

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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PART I **FOR INFORMATION**

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)

1. **Purpose of Report**

To update the Committee on progress on Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the actions Officers are taking to implement IER.

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Committee is requested to note the changes taking place to registration processes and the work Officers are undertaking to implement the changes.

3. **The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Corporate Plan**

No implications at this stage.

4. **Other Implications**

Financial

The Government has committed to funding the costs of moving to IER. Implementation is being grant-aided by central government. An allocation of £7,000 was received in April 2013, which was for the costs of change management and preparation for the 'confirmation dry run'. Government Grant funding (Transition Fund) has been allocated under a Section 31 agreement and allocation is by formula - Slough's allocation for 2014/15 is £67,004. Government expects this funding will cover all additional costs of IER. Guidance is still awaited as to whether this will be one off transition or recurrent revenue funding. Significant additional costs will be incurred in the transition to and maintenance of IER – these costs will mainly be associated with printing, postage and additional canvasser visits. Budget implications and a claim for additional funding are being assessed but it is currently believed that the transition costs for Slough will exceed the available funding and that the annual cost of maintaining IER will exceed existing budgets so creating a pressure if the grant is not maintained.

Risk Management

The risks and opportunities around implementation of IER are set out below.

Risk	Mitigating action	Opportunities
More onerous nature may deter or frustrate eligible voters from registering.	Ensure engagement and information strategy is robust. Ensure numbers of people on Electoral role is monitored.	Opportunity to reduce electoral fraud and increase accuracy of the Register.
Employment Issues – failure to secure adequate and suitably skilled staff to deliver	Electoral Services Team restructured to build management resilience and capacity.	Opportunity to develop staff.
Equalities Issues - Potential that take up will differ among different communities	Ensure engagement strategy is robust and tailored to Slough community. Deploy engagement methods and approaches with hard to reach groups used previously in the 2011 Census	Basic intent of IER is to enable everyone who is entitled to register to vote in UK elections and exercise their democratic rights.
Maintaining a current and accurate register in area with significant population ‘churn’ will be far more difficult	Use of canvassers to gather up to date information and other council records to identify where there may be new occupiers	Increase accuracy of the Register
Effective public engagement strategy among our community is very time and cash intensive.	Public engagement strategy to be effectively targeted. Bid for additional grant funding as necessary.	Good communication and processes resulting in more accurate Register.
Financial – See above		
Implementation date not met	Robust project management arrangements including governance structure reporting to Electoral Registration Officer (Chief Executive).	Statutory timetable

Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

The Council is under a statutory duty to implement IER. There are no Human Rights Act implications relating to the content of this report.

The Committee should be aware that Electoral Registration as a function is the individual responsibility of the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and not the Council or its members. The Council is required to appoint an officer to be Registration Officer (Representation of the People Act 1983 s8) and is required in law to provide resources for the function to be carried out (Representation of the People Act 1983 s52). Ruth Bagley, the Council's Chief Executive is the Electoral Registration Officer for Slough.

Equalities Impact Assessment

The report does not address equality issues specifically but the basic intent of IER is to enable everyone who is entitled to register to vote in UK elections and exercise their democratic rights. Any actions will fully comply with the Council's equality duties.

5. Supporting Information

Background

- 5.1 The register of electors is the foundation of Electoral Services, providing a record of those people entitled to vote at various UK elections. At present, Electoral Services carry out an annual canvass each year by sending a registration form to each **household**. One person is responsible for completing this form and for registering every eligible person at that address.
- 5.2 On 31 January 2013, the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 gained Royal Assent requiring the move to a system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). This will require each **elector** to register individually, rather than via a household form as at the moment. It also had other implications, such as moving the canvass to Winter 2013/14.
- 5.3 IER is intended to help tackle electoral fraud and result in a more accurate and complete register, requiring each person to confirm they live at a property rather than relying on one person to sign for the household. To make an application to register to vote once the transition is underway, residents will need to make an individual application, with their name, address, date of birth and National Insurance Number.

The transition to Individual Electoral Registration

- 5.4 The transition to IER will start after the European parliamentary elections in July 2014. This date has been set by the Government after taking account of the system testing that has been undertaken in 2013. This testing has included a 'dry run' of the necessary data matching that will be required for confirming existing electors.
- 5.5 From that point onwards all new applications to register will have to be made individually using the new system. It will also be possible to register to vote online, opening up more choice over how to register.
- 5.6 The transition will begin with the confirmation of existing electors. This means that if an elector's name is on the electoral register when the transition begins, we will try to match their name against information held by the Department for

Work and Pensions (DWP) on its Customer Information System. If we can match it, that entry on the register will be confirmed, the elector will be told about this and they will not need to take any further action.

- 5.7 Evidence from the dry run suggests that about two thirds of electors could be confirmed this way. Other records including local authority data are also being tested to see which are accurate and reliable enough to be used to confirm people's details on the register
- 5.8 EROs will invite people individually to register under the new system. This will include people on the register who have not been confirmed, and the names of any other people who the ERO thinks might be eligible.
- 5.9 Where there is no information or some doubt about who lives at an address an ERO will ask the residents to identify who lives at that address and then invite them to apply to register individually.
- 5.10 People will be reminded more than once and if they still do not respond, will be visited by a canvasser before a new electoral register is published in December 2014.
- 5.11 In December 2014 a new electoral register will be published. It will contain the names of the people who have successfully been confirmed on the register and those who have applied successfully to be added to the register.

Before the General Election in 2015

- 5.12 The period between the publication of the December 2014 register and the General Election will be used to encourage those people missing from the register to apply, people who have moved house to update their details, and those who have not yet applied individually to do so.

After the General Election

- 5.13 A full household canvass will take place in the autumn of 2015. This will look a lot like the current system where each household is sent a list of people registered to vote at that address, however from 2015 onwards if an elector is on the register and their details have not changed, they will only have to confirm that their details have not changed – it will not be a requirement to apply each year to register to vote.
- 5.14 If an eligible citizen, or someone at the address, is not on the register, for example because they have moved or have just become old enough to vote, they should tell the authority and will be sent an invitation to register, or make an application to register direct on the local authority website. They will be invited to apply individually, reminded in writing and if they still do not respond, will be called upon by a canvasser.

Once the transition is complete

- 5.15 In January 2016 the transition to IER will be complete and all new electors or home movers will be required to apply individually to register to vote. An annual canvass of all households will continue to be carried out to ensure that the electoral register is up to date.

Preparations for IER

5.16 The Council (along with all local authorities) is working closely with the Cabinet Office on implementation issues. Staff from the Electoral Services and Democratic Services teams and the Council's IT team are working together to implement the change process, and so far progress has been made as follows :

- A project team of key staff has been established to implement the project plan and a schedule of actions/meetings agreed
- Initial training/Information seminars have been held by the Cabinet Office which key staff have attended
- The Council's Election Management System (EMS) supplier is providing advice on a regular basis with regard to the necessary system upgrades
- IT requirements locally in terms of Server capacity are being assessed
- Connectivity Testing between the Council's IT provision and the Government's Digital Service has been passed
- EMS enhancements have been rolled out and have been tested or are being tested
- the Confirmation 'Dry Run' was undertaken in July 2013 which allowed the the ERO to start to predict and estimate the work involved in the new system of registration.
- Funding from the Cabinet Office by way of a S.31 Grant allocation has been received and the overall electoral registration budget is being assessed with a view to bidding for additional grant.
- Reports of progress have been submitted as required on a monthly basis to the Cabinet Office through its IER readiness reporting portal.
- The Electoral Services Team has been restructured to increase management resilience and capacity to support implementation of IER and help drive through the changes. The additional posts are largely being offered on a fixed term basis to 31st December 2015 to maximise flexibility once IER has been introduced.

Publicity and Engagement

5.17 The majority of engagement with residents intended to encourage people to take the necessary action, will be delivered locally by Councils. Local engagement will be supported by public awareness advertising campaigns run by the Electoral Commission at key points during the transition. The Electoral Commission will be providing support on engagement with residents in local authority areas to enable an effective transition to IER.

5.18 An effective local public engagement strategy and robust processes behind this will be required in order to maximise the number of voters registered under IER. The activity undertaken in the run-up to and during transition should ensure as many residents as possible understand what they need to do to join or remain on the register. Every contact a resident receives from their ERO, message in the media they hear or advertisement they see will contribute to the likelihood of them taking action. Public engagement activities will include:

- Correspondence from the ERO..
- Phone calls, e-mails or direct face-to-face conversations with canvassers
- Canvass forms and household enquiry forms

- Local activity with partner organisations who will spread the message on the ERO's behalf
- Contact with organisations such as schools, colleges, landlords, housing associations and hostels
- Press releases and media work
- Public awareness activity including local advertising (in council-owned or paid-for media) directly aimed at residents

5.19 The Project Group is currently working on the engagement strategy to ensure that it is effective and robust and ensure that the electorate in Slough are both aware of and understand the changes.

Next Steps

5.20 Members will receive regular update reports in respect of the implementation of the change and it is intended that David McRitchie (AEA Cert.) the IER Regional Delivery Manager - South East Region will be invited to brief members following the elections in May.

5.21 A Questions and answers document that Members may find useful is attached at Appendix A.

6. Background Papers

None

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Key points of the new registration system:

- Electors will register individually rather than through heads of household. An individual must provide personal information including their National Insurance number to verify their application.
- 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 others may be considered.
- A modernised electoral registration system based on IT will be introduced, making it easier for people to register to vote, and open up the way for digital applications, principally by using the Council's website.
- Once registered, individuals will need only to confirm annually that their details have not changed.
- The annual household canvas will continue to check register is complete.
- Individuals not on the register will themselves be responsible for applying to register.
- There will be a civil penalty for failing to register (with stringent requirements in place before a penalty can be issued). The criminal penalty for failing to return the household canvas remains.
- From 2014 IER will be a requirement for any new registrations and for anyone who wants to vote by post or proxy.
- After 1 December 2015 everyone on the electoral register will be registered under the new system.

Making the transition

Managing the transition of 46 million UK voters to a new system of registration with a tight timetable is a considerable challenge. It will require a high level of cooperation, and make considerable demands on electoral registration officers and their staff. Local authorities are expected to support the process by planning resources and organisational change, as well as playing a key role in promoting public awareness.