Northern Ireland electoral registration canvass autumn 2013

2 July 2013

The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland will be conducting a full canvass of electors across Northern Ireland this autumn. This briefing paper provides some background information about the canvass and outlines what steps the Electoral Commission will be taking to raise public awareness of it. We will monitor the effectiveness of the canvass and report on our conclusions in early 2014.

Our report on continuous electoral registration

In November 2012 we published our report on Continuous electoral registration in Northern Ireland. It found that there has been a significant decline in both the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland since our last assessment in 2008. In April 2012 the parliamentary register was 73% complete and the local government register 71%. The accuracy of both was 78%.

In our report we therefore recommended that before the 2014 elections:

- Household registration activity should be conducted by the Chief Electoral Officer, involving all necessary steps to identify who is entitled to be registered in respect of a property, to improve the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers
- There should be public awareness activity to support the household registration activity.

Following the publication of our report, the Chief Electoral Officer recommended to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that a full canvass of electors should take place. As a result, the UK Government has now provided the Chief Electoral Officer

1 By completeness we mean that ‘every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered’. By accuracy we mean ‘that there are no false entries on the electoral registers’. Similar research conducted in 2008 found the registers to be 83% complete and 94% accurate.
with the resources to conduct a canvass and we have secured funding to support this by conducting a public awareness campaign.

The canvass

The Chief Electoral Officer has advised us that there will be three phases of the canvass.

**Phase one:** Approximately 1,350 canvassers will call at households across Northern Ireland from 24 August – 21 September and hand-deliver registration packs which will include registration forms pre-populated with the intended recipient’s name and address, where known. A canvasser will knock on the door and either hand over the pack or post it through the letterbox. Registration forms should be returned no later than 27 September.

**Phase two:** canvassers will re-visit households where no returns have been made from 5-19 October and encourage people to complete electoral registration forms. If no one answers, a new pack will be placed through the letterbox. These forms should be returned by 23 October.

**Phase three:** on 5 November, there will be one final Royal Mail mailshot to those who have not responded. These forms must be returned by 18 November. The Chief Electoral Officer will also utilise data matching during this phase to help him ensure he has a complete and accurate register. The new register will then be published on 2 December 2013.

Informing the public

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the autumn canvass and help increase the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register we will run a public awareness campaign across Northern Ireland.

The specific objectives of the campaign will be to:

- encourage people to accurately complete and return their canvass form with their personal identifiers
- ensure all electors know how to return their canvass form and by when
- ensure all electors know where to go to find out more information if they need it

Our public awareness campaign will be structured to complement the phases of the canvass as follows:

**Phase one:** Two-week campaign ahead of and during the first canvass phase from 23 August-6 September, with follow up activity towards the end of the canvass to maintain awareness levels across the full five-week canvass period. This phase will encourage people to complete and return their canvass form by 27 September.
Phase two: follow-up campaign telling people who have not returned their canvass form that it’s not too late to do so and encouraging them to complete and return the form by 23 October.

Phase three: we will not be running any activity during this phase as the number of people that need to respond at this stage should be reduced significantly.

In order to reach the maximum number of people in an efficient manner, we envisage using TV, Radio, Press, Online and outdoor advertising. We will also be producing an information leaflet that will delivered by canvassers with the registration form.

Key performance measures (KPMs) will be developed to assess how well the campaign has met its objectives. These will be used to measure the increase in awareness of the canvass and specific campaign messages, as well as reported levels of response to the campaign. As with all our other campaigns we will carry out quantitative research with the public to assess delivery against our KPMs and to feed into the planning of future campaigns.

We will continue to work closely with the Chief Electoral Officer to make sure there is coordinated activity to maximise registration. This will include the use of a single helpline administered by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (0800 4320 712) and through our voter facing website www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

Monitoring and reporting

In our November 2012 report we gave a commitment to monitoring the processes used to manage the electoral register in Northern Ireland, as well as to conducting future research into the accuracy and completeness of the register.

As part of this process we have requested data from the Chief Electoral Officer to assist us in measuring the success of the autumn canvass. This will include information on the number of households visited by canvassers, the number of canvass forms returned, the number of new registrations, the age profile of those who register, the use of data matching and the overall cost of the canvass including cost per registration. We will produce a report in early 2014 on the overall effectiveness of the canvass. If we identify any issues that arise during the canvass we will also work with the Chief Electoral Officer to resolve them.

For further information

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