

**CHILTERN DISTRICT COUNCIL
UPDATE ON INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION**

Background Papers, if any, are specified at the end of the Report

UPDATE ON INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER)
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RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) That the Committee note the content of this report and submit any comments; and
- ii) That a further report will be presented to the Committee during 2015 following agreement of the processes involved for the 2015 Canvass.

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This purpose of this report is to provide the Governance and Electoral Services Arrangements Committee with an update on the progress of the annual canvass for the Register of Electors 2014-15, and the impact of the recent implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER).

2. Background

- 2.1 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, which received Royal Assent on 31 January 2013 required the implementation of Individual Electoral Registration during the 2014 canvass. This changed the household based system to one that requires each individual to be contacted and registered individually.
- 2.2 The changes introduced the use of revised letters and forms to be sent to each elector. This created a high level of additional work for the Democratic and Electoral Services Team. The implementation of IER commenced on 10 June 2014.

3. Confirmation Live Run

- 3.1 The first stage of the process for IER was the completion of a data matching exercise with the data held on the existing electoral register and the data held by the Department for Work and Pensions. This process was called the Confirmation Live Run, which for Chiltern District Council, took place on 3 July 2014.
- 3.2 The results for Chiltern District Council were **87.95% Confirmed** and **12.05% Red / Amber** which was very much in line with our estimates

from the Dry Run, which took place in 2013, and in fact slightly better in terms of confirmed electors. Therefore at that stage there was no need to change our engagement strategy and /or implementation plan. At this stage our activities were in line with proposed timescales.

4. Submission of Data to Electoral Reform Services

4.1 The next stage of the process for Chiltern District Council was immediately prior to the write out during submission of our data to our printing supplier Electoral Reform Services (ERS). This involved a few hitches in terms of the software working effectively but this was only a minor delay and both Xpress and ERS were extremely helpful in assisting with this. At Chiltern District Council we had made the decision to use canvassers from the initial stage of write out, therefore delivering Confirmation Letters, ITRs and HEFs commencing from early August. Canvassing commenced from 1 August 2014. The benefits of using canvassers from the write out stage was that we had full coverage across the district of Council representatives able to answer electors' queries, on the doorstep, deliver all letters / forms by hand and the first delivery resulted in a £2,000 saving compared with the cost of the same delivery by Royal Mail.

5. Canvassing

- 5.1 Prior to canvassing there was a significant amount of work involved in sorting the confirmation letters, ITRs and HEFs into canvass areas and this involved appointment of a temporary member of staff to assist with this work.
- 5.2 All canvassers were provided with training and provided with information to help inform electors. We also improved information on our website and used social media (twitter) to increase engagement of the changes.
- 5.3 Training was provided to all customer services staff to assist with any frontline queries; and we have continued to provide ongoing updates and advice to colleagues where necessary.
- 5.4 All canvassers were required to deliver all confirmation letters, and majority of Invitation to Register (ITRs) and Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) by 30 September 2014.
- 5.5 There was a slight delay on 1st reminders again due to submission of data to ERS partly due to software problems but also due to volume of work within the team at this stage in respect of telephone and email enquiries.
- 5.6 The use of canvassers from the write out stage has been effective in respect of managing the volume of queries we were getting because canvassers were mainly delivering at weekends and therefore our high

volume of calls / emails were Mondays and Tuesdays with slightly lower volumes as the week progressed. If Royal Mail had delivered all areas at the write out stage we would have had a greater impact on resources and therefore not able to provide such an effective and responsive service throughout the process. We have also identified issues in respect to Royal Mail deliveries of Opt Out request forms not arriving and electors having to request further forms due to this delay on the part of Royal Mail. This is being pursued with Royal Mail due to this situation creating an impact on our service.

6. Implementation and possible improvements

- 6.1 The impact of the implementation at this stage was the sheer volume of calls and emails that were received due to Open Register opt out requests.
- 6.2 There has also been additional work involved due to the prescribed wording of letters and the potential for confusion due to the ambiguity of the structure of letters e.g. On the Open Register or not on the Open Register! The letters and forms were prescribed by the Cabinet Office and due to our experiences and similar experiences for other Electoral Registration Officers across the country officers are feeding back concerns on the prescribed wording to avoid further problems in the future.
- 6.3 In terms of general queries regarding additional information and changes in respect of ITRs and HEFs this has resulted in a high volume of work but comparable to previous canvass periods and in respect of the return of forms less paperwork and more online applications.
- 6.4 Due to an increased number of electors responding via online registration staff resources were diverted to responding to the online submissions. This over time and familiarity for electors will improve and increase the use of online registration and although paper copies will still be required for the foreseeable future this is a move in the right direction. There are some key areas of the process that need to be improved and this is in respect of HEFs – are they really necessary?

7. Impact on electors

- 7.1 In respect of electors who were successfully data matched and returned as confirmed electors in the initial stage the impact has been minimal as they received a letter which required no further action. However due to the prescribed wording in relation to the opt in / out of the Open Register there was an element of concern, confusion and frustration for electors on what this meant for them and how they could amend their opt in / out status. This aspect of the IER implementation generated a significant amount of additional work, which was unforeseen but was managed effectively.

7.2 Those electors who did not data match correctly at the initial stage (12% of the electorate) received an Invitation to Register form. A large number of electors have successfully completed the ITR through the online process or completed and returned the paper copy for the team to process. Following the initial write out the average return on ITRs was 54%.

7.3 This table illustrates the electorate figures and the breakdown of Confirmed, ITRs and HEFs delivered and the responses received:

Total Electorate	Total properties	Confirmed electors	ITRs	HEFs
74058	38934	61017	12813	3288
			ITR 1st reminders	HEF 1st reminders
			5923	2934
			Average % return = 54%	Average % return = 11%
			ITR 2nd reminders	
			3995	
			Average % return = 69%	

7.4 The above table highlights the ongoing return on ITRs and HEFs. The current figure at the time of register publication is about 3,000 outstanding ITRs and about 500 outstanding HEFs.

7.5 Following the 1st reminder stage for HEFs and the relatively average low return on HEFs, alternative approaches to reduce these were sought. The need for additional HEF reminders were costly when evaluated against the ongoing ITR returns which in majority of cases superseded the return of a HEF. The initial guidance was that all HEFs should be returned but from an elector point of view if the completion of an ITR had been done the return of a HEF could be seen as unnecessary and therefore difficult for the canvasser and office staff to pursue successfully.

7.6 To ensure accuracy on the register of electors joint working has increased between the Electoral Registration team and Council Tax to check records of households effectively and use a more integrated approach which is often an expectation of the elector. Furtherwork is being developed on how the two teams can exchange information on a regular basis within the restraints of Data Protection but for the benefit of accuracy of all records and the reduced need for an individual to contact various departments of the Council.

8. Readiness of software

- 8.1 The preparation of software companies to be ready for the various stages of IER has been disappointing because this has caused unnecessary work. It has often been necessary to seek a work around to previously straightforward tasks e.g. Canvass worksheets were not available; and also response reports have only recently become available. In relation to the response reports, this does impact on the effectiveness of our monitoring of the process and being able to gauge our overall progress which has caused some concern. It has been possible to monitor returns through a more lengthy process and our response rate is in line with previous years and possibly a little higher but the information needs to be improved and be more instantly accessible within the system. Nevertheless the support that we have received from Xpress has been excellent and they have been very responsive to our queries.
- 8.2 The Cabinet Office are liaising with the software companies in relation to their preparation for IER and how this can be improved. Through discussions with colleagues in other local authorities it is apparent that Xpress have been the most responsive software company and that concerns are being addressed.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Overall the transition to IER has worked well but as with any initial implementation this has come with its problems and concerns. The main concern has been and continues to be, the sheer volume of additional work that has been involved in the IER process, much of this was unforeseen but is as a result of the explanation of the Electoral and Open Registers; and the prescribed wording of letters and forms sent to electors. This has had a significant impact on the team and required additional resources and a substantial increase in costs to provide an effective and responsive service throughout the process.
- 9.2 Due to additional funding from the Cabinet Office for the implementation of IER (£23,000 for CDC) we are still within budget for the process but the breakdown of cost must be analysed for future years to seek reduction in costs where possible. This can be achieved through a greater emphasis on the online registration process and also by introducing increased use of email addresses for future correspondence with electors rather than prescribed letters / forms. It is important to retain a paper process for those electors unable to access online methods but where possible online communication should be increased and a reduction of paperwork achieved.
- 9.3 Overall officer's believe that the implementation of IER is good, especially in relation to online registration and the opportunity for the process to be more automated and streamlined. But in hindsight there are a lot of improvements to be made in terms of wording of letters and

the need for local discretion on the wording, forward planning of software companies and consideration of additional resources required. This is not only necessary during the canvass period but also a further consideration for the election period when there will be added pressures around day minus12 for online registration deadlines.

- 9.4 The current breakdown of cost for the canvass and implementation of IER for Chiltern District Council is £31,000 approx. The budget, including additional funds from the Cabinet Office of £23,000, is £59,000. Therefore spend is within budget and likely to result in an underspend.

10. Next Steps

- 10.1 The Register of Electors was published on 1 December 2014.
- 10.2 A mini-canvass of all properties will be carried out in January – February 2015, confirming who is residing at a given property in the district. If the details are correct the electors need take no further action or if amendments are necessary they need to contact the Electoral Registration team. This will ensure that the register is as accurate as possible in preparation for the Parliamentary and Local Elections on Thursday 7 May 2015.
- 10.3 A full evaluation of the implementation of IER, nationally, is ongoing with the Cabinet Office via the Association of Electoral Administrators and individual EROs. This will result in further developments and potential changes for the 2015 canvass and a report to the Governance and Electoral Arrangements Committee can be presented when further information is available during 2015.

Background Papers: None
