

# Electoral registration in Great Britain: ERO performance at the 2016 and 2017 canvasses

## Introduction

- 1.1 This document provides a review of our experience of monitoring ERO performance standards during the 2016 canvass, which was the first full canvass following the end of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in December 2015. It outlines the challenges we faced in collecting data on the revised registers and using this to understand ERO performance, and highlights the outcomes of our monitoring and support work.
- 1.2 The document also sets out our proposed approach to supporting EROs in their planning for and delivery of the 2017 canvass, learning lessons from our work in 2016. The approach includes ensuring that key risks to the delivery of the canvass are correctly identified for each ERO and that support and challenge is provided where appropriate to help to mitigate these risks as far as possible.
- 1.3 Although the standards focus on a well-run electoral registration service throughout the whole year, our monitoring of EROs has to date been targeted towards electoral registration activity during the canvass period given that this takes place at a defined point in the year and by all EROs. However, where we become aware of any issues relating to the performance of EROs outside this period, such as in the run-up to a poll, we follow up with individual EROs as necessary and in turn reflect this in our risk profiling and monitoring approach for the following canvass.
- 1.4 Over the next 18 months we will review how we use the performance standards framework to support and challenge EROs in the delivery of their registration functions, particularly recognising the increasingly year-round nature of their activity. We will also look to review the standards themselves in the context of potential permanent change to the canvass arising from the Modernising Electoral Registration Programme (MERP).

## Review of the 2016 canvass

### Performance standards framework

- 1.5 The ERO performance standards framework is shaped around key outcomes from the perspective of ensuring that all eligible people are able to participate in the electoral process, should they wish to do so, and of achieving electoral registers that are as accurate (including no fraudulent entries on the electoral register) and complete as possible. The standards focus on the following two key areas:
  - Framework for the delivery of registration activity

- Delivery of registration activity to maintain accurate and complete registers

## 2016 monitoring approach

- 1.6 As set out in our [response to consultation](#) on the new standards, our approach to monitoring against the standards at the 2016 canvass was similar to previous years, with risk based monitoring used to ensure we focussed our support where it is most needed.
- 1.7 A number of EROs were selected for more detailed monitoring taking into account factors such as the experience of the ERO, significant changes in staffing in the electoral services team, any issues highlighted at the previous canvass or recent polls, and other relevant local circumstances. The Commission's teams across England, Scotland and Wales were in regular contact with these EROs throughout the canvass.
- 1.8 A management information survey was issued to all EROs in early October 2016 and this allowed EROs to detail their general progress with the canvass, as well as highlight any particular issues and challenges that they were facing. While the survey provided a high level of overall assurance that the canvass was progressing well, it was clear that there were a number of EROs facing resource challenges, and particularly in recruiting and retaining sufficient canvassers.
- 1.9 In addition, the survey also highlighted that some EROs, in an attempt to seek a more cost effective approach to the canvass, had adopted practices which were not in accordance with the legal requirements of issuing and following up household enquiry forms (HEFs).
- 1.10 Using the survey information, the Commission's teams were able to work more closely with EROs who were reporting issues and, where necessary, to switch their focus to supporting and challenging them and providing advice and guidance. This included providing examples of practices employed by other EROs, such as making effective use of available resource to continue canvassing beyond December 2016, and challenging EROs to make sure that the proper statutory processes are followed.

## Use of registration data

- 1.11 As our report 'Analysis of the December 2016 electoral registers in the United Kingdom'<sup>1</sup> highlighted, the collection and analysis of registration data once again presented several challenges in helping us to objectively assess the performance of EROs.
- 1.12 The registers for 373 local authority areas are managed through four different Electoral Management Software (EMS) systems, and seven local authority areas use software developed in-house. Collecting accurate and consistent

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/222877/Analysis-of-the-December-2016-electoral-registers-in-the-United-Kingdom.pdf](https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/222877/Analysis-of-the-December-2016-electoral-registers-in-the-United-Kingdom.pdf)

data at a detailed level across these software systems proved difficult and while we are confident that the aggregated data enabled us to provide an accurate overview of the state of the registers, our ability to use the data to review the progress of individual EROs delivering registration activities in their area was affected. It has therefore been difficult for us to fully understand the performance of those EROs who were outside of our risk-based sample, creating the risk that there were other issues with performance that we were not aware of.

- 1.13 The lack of accurate and consistent data also impacts on the ability of EROs to confidently monitor progress of the canvass and assess the impact of their activities. It is therefore important to ensure that more is done to improve the robustness of data capture and reporting. We are already working closely with Cabinet Office on a project to improve the metrics available to EROs and the Commission, which will provide a more effective mechanism for monitoring and reporting on progress and impact. In the meantime, we will ensure that the contextual information that we capture through our management information survey is expanded to enable us to identify more easily issues that may not otherwise be identifiable from data returns.

### **Assessing performance in 2016**

- 1.14 By the beginning of March 2017, 10 EROs remained subject to more focussed engagement. Of these 10, seven had been part of the initial higher risk assessment of 68 EROs and three had become part of the monitoring group as a result of concerns identified during the canvass<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.15 Four of these ten EROs had completed the canvass but did not carry it out initially strictly in accordance with the legal requirements, or otherwise had difficulties with an element of the canvass such as providing evidence of supporting canvass plans. We worked closely with these EROs during the canvass to ensure that they met the legislative requirements, including meeting with them to discuss how they could adjust their processes to do so. While our final assessment is that these EROs met the performance standards, we will include them in the group of EROs that will be more closely monitored throughout the 2017 canvass. This will allow us to support and challenge them through more regular contact and discussions throughout the canvass period.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.16 The other six EROs have been assessed as not meeting elements of the performance standards, with the available data indicating that they did not complete a full canvass.<sup>4</sup> We have worked closely with these EROs to ascertain the reasons for this and have identified a number of areas that they need to address for the 2017 canvass, including ensuring an appropriate level of staff to undertake the personal visit elements of the canvass and

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<sup>2</sup> The 7 who had been subject to more focused engagement initially included: Brighton & Hove, Maldon, Monmouthshire, North Norfolk, Reading, Southwark, and Wakefield. The remaining 3 who were added during the canvass were: Epsom & Ewell, Merthyr Tydfil, and Warwick.

<sup>3</sup> These EROs are: Monmouthshire, Southwark, Wakefield and Warwick.

<sup>4</sup> These EROs are: Brighton & Hove, Epsom & Ewell, Maldon, Merthyr Tydfil, North Norfolk, and Reading

investigating options for accessing hard to reach electors in secure access buildings and nursing homes.

- 1.17 We are working to provide targeted support and advice to these EROs and will continue to do so throughout the 2017 canvass to ensure that they carry out the canvass in a way that meets both the legislative requirements and our performance standards.

## The 2017 canvass

- 1.18 The 2017 canvass is the second full household canvass to take place since the end of transition to IER in December 2015. With some limited prescribed exceptions, an ERO must send a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) to every property in their area between 1 July and 30 November 2017. They must then take the legally required specified steps to follow up any HEF non-responses, including issuing two reminders and making a personal visit where necessary. As is also the case throughout the year, should an ERO become aware of any potential new electors the ERO must send the elector an Invitation to Register (ITR) within 28 days and complete the required follow-up steps in the event of non-response.

- 1.19 Canvass pilots are scheduled to be undertaken in 23 local authority areas in Great Britain in 2017, which the Commission will be evaluating and reporting on. These authorities will therefore not form part of our standard monitoring approach but will nevertheless be subject to focussed engagement.

- 1.20 The 2017 canvass is also taking place in the context of recent and extremely high registration activity as a result of elections in May and June 2017. It is therefore reasonable to assume that at the start of the canvass EROs are managing registers that have relatively high levels of completeness.

## Monitoring approach

- 1.21 Our approach to the 2017 canvass is consistent with that taken in 2016 but with minor amendments to reflect lessons learnt from monitoring at the 2016 canvass. These include, for example, removal of a requirement for all EROs in the sample to provide plans to the Commission, reflecting the fact that formal project planning is now generally embedded in EROs' approach to the canvass, and a revision of the management information survey to ensure it enables EROs to understand their progress and challenges through the canvass, as well as capturing all the necessary information we would want to see to be able to assure ourselves of their progress.

- 1.22 This approach assumes that there will not be any further national electoral events taking place during the remainder of 2017. If, however, this proves not to be the case, we will review our monitoring and support approach depending on when in the canvass any such electoral event takes place, and will provide appropriate guidance for EROs within five working days of an electoral event being confirmed.

1.23 The following summarises our approach to the 2017 canvass:

- Risk profiling will be used to identify and ensure that we are able to provide targeted support where it is most needed. (Further information on our approach to this is included below.)
- The approach and focus of monitoring and support offered will vary dependent upon the level of risk of each ERO. The aim of our monitoring work is to support EROs in the successful delivery of electoral registration and to ensure that those EROs who need additional support can be identified and provided with appropriate targeted support.
- As such the reaching of a performance assessment is not the end goal of the work; rather, the performance standards are a tool for us to use in ensuring electoral registration services are consistently well run across GB.
- A canvass progress survey will be used to provide additional assurance in relation to the delivery of the canvass as a whole, and will allow us to review and adjust the EROs selected for risk-based monitoring accordingly
- We will continue to strive to identify and share good practice in delivering successful electoral registration, working closely with the AEA and the SAA.
- As in previous years, we will also be monitoring those EROs in the 18 areas identified as being at higher risk of allegations of electoral fraud, ensuring that integrity plans are in place and reflected in canvass planning and delivery.

### **Risk profiling and progress survey**

1.24 In developing the criteria to be used for this round of risk profiling work and in accordance with the factors outlined previously, we will reflect performance in relation to the 2016 canvass and any intelligence gained through our monitoring of electoral services across Great Britain during both the May and June 2017 polls. EROs identified as forming part of the risk-based monitoring will fall into two groups; those of a higher risk level (red) and those of a moderate risk level (amber).

1.25 Although our principal contact will be with those EROs selected as part of the risk-based monitoring, all EROs will be asked to provide us with an update on progress with the canvass and follow-up processes, through the completion of the management information survey. The survey will be published in early October 2017 and all EROs will be asked to complete the survey by 20 October 2017.

1.26 This will be similar to previous progress surveys and content will be shared with the Elections, Registration, and Referendums Working Group (ERRWG) prior to circulation to obtain an administrator perspective on the most useful areas to cover. It will involve asking all EROs to complete a questionnaire, designed to help us to understand how the canvass is progressing in each area and to provide the EROs with a clear point at which they can measure their own progress with the canvass. The value of recording contextual information through the survey will be particularly useful in supporting EROs if there are continuing issues with the provision of data through software systems at the end of the canvass.

1.27 The outcomes of the survey will help to indicate to EROs and to us if there are any emerging issues or performance concerns which would benefit from the provision of general or targeted guidance and support. This also means that we will have an opportunity to identify any EROs who were not originally highlighted from risk profiling as requiring focussed support but where the available information highlights an increased risk to effective canvass delivery.

### **End of canvass data return**

1.28 As in previous years, all EROs will be required to provide the data as set out in the standards following the conclusion of the canvass and after publication of revised registers. We will use the data that we gather to draw broad conclusions to support our monitoring of the success of the canvass up to that point.

1.29 Where necessary we will also use the data to provide targeted support and guidance to enable EROs to complete their canvass beyond publication of the revised registers, and more generally as a basis to support EROs to better use the data to evaluate and identify improvements to their processes.

1.30 Due to difficulties in collecting detailed figures from the 2016 canvass and the challenge of properly analysing such data we will, as explained above, also adapt the management information survey to allow EROs to better record contextual information during the canvass and provide a means of confidently assessing progress.

### **Assessment of ERO performance**

1.31 Our assessment of the performance of EROs against our performance standards will be reached based on analysis of the information obtained through our focussed monitoring work and any other available information, such as data and information collected from the interim progress survey and data submitted following the publication of December registers.

1.32 Where performance issues are identified they will be assessed and shared with a panel comprising members of ECAB for consideration. Final assessments will be made by the Commission and EROs notified accordingly.

1.33 We aim to report on the performance of EROs by the end of March 2018.

### **Identifying and sharing good practice**

1.34 Any examples of good practice that are identified during the course of the canvass will be reviewed and considered for sharing more widely as part of the project we are undertaking with the AEA and the SAA to identify and share good practice. This builds on the work which has already been undertaken to identify and disseminate examples of good practice in electoral registration and is designed to support EROs and administrators to find new ways to address electoral administration challenges, using learning from colleagues across the UK.