



## Report to Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee 28<sup>th</sup> Jan 2015

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**Report of:** Director of Policy Performance and Communications

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**Subject:** Update on the Transition to Individual Electoral Registration

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### Summary:

The Government has made major changes to the way in which people are registered to vote, introducing a new system called Individual Electoral Registration (IER).

This report updates the Committee on progress in implementing IER, and outlines actions and proposals to ensure that we maximise registration across the city.

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**Type of item:** The report author should tick the appropriate box

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	<b>x</b>
Statutory consultation	
Community Assembly request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	<b>x</b>
Other	

### The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:

- Note the progress made to date in relation to the implementation of individual Electoral Registration
  - Comment on the actions and proposals outlined in this paper
  - Provide suggestions on how we can maximise voter registration and support members in registration activity.
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# **Report of the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications**

## **Update on the Transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER)**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Government has made major changes to the way in which people are registered to vote, introducing a new system called Individual Electoral Registration. The rationale behind introducing IER is to introduce safeguards against fraudulent registration and give individuals control over their own registration.

Previously the majority of people registered to vote on a household form which one person in the household completed. Now everyone will have to register themselves individually. Online registration has also been introduced.

We are taking action to ensure that in the transition to IER, electors are not lost from the register, and that we increase registration of 'Under-Registered' groups.

This report outlines progress to date.

### **2. What is IER?**

- 2.1 From 10 June 2014 the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) has been required to begin the transition from the current rolling and household registration system to IER.

From that date new applicants to be added to the electoral register have been asked to provide their date of birth and National Insurance number. This is then verified against Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) records. If people are unable to provide the information, or it does not match DWP records, the ERO can use other trusted data sources or request additional evidence to verify an individual's identity.

- 2.2 For the first time, electors have a choice in how they register. They can either provide all the relevant information in writing, or complete an application on line at [www.gov.uk/register-to-vote](http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote). The majority of applications will be matched against DWP records, and so for the elector the process of being added to the register is quick and easy.

However under the previous system of household registration, for the majority of people, electoral registration was completed by someone else on their behalf and they may not realise they are now responsible for their own registration.

2.3 IER has significantly increased the resources required to maintain the electoral register. As well as entering into transactions with 400K individuals as opposed to 242K households there are more stages required in both adding and deleting electors from the register. The legislation still requires EROs to correspond with electors by physical mail at key stages during an application. For the majority of new electors the ERO will have sent at least two letters to the applicant. Online registration is the most cost effective way for someone to be added to the register, but requires the same amount of process time as adding someone to the register prior to IER. Paper applications take more resources because:

- there is more information to enter
- security of the forms has be higher than previously because of more sensitive information
- Additional processes to verify an elector (checking against DWP records, requesting and checking other evidence if DWP does not verify elector)
- Additional correspondence (confirmation of receipt of application as well as confirmation of registration).

Electoral Services are investigating and introducing a number of different initiatives to ensure the processes in place are as cost effective as possible, eg student registration, hybrid mail (to reduce the costs of printing and sending letters), to enable as much resource as possible to be available for maximising registration.

### **3 The Transition to IER**

Electors already registered, or whose application was received by 10 June 2014, were subject to a confirmation exercise. The name and addresses on the register were checked against DWP records. Those electors who matched with DWP records were passported on to the IER register.

Those that didn't match were subject to local data matching against Council Tax and Sheffield Housing records. Any that couldn't be matched were sent an Invitation to Register (ITR). 314000 electors

matched with DWP records (77.89% of those registered). This was increased to 336000 (83.40%) by local data matching.

In August confirmation letters were sent to those electors who had matched (either with DWP records or through local matching), with ITRs sent to the remaining electors, and household enquiry forms sent to empty properties.

The Police and Crime Commissioner by-election in October interrupted scheduled work on the register. Notwithstanding this, the revised register was still published in December, and will be continually updated between then and the General Election in May. Work to ensure as many people as possible are registered was resumed as soon as the PCC by-election was over. Registration work will continue in the run up to May, including door to door visits where required.

When the register was published in December it contained 394,518 electors. That represents a 1.2% reduction from February 2014,, which is a significantly lower reduction than some other cities. However work is ongoing to ensure that the register is as complete and as accurate as possible. As we would actually expect an increase in electorate since the last register, the real shortfall is likely to be closer to 2%. The table below lists the electorate when the revised register was published for the last 5 years.

<b><i>Date Published</i></b>	<b><i>Electorate</i></b>	<b><i>Notes</i></b>
<b>1 December 2010</b>	392,407	
<b>1 December 2011</b>	397,809	
<b>16 October 2012</b>	403,324	Because of the Police & Crime Commissioner elections on 15/11/12 electors who had not returned a registration form for 2 years were not deleted, as would normally be the case.
<b>17 February 2014</b>	399,207	
<b>10 December 2015</b>	395,518	

Over the last few years, we have aimed to increase the response rate to the annual canvass; in 2014 it was 94%. This year there has not been a

traditional canvass and so it is difficult to assess the completeness of the register. However, the household mail-out due to take place in February will provide the opportunity for any omissions to be rectified. More details of the mail-out can be found in section 4.2.1 of this paper.

During December, 3500 electors were added to the register and it is estimated that the same number will have been added by the end of January.

Existing electors who haven't been passported on to the IER register or completed an IER application were carried forward on to the electoral register published in December 2014 and will be able to vote in the May elections. However, they are not allowed to have a postal or proxy vote without first completing an IER application to register. There are currently 35,000 electors who fall into this category in Sheffield. For those who do require a postal or proxy vote and apply before the registration deadline of 20 April 2015 there should be no problem in ensuring their IER registration is submitted and verified in time. However, after this point, they will only be able to vote in person at a polling station.

### **3.1 Funding the transition to IER**

The government has provided funding towards the additional costs of Individual Electoral Registration in accordance with the new burdens doctrine.

Sheffield's transitional funding for 2014/15 is £304,544, plus additional grants of £98,497 to maximise registration. The monies were needed to cover extra print, postage and staffing costs and to fund activities to mitigate against any negative effect on registration levels. Temporary staff have been used to support the additional processing work, whilst the service gains a better understanding of the longer term resources IER will require. Electoral Services are now, with the benefit of 6 months IER experience, assessing staffing requirements to ensure a robust service for the future.

The government has announced that further transitional funding will be available in 2015/16 although the amount is currently unknown. For 2015/16 and beyond, it is anticipated that the costs of electoral registration will increase, although it is difficult to project these additional costs with any certainty until activity during the transition phase is fully evaluated, including the take up of registration on line. The Government has made no guarantees that these ongoing costs will be funded.

## **4 Maximising Registration**

The ERO has a duty to maintain a register of electors, and to encourage electoral registration. The Electoral Commission monitors the performance of EROs, currently Sheffield is either at or above all the standards and has been improving every year since monitoring started. In addition best practice is regularly shared at meetings both of Yorkshire and Humberside Authorities and those in the Core Cities group.

As well as these legal responsibilities Sheffield City Council is committed to promoting democracy and ensuring that anyone who is eligible and wants to vote is able to do so.

Parliamentary constituency and ward boundaries are based upon elector numbers, and therefore in any future boundary review, an unrepresentative register will lead to unrepresentative constituencies and wards.

### **4.1 Groups and areas of under registration**

We know from Cabinet Office research that nationally certain groups are more likely to be unregistered now, and/or less likely to be confirmed in the transfer to IER –

- Social renters - 78% registered
- Students - 78% registered
- BME groups - 77% registered
- Irish and Commonwealth nationals - 68% registered
- Private renters - 56% registered
- Young people 19-24 - 56% registered
- Young people 17-18 - 55% registered

Sheffield being a vibrant and diverse city has significant numbers of all the above categories.

The table below lists the 5 wards that had the lowest match rate with the DWP records during the confirmation stage. Although there is not a direct correlation between the accuracy of the register and the amount of

people confirmed, it is an indicator of which parts of the city are most likely to suffer from under-registration.

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Constituency</b>	<b>% Confirmed</b>	<b>ITR sent</b>	<b>% return of ITR</b>
<b>Broomhill</b>	Central	43.50	7341	27.49
<b>Central</b>	Central	46.33	10458	64.92
<b>Fulwood</b>	Hallam	65.46	4920	87.32
<b>Crookes</b>	Hallam	74.11	3596	34.09
<b>Walkley</b>	Central	78.78	3057	52.99

## **4.2 Action taken to maximise registration**

### **4.2.1 Partnership working**

Sheffield has gained national acclaim for its student registration work in partnership with Sheffield University, in enabling students to register to vote at the same time as registering for their course online. 12,000 students at Sheffield University (60% of those who are eligible) applied to be added to the electoral register this way, and means that under-registration of students will be less acute than in other cities. This system will be available to Sheffield Hallam students in 2015, and is being adopted by other authorities.

We will provide voluntary, community and faith groups with information and promotional materials to promote voter registration through their networks and communication channels.

We are developing a 'toolkit' to support partner organisations, community groups, volunteers etc. who are interested in undertaking registration activity.

We will be contacting residential care homes to work with them to put in place systems to ensure that residents are registered.

### 4.2.2 Integration

We are working with customer facing services across the Council, particularly those who have contact with under registered groups (eg Housing, Public Health), to incorporate registration activity as part of their everyday contact with customers and service users.

This may be through promoting and encouraging voter registration, or registering people using the online system. If this is successful we will look to expand it to other areas of council activity.

Voter registration has been integrated into the Equality and Fairness Grants regime for 2015/16. Voluntary and Community Groups and organisations are able to bid for funding to carry out activity that will increase the number of registered voters from under-represented groups.

### 4.2.3 Traditional Canvass Activity

Although this year there wasn't a traditional canvass, everyone who was registered previously will have received either a confirmation letter, an invitation to register or a household enquiry form (HEF).

HEFs are designed to collect information of who is resident at a property so that an ITR can be sent.

Electoral Services have continued to use Council Tax and Housing records to identify people who should be registered and send them an ITR.

Sheffield has put considerable effort into data-matching to release resources to target the groups and areas of known under registration.

Further to the 'standard canvass', Government has recently announced that funding will be made available for a **city-wide mail-out**. We envisage that this personalised letter will detail our record of who is registered to vote at each household, and ask people to take action if there are people living at the address who are not registered. The letter will go to 242,000 households and we expect it will generate about 100,000 transactions to add, delete and correct entries as well as answer other queries prompted by the arrival of the letter. This mail-out will commence in February and the majority of additions generated should appear on the register 1 April 2015.



From July 2015 the first full IER canvass will occur. Every household will be sent a HEF. New electors identified will be sent ITRs to enable them to register. If the HEF indicates that an elector should no longer be registered at that address the ERO can only remove them after confirming the fact by another source e.g. Council Tax records.

On 1 December 2015 the revised register will be published and anyone who has not been passported on to the IER register or completed an IER application will be removed. The legislation allows for Parliament to postpone this date to 1 December 2016.

#### **4.2.4 Communication**

The bulk of communication activity will begin to coincide with National Voter Registration on February 5<sup>th</sup>.

Planned communication activity includes:

**Electronic communications** – social media, Gov Delivery, web pages, footers of staff emails

**Advertising** – JC Decaux posters, posters in key locations – First Points, housing offices, Citizens Advice Bureaux, children's centres etc,

**Internal communication** – target council employees via intranet, Key Brief; link into communication channels used by council services eg housing publications

**Partner communication** - provide information and promotional material to partner organisations to promote voter registration to staff /customers/service users; and utilise their channels of communications – newsletters etc.

All Members were sent a briefing note about the change to IER in August. Electoral Services will be offering briefing sessions for Members.

## **5 Conclusion**

IER is the biggest change to our democratic system for nearly 100 years. It is not surprising therefore that the transition has been challenging. Moving to the canvassing of individuals was always going to pose problems in large cities where a significant proportion of the population move residence frequently.

The Electoral Manager has taken a regional role within South Yorkshire and Humberside to support authorities' introduction of IER as well as being involved in forums of authorities with large student populations. Sheffield is therefore in a prime position to understand the problems IER brings and the best practice solutions to those problems.

By using a multi- pronged approach we are confident that the challenges of Individual Electoral Registration can be met. This includes:

- The household write-out in February 2015
- Working with community groups
- Working in partnership with other Council services
- The intelligent use of data
- Targeted Canvassing.

## **6 Recommendation**

The Committee is asked to:

- Note the progress made to date in relation to the implementation of individual Electoral Registration
- Comment on the actions and proposals outlined in this paper
- Provide suggestions on how we can maximise voter registration and support members in registration activity.