

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Civic Affairs Committee September 2013
LEAD OFFICER: Jean Hunter (Electoral Registration Officer) / Fiona McMillan

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Purpose

1. This is a report to brief members on the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the potential issues that might stem from this change.
2. There is no decision to be made as this report is for information only. Members should be aware that whilst no formal decision is required, the transition to IER will have a significant impact on members and electors across the whole of South Cambridgeshire.

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that the Civic Affairs Committee notes the content of this report.

Background

4. The current system of electoral registration sees an annual mailing of registration forms to each property in the district. A single member of each household is able to update the form by way of adding and deleting electors as appropriate.
5. From Summer 2014 this system of household registration will transition to a system based on registration by the individual.
6. The new system of registration will require electors to provide their national insurance number (NINO) and their date of birth. For the first time, electors will also be able to register online.
7. The move to IER will also introduce the need to verify applications against the database held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

IER Canvass Process (2014 Only)

8. In July 2014, the register of electors will be sent electronically by the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to the DWP for data matching. This "confirmation" process has been designed to transfer as many electors as possible directly from the current register to the new IER register.
9. The data will be returned to the ERO with a RAG (red/amber/green) status for each elector. Electors who are returned as green have passed the data matching process and will not be required to register individually.
10. The ERO will carry out a process of local data matching, whereby red and amber electors are matched against other council held records. If possible, they will be converted to a green match under this process.

11. All green electors will receive a letter to advise of their confirmation.
12. Any electors still amber or red when local data matching is finished will be sent an "Invitation to Register" (ITR) form. ITR forms will enable individuals to individually register on the new IER register. The ITR form will display a web address to encourage online registration.
13. Any properties recorded as void will be sent a "Household Enquiry Form" (HEF) form. HEF forms will look similar to the existing canvass form, and will invite a single member of the household to list the names of those people resident in the property that are entitled to be registered. Upon receipt of the HEF, the ERO will send ITR forms to those electors introduced on the HEF.
14. All forms (HEFs & ITRs) will need to be followed up with an initial reminder, and then with canvasser visit(s).
15. Non responders to the 2014 canvass will **not** be removed from the register when it is published on 1 December. This is because the government do not want to see a large fall in registration levels in advance of the Parliamentary General Election in 2015. Note that electors with absent votes in place must register individually in 2014 or their absent vote will be cancelled.

IER Canvass Process 2015

16. The canvass in 2015 will begin with HEFs being sent to every property in the district.
17. The information provided on the returned HEFs will be used to send out ITR forms to new electors. There will be no requirement to re-register individually on an annual basis. ie. If an elector has previously been transferred across having been matched at the DWP or if an elector has previously returned an ITR form or registered online, they will not have to register again. They will have to register again if they have moved house or changed their name.
18. Returned HEFs will be processed by the ERO and newly identified electors will be sent an ITR form.
19. As with the 2014 canvass, all HEFs and ITRs will be followed up with a reminder and doorstep canvassing.
20. Upon completion of the 2015 canvass, all electors who have failed to register individually will be removed from the register.

Post 2015

21. After the 2015 canvass, the government consider that the transition to IER will be complete, and registration will revert to "business as usual", with IER operating as the norm.

Considerations

22. A dry run of the DWP confirmation process took place in July 2013, and resulted in a match rate of just over 78% of the district's electors being returned as green.
23. In a measure designed to improve DWP match rates in 2014, the government have delayed the 2013 canvass. This will now commence in October, with publication of

the revised register due in February 2014. Members should be aware that edited register opt outs must now be indicated on an annual basis – this information cannot be carried forward. A flyer will be inserted with initial canvass forms to raise awareness, and an article appeared in the last issue of South Cambs Magazine.

24. The government have committed to funding the transition to IER through the distribution of non-ring fenced grant funding. This funding should be sufficient to enable the transition to IER. However, the government have made no funding commitments beyond the 2015 canvass. This means that the potential cost of administering “business as usual” electoral registration is likely to be considerably higher than it currently is.
25. Through the Electoral Services team, the SCDC ERO is reporting on progress to the Cabinet Office via a web portal. This includes numerous milestones throughout the transition process.
26. As an aside to point 15, there is a concern that levels of registration could be significantly negatively impacted upon introduction of IER. This is why electors will be safeguarded in 2014, and could see a 2014 register that is fairly inaccurate, as non-responding electors will not be deleted. This will change after the General Election when those who have not responded under IER will be deleted. It is impossible to forecast what level of impact this might have, but the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office have voiced concerns that it will hit traditionally under-registered groups the hardest.
27. The Electoral Commission will be tasked with increasing awareness at a national level, but locally the Electoral Services team will work with the Communications Team and other EROs from across the county trying to engage with these groups of people. In South Cambs, these are likely to be young people, older people, non-english speakers and Travellers. In the Girton ward there may also be a potential issue regarding the registration of students.
28. Members should be aware that irrespective of how well the message is communicated, the transition to IER has the potential to be poorly received in some parts of the community. In particular, residents may not be happy to provide NINOs and dates of birth to canvassing staff.

Options

29. The move to IER has been prescribed in legislation. Some elements of the transition are yet to be agreed by the government, but neither the Council nor the ERO have any discretion in making the change.

Implications

30. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk management, equality and diversity, climate change, community safety and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered: -

Financial

31. As mentioned at point 24, the government have not yet committed to providing any funding after the 2015 canvass. The day to day cost of administering electoral registration will be higher, but it is currently difficult to forecast by how much.

Legal

32. There are no legal implications.

Staffing

33. There are no staffing implications.

Risk Management

34. There are no risk implications other than the potential cost implications mentioned at point 31.

Equality and Diversity

35. The new process of registration is likely to be confusing for a large section of the electorate. It is clearly a big departure from the previous system of household registration. However, the transition to IER has been prescribed in legislation, and there is no local discretion to do things differently. The ERO will work closely with the Council's Communications Team to deliver ways to improve local registration rates over the 2013 canvass and into the new IER canvass.

Climate Change

36. There are no climate change implications.

Consultation responses (including from the Youth Council)

37. Since the transition process is prescribed in legislation the Youth Council have not yet been consulted with. It may be appropriate later in the process to work with the Youth Council to improve registration rates amongst young people.

Effect on Strategic Aims

Aim A – We will listen to and engage with residents, parishes and businesses to ensure we deliver first class services and value for money

38. The successful delivery of IER will require considerable close engagement with our residents.

Background Papers

No background papers used.

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