



Graham Allen MP
Chair, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
7 Millbank
London, SW1P 3JA

16 March 2015

Dear Graham

Thank you for your letter of 5 March 2015 regarding the December 2014 electoral registers for England and Wales and the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER).

The registers published in England and Wales on 1 December 2014 are a snapshot mid-way through the transition to IER. The picture has changed since these registers were published, with over 2.4 million applications to register to vote submitted since December, including 166,000 on national voter registration day. Drops in registration levels can in part be explained through IER meeting the objective of increasing the accuracy of the register by removing duplicate and inaccurate entries.

IER also gives people greater control and ownership over registering to vote compared with the previous outdated household system. This is particularly the case for students, who are now better able to choose whether to register at their home or term time address, or both. There is evidence which suggests that many are choosing to register at their home address only, which would explain some of the drops in numbers in certain areas with high student populations. Under the old system many students could be registered or deleted from the register, through block registration, without their knowledge.

Turning to your point about canvassing activity, as the Electoral Commission's (EC) report acknowledges, the Government's £6.8 million funding for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) is enabling them to conduct targeted activity, mainly through the issuing of household notification letters, to help increase the completeness and accuracy of their registers ahead of the General Election. As you are aware, through data matching almost nine in ten electors were automatically transferred onto the new registers under IER. As a result, in 2014, Household Enquiry Forms were required to be sent to vacant properties, or those where there was evidence that there were additional eligible people. The vast majority of people were contacted individually and informed whether they needed to take any action following this data matching exercise. As a result of that activity, the registers in December contained 98% of the numbers present on the last registers published before the introduction of IER.

The number of electors who could not be confirmed through data matching and not automatically transferred, was estimated to originally stand at about 5.5 million. These

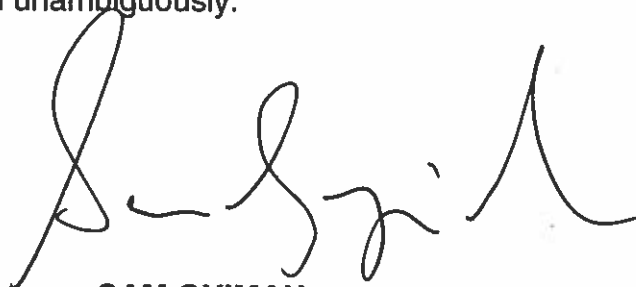
electors have been invited to register, sent reminders and canvassed in person in order to encourage them to apply under IER. They have also been carried forward onto the new registers and have until the end of the transition (December 2015 at the earliest) to apply under IER before they are removed. The EC estimates on retained electors in their latest research suggests that the canvassing of these unconfirmed electors has had a positive impact in reducing the number from 5.5 million to 2-2.5 million. We are of course not complacent which is why we are funding a significant level of activity aimed at maximising registration in the run up to the election. It is also important to note that a decision needs to be taken in the summer about whether the transitional arrangements for IER should end in December 2015 or December 2016 and I would expect evidence on the amount of retained electors in the Electoral Commission's June report to be at the heart of these deliberations.

I share the Electoral Commission's disappointment that software problems prevented a full set of data of sufficient quality being provided by all authorities. My officials are continuing to work closely with software providers and the EC to ensure the full set of data is available to support the EC's June report. I am confident that this full data will be available when it is needed provided that all partners, including the EC and EMS suppliers, deliver what they are required to deliver on time.

I also share your concerns about the 7.5 million people estimated to be missing from the register. That is why the Government is already taking action by making registering to vote easier through online registration, as well as the investment of over £14 million over the last two financial years aimed at maximising the rate of voter registration. The EC's awareness campaign for the General Election will promote voter registration and help to augment this work.

Finally, you raised the issue of ERO performance. As you know, the performance of EROs is monitored and reported on by the EC. The Commission's most recent assessment was published in June 2014 and showed that the majority of EROs are performing well against the standards.

Where problems are found, the Cabinet Office and the EC are working closely with EROs to ensure that they fulfil their statutory duties and are implementing their public engagement and implementation plans for the transition to IER. Last year, Ministers wrote to all EROs, stressing that Parliament expects EROs to meet these obligations. We made clear that we are fully prepared to consider a formal direction to EROs if necessary to ensure that they comply with their statutory obligations. This level of monitoring applies to all authorities and not only those who have failed a standard. Any authorities picked up during the transition as failing to implement their legal obligations will be dealt with promptly and unambiguously.



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