

Graham Allen MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

24 February 2015

Dear Graham

Analysis of December 2014 electoral registers in England and Wales

The Electoral Commission has today published a report on our analysis of the December 2014 electoral registers in England and Wales.

This is part of the Commission's programme of work monitoring the progress of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). In April, we will publish equivalent data and analysis for Scotland, which began the transition to IER on 19 September after the referendum on independence.

December 2014 registers

Our analysis of the December 2014 registers identified that they contained 920,000 fewer entries than the registers published in February/March 2014 following the 2013 canvass, which indicates a decrease of 2%.

This decline is mostly attributable to the lack of comprehensive household canvass activity in 2014. Data collected by the Commission indicates that the level of additions to the registers in 2014 was lower than in previous years. The 2013 canvass – which took place between October 2013 and February/March 2014 - resulted in the addition of entries to the register equivalent to 12% of the total registered electorate in February/March 2014, whereas the roughly equivalent figure at the end of the 2014 write-out period was 5%. The change in the number of additions to the registers is

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largely mirrored by a similar, but slightly smaller, decline in the number of entries being deleted.

The processes followed in 2014 were unique in this regard; canvass activity in 2015 and all subsequent years will involve sending forms to all properties to check who is resident at an address and to identify new electors who can subsequently be invited to register, as well as carrying out follow up activity as required.

There have also been more specific challenges, including the registration of students at their term time address; therefore some local authorities with large student and young mobile populations have seen larger than average falls in numbers of entries on the register. In our analysis, we also report that the number of registered attainers - 16 and 17 year olds - is significantly lower than in previous years.

Addressing issues identified by the December register data

The 1 December 2014 registers provided a snapshot of how the registers stood at that date, but work has and will continue to be done to ensure as many people as possible are registered to vote in respect of the correct address in advance of the May 2015 polls. While anyone on the 1 December registers will not be removed from the register before the May 2015 elections unless the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is no longer satisfied that they are entitled to remain registered at that address, more needs to be done to target those not yet included on the register at their current address. As you know, we have strongly recommended that all EROs carry out an audit of their registers by sending a letter to every property in their area showing who is registered to vote at that particular address and prompting anyone who is not yet registered to do so. We welcomed the Government's announcement that £6.8 million would be made available to EROs to support activity to maximise registration, and we are pleased that many EROs have used their share of this to fund sending out these Household Notification Letters (HNL).

The HNL has a number of clear benefits, all of which can contribute to helping EROs to ensure that their registers are as accurate and complete as possible ahead of the May 2015 polls. They should prompt those who have not registered to do so; help to pick up those who have recently moved within or into the registration area; and give residents an opportunity to check that their details on the register are accurate. All EROs in

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England and Wales have confirmed that they have or will be carrying out this activity or other comprehensive activity which seeks to address the issues identified by our analysis of the 1 December registers data.

EROs, the Commission and many others (including over 50 partners that we have been working with to encourage them to promote voter registration activity) have already undertaken significant activity since publication of the revised registers - with National Voter Registration Day on 5 February a particularly good example of concerted effort to encourage registration by those not currently included on the register at their current address, and this work continues right up until the voter registration deadline.

It is positive that as of today around 2 million applications to register have already been made since 1 December - 166,000 of which were on National Voter Registration Day itself; although we know that some of these will be duplicate entries.

Alongside the work by EROs we will be running a range of public awareness activity in a variety of areas leading up to the registration deadline. Our TV campaign will launch on 16 March and run until 17 April, which supports the online activity already running that targets those who we have identified as being less likely to be registered.

The television adverts, which are being developed through testing with the public, will run on both English and Welsh language terrestrial and satellite channels across Great Britain, and on all mainstream online TV 'video-on-demand' channels. We are also doing specific activity to raise awareness of the need to register and to ensure voters have photo ID in Northern Ireland.

Our paid-for-search advertising launched on 12 January to coincide with the HNL activity being carried out by EROs mentioned above. This is hosted on search engines featuring key words specifically relevant to voter registration and elections, along with other generic search terms related to voting. Alongside this, we have also already launched our online display advertising. This began on 2 February and will appear on a variety of websites.

We updated our plans when we saw the results of the data analysis to provide a further boost to our online and mobile advertising targeting students and attainers. This will run from 1-31 March. The adverts aimed at students will tell them that they need to be

registered at university if they want to vote there and advertising targeting attainers will provide a prompt to register based on turning eighteen. This will run alongside the online display advertising targeting both students and attainers on Facebook, Yahoo, and wider advertising networks. We have already seen the impact that sites such as Facebook can have in reminding people to apply to register to vote as on NVRD a significant percentage of the online applications received came via Facebook or the Commission's websites.

Data issues affecting reporting

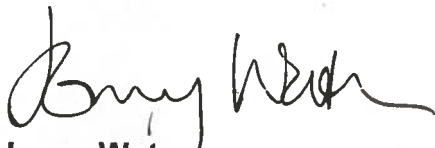
We previously reported that some issues had been encountered with the functionality of the electoral management software (EMS) systems that EROs use. This has had some impact on the transition to IER in particular areas, for example in delaying the write out. In seeking to compile our analysis of the December 2014 registers, we have encountered further issues, which have meant that not all local authorities were able to provide the accurate management information data we expected. We are grateful to electoral administrators and their teams for trying to provide the information that we needed, and their patience in answering our questions.

Whilst this has not impacted on the work that is being done to get people registered, the absence of some key data and issues with the quality of other aspects of the data have had a significant impact on our ability to report on progress with implementing the transition to date. This has also raised a real risk that the Commission will not have sufficient information to be able to make a robust, evidence-based assessment and recommendation in June 2015 to inform the UK Government's decision on whether to make an Order that the end of the transition to IER should be brought forward to December 2015. It is therefore vital that Cabinet Office and EMS suppliers make urgent changes to the systems to ensure that the necessary data will be available to allow for a full and robust analysis in our next report of the state of the registers and progress with implementing IER. We will continue to work with the Cabinet Office and the suppliers in order to make this happen. Without reliable data about electoral registration in June 2015, it is highly unlikely that the Commission would be able to recommend in any circumstances that the end of the transition to IER should be brought forward to December 2015.

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I look forward to appearing in front of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee next week. However if you would like to discuss the contents of this letter, your office can contact Mazida Khatun at the Commission on 0207 271 0583 or mkhatun@electoralcommission.org.uk to arrange this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jenny Watson', written in a cursive style.

Jenny Watson
Chair