also considered the difference in cost between the piloted model and the normal canvass.

Limitations

1.9   There are a number of limitations to our evaluation which should be noted.

1.10 Firstly, the number of local authorities involved overall is not large (24) and a smaller number tested each of the four trialled models. In drawing conclusions from these pilots, we need to be cautious about how representative the findings are. Secondly, each trialled model involves more than one change from the current normal canvass process. For example, using email in place of postal contacts while also using amended forms and fewer numbers of contacts overall. We can explore how the different elements of each model worked but it is not always possible to draw a clear conclusion on the effectiveness of individual elements.

1.11 Finally, we are only able to draw tentative conclusions in relation to the costs of the piloted models. Financial data supplied by the local authorities, via Cabinet Office, is not sufficiently consistent to support detailed conclusions.

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[1] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2017/610/contents/made
[2] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/232761/Electoral-registration-report-July-2017.pdf
[3] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/6/section/8

Our conclusions and recommendations

1.12 We believe that Great Britain needs to make major changes to the system of registering electors. Our vision for a modern electoral register[4] is that:

- It should use trusted public data to keep itself accurate and complete throughout the year, and should not rely on action by individuals.
- It should be as easy as possible for electors to keep their own registration record up to date, particularly ahead of elections and referendums.

1.13 Meanwhile, in the short to medium-term the current canvass is not sustainable. These pilot schemes have given us important data to help shape the next stage of changes to electoral registration in Great Britain.

1.14 We do not think any of the specific pilot models are ready to be put into practice yet. The use of data to allow EROs to target their canvassing activities has the most potential benefits, and the Government should focus on developing this approach.

1.15 Evidence from these pilots shows that this approach could help EROs use their resources more efficiently. The use of data from DWP during the move to individual electoral registration also showed how data can help EROs focus their effort where it is needed most.

1.16 We have identified changes that would make data-led canvassing more effective and practical. The UK Government should work with EROs, electoral administrators and their software suppliers to make these changes. They should also work with the Scottish and Welsh Governments who have responsibility for delivering change relating to local government electoral registers in Scotland and Wales.

1.17 Our specific recommendations for change are set out below.

> **Recommendation 1: The Government should look at the benefits of using both national and local datasets to improve the canvass.**
>
> Government should look at which datasets are most likely to provide EROs with reliable information about which addresses have had no changes in residence since the last canvass. It should include national data sources like the Department for Work and Pensions Customer Information System. It should also include local data sources like council tax and housing benefit records.

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[4] We explained our ideas and plans for developing them in these reports: Electoral Commission (2016) *The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain*: Electoral Commission (2017) *Analysis of the December 2016 electoral registers in the United Kingdom*

Recommendation 2: The Government should look at what skills and training electoral administrators need to manage data effectively and securely.

If there is a greater use of data to match electors in the future, electoral administrators need to be able to confidently manage these technical processes. The Government should work with EROs, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Scottish Assessors' Association to identify effective next steps. The Electoral Commission will also support any changes to practice through guidance and advice.

Recommendation 3: EROs should apply a strict match threshold for any data-led canvassing.

There needs to be a consistent and robust approach to how electors and households are matched or not matched. This would reduce the risk of poor canvass response rates from properties where the data has matched details of residents by mistake. The Government should look at requiring a strict match threshold in regulations, at least during the first few years of any new approach.

Recommendation 4: The Government should look at allowing EROs to use email or telephone contact options at different stages of the canvass process.

This would be in addition to mandatory mail or physical contact processes. It would give EROs more efficient and effective tools to follow up with households and electors.

1.18 We think there is more work to be done to look at how to improve electoral registration as a year-round process. Although these pilots only looked at the annual canvass, electoral registration is now a year-round process. To complement changes to the canvass, EROs could also do more to identify people who need to register to vote throughout the year. This includes people who have moved address or who are newly eligible to be registered.

Recommendation 5: The Government should look at how EROs could use data to improve activity throughout the year.

The Government should look at how EROs could be given access to useful data from other public services. For example, access to reliable data about people who have recently changed their address though other government services would help EROs. This could be given to them monthly or quarterly. They could then carry out targeted activity to encourage these people to update their electoral registration details.

Model 1: Household Notification Letters

The model

1.19 Household Notification Letters (HNLs) are used by EROs to inform households of the registered electors at their address. They are most commonly used after the canvass has concluded and ahead of scheduled elections. Unlike the Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) used during the canvass, they do not require a response from a household unless the residents wish to inform the ERO of any changes that need to be made to the electoral register.

1.20 In this model the treatment approach involved sending one HNL to a household with no further reminders. If the ERO had reason to believe the residents at a household had changed (if they received a new application to register at that address, for example) they could issue an updated HNL.[5]

1.21 This model was intended to test whether the HNL would be an effective method of maintaining registers in areas with a more static population, since fewer changes are required to the registers where there is less population movement. EROs would also not be required to chase responses from the majority of households where there had been no change to details, potentially removing substantial inefficiency and cost from the system.

Our findings

Impact on the registers

1.22 There are two main metrics available to assess the impact on the registers of the control and treatment approaches:

- the proportion of households reporting a change
- the volume of electors added to or removed from the registers.

1.23 The group of households making up the control and treatment groups were randomly generated and should therefore not be systematically different from each other. If the control and treatment approaches worked equally well we would expect to see similar levels of household change reported in each. However, as the table below shows, the treatment approach – sending HNLs – saw notably fewer households reporting a change.

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[5] The numbers here were small and this is not considered in any detail in our assessment.

Table 1.1 Households reporting changes to registered details

Local Authority	% Households reporting change		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Barrow in Furness	6.6%	2.6%	-4
Blaenau Gwent	13.9%	3.5%	-10.4
East Devon	10.9%	5.8%	-5.1
Newcastle Upon Tyne	12.3%	2.7%	-9.6
Ryedale	16%	5%	-11
South Holland	7.9%	3.6%	-4.3
South Norfolk	10.4%	5.3%	-5.1
Torfaen	9.4%	4.2%	-5.2
Wakefield	16%	4.8%	-11.2

1.24 This in turn means that fewer additions and deletions were generated via the treatment group compared to the control. Registers compiled using the treatment approach would not be as complete or accurate as those compiled using the normal canvass process. The completeness and accuracy of these registers would therefore steadily deteriorate over time. Although this could be partially offset by the positive impact of occasional high interest polls on registration applications the systematic method for maintaining the registers would be flawed.

Table 1.2 Levels of additions to the registers

Local Authority	% additions to the register		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Barrow in Furness	2.7%	1.4%	-1.3
Blaenau Gwent	3.2%	2.4%	-0.8
East Devon	5.3%	3.5%	-1.9
Newcastle Upon Tyne	7.1%	3.1%	-4
Ryedale	5.4%	3.2%	-2.2
South Holland	4.9%	3%	-1.9
South Norfolk	5%	3.5%	-1.5
Torfaen	3.9%	2.4%	-1.5
Wakefield	6.7%	3.4%	-3.3

Table 1.3 Levels of deletions from the registers

| Local Authority | % deletions from the register | | Diff. |
	Control group	Treatment group	
Barrow in Furness	3.5%	2.2%	-1.4
Blaenau Gwent	7.1%	4.1%	-3
East Devon	6%	4.8%	-1.2
Newcastle Upon Tyne	8.3%	4%	-4.3
Ryedale	8.2%	4.7%	-3.6
South Holland	3.2%	2.7%	-0.5
South Norfolk	5.6%	4.4%	-1.2
Torfaen	6.3%	4.2%	-2.1
Wakefield	6.7%	5.4%	-1.3

Cost

1.25 Although there are some issues with the cost data provided, the overall trend in the data suggests that the HNL model was less expensive than the normal canvass.[6] The differences in cost appear to be realised in three areas:

- Printing and postal costs per unit were generally lower for HNLs than for HEFs because the HNL is a shorter document to produce and send. On average per unit costs appear to have been £0.08 lower for printing HNLs and £0.04 lower for postage.
- The overall cost savings are mainly generated by the absence of follow up activity which saved the cost of printing and sending reminders.
- This lack of follow up also meant that the treatment route did not incur costs associated with door-to-door canvassing which can be a significant element of the canvass budget.

Conclusion

1.26 It is likely that this model would deliver substantial cost savings compared to the current canvass process. However, not following up with any households (as in the treatment approach) means a significant reduction in the amount of change information gathered. It is inefficient to chase all households for a response, when only a smaller number need to update

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[6] One issue is that where pilots applied the treatment approach to the rest of their register (the households not assigned to control or treatment groups) the costs for printing those non-treatment HNLs are included in the cost data for the pilot. It is possible that the economies of scale here, compared to the printing of the smaller number of HEFs, have some impact on the unit costs being reported.

registration details, but in the complete absence of this chasing, less information is captured by the ERO.

1.27 While HNLs remain useful in the way they are mainly employed at the moment – for auditing registers ahead of scheduled events – this approach should not be used to replace the current canvass process as it would negatively affect the completeness and accuracy of the registers.

Model 2: Email canvassing

The model

1.28 This model tested whether emailing could be as, or more, effective than postal contacts at capturing information on electors while also being cheaper and faster for EROs to manage. In this model, the treatment group contained two separate processes.

- Where **an email address was held** by the ERO (at least one individual email address for a household), an initial email HEF was sent. This was followed up with an email reminder, then a postal reminder and then a household visit as needed.
- Where **no email address was held** by the ERO then a postal HEF was sent initially. A postal reminder and a household visit followed on in that order.

Our findings

Impact on the registers

1.29 In this model, unlike the HNL model, there is little difference in the level of household changes in the control and treatment groups. The majority of areas show a lower level of changes in the treatment group but these differences were often quite small. This is also true in the differences in levels of additions and deletions between the control and treatment groups.

Table 1.4 Households reporting changes to registered details

Local Authority	% Households reporting change		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Bath	15.3%	15.6%	0.3
Coventry	13.4%	12%	-1.4
Derbyshire Dales	10.5%	10%	-0.5
Hounslow	19.1%	17.2%	-1.9
Woking	11.3%	11.2%	-0.1

1.30 It is more difficult to draw clear conclusions in this model as there are several differences from the control group – the use of email in one process and the absence of a reminder stage in another. Both of these differences are likely to have contributed to the slightly lower levels of household change picked up in the treatment group. However, looking at the overall response rates, as well as the proportion of change responses, shows that the email stages were of limited effectiveness.

1.31 Across the pilots, response rates at the email stage were relatively low, for example, in Bath the first two postal stages for those without an email address achieved a 55% response rate while the equivalent two email stages achieved a 32% response rate (the first two stages in the control group yielded a 69% response rate).

1.32 As shown in Table 1.5 below, this is also reflected in the proportion of change responses picked up by the email stages compared to postal. The email treatment route had four stages – two by email and two by post – and in Bath, for example, the email stages contributed 32% of the total change responses and the postal stages contributed 68%.

Table 1.5 Cumulative change responses by stage

Treatment route 1	Bath	Coventry	Derbyshire Dales	Hounslow	Woking
Initial postal HEF	38.5%	24.7%	53.7%	37.9%	38.2%
Reminder (post)	55.1%	47.1%	90.8%	63.0%	55.7%
Personal visit	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Treatment route 2					
Initial email	15.4%	11.5%	18.1%	22.1%	15.6%
Reminder (email)	31.6%	22.6%	26.4%	30.5%	23.4%
Reminder (postal)	49.7%	46.5%	91.4%	64.1%	50.1%
Personal visit	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

1.33 These findings indicate that email canvassing on its own is unlikely to be an effective replacement for the current postal contacts and household visits. There also remains a limitation to the reach of email canvassing as it clearly requires the ERO to hold at least one email address for a household. The proportion of emails held varied significantly in the pilots (from 35% to 49% of the treatment households had emails) and is likely to also do so across local authorities in Great Britain.

Cost

1.34 Unsurprisingly, the data and feedback from each area suggests it was less expensive for authorities to send emails compared to sending postal forms and reminders.

1.35 The lower response rates to the email stages meant that EROs were required to contact more households later in the process. For example, more household visits were required in the final stage of the email process compared to the final stage of the non-email process. This increased the costs incurred on personal canvassing.

1.36 However, as a whole this model does appear to result in savings compared to the usual canvass but the differences in cost being reported seem to vary significantly between areas. It is not clear from the data what is driving these differences and this, combined with the small number of pilots, suggests we should be cautious in drawing overly specific conclusions on levels of likely savings.

Conclusion

1.37 Overall, this model was nearly as successful as the existing canvass at gathering information on household change. However, the email contact stages themselves were not as effective at generating responses. Despite this there is no reason to suggest that email canvassing could not be used as an element within a wider canvass process – allowing EROs to choose to use it as a tool where appropriate – particularly as the volume of email addresses available to EROs is likely to increase over time.

Model 3: Phone canvassing

The model

1.38 This model aimed to establish whether phoning households could be as, or more, effective as postal contacts while also being a cheaper and faster process for EROs to manage. In this model, the treatment group contained two processes.

- Where **a telephone number was held** (at least one for a household), an initial postal HEF was sent. This was followed up by a telephone reminder and a further, final postal reminder as needed.
- Where **no telephone number was held** a postal HEF was sent initially. This was followed up with a postal reminder and finally a household visit/hand delivered reminder.

Our findings

Impact on the registers

1.39 As in the email model, there is little difference between the control and treatment groups in the level of household changes being picked up. This is also reflected in minor differences in the levels of additions and deletions between the two groups.

Table 1.6 Households reporting changes to registered details

Local Authority	% Households reporting change		Diff.
	Control group	**Treatment group**	
Dumfries and Galloway	4.2%	3.9%	-0.3
Luton	15.8%	15.8%	0
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse[7]	10.3%	9.8%	-0.5

1.40 Also similarly to the email model, it is challenging to draw clear conclusions on the elements of the treatment approach because there are several differences from the control approach. However, data, set out in Table 1.7, shows that in two of the three pilot areas the response rates to the reminder phone call were significantly higher than the equivalent postal reminder.

1.41 It is not clear why South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse achieved a notably different result to the other pilot areas for the telephone stage. They did have a higher proportion of households with phone numbers but they did not indicate that a high proportion were inaccurate, for example, which could explain the discrepancy. They did achieve a high response at the initial stage, before the telephone reminder, which could have meant their phone calls were to a group less likely to respond. However, Dumfries and Galloway achieved a similar, high response at the initial stage but saw a good response to their phone calls.

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[7] Note: In their treatment group South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse omitted the household visit stage for those households without a telephone number and sent a second postal reminder instead. It is possible that they would have seen a larger proportion of households reporting a change if they had carried out the household visit.

Table 1.7 Response rate to comparable contact stages

Local Authority	Control group	Treatment group	
	1st reminder - postal	1st reminder - postal	1st reminder - telephone
Dumfries and Galloway	33.8%	27.8%	56.8%
Luton	24.3%	22.9%	59.7%
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse	36.3%	31.7%	11.1%

Cost

1.42 The data available on costs for this model suggests that it could be cheaper than a normal canvass. However, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions for several reasons. Firstly three pilot areas offer a limited dataset on which to base any wider conclusions. Secondly, there were set up costs associated with telephone canvassing and it is not straightforward to disaggregate these from what would be normal running costs.

1.43 The available data does suggest that it may be possible for this model to realise cost savings but with the caveat that EROs would need to assume that initial set up costs would be incurred.

Conclusion

1.44 Overall this model was largely as successful as the current canvass process at capturing household changes. The telephone stages themselves, with the exception of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, were more effective than the equivalent postal stages.

1.45 Pilot authorities told us that there were some issues with the set up required for phone canvassing. This included the need to have core staff working outside normal hours or, if a call centre was used, ensuring that the correct processes were followed. In many cases these were set up related issues because this was the first time the local authority had attempted telephone canvassing.

1.46 This pilot indicates that it would be beneficial for EROs to be able to choose to include a telephone stage in their canvass processes. However, there is a question about the scalability of this approach. One pilot area told us that, although their pilot was a positive experience, it would be difficult to employ telephone canvassing across their entire register (as opposed to just the pilot treatment group). This is because the volume of calls they would need to make would be unmanageable for their call centre. Another area, that managed the calls in-house, said they could do it because at the time they temporarily had office space to give over to the telephone canvassers but that this would not usually be the case.

1.47 These issues may not be the case for all local authorities but they suggest two things. Firstly, that one potential of phone canvassing may be in helping to tackle non-responding properties towards the end of any canvass process when volumes are smaller. Secondly, that there could be practical challenges around any implementation of phone canvassing depending on the specific circumstances in each local authority.

Model 4: Data-led canvassing

The model

1.48 This model was intended to test whether, by using data to identify households where there has been no change to residents, EROs could canvass more efficiently by targeting areas of greater change.

1.49 The pilot areas testing this model matched the register entries for their treatment group households against data held locally including council tax and housing benefit. Within the treatment group there were three possible routes for a household.

- Where **a household was deemed to have matched** an HNL was sent and no follow up carried out.
- Where **a household could not be matched and an email address was available** then an initial email HEF was issued. This was followed by an email reminder, then a postal reminder and finally a household visit as needed.
- Where **a household could not be matched and no email was available** then a postal HEF was sent. This was followed by a postal reminder and finally a household visit.

Our findings

Impact on the registers

1.50 Each pilot took a different approach to the data matching they carried out as set out below. In addition, the pilots also varied in the detailed processes they used in the matching, for example how non-exact ('fuzzy') matches were treated. These variations, combined with (for example) the differing demographics of the pilot areas, meant that the overall match rates achieved vary significantly.

Table 1.8 Data matching levels and summary of approaches

Local authority	Match rate	Data sources	Details
Birmingham	46%	Council tax	• 75% match threshold • Council tax only holds bill payer's name
Camden	66%	Council data warehouse – 16 sources including 'trust rating'	• 100% match threshold • Excludes records with 'trust rating' below 85%
Glasgow	84%	Council tax and 2016 canvass results	• Detailed matching approach depending on number of electors in household and other factors, e.g. if they are an attainer or if electors share surnames
Salford	50%	Council tax	• Varied threshold approach, e.g. 100% for 1 or 2 person household, 66.6% for odd numbers greater than one – 66.66%, 75% for even numbers greater than two
South Lakeland	64%	Council tax	• 100% match threshold
Sunderland	58%	Council tax and housing benefit	• 100% match threshold

1.51 The relevant skills, to set up and manage the data matching, also varied between each local authority. In some authorities, other teams within the council – IT or audit functions – provided expertise. In others, the electoral services team had the skills to manage the matching directly. Finally, in others the work was outsourced to an electoral management software (EMS) supplier. This variation in skills and resources would need to be considered if the data matching element of this model was to be taken forward and developed as part of the canvass reform work.

1.52 As with the other models, because the control and treatment households have been selected randomly, there should be no systematic differences between them. If the treatment model worked as well or better than the control process the results should therefore show the same or an improved level of household change. However, as the figures below show, each of the pilots saw a notable drop in change responses for the treatment group.

Table 1.9 Households reporting changes to registered details

Local Authority	% Households reporting change		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Birmingham	15.2%	9.4%	-5.8
Camden[8]	15.1%	5.5%	-9.6
Glasgow[9]	12.7%	4.5%	-8.2
Salford	13.3%	9.5%	-3.8
South Lakeland	13.2%	10.1%	-3.1
Sunderland[10]	10.8%	9%	-1.8

1.53 As in the HNL model, the differences in levels of household change are also reflected in differences in proportions of individual level additions to and deletions from the registers.

Table 1.10 Levels of additions to the registers

Local Authority	% additions to the register		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Birmingham	4%	2.7%	-1.3
Camden	6.7%	3.6%	-3.1
Glasgow[11]	5.5%	4.3%	-1.2
Salford	6.7%	5%	-1.7
South Lakeland	5.7%	4.3%	-1.4
Sunderland	4.4%	4%	-0.4

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[8] Note: Camden carried out the treatment process correctly but, due to a firewall issue, they needed to issue their emails outside of their EMS system. As a result no data was captured on these emails and the email step is not included in the figures presented here. The households assigned to that step have been fully excluded, i.e. the missing data does not mean the data here is misleading and it still gives a good indication of the impact of this model.

[9] Note: Glasgow's reported level of household change in the treatment group is an underestimate. Electors responding to an HNL online were directed to the gov.uk registration site where they could register themselves directly. Where this route was used no response was recorded within the EMS system for that address. It is very likely that the level of household change captured would have been higher if these responses had been captured.

[10] Note: Sunderland did not send a second postal reminder to households for which they held an email. Instead they moved immediately to the household visit (reducing the number of contacts to three from the intended four). This is likely to have slightly decreased some results for the treatment group, for example the level of additions and deletions achieved.

[11] Glasgow's additions and deletions figures are not affected in the same way as those on household change. However it is impossible to tell if there would have been more or fewer additions or deletions if Glasgow had not directed individuals to the online registration site.

Table 1.11 Levels of deletions from the registers

Local Authority	% deletions from the register		Diff.
	Control group	Treatment group	
Birmingham	6.1%	5.1%	-1
Camden	12.9%	6.3%	-6.6
Glasgow	7.2%	6.1%	-1.1
Salford	8.4%	7.3%	-1.1
South Lakeland	5.5%	5.3%	-0.2
Sunderland	6.6%	6%	-0.6

1.54 These differences stem from the combined effects of an imperfect data matching step and the subsequent follow up process with only one contact. The data indicates that registers compiled using this approach would over time become less accurate and complete because they would not keep pace with population change. Increases in registration around major polls would still have a positive impact on the registers but the systematic method for keeping them up to date would not be as effective as the current canvass.

1.55 However, the idea of data-led canvassing has potential – depending on how effective it is possible to make the data matching step. In the HNL model households were assigned at random while in this model a household received an HNL if there was evidence (a data match) to suggest that no changes were needed to the register entries for that address. If the data match was effective at identifying households where there was less likelihood of a change of residents then we would expect the pilot data to show fewer changes being reported in response to these HNLs compared to the HNLs sent out without targeting.

1.56 This is broadly the case, as shown in the chart below on the proportion of reported household change. The red columns are for households matched in the data-led pilots and the blue columns for the treatment group households in the HNL only pilots.[12]

1.57 While the results are not uniform – not all of the lower results are for data-led pilots – we would not expect them to be unless the data match was perfect. Some local authorities will have higher levels of household change because of the nature of their populations. However, the fact that areas like Ryedale and Torfaen recorded higher levels of change than Camden in this exercise suggests that the data matching in Camden was at least partially successful in identifying households less likely to need to update details.

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[12] Note: Glasgow is excluded from this analysis due to the issue set out above with underestimating households reporting change.

Figure 1.1 Percentage of treatment households reporting change to household details (HNL and Data-led models)
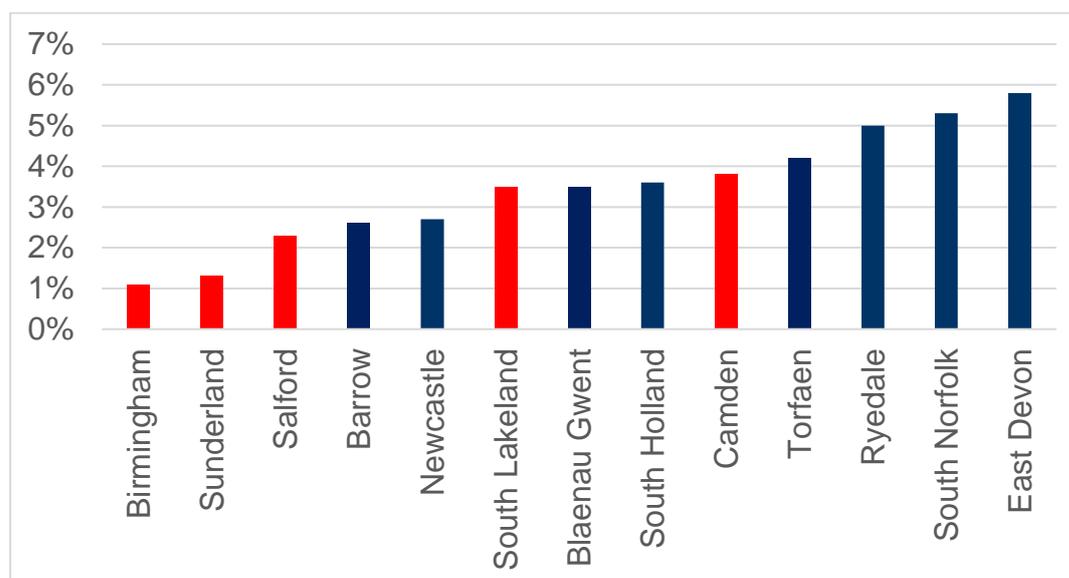
Costs

1.58 There are two key elements to this pilot in terms of potential cost savings: the data matching process itself and the cost of the follow up activity. In relation to follow up activities the findings are similar to the HNL model – that reducing the volume of contact with households reduces the cost of carrying out the canvass. Therefore the greater the proportion of households subject to the treatment approach and matched, the greater the potential saving compared to the normal canvass.

1.59 It is less clear how to assess the cost of the matching process itself. In some areas existing infrastructure within the local authority was used and the cost to the ERO was therefore limited. In other areas additional help was required, for example from an EMS supplier, and higher costs were incurred. This is also not only a question of initial set up costs because the evidence suggests that some areas would continue to need to buy in support each time they carried out this exercise.

1.60 Overall, the data suggests that this model has the potential to generate cost savings for EROs. However, the specific circumstances in each local authority, in relation to data matching resources, would be likely to impact on how cost effective the model is for different areas.

Conclusions

1.61 The results from this model show that, as tested, it would not be a suitable replacement for the current annual canvass process. The lower levels of change being picked up would, over time, negatively affect the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers. However, there is clearly potential in the idea behind this model – using data to improve the efficiency of canvassing. Information from the pilot authorities also indicates that there were cost savings to this approach – particularly in the reduction in follow up work that could be required with data matched households.