The Electoral Commission

THE 2017 UK GENERAL ELECTION

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Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election

Report on the UK Parliamentary general election held on 8 June 2017

July 2017

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The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

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Key data

- An estimated **46.8 million people were registered to vote** at the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election, of which 68.8% actually voted.
- This was **the largest electorate for a UK-wide poll**, with approximately 500,000 more electors than at the 2015 election.
- More than **2.9 million applications to register to vote** were made in Great Britain between the Prime Minister's announcement on 18 April (that she would ask Parliament to approve a general election) and the deadline for applications on 22 May.
- More than **96% of applications were made using the online service**, including 612,000 which were submitted on the last day for applications.
- Between 18 April and 22 May, **over two thirds (69%) of online applications were made by people aged under 34**.

Key issues

- The **online registration service has significantly improved access to elections in Great Britain** since it was introduced in June 2014, but it is not yet available for people in Northern Ireland.
- Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) have again highlighted the **significant administrative and financial impact of processing duplicate applications** submitted by people who are already registered to vote. Initial estimates by EROs of the proportion of duplicate applications have ranged from 30% of the total submitted in some areas to 70% in others.
- Although people may lawfully be registered to vote in more than one place in certain circumstances, **it is troubling that some voters appear to have admitted voting more than once at the general election**, which is an offence.

Key areas for further improvement

- **Online electoral registration should be extended** to Northern Ireland as soon as possible.
- **Urgent steps are needed** to reduce both the scale and **administrative impact of duplicate registration applications for EROs** ahead of future polls.
- Tools to **prevent double voting** at general elections should be explored quickly.
- **Funding for EROs** needs to reflect better the scale of activity required to process electoral registration applications ahead of major polls.

- **Electoral registration should be more joined-up** with other public services, to make registering to vote even simpler for the public and more efficient for EROs. This should include integrating applications into other public service transactions, and better use of national data to identify new electors or home movers.
- **Automatic registration methods should be explored further**, drawing on other countries' experiences.

Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election

1.1   A UK Parliamentary general election was held on 8 June 2017. This is the first of the Electoral Commission's statutory reports on the election, and it focuses on the registration of voters, which is at the heart of a sound and efficient electoral system. It sets out our analysis of key data about electoral registration applications and the electoral registers, and identifies issues and recommendations for further improving and modernising the system, which we believe to be urgently needed.

1.2   Within the UK, the developing devolution settlement means that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have powers to develop policy and legislation for electoral registration for local government elections and Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales elections respectively. We will continue to work closely with all of the UK's governments to help support the development of new approaches to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers.

Electoral registration in the UK

1.3   There is no national electoral register in the United Kingdom. A total of 380 separate electoral registers are compiled and maintained by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in Great Britain, and one register for Northern Ireland is compiled and maintained by the Chief Electoral Officer.

1.4   A system of individual electoral registration (IER) has operated in Great Britain since 2014, and a similar system has been used in Northern Ireland since 2002. Individuals are responsible for applying to register to vote individually, and must supply identifying information (such as date of birth and National Insurance number) as part of their application. The information is verified before their names can be added to the electoral register.

1.5   An online registration application service was introduced in Great Britain at the same time as IER in 2014. Individuals can apply to register online at any point during the year at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote, or by completing and returning a paper application form. In either case, although data from registration applications are verified against Department for Work and Pensions records, each application is determined locally by individual EROs. The deadline to register to vote for the general election was Monday 22 May 2017.

1.6   Each ERO in Great Britain is still required by law to conduct an annual canvass of all properties in their registration area to audit their electoral register entries and to identify electors who have moved or were not previously registered. EROs must publish a revised register by 1 December

each year, with further updates published on the first working day of each month and before elections.[1] In 2006 the annual canvass was abolished in Northern Ireland and replaced with a process of continuous registration.

Our public awareness campaign

1.7 The Electoral Commission ran a campaign to increase people's awareness of the election and how to take part, including the need to be registered to vote by 22 May. Our campaign strategy was informed by the need to maximise the limited time available and had four strands:

- Using advertising with a tried-and-tested record of success
- Securing high-profile social media partnerships with Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Nextdoor
- Generating media coverage around key milestones
- Supporting partner organisations - including UK and local government, charities and NGOs - by co-ordinating activities and providing resources for them to use on their own channels

1.8 Our aim was to reach both a general audience and under-registered groups, including students, home movers, 18-34 year olds, private renters, UK citizens living overseas and armed forces personnel. The channels used across Great Britain included TV, radio, social media and Google search advertising. In Northern Ireland channels included radio, social media, outdoor and digital display advertising.

1.9 We updated existing advertising materials and created new social and radio adverts based on the 'don't lose it' concept used in previous campaigns.

Figure 1: 'One week to go' Facebook advert

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[1] If an election is held between 1 July and 1 December, publication of the revised register can be postponed until 1 February of the following year.

1.10 The time constraints on registration opportunities for armed forces personnel serving abroad and UK citizens living overseas were even more pronounced.

1.11 We worked with the Cabinet Office who supported our campaign by facilitating support from all departments who shared our messaging across social media and intranet channels; and featuring registration reminders across GOV.UK including at the end of transactions on the platform, such as passport and driving licence applications.

1.12 We worked with the Ministry of Defence to provide materials for Unit Registration Officers and with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to provide materials for embassies and consulates. Facebook advertising also enabled us to target both groups effectively; we updated existing advertising materials and kept refreshing them to ensure the messaging reached our target audiences.

Figure 2: Armed forces Facebook advert

Figure 3: Overseas voter Facebook advert

The size of the electoral register

1.13 An estimated 46.8 million people were registered to vote at the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election.[2] This was the largest electorate for a UK-wide poll, with approximately 500,000 more electors than at the 2015 general election and 300,000 more than at the 2016 EU referendum.

1.14 The total number of people registered to vote across the UK also increased by approximately 1.4 million between the end of the annual canvass on 1 December 2016 and the June 2017 election. Chart 1 below

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[2] Based on data collated on behalf of the House of Commons Library and published in its Briefing Paper *General Election 2017: results and analysis* (June 2016)

shows the changing size of the UK's electoral registers at UK-wide electoral events (including UK Parliamentary general elections and European Parliamentary elections) and at the conclusion of the annual canvass each year since 2009.

1.15 There was some variation in the volume of change in the constituency electorates between May 2015 and June 2017. Four constituencies saw a fall in the total number of registered electors of just over 10% since the last general election (Ilford South, Glasgow North, Glasgow North East and Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) while two saw increases of 10% or more (Bridgwater and West Somerset, and Leeds North West). Bridgwater and West Somerset saw the largest absolute increase of 8,803 electors while Ilford South recorded the largest absolute decrease of 9,500 electors.

1.16 The size of electoral registers fluctuates over time and there were also changes in the registered electorate in the shorter period between December 2016 and June 2017. This is not surprising as the electorate increases ahead of a major poll to reflect population movement, and commonly decreases after the subsequent canvass. We would therefore expect greater similarity between two sets of general election registers (in a short period) than between a set of December registers and those used at a general election.

Chart 1: The size of the UK electoral registers 2009-2017
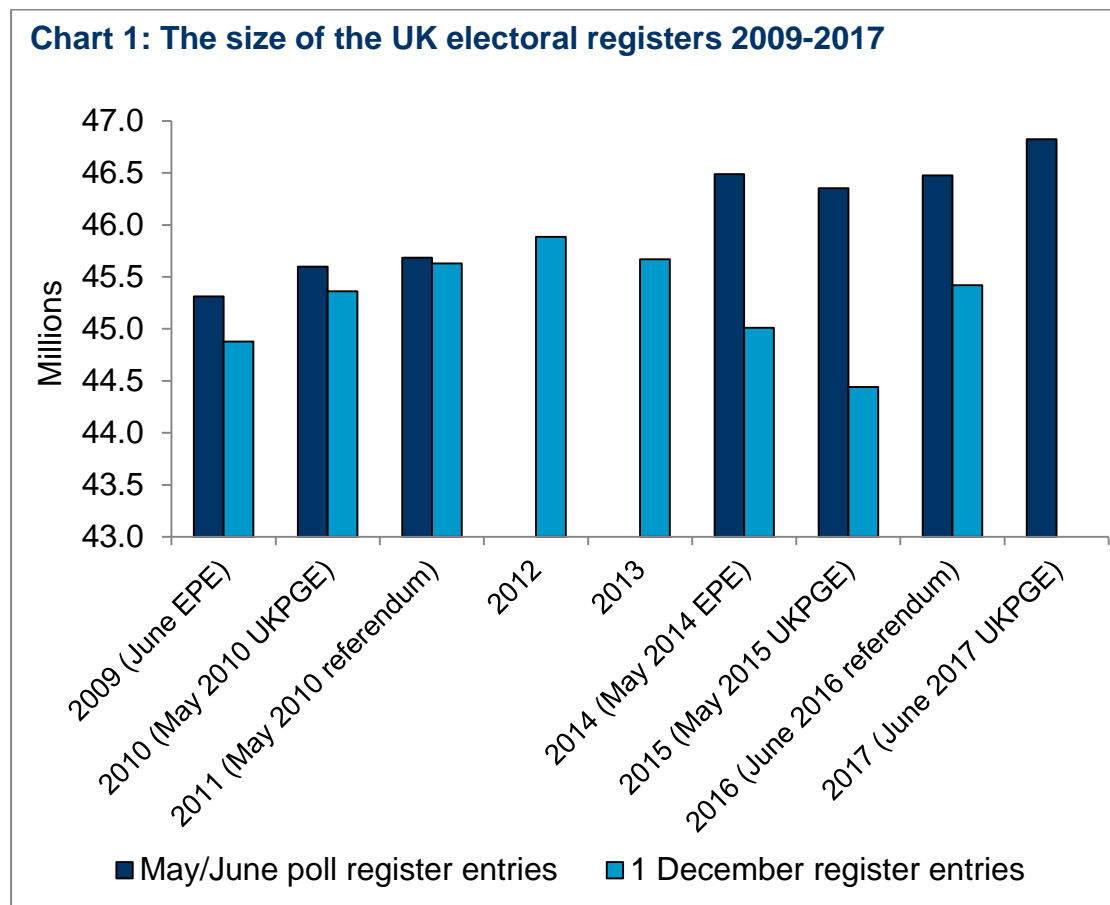
1.17 Unsurprisingly therefore a larger number of constituencies saw increases in their electorate between December and June and the size of any decreases was not as great. Increases in electorate of over 15% were

recorded in Bethnal Green and Bow, Poplar and Limehouse and Leeds North West constituencies. There were also notable increases of more than 10% in constituencies with high concentrations of students (Canterbury, Cambridge, Brighton Pavilion, Bristol West and Leeds Central).

1.18 Our briefing paper issued after the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections highlighted concerns that nearly 3,500 people attended polling stations in order to vote but were found to be not registered.[3] We are aware that 1,862 people in Northern Ireland were turned away at the June UK general election for the same reason. Although this was a significant reduction in the number of people unable to vote because they were not correctly registered, it was nonetheless disappointing that a significant number of people could not vote.

Online registration

1.19 The online registration service has significantly improved access to elections in Great Britain since it was introduced in June 2014. Data about applications made using the online electoral registration service show that the numbers of people using the service have increased each year since 2014. Between 10 June 2014 and 30 June 2017 a total of 21,580,788 registration applications (representing 77.6% of all applications) have been submitted online.

1.20 Analysis of online registration applications data again shows that the number of applications appears to be related to the proximity of high-profile electoral events. More than 2.9 million applications to register to vote were made between the Prime Minister's announcement on 18 April (that she would ask Parliament to approve a general election) and the deadline for applications on 22 May. More than 96% of these applications were made using the online service.

1.21 The number of applications submitted online on 18 April was approximately 146,810, compared with 10,106 submitted on the previous day. On 22 May, the last day for submitting registration applications, a total of 612,543 applications were made using the online service. Figure 4 on page 8 below illustrates the profile of electoral registration applications using the online service between 1 April and 31 May 2017.

1.22 More detailed data from the online registration service shows that online registration has been particularly popular among some of those groups who we know are less likely to be registered to vote, including young people and British citizens overseas. Over two-thirds (69%) of online applications received between 18 April 2017 and 22 May 2017 were from people aged
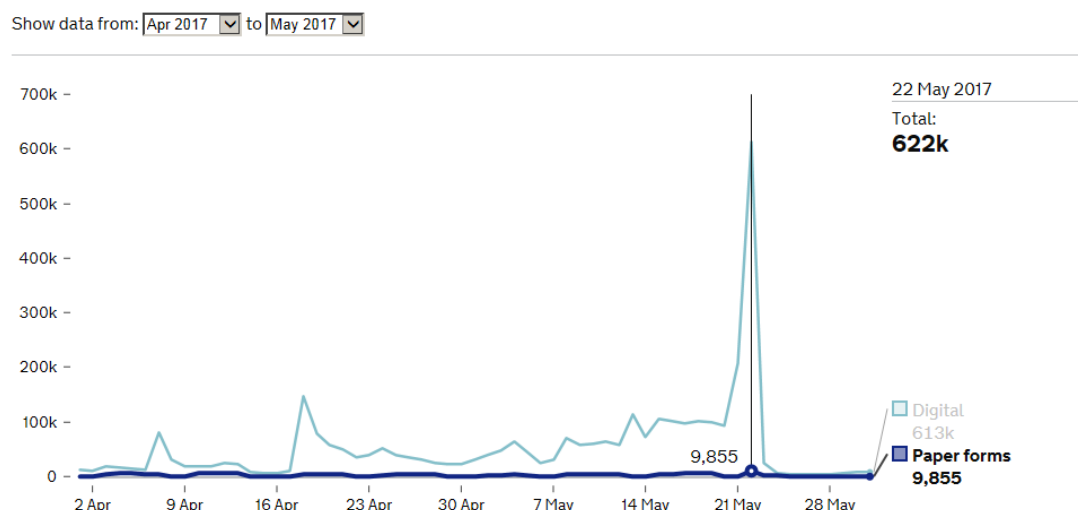
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[3] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/226970/Northern-Ireland-Assembly-election-March-2017-report-briefing-paper.pdf

under 34. Applications from those aged over 55 represented 8% of all applications received.

Figure 4: Electoral registration applications made between 1 April and 31 May 2017

Applications breakdown

Show data from: Apr 2017 ▼ to May 2017 ▼

22 May 2017
Total:
622k

Digital
613k

Paper forms
9,855

9,855

700k –
600k –
500k –
400k –
300k –
200k –
100k –
0 –

2 Apr   9 Apr   16 Apr   23 Apr   30 Apr   7 May   14 May   21 May   28 May

Source: gov.uk voter registration performance dashboard

1.23 Digital applications from overseas voters represented a relatively small proportion of the total (4%) but with 117,609 applications compared to a total of 263,902 overseas electors included in the registers published in December 2016, it is clear that online registration is a popular and important facility for British citizens living overseas.

Online registration in Northern Ireland

1.24 On 12 December 2016 the Representation of the People (Electronic Communications and Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2016 passed both Houses of Parliament. The Regulations allow for the introduction of digital electoral registration and will come into force once the necessary technical requirements are in place for the system to operate in Northern Ireland.

1.25 The Chief Electoral Officer had originally intended that online registration would be launched by the end of 2016. However a number of technical difficulties began to emerge during testing of the system, including how it would work in collaboration with the current online portal that exists in Great Britain. The launch was therefore delayed until early 2017.

1.26 Following the announcement in January 2017 that a Northern Ireland Assembly election would be held in March 2017, the Chief Electoral Officer further postponed the scheduled introduction of online registration. This was

understandable given that there were a number of technical difficulties which still needed to be addressed prior to implementation. It is now likely that online registration will be introduced in autumn 2017.

> **Next steps: extend online electoral registration to Northern Ireland**
>
> Online electoral registration has transformed access to elections and referendums for voters in Great Britain, and we want the Chief Electoral Officer to make progress to extend online registration to Northern Ireland as quickly as possible.

Duplicate electoral registration applications

1.27 The online registration system currently allows people to submit an application to register even if they are already registered to vote. There is no direct link between the online registration service and the electoral registers, which are each held separately on local databases using a range of different management software systems. This means that the different systems cannot currently communicate directly with each other and it is therefore not possible to automatically detect and prevent these duplicate applications.

1.28 After the June 2016 EU referendum, we highlighted data which showed that 38% of applications made during the campaign were duplicates. The relative ease of submitting an application to register to vote using the online service, in comparison to the difficulty of contacting a local authority electoral services team by telephone or email to check if they were already registered, meant that many people simply submitted another application.

1.29 We worked with the UK Government, Association of Electoral Administrators and Scottish Assessors Association ahead of the May polls and the June general election to update messaging across our websites and the GOV.UK register to vote site to explain that voters did not need to apply again if they were already registered to vote. Our website explained that where voters had received a poll card for or voted in the local elections on Thursday 4 May, they did not need to apply again for the UK general election. The Cabinet Office also added a new page to the start of the online registration process to alert users to this message before they could continue to submit an application.

1.30 Despite this, initial estimates by EROs of the proportion of duplicate applications received ahead of the 2017 general election have ranged from 30% of the total submitted in some areas to 70% in others. We are currently collecting data from EROs on duplicate applications which should provide a more precise figure for the period ahead of the general election. Even without that detailed data, the difference between the number of applications submitted between 1 December 2016 and 22 May 2017 (approximately 4.9 million) and the net change in the number of electors on the registers in that

period (approximately 1.4 million register entries added) suggests that a significant proportion of applications are likely to have been duplicates. EROs also reported that some applications were from voters wishing to change their voting preferences for the election – for example, from a polling station vote to a proxy or postal vote.

1.31 EROs have again highlighted the significant administrative impact of processing duplicate applications ahead of the general election. Each individual application must be carefully checked to confirm whether or not they are a duplicate, although some electoral management systems used by EROs can help manage this workflow more efficiently.

1.32 EROs and their local authority electoral services teams have also highlighted concerns that the significant increase in work required to process registration applications ahead of the June general election came while many were also running local government elections in May 2017 and then preparing to run the poll for the general election.

1.33 We again received feedback from EROs and directly from electors themselves that it would be more helpful if it were possible for people to use the online registration system to check whether they were already correctly registered to vote before submitting a new application. Similar facilities are already offered to voters in other comparable democracies, including Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland.

1.34 We want to begin quickly to work with the UK Government to consider how existing systems could be improved to address the administrative impact and wasted effort by EROs and their teams which results from duplicate applications. We have previously recommended that an online 'look up' facility should be provided for electors to check whether they are already registered and we are keen to explore options for enhancing the existing online registration service. It may be possible, for example, for the online service to notify applicants if they have recently submitted an online application before they complete a further application to tackle the cause of the problem at source.

Figure 5: Australian Electoral Commission online enrolment check
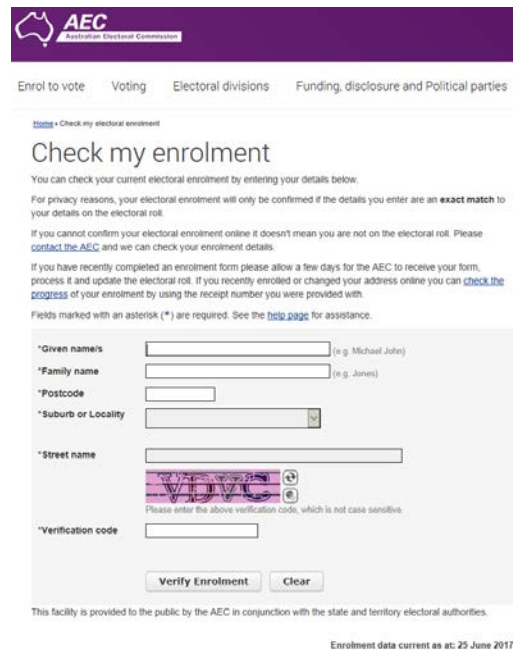
Figure 6: New Zealand Electoral Commission online enrolment check
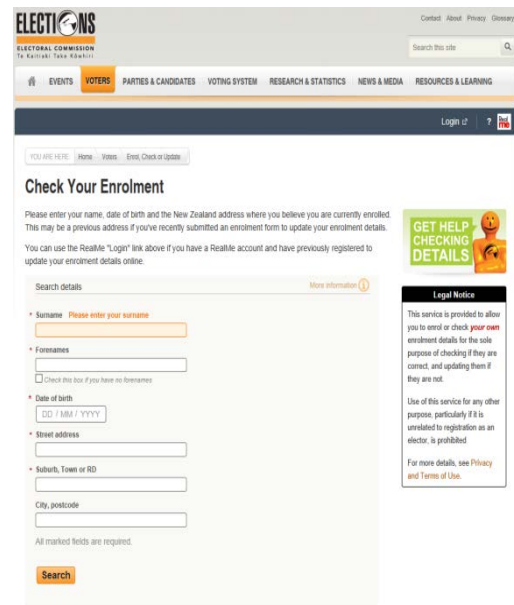
Figure 7: Republic of Ireland online register check

1.35 There are also more immediate steps which the Commission, the UK Government and other government and public agencies can take to help reduce the number of duplicate applications.

1.36 These steps include reviewing public awareness campaign activities and messaging on the government and other websites signposting to the online registration service, and improving the wording on the online registration service to remind applicants that they may not need to apply again. The UK Government should also consider how best to link to absent vote application forms and information provided on the Commission's Your Vote Matters

website, instead of suggesting that the online registration service could be used to apply for a postal or proxy vote.

Next steps: reduce the number and impact of duplicate applications

We want to work with the UK's governments to consider how to incorporate more automatic checks into the online application service to highlight if someone has already submitted an application.

We will work with all of the UK's governments and EROs to review public awareness campaign activities and messaging on the government and other websites signposting to the online registration service, and to improve the wording on the online registration service to remind applicants that they may not need to apply again. These changes should be developed and implemented as quickly as possible so that they are in place in time for registration ahead of elections in May 2018 at the latest.

We will also work with Electoral Management Software (EMS) suppliers, EROs and the UK Government to explore and identify ways to enable quicker duplicate detection and better processing to reduce the administrative burden on EROs and their staff, which should include exploration of the role improved communication between separate registers could play in this.

Registration and voting in more than one area

1.37 In the days following the election, a number of people on social media claimed that they had voted twice at the general election. We received a significant amount of correspondence referring to these posts – at the time of writing, we had received 38 letters from MPs raising constituents' concerns, as well as 1,013 emails and 15 telephone calls from members of the public referring to media reports about these claims. We take these reports very seriously, though there is so far a lack of evidence of widespread abuse.

1.38 In certain circumstances, it is possible for someone to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. In order to do so, the applicant must be resident at each address: residence in the constituency or electoral area is central to the entitlement for any elector to be registered there, and the local ERO must be satisfied that the applicant is resident before determining their application.

1.39 There are several groups of people who may be entitled to be registered to vote in more than one place, including students who live at different addresses during term time; people required to work away from their normal home address and who have a second residence for that purpose; and some people who own and occupy a second home.

1.40 People who are registered at two addresses are entitled to vote in local government elections at each of those addresses, provided they are not in the same local government area. It is, however, a criminal offence for an elector to cast more than one vote on their own behalf in a UK Parliamentary general election or at a referendum. This offence carries a penalty of an unlimited fine in England and Wales, or a fine not exceeding £5,000 in Scotland.

1.41 We have reminded complainants that anyone with evidence that someone may have voted twice should report it to the police force covering either voting area or should contact Crimestoppers, the anonymous crime reporting charity. We have also been providing advice to UK police forces about how to investigate allegations that an individual may have voted twice, including obtaining from the relevant Returning Officers the marked copy of the register. The marked register records those electors who have been issued with and returned a postal ballot pack and those who have been issued with a ballot paper at a polling station.

1.42 The dispersed and unconnected nature of the electoral registers across Great Britain means that it is not currently possible to collectively interrogate registers which are maintained by different EROs in order to identify duplicate entries. Providing a mechanism for EROs to compare information about electoral register entries across all 381 registers would help to further improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers and could help significantly to address the risk of some electors voting more than once at a relevant election.

1.43 Modifying the current framework so that an elector who is lawfully registered in two different electoral areas (and therefore entitled to vote in local elections for the two different local councils) must choose which area they will vote in for UK Parliamentary general elections could also reduce this risk.

> **Next steps: registration and voting in more than one area**
>
> We want to work with the UK Government to explore whether possible solutions to identify duplicate registration applications could also help to reduce the risk of people voting in more than one constituency at a UK Parliamentary general election.
>
> The Government should also consider others options for reducing this risk, such as requiring people who are lawfully registered to vote in local government elections for more than one local authority area to choose which of those addresses they will vote at for UK Parliamentary general elections.

Balancing resources for electoral registration

1.44 Our previous reports on the implementation of IER have highlighted that the introduction of online registration means that people are more likely to apply to register when they are motivated by forthcoming elections, rather than in response to contact from the ERO during the annual canvass period.[4] Our analysis from 2017 shows again that a significant number of people chose to apply to register to vote directly in response to both the May elections and the June general election.

1.45 EROs were required to process significant numbers of electoral registration applications during April and May 2017, which were unexpected and unplanned in terms of both their volume and timing. While Returning Officers for UK Parliamentary elections are funded directly by the UK Government for the costs involved in administering the election, EROs are funded entirely by the local authority which has appointed them. This means that EROs across the UK will have been required to draw on their local annual budgets to deal with the impact of an unplanned national electoral event.

1.46 We want to work with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments and EROs across the UK to review the balance of funding and resources for EROs so that election-specific activity can be appropriately resourced as well as ongoing activities such as the annual canvass of properties. We recognise that there are also ongoing questions about the effectiveness, efficiency and timing of the current annual canvass process, and we are also working with EROs and the Cabinet Office to evaluate pilot schemes to trial different approaches.

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[4] The Electoral Commission, *The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain* (July 2016).

2016 canvass pilots

1.47 During the 2016 canvass, EROs for three local authority areas tested the effectiveness of two different approaches to the household canvass. Every ERO in Great Britain is currently required to conduct a canvass of households each year. The legislation currently requires each household to be sent a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) and EROs must chase for a response to that form (even where no changes are required) employing at least two reminders and one household visit.

1.48 There are significant cost implications from this exercise and much of the time and resource goes towards getting responses from households where there are no changes to the registered electors. These pilots were designed to test the effectiveness of different, less resource intensive approaches to canvassing.

1.49 The processes tested were:

- **Discernment - Using data to determine canvass approach** (Birmingham and South Lakeland): this approach started with a data matching exercise between the electoral register and other locally held data. Electors who could be matched were then canvassed in a more light touch way than those who could not be matched.

- **Using Household Notification Letters (HNLs) in place of HEFs** (Ryedale): HNLs are similar to HEFs in that they list the registered electors at a property but unlike a HEF they do not require a response (and EROs are not legally require to chase for one). In this pilot some households were contacted once by HNL with no follow up reminders. Households could respond to the HNL either online or by phone.
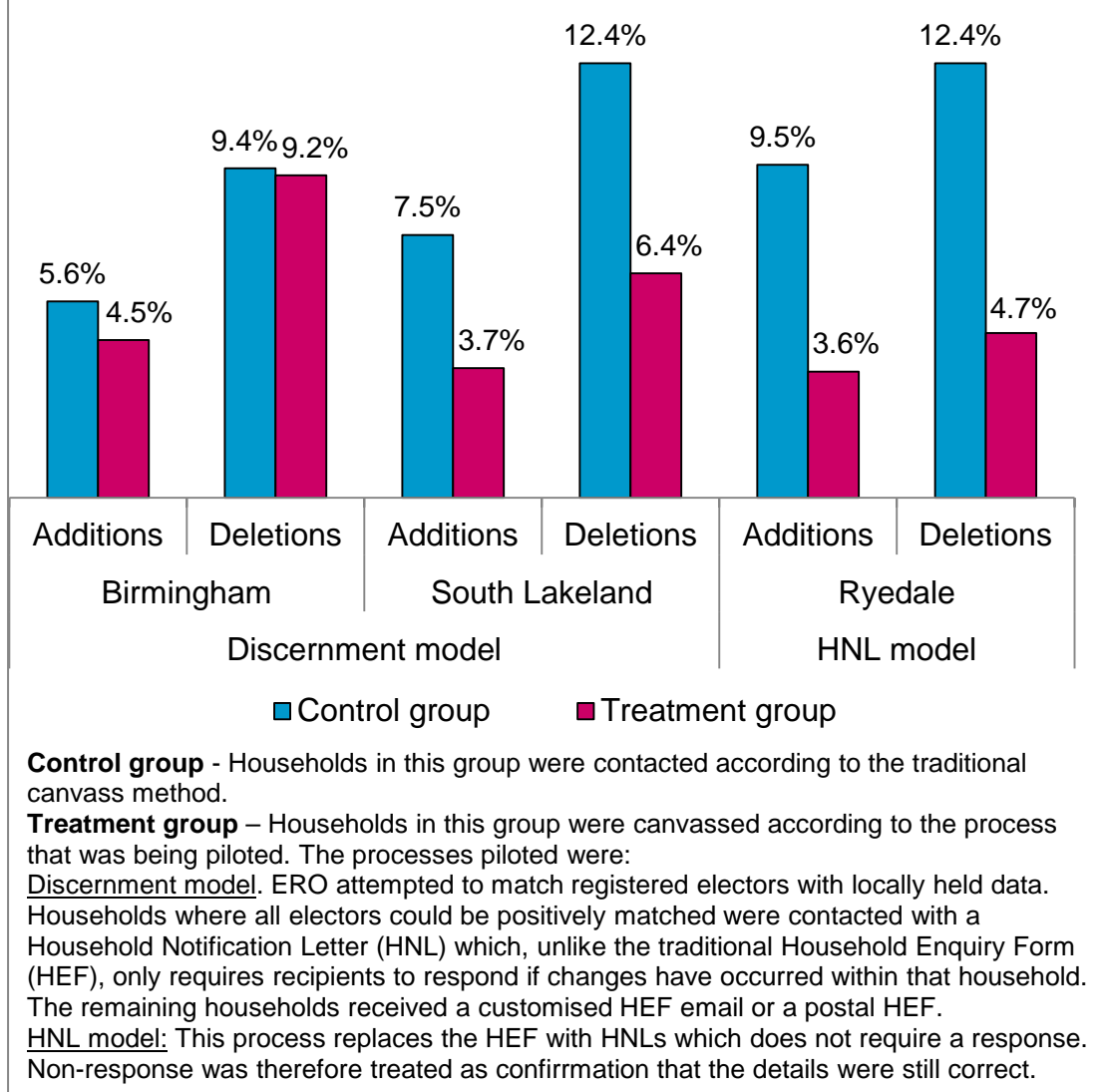
Findings

1.50 Our analysis is limited by the small number of pilot areas in 2016 and by the small size of the control groups used.[5] However, the data we have received suggests that the current, legislated approach to canvassing was more effective than the piloted approaches at capturing population movement and therefore maintaining accurate and complete electoral registers. However, there were variations across the different methods tested.

1.51 As Chart 2 below shows, for South Lakeland and Ryedale there was a substantial difference between the level of new electors added and redundant entries removed from the registers depending on whether the existing or pilot approach to canvassing was used.

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[5] Each pilot area assigned a number of households to a control group. These households were subject to the standard canvass processes while other households, assigned to a treatment group, were subject to the amended process for that pilot.

Chart 2: 2016 canvass pilots results - additions and deletions

	Additions	Deletions	Additions	Deletions	Additions	Deletions
	Birmingham		South Lakeland		Ryedale	
	Discernment model				HNL model	

Control group ■   Treatment group ■

Control group - Households in this group were contacted according to the traditional canvass method.

Treatment group – Households in this group were canvassed according to the process that was being piloted. The processes piloted were:

<u>Discernment model</u>. ERO attempted to match registered electors with locally held data. Households where all electors could be positively matched were contacted with a Household Notification Letter (HNL) which, unlike the traditional Household Enquiry Form (HEF), only requires recipients to respond if changes have occurred within that household. The remaining households received a customised HEF email or a postal HEF.

<u>HNL model:</u> This process replaces the HEF with HNLs which does not require a response. Non-response was therefore treated as confirrmation that the details were still correct.

1.52 The results for Birmingham, which tested the same model as South Lakeland, show a smaller gap in additions between control and treatment group and similar level of deletions. The difference between Birmingham and South Lakeland is likely to be due to the accuracy of the data-matching conducted at the start of the process by the two authorities.

1.53 The planned set of pilots in 2017 should provide a greater range of higher quality information and will therefore allow for a more robust evaluation.

1.54 These limited initial pilot schemes suggest that the tested processes have the potential to generate significant savings compared with the current canvass approach. This is clearly an important and positive factor for the local authorities which are required to fund electoral registration activities.

1.55 However, in any final assessment of changes to the current canvass requirements this cost reduction would need to be weighed against the findings on how well the possible replacement processes would maintain the

registers. For example, over time, lower levels of additions to and deletions from the registers would have a detrimental, cumulative impact on the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers as home movement would not be picked up.

1.56 Any new high profile poll would have the potential to counteract this deterioration by generating interest and therefore applications. However, we note above that managing activity ahead of a major poll is already a challenge and this challenge would arguably be even greater if the registers were less up-to-date at the start of the election period.

1.57 As noted above the data from 2016, covering only three local authorities, does not enable firm conclusions to be drawn either for or against the piloted changes and a further, larger set of pilots will take place during the 2017 canvass. The Commission will also evaluate these pilots and will publish our findings in June 2018.

Next steps: balancing resources for electoral registration

We want to work with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments and EROs across the UK to review the balance of funding and resources for EROs so that election-specific activity can be appropriately resourced as well as ongoing activities such as the annual canvass of properties.

We will continue to evaluate pilot schemes to test new approaches to carrying out annual canvass activities, and will work with EROs and the UK Government to consider the implications of those evaluations for the future of the annual canvass.

Making electoral registration more joined-up

1.58 Introducing IER and an online registration application service has transformed electoral registration in Great Britain during the last three years. The various governments of the UK now need to build on this important success, and continue to modernise electoral registration to make it simpler and more accessible for voters and more efficient for EROs. We want to see early action to develop an ambitious agenda for further modernising electoral registration during the next five years.

1.59 As we have previously highlighted in our series of reports on the implementation of IER in Great Britain, we believe it is time for the UK to evolve the current system, which relies solely on electors taking steps to register themselves, to make electoral registration more joined up with other

public services.[6] That means considering direct or automatic enrolment processes which have the potential to deliver more accurate and complete electoral registers more efficiently than current resource intensive canvass processes.

1.60 The challenges facing EROs are not unique to the UK – a range of new and established democracies around the world have considered responses to rapidly changing demographic and digital communication trends, and have moved in the direction of more direct or automatic enrolment procedures. The UK can learn from other countries about what works, and we need to implement changes which have the potential for significant improvements to the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers.

Integrating electoral registration into other public services

1.61 The popularity of online registration reflects growing public expectations about the availability of online channels for completing transactions, including government services. The availability of online channels to access an increasingly wide range of public services presents opportunities to make electoral registration even simpler for the public and more efficient for EROs.

1.62 Some EROs have already worked with local higher education providers to integrate electoral registration applications into student enrolment processes. It was a positive step forward that during the passage through Parliament of the Higher Education and Research Act earlier this year, the UK Government was able to include powers which will enable the new Office for Students (OfS) to require registered providers in England to work with EROs to improve electoral registration for students. We will work with governments and the OfS to ensure that EROs and higher education institutions have effective guidance to help them improve registration by students.

1.63 We were also pleased to have been able to work with the UK Government ahead of the 2017 general election to ensure that a wide range of government and public service websites included signposting to the online registration service. On the main GOV.UK site these included transport and driver licencing pages; passport, visa and consular service pages; and benefits and tax credits pages.

1.64 Other countries have implemented procedures to enable simultaneous voter registration application alongside accessing other public services. The most well-known example is the USA's National Voter Registration Act 1993 (commonly known as the "Motor Voter Act") requiring each US state to offer registration at public service agencies such as motor vehicles departments.

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[6] http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/197516/IER-Assessment-December-2015-registers.pdf

Other democracies offer similar opportunities, including in Canada where citizens can apply to be registered when they submit their annual tax return.

> **Next steps: integrating electoral registration into other public services**
>
> We want to work with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments and EROs across the UK to explore options to enable people to make an application to register to vote when using other online public services including, for example, as part of their driving licence or passport application or tax return submission.

Better use of public data

1.65 EROs can currently access data held locally by local authorities and others to help identify potential electors and manage their electoral registers, and we have made guidance available about how to identify appropriate data sources and how to manage and use that data. We will also shortly be issuing a good practice resource which uses examples of how EROs have used data to improve the accuracy and completeness of the registers in their local area.

1.66 We want to see further steps taken by all of the UK's governments to explore the potential benefits for voters and EROs of enabling access to non-local public data. This could be particularly useful in helping to identify people who have changed address and updated their details with other public services, for example when they have applied for a driving licence or passport. The experience of confirmation matching during the transition to IER in Great Britain also highlights the potential to simplify the process by which electors' identities are verified before being added to the register.

1.67 Earlier this year the Digital Economy Act received Royal Assent following approval by the UK Parliament. The Act includes provisions which are intended to make it easier for public bodies to share data they hold in order to improve the delivery of public services to citizens. We will explore further with the Cabinet Office Modernising Electoral Registration Programme what opportunities there are for using these provisions to improve the compilation and maintenance of electoral registers, in particular using appropriately reliable data so that EROs can better identify people who are not accurately registered.

> **Next steps: better use of public data**
>
> We want to work with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments and EROs across the UK to improve opportunities for EROs' access to data from other public service providers – particularly where that data is held by national rather than local providers – to enable them to target their activity at new electors or those who have recently moved.

Direct or automatic registration

1.68 Several countries have already implemented forms of direct or automatic electoral registration to help meet challenges similar to those now facing EROs in Great Britain, including Australia, Canada and various US states. These systems enable those with responsibility for maintaining the electoral register to register electors automatically using reliable and trusted information from other public sources, or to update their details when they move without the elector having to "re-register" at their new address.

1.69 In Australia, legislation allows the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to directly enrol citizens or update their details on the electoral roll based on information received from other government agencies, including the federal social security and national driver license agencies. The AEC writes to prospective electors to inform them that they intend to add their name to the roll or update their details, while also giving the elector an opportunity to change their details if necessary. Data published by the AEC shows that during the six months between December 2016 and May 2017, just under 55% of all new, re-enrolments and updated enrolments were received via their Federal Direct Enrolment and Update programme.[7]

1.70 A recent analysis of automatic voter registration (AVR) in the US state of Oregon also highlighted a range of benefits for voters and electoral administrators:

> AVR strengthens democracy by expanding and broadening the electorate. AVR's streamlined systems can save states and localities significant costs, make the voter registration lists more accurate and up to date, and increase the security of the voting system. AVR is the next logical step in creating an efficient, secure, and modern voter registration system for the 21st century.[8]
>
> **Center for American Progress, 2017**

1.71 We recognise that introducing more direct or automatic registration processes would be a significant change to electoral registration policy for the UK, and also that there may be concerns about the implications of moving away from requiring individual citizens to take direct personal responsibility for their own electoral registration. Nonetheless, we believe it is important to continue to explore the implications, possible benefits and costs of more fundamental changes to the UK's electoral registration framework as well as the more immediate and incremental improvements identified above.

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[7] http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/type/
[8] Center for American Progress (June 2017) Who Votes With Automatic Voter Registration? Impact Analysis of Oregon's First-in-the-Nation Program

Next steps: exploring implications of direct or automatic registration

We want to work with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments and EROs across the UK to explore how a more integrated approach to electoral registration could feature greater use of direct registration by EROs, or more automatic enrolment processes (for example, direct enrolment of young people alongside issuing their national insurance number).