

The Electoral Commission

Graham Allen MP
Chair, Political and Constitutional
Reform Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear Graham

Commission's Evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Following the publication of the transcript of our one-off evidence session with the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on 2 March, I wanted to provide the Committee with further information on issues around accessibility raised during the session. I have also responded to your recent report on UK Parliamentary boundary changes.

Mr Durkan asked us about provisions for accessible voting during the session and we promised to outline what the Electoral Commission has been, and is, doing to ensure that disabled people can register to vote, and cast their vote. We take very seriously the need to ensure that all voters can exercise their rights, as does the Commission's Electoral Advisory Board (made up of the most senior Electoral Registration and Returning Officers across the UK). Everyone who is eligible should be able to register and to cast their vote without impediment.

Registering to vote

In terms of registration, the process of confirmation of all existing electors used the Department of Work and Pensions database. That would include those claiming benefits such as the disability living allowance. EROs can also confirm individuals using locally held data, such as council tax records. This process took place in summer 2014 in England and Wales and the autumn in Scotland.

Any existing elector who was not matched in that process will then have been contacted by their Electoral Registration Officer and been invited to register to vote.

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An independent body established by Act of the UK Parliament



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As we have stated previously, no-one will be removed from the register ahead of the elections in May as a result of the changes if their register entry has not been matched; they are carried forward on the register for the time being.

Among the wide range of guidance and resources we have provided to support EROs, we have produced an information document for care home staff so that they can support those in their care to register to vote. We are also working alongside relevant community organisations to develop materials in a range of formats such as large print and Easy Read. (You can access our Easy Read voter registration form for example, here: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/169126/Form-Easy-Read-English.pdf)

To support this, as part of our public awareness campaign to increase voter registration ahead of the May elections, and to raise awareness of the new process for registering, we have formed a wide range of partnerships that help us reach under-registered groups. This includes a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations who are helping us to reach directly into some of these key audiences – they include organisations like Mencap, United Response and Mind.

We are working in particular with Mencap to produce a factsheet for people living with learning disabilities. It explains that they need to be registered to vote to be able to vote and sets out their rights in a polling station, including their right to ask for help - and reiterates that they cannot be turned away. Voters can take this to the polling station if they want to do so. This builds on the easy read guide for voters that Mencap has already produced and that we have also made available on our website <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-registration/partnership-working/resources-for-partners/general-audience>

A list of our other partners is also available on our website: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-registration/partnership-working/partner-organisations>

It is also possible for someone who cannot complete a voter registration application to be assisted in the process – whether online or in writing. Legislation does not address in any specific way whether or how someone can be assisted. However, the applicant must be the one to confirm that the details provided on the application are true, i.e. they must be the one making the declaration.

For example, if an elector has a physical disability that means they cannot write or type, a person can assist them by doing the typing on their behalf, so long as the elector is present and can communicate that the information provided on the application is true. In

the case of a paper application form, the applicant would have to sign the form, or make their usual mark, themselves; however, where they are unable to do so, the ERO can accept a declaration made in some other way (for example, by telephone or in person) as long as they are satisfied that the declaration is being made by the applicant and is genuine and true.

In addition, a person with an appropriate power of attorney may complete a registration application and make the declaration of truth on behalf of the incapacitated person.

Voting

The Commission's guidance for Returning Officers and polling station staff emphasises that the electoral process should be accessible to all.

Appendix 1 of our polling station handbook, for example, contains detailed information on assisting those electors who may need help when casting their vote. Our guidance covers what assistance is available to voters in a polling station including:

- The right to request assistance to mark the ballot paper
- Tactile voting devices
- A large-print version of the ballot paper
- Assistance if unable to gain access to the polling station

You can download a copy of the handbook we produced for this year's UK Parliamentary general election and local government elections in England. http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/175620/Polling-station-handbook-UKPGE-Combined.pdf

Accessibility issues are also included in our training slides for Returning Officers which re-enforce the points made in our handbook, and we reinforced this at the seminars we held around the country last autumn, when we briefed Returning Officers on our expectations for the running of this May's polls.

Boundaries

Your recent report on the next parliamentary boundary review contained a recommendation that the Commission should include, in its advice on whether to bring forward the end date for IER transition, an assessment of local variations in changes to electoral registration. I wanted to confirm that it is our intention to include an

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assessment of local variation in our advice and that this is one of the key areas of our monitoring of the transition.

I should clarify, however, that while we expect to make some assessment of local variations in the number of entries retained in electoral registers and the numbers added to and deleted from registers, we will not be able to make any assessment of local variations in the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers. As we have explained previously, the methodology required to make such an assessment is not feasible in the time available after the May 2015 polls.

This is dependent on us receiving good quality data from EROs in order to build up a clear picture of the state of the electoral registers in force at the May elections. As we mentioned when we gave evidence, the Cabinet Office and the electoral management software suppliers are now working differently with us to ensure that we receive the information we require. We are hopeful that the data we will collect in May will be more accurate and reliable than the data we received on the December 2014 registers.

I hope that you find this additional information helpful, and do please get in touch if you would like to discuss this in more detail. Your office can contact Mazida Khatun on 020 7271 0583 or mkhatun@electoralcommission.org.uk.

With best wishes as ever,



Jenny Watson
Chair