



Report to Cabinet

Subject Individual Electoral Registration

Date 1 September 2011

Author Head of Strategy and Performance

1. Purpose of the Report

- § To outline issues raised in the government's proposals for Individual Electoral Registration.
- § To draw members' attention to consultation on the issue.

2. Background

Current arrangements for electoral registration are based substantially on an annual household canvass, carried out in Autumn each year. This largely paper based system, substantially unchanged since the early 20th century, involves sending a form to all households (one form per household), either for return by post (necessary if there are any changes) or for confirmation by phone, email or text.

Since 2001, this has been supplemented by an element of rolling registration, whereby residents can apply to be put on the register at any time (though this is in effect suspended during the annual canvass process between August and December each year). In 2006, this was further amended, allowing electors to register up to 11 days before an election (previously this would have been between 6 and 8 weeks prior to an election).

The previous government had indicated an intention to change this process¹, and to move towards a system of individual registration, through which voters would register on an individual, rather than household basis.

The Coalition Government is now planning to accelerate that process, removing the voluntary phase the previous government had proposed and bringing forward full implementation to 2014 in time for the next General Election in 2015.

¹ Political Parties and Elections Act 2009

Full details, including a link to the White Paper, are available at

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/new-voter-registration-steps-set-out>

Comments are being sought by 14 October 2011.

In putting forward its proposals, the Government argues that the current system is potentially open to electoral fraud (though acknowledges there are few examples of this) and that there is a need to improve electoral registration rates (while conceding that current rates of registration, at over 90%, are comparable with other similar developed countries).

3. Proposal

A system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) has been in place in Northern Ireland since 2002. The system proposed for Great Britain now draws substantially on that experience, albeit with some important differences.

Key features of the new system for Great Britain proposed now include: -

- Individual registration, rather than by household, through individual applications – these will form the base of the Electoral Register
- Use of Date of Birth (DoB) and National Insurance Number (NINO) as personal identifiers, with linked Data Matching with other agencies such as DWP – but these will only be saved for a maximum of six months
- Strong emphasis on proportionate use of personal data
- On-line and telephone applications to be available, as well as in writing – though address verification will still be in writing, most likely by post
- Encouragement to gather with other data where legally permissible
- A continued annual household canvass required, at least in 2014 and 2015, but this will be a means of updating and checking the electoral register derived from individual registration, not for compiling the register.²
- Registration will be ongoing, and will not need to be renewed annually – electors will remain on the register on a continuous basis, unless they notify the Electoral Registration Officer that their circumstances have changed, or unless the annual canvass suggests they have moved house.

4. Resource Implications

The new system looks likely to be significantly more resource intensive than the current one, at least in the short and medium term.

² Provision is made in the legislation to amend the frequency or abolish the annual canvass, but government indicates that there are no plans at present to change the canvass arrangements. In Northern Ireland, the register is updated by Data Matching, individual registration and a canvass every ten years.

A move to individual registration of itself increases the potential number of transactions from around 50,000 (households) to 87,000 (electors). Though some of these may be through more efficient electronic means, there is still a requirement for individual transactions to be verified and an as yet unquantifiable increase in work will be generated by the data matching requirements.

Moreover, this additional work is not offset by a corresponding reduction in work from current arrangements, as the canvass will continue to be required, at least for the foreseeable future.

It is not clear at present whether these additional demands will be reflected in increased government grant.

5. Recommendation

Cabinet is **recommended** to: -

- Delegate responsibility to consider and if appropriate respond to the consultation to the Head of Strategy and Performance, in consultation with the Leader of the Council.