

Electoral registration in Great Britain: 2017 and 2018 annual canvasses

October 2018

Context

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 any changes to be notified to the ERO. 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. In addition, a HEF cannot be used to register people or remove people from the register. The information provided on a HEF will act as a prompt for further action based on the response received. For example, where a name has been added to a HEF, the potential new elector will need to be sent an invitation to register (ITR) and a registration application form, and EROs will need to take the specified steps – issuing two reminders and a personal visit – to follow up with any ITR non-responders.

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 become less efficient and more expensive for EROs to conduct. The Commission has previously 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 registers¹ concluded that the current system is not sustainable in the longer term.

1.4 While some form of contact at a household level is likely to remain a key method by which EROs audit their registers, at least in the short to medium-term, 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

¹ Electoral Commission (2016) [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain: Accuracy and completeness of the registers in Great Britain and the transition to Individual Electoral Registration](#)

from more efficient canvassing processes to target activity to help people who are less likely to register to vote throughout the year.

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 involved four alternative models to the current canvass:

- Household Notification Letters
- Email canvassing
- Telephone canvassing
- Data-led canvassing

1.7 The Commission is required to evaluate any pilots run under the ERA Act provisions, and we published our evaluation of the 2017 pilots in June 2018². The pilot schemes gave us important information to help shape the next stage of changes to electoral registration in Great Britain.

1.8 We concluded that we do not think any of the specific pilot models are ready to be put into practice yet. However, the fourth model, using data to allow EROs to target their canvassing activities, has the most potential benefits. Evidence from these pilots shows that this approach could help EROs use their resources more efficiently. The report recommended that the Government should focus on developing this approach, and we have identified a number of changes that would make data-led canvassing more effective and practical.

1.9 We therefore welcome the recent policy statement from the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments on proposals for reform of the annual canvass, which recognises that the current processes, as prescribed by law, are resource intensive and do not take account of the differences within and between registration areas.

1.10 Any measures that will introduce permanent change to the canvass are planned to be in place for the 2020 canvass.

1.11 We will review the performance standards themselves in the context of potential reform of the canvass and work on developing metrics to support canvass reform. In addition, over the next 18 months we will review how we use the performance standards framework, including how the standards are reflected within our suite of guidance, to support and challenge EROs in the delivery of their registration functions, particularly recognising the increasingly year-round nature of their activity.

² Electoral Commission (2018) [Annual canvass reform: pilot scheme evaluation, June 2018](#)

Review of the 2017 canvass

Performance standards framework

1.12 The current 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

2017 canvass approach

1.13 Although the standards focus on a well-run electoral registration service throughout the whole year, our monitoring of EROs has traditionally been targeted towards electoral registration activity during the canvass period. 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.

1.14 Our approach to the 2017 canvass was broadly consistent with that taken in 2016 but with a shift in emphasis to reflect lessons learnt from monitoring during previous canvasses and the fact that formal project planning is now generally embedded in EROs' approach to the canvass.³ We also worked to ensure we could capture good practice where it occurs with a view to sharing it more widely across the electoral community.

1.15 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.

1.16 The management information survey issued to all EROs in early October 2017 allowed EROs to detail their general progress with the canvass, as well as to highlight any particular issues and challenges that they were facing. It was designed to enable EROs to understand their progress and challenges through the canvass, as well as to capture all the information we wanted to see to be able to assure ourselves of their progress. While the survey provided a high level of overall assurance that the canvass was progressing well, it was clear that there were some EROs facing resource challenges, and particularly in recruiting and retaining sufficient canvassers.

1.17 The survey also highlighted that some EROs, in an attempt to seek a more cost effective approach to the canvass, appeared to have adopted practices which were not

³ Our consideration of performance in respect of the 2017 canvass does not include the 23 local authority areas who engaged in canvass pilot schemes. These authorities did not form part of our standard monitoring approach but were nevertheless subject to focussed engagement.

strictly in accordance with the legal requirements of issuing and following up household enquiry forms (HEFs).

1.18 Using the survey information, the Commission's teams were able to work more closely with EROs who were reporting issues. This included providing examples of practices employed by other EROs, such as making effective use of available resources to continue canvassing beyond December 2017, and challenging EROs to make sure that the proper statutory processes were followed.

Use of registration data

1.19 As outlined in our previous reports on electoral registers in the United Kingdom,⁴ the collection and analysis of registration data again presented some difficulties in helping us to objectively assess the performance of EROs. We were, however, able to use the lessons learned from the 2016 canvass to ensure that the contextual information captured through the management information survey would provide robust evidence to enable us to better understand how EROs were delivering their registration activities even in the absence of timely and accurate data.

1.20 As well as making it more challenging for the Commission to understand ERO performance, more fundamentally the lack of accurate and consistent data impacts on the ability of individual EROs to confidently monitor the progress of their canvass and assess the impact of their activities. We are continuing to work 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 future.

Performance at the 2017 canvass

1.21 By the beginning of March 2018, we were still following up on elements of the final canvass data return submitted between December 2017 and February 2018 with 38 EROs. By the end of May 2018 we had identified 20 EROs where the data and other available information indicated that elements of the performance standards may not have been met in full. We reached provisional assessments of performance against the standards for each of these EROs, which we moderated through consultation with representatives of the Electoral Coordination and Advisory Board (ECAB).

1.22 Of these 20 EROs, we are satisfied that in 9 cases the canvass processes had been completed and performance was in line with the performance standards.

1.23 For the other eleven EROs, the available data indicates that they did not complete a full canvass as prescribed by law and reflected in the performance standards.⁵ We have worked closely with each of these EROs to ascertain the reasons for this and have identified a number of areas that they need to address for the 2018 canvass, including

⁴ Electoral Commission (2017) [Electoral Registration in Great Britain: ERO performance at the 2016 and 2017 canvasses](#)

⁵ These EROs are: Cambridge, Lewes, Newark and Sherwood, North Hertfordshire, Sefton, Shropshire, Wandsworth, Warwick, West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland and York

ensuring an appropriate level of staff to undertake the personal visit elements of the canvass and investigating options for accessing hard to reach electors in rural areas, secure access buildings, university accommodation and nursing homes.

1.24 We will continue to provide targeted support and advice to these EROs throughout the 2018 canvass to help to ensure that they carry out the canvass in a way that meets both the legislative requirements and our performance standards.

1.25 We hope that reform of the current canvass requirements will help to address some of the challenges faced by EROs in maintaining their electoral registers in future years.

1.26 The recent policy statement on proposals for reform of the annual canvass recognises that there are specific issues that EROs have in reaching certain groups of the electorate, such as areas with large student populations.

1.27 We therefore welcome the proposal to exempt certain property types, for example, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), care homes and student halls of residence, from the typical canvass processes. Instead, it is proposed that a single responsible officer would be required to provide a list of eligible residents at the property, which EROs could then use to issue ITRs to any individuals who are not currently registered.

The 2018 canvass

2018 canvass approach

1.28 Our approach to the 2018 canvass is similar to previous years but will take account of the lessons learned throughout the 2017 canvass, and also features a refreshed approach to stakeholder engagement.

1.29 Initial risk profiling of local authorities remains an important tool to assist us with the identification of areas where we can provide additional support through various means, such as the sharing of innovative practices. Undertaking this exercise has allowed us to identify any specific areas of risk to the delivery of the canvass, enabling us to have meaningful ongoing discussions with EROs and their electoral administration teams.

1.30 We aim to contact all authorities at some point during the canvass period. We will also review the management information survey we issue, to ensure it asks the right questions so that the information gathered can be used to prioritise this engagement. Alongside the performance standards this will allow us to tailor our support more effectively and challenge where the canvass is not being carried out in a way that meets both the legislative requirements and our performance standards.

1.31 While the performance standards are a focus for this engagement, we do not view the reaching of a performance assessment as the objective of this work; rather, the performance standards are a tool for us to use in supporting and challenging EROs to ensure electoral registration services are consistently well run across GB.

Identifying and sharing good practice

1.32 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 a 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.

End of canvass data return

1.33 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 canvass up to that point.

1.34 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.

1.35 Due to difficulties in collecting detailed figures from recent canvasses and the challenge of properly analysing such data we will also adapt the management information survey to allow EROs to better record contextual information at a point or points during the canvass, which will provide both us and them with a means of confidently assessing progress.

Assessment of ERO performance

1.36 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.

1.37 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.

1.38 We aim to report on the performance of EROs by early summer 2019.