

## **Report to Cabinet**

**Subject:** Individual Electoral Registration

**Date:** 6 June 2013

**Author:** Service Manager Elections and Members' Services

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### **Wards Affected**

Borough-wide

### **Purpose**

To brief Cabinet Members on the upcoming changes to Electoral Registration that will be introduced by 2015.

### **Key Decision**

This is not a Key Decision

### **Background**

- 1.1 Individual Electoral Registration (IER) will require electors to register individually and end reliance on registration through heads of household. Local authorities will play a crucial role in the introduction of IER in part through the responsibilities of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) in leading the changes in administration, in part through the corporate effort involved in promoting understanding of the changes and supporting and encouraging individuals to register, perhaps for the first time. The information on this report is largely drawn from a briefing provided by the Local Government Information Unit.
- 1.2 Under the new system:
  - Electors will register individually rather than through heads of household.
  - An individual must provide personal information including name, address, and date of birth and National Insurance Number to verify their application.
  - An individual unable to provide their date of birth or National Insurance Number will be required to explain why they cannot do so, and to provide alternative evidence. At present this may take the form of a passport or ID, or attestation from a person of 'good standing'. Other options may be adopted in the future.
  - Once registered, individuals need only confirm annually that their details have not changed.

- The annual household canvass will continue to check the register is complete. Individuals disclosed in the canvass will then be required to register themselves.
- An individual who has been required to register and fails to do so will receive a second and third notice before a penalty arises. A personal visit must be made before the issue of a third notice; at the discretion of the ERO this can now be a first step to encourage a response before further written notices are issued.
- There will be a civil penalty – comparable in amount to a parking fine - for a failure to register (with stringent requirements in place before a penalty can be issued). The fine will be waived by registration. The criminal penalty for failing to return the household canvass remains.
- Data matching will be used to verify applications and during the transition phase will be used to confirm existing entries in registers. The primary data base will be that of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) but local databases may be used too.
- Anyone who is currently registered to vote by post or proxy and whose registration has not been confirmed through data-matching will be informed. Their names will remain on the electoral roll for the 2015 General Election, but they will lose their postal or proxy vote unless they make an individual application to register.
- A modernised electoral registration system based on IT is being introduced, making it easier for people to register to vote, and opening up the way for digital applications, principally by using local authority websites.

### Implementation and Transitional Arrangements

- 1.3 A great deal of work has taken place to date to prepare for the changes and the Council has worked very closely with the Cabinet Office. The key milestones ahead are briefly explained in Appendix 1.
- 1.4 Over summer 2013, every local authority will be required to participate in a fully IT-based Confirmation Dry Run, to obtain an indicative match for their area. The 2013 annual canvass has been postponed to allow this to take place: the next register will be published on 17 February 2014 in England and 10 March 2014 in Scotland and Wales.

The dry run will see entire electoral registers sent through the secure IER Digital Service and processed as in the full confirmation dry run. The results will not affect people's entries on the register, but will allow EROs to plan for the 2014 confirmation data-match. In preparation for this dry run, local authorities will be able to establish their secure connections to the IER Digital Service under the new regulations. The necessary software upgrades and testing of equipment on the Gedling network have all proved successful.

On an overall assessment, pilot studies have shown that an experiment comparing pre- and post-canvass electoral records with the DWP database produces 70% match rates, a figure which the researchers were confident was accurate – 95% of

that 70% were confirmed as accurate. However, the studies disclosed significant variation between different areas, an outcome which has an impact on estimates of the level of resources required by different EROs and has implications for public information campaigns, as well as involving an assessment of what other measures are needed to compile the new register.

Data-matching is based on identifying named individuals by address, and certain groups – such as those in the private rented sector, those in areas with a higher population turnover, and students – are less likely to be confirmed in this way. In addition, a significant minority are NOT confirmed by data-matching, and yet are subsequently identified as resident at the address in the canvass. In terms of the population of Gedling it is anticipated that the match rate should be towards the higher end of the estimates due to the relatively stable population in the Borough. Gedling does not have a significant student population which again should increase the chances of a high match rate

These variations present a challenge for individual EROs in establishing a full and accurate register. This situation is now acknowledged by government, which should be reflected in allocation of additional resources. In practical terms, comparison with the council's own council tax and housing benefit databases has been shown to add 7-15% to match-rates (at least in the five authorities in the study who used this method). It will be up to local EROs to decide how far to use local databases, and some guidance on the decision is likely.

In summary, the dry run of electoral registers against the DWP database will allow each authority to identify the particular issues it faces in creating a full and accurate local register, and be used to determine funding allocations. The Electoral Commission will conduct an independent evaluation of the exercise. Support and guidance on interpreting matches is being prepared, based on experience of the pilots, which should enable EROs to be confident in their results and help them determine which entries can be transferred directly onto the IER register

### Public Information

1.5 IER represents a very significant change to how citizens register to vote so communication both nationally and locally is vital to its success. Responsibilities for public information rest with the Electoral Commission and EROs. The main elements of publicity identified in the implementation plan are:

- Local publicity plans from June 2013
- Coordinated national and local publicity explaining what people need to do to remain registered in 2014
- Further registration activity in run-up to the 2015 General Election
- In autumn 2015, further publicity to ensure that all those who have not moved over to the new system do so by the December deadline.

Recent research suggests that simple provision of information will not be sufficient to ensure maximum registration. A number of factors which currently discourage registration are likely to be carried forward into the new system of IER, and IER itself raises issues for many currently non-registered people about data and the use of personal information. As a result,

- The public information campaigns will have to demonstrate that these concerns are being addressed - perhaps by being transparent about the security of online registration
- Messages that explain the requirement to register and the process involved may include highlighting the rationale for registration and associated benefits
- Positive statements can be encouraging too, highlighting the social benefits of being able to vote, and personal value of an improved credit rating.
- Tailored support needs to be directed towards vulnerable groups if registration is to be successful: the involvement of community intermediaries will also make a difference.

### Maximising registration

- 1.6 The basis of the IER register will be data-matching, but the need to adopt targeted activities to maximise registration of those individuals whose place on the register cannot be confirmed is quite clear. It will be crucial to use time and available resources to find and encourage registration by those not currently registered to vote.

Government plans to support maximisation of registration include:

- Publication of research which looks at the barriers and levers to registration among under-registered groups.
- Pilots of data-matching exercises up to April 2013, in which electoral registers in 20 areas are matched against a number of public databases, for publication in July 2013. The names of potentially new electors are being given to EROs so that the individuals can be invited to register. Targets are students, home-movers, and 'attainers', i.e. those about to reach voting age.
- In a separate study the Cabinet Office has been piloting different approaches to encourage registration among attainers, students, and BME communities. Events have been held at schools and universities (in partnership with Bite the Ballot) and in Birmingham and Hackney (in partnership with Operation Black Vote). The experience of these initiatives will be used to scale up these activities, which according to Cabinet Office plans will draw in a wider range of partners in the private, voluntary and community sectors.

### Under-registration

- 1.7 Research commissioned so far by the Cabinet Office on under-registered groups and individual electoral registration has explored barriers to current and IER registration amongst under-registered groups. In addition to indicating public awareness of the changes is currently very low, it also examined attitudes to IER, and what can be done to overcome potential barriers and resistance to registering to vote.

Contrary to many assumptions, the researchers found that the likelihood of individuals registering to vote is driven by attitudes rather than demographic characteristics, and that motivation to register (and to vote) and awareness

and understanding of the registration process are the key factors.

### Work at Gedling

- 1.8 The upgrade to software and equipment has already taken place well ahead of the Cabinet Office schedule. Training for electoral registration staff has started and will continue for the foreseeable future in order to build and strengthen capacity to cope with the increased workload.

A working group comprised of Election Staff, IT staff, Communications Staff and staff from benefits had been established and will meet soon to take stock of the preparations made to date. It is hoped that staff from benefits will be able to share expertise in the use of data matching which is routine part of assessing benefit claims. The group will be chaired by the Corporate Director and the Chief Executive (in his capacity as ERO) will be kept fully informed.

Funding from central government has been provided to assist election departments in their preparations for the changes. Further funding has been allocated by the government for future years so that Local Authorities do not have to bear the financial cost of the changes. In the backdrop of the poor outlook for local government finance generally this news is particularly welcome.

Once more is known, and after the Electoral Commission produce guidance for local authorities, it is planned to hold a briefing for all elected members. Their role in promoting and publicising IER amongst the Gedling community will be very important in ensuring its success.

### **Proposal**

2. The report does not contain a direct proposal for Cabinet. It is tabled to raise awareness of IER.

### **Alternative Options**

3. There are none. Primary legislation has already been approved to introduce IER. Gedling Borough Council must take action to implement the new system.

### **Financial Implications**

4. The Cabinet Office has maintained the position that all costs involved in establishing the new system will be fully met from government grants. Beyond the implementation phase it is not known how future budgets will be affected. Funding of £6866.52 was received in April, funding of £2918.24 is due to support implementation and funding of £3948.28 around the time of the confirmation dry run. The amounts referred to above that have not been paid are described as "indicative amounts". It is not clear whether further funding will be available after 2014. The Cabinet Office has told authorities that spending for IER beyond 2015 "falls into the next spending review period." They do, however assure us that "the Government is committed to ensuring that local authorities are not left with unfunded burdens."

## **Appendices**

5. Appendix 1 – Summary and key dates

## **Background Papers**

6. None

## **Recommendations**

**THAT Cabinet notes the content of the report.**

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

7. To ensure that communication on the changes to voter registration are publicised as widely as possible.

## Appendix 1

SUMMARY TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS 2013-2016	
2013	<p>Planning and implementation from January onwards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report on data-matching pilots (March)</li> <li>• government guidance indicated for April - delayed, or replaced by</li> <li>• Electoral Commission guidance for EROs (expect after draft regulations finalised)</li> <li>• Final regulations laid before parliament before summer recess</li> <li>• Report on pilot studies of under-registration</li> </ul> <p>Local authorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take part in dry run of data-matching electoral rolls with DWP database through the IER Digital Service. (Gedling's dry run is scheduled for 30 July 2013)</li> <li>• Local publicity plans in place from June</li> </ul>
2014	Preparation for provision and roll out of the new registration service. In Spring, final old style canvass (deferred from December 2013) prior to June European elections. Expect local elections to be moved to June as previously.
July-Dec 2014	Following European elections, transitional phase begins with the confirmation of existing electors through data matching against information held by DWP, and letters sent to those not confirmed by data-matching inviting applications for registration.
Dec 2014	New register comprises all electors confirmed by data matching, all those who have made successful individual applications, and those on spring 2014 register who have not yet reapplied and are carried forward.
To March 2015	Completion of the transition, with targeted activity prior to March inviting further missing electors and encouraging applications. May General Election.
Autumn 2015	Full household canvass. Every household confirms who lives there, anyone new invited to register individually. Re-canvass of electors carried forward from March 2014 canvass who were not confirmed by data-matching and have not self-registered – names removed from register in December 2015 of those who do not then re-apply. Possibility of final canvass being extended to Autumn 2016 should insufficient progress have been made at this point.
2016	New system in place – all new electors and those moving home will be required to register individually. There will be an annual household canvass to ensure the register is up to date.

