



Cabinet Office

# Maximising Electoral Registration: An evaluation of local activities

## Summary report

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# Acknowledgements

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) from June 2014 in England and Wales and September in Scotland will mean people will be required to register to vote individually, replacing the existing outdated system where a 'head of household' submits an application for registration. As part of the transition to IER, the Government is funding and promoting work at a national and local level to maximise rates of electoral registration. To this end, in July 2013 the Government announced £4.2 million for maximising registration.

A significant proportion of this maximising registration funding has been allocated to Local Authorities (LAs) and Valuation Joint Boards (VJBs). Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) have a statutory duty to ensure that their electoral registers are as complete and accurate as possible. This funding was designed to support them in fulfilling this duty.

This report presents a summary of the evaluation of the first wave of maximising registration activity supported by the Government in the lead up to the launch of IER. These examples stemmed from the Registration Fund, announced in July 2013 – part of the £4.2 million – which invited proposals from LAs and VJBs wishing to undertake and pilot activity to increase registration rates of under-registered groups (URGs) in their local area. The evaluation assesses both the impact and process of the funded LAs' interventions, considering which activities were most successful and among which groups, and how cost-effective these were. It also presents examples of good practice and lessons learnt to support a number of suggestions for developing future strategies aimed at improving registration rates, particularly among URGs.

## Chapter 2

# Maximising registration

The move to IER is intended to make registering to vote more convenient and more secure. The launch of the online application process for voter registration and the campaign to make electors aware of the new system creates an opportunity to focus on promoting registration and democratic engagement as part of the transition.

### 2.1. Under-registered groups

Research has identified a number of specific groups of elector types in which individuals are more likely to be unregistered now and/or less likely to be confirmed<sup>1</sup>. Previously, Electoral Commission research has highlighted seven groups where rates of registration fall below that of the average rate of the UK: social renters (78 per cent registered); BME groups (77 per cent); Irish and Commonwealth national (68 per cent); private renters (56 per cent); young people, 19-24 years (56 per cent); and young people, 17-18 years (55 per cent)<sup>2</sup>. Additional research by the Commission has suggested as many as 22 per cent of students will not be registered to vote, giving them a registration rate similar to that of social renters<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Government has developed a number of safeguards aimed at preventing a decline in registration during the transition to IER. A core component will be the use of data matching to confirm the majority of electors on the register. Existing electors will have their records matched with other public databases. Any elector whose records match will be confirmed and automatically re-registered under IER. A dry run of this confirmation process in the summer of 2013 suggested that while the majority of registered electors are likely to confirm, 22 per cent of electors are unlikely to be confirmed. This average fell to 15 per cent where data matching was extended by LAs and VJBs to use local data sources. [Cabinet Office, The (2013) *Simplifying the transition to Individual Electoral Registration: full report*. London, The Cabinet Office.]

<sup>2</sup> Electoral Commission, The (2011) *Great Britain's Electoral Registers 2011*. London, The Electoral Commission. <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/our-work/our-research/electoral-registration-research>

<sup>3</sup> Electoral Commission, The (2008) *Students urged to find their voice* [Online] <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a-journalist/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-campaigns/students-urged-to-find-their-voice?> (accessed 25 June 2014)

Building on this the Cabinet Office conducted regression analysis to isolate those factors which have a significant impact on registration rates in England and Wales<sup>4</sup>. Lower rates of registration were found to be significantly associated with higher levels of: private renting; social renting; residents born outside of the UK; and 18-24 year olds and students.

Evidently in many cases, even LA and VJB activity tailored towards specific electors has the potential for wider impact. For example, the reach of publicity campaigns cannot always be controlled while individuals targeted by an activity might pass on messages to friends and family beyond the identified target group. It was therefore expected that the reach and impact of any funded activities could extend beyond the intended scope of a specific intervention.

## 2.2. Maximising registration fund

In July 2013 the Government announced £4.2 million would be made available to support activities aimed at maximising electoral registration, particularly among URGs. The first stage of delivering maximising registration activity saw funding awarded on a competitive basis to bidding LAs and VJBs. All activities of this first phase of activity were designed to run between 1 October 2013 and 17 February 2014 (England) and 10 March 2014 (Scotland and Wales), coinciding with the 2013/14 annual canvass and publishing of the updated electoral register. The annual canvass for 2013/14 was delayed in order to ensure the electoral register was as accurate as possible before commencement of the IER confirmation process. This summary report presents findings from this first phase of activity.

Since the allocation of these funds and commencement of activities, an announcement by the Minister of State for Cities and the Constitution on 5 February 2014 provided funding to all EROs in Great Britain for maximising registration, alongside five national organisations<sup>5</sup>. While the objectives for maximising registration remain unchanged, altering the distribution of the funds means that ultimately every LA and VJB will benefit from extra resources to help boost the completeness and accuracy of their register. Allocations were based on levels of under-registration by comparing the size of the register to the 16+ population. An element was based on the number of 16-18 year olds to encourage activity in schools to register attainers. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity and the recognition that EROs are best placed to determine what local activity can best drive up voter registration among URGs or specific areas of under-registration, the types of maximising registration activity were not mandated but guidance was made available on the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) website which LAs/VJBs can draw from<sup>6</sup>. Annex A,

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<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Office, The (2013) *Electoral Registration Analysis*. London, The Cabinet Office. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/electoral-registration-factors-in-england-and-wales>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-for-new-ways-to-encourage-voter-registration>

<sup>6</sup> Cabinet Office, The (2014) *Maximising Registration: Good practice guidance for Local Authorities*. London, The Cabinet Office. [http://www.aea-elections.co.uk/downloads/co\\_guidance\\_max\\_registration\\_funding\\_310114.pdf](http://www.aea-elections.co.uk/downloads/co_guidance_max_registration_funding_310114.pdf)

accompanying the full evaluation report, presents some early examples of phase two activities.

### 2.3. Summary of phase one bids

A total of 105 applications for the maximising registration fund were received (a number of these were joint applications encompassing several LA areas). Applications were assessed and scored against set criteria including components such as a feasible delivery plan, a focus on URGs and a justification of their anticipated costs. Applications were first scored by an assessment panel consisting of a core of three Electoral Registration Transformation Programme (ERTP) staff, plus a relevant policy expert based on the type of activity proposed. They were then subject to a moderation panel consisting of senior ERTP officials before final approval from the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform.

Following the selection process above, funding was subsequently awarded to 24 proposals in 2013<sup>7</sup>. This amounted to £385,848.28 being made available to support maximising registration activities. The total number of electors intended to be targeted by the original proposals was 203,978 with the median number targeted standing at 5,470 (an average of 8,499). Across the 24 grants this worked out at an average £1.89 per elector targeted, prospective costs ranging from £0.22 to £5.04.

The activities proposed by the successful LAs fell into three broad categories:

- Those which proposed publicity and communications activity to target URGs, for example radio adverts, posters, and workshops.
- Those which proposed partnership working with third parties such as housing associations, universities, and schools.
- Those which proposed undertaking traditional ERO activity such as additional, intensive, and super canvassing to target particular URGs, wards or non-responding households.

Of the 24 LAs awarded funding, the most popular type of activity was intensive canvassing with more than half of all bids focused here (thirteen, 54 per cent). Five LAs proposed to undertake publicity or communications campaigns (21 per cent), including all three of the joint-LA bids, and six intended to pursue partnership work (25 per cent).

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<sup>7</sup> Three of the 24 grants covered multiple LAs following joint bids: London (32 LAs); Manchester (10 LAs); and Cornwall (3 LAs). Only one evaluation has been required for each and so throughout the report these activities will be referred to as single LAs/VJBs.

The proposed activities intended to target a range of URGs. LAs identified where under-registration was particularly significant in their area and among which groups they felt their intervention would have most effect. Social renters, attainers and young people were the most frequently targeted with fourteen, ten and nine of the successful LAs focusing at least some of their activity here respectively. This corresponded with those groups more likely to be confirmed under IER. In many areas, multiple groups were targeted, sometimes through the same activities and sometimes with specific or tailored interventions *within* the overarching activity. In some cases there was also an element of overlap. Students for example were a specific target group for some EROs, particularly in university towns, but in others they may have been reached inadvertently within the arguably broader category of 'young people'.

The target groups often appeared to influence the type of activity pursued. Intensive canvassing was particularly popular for targeting social renters (local authorities would know where these properties were and therefore be able to identify the group more easily) while publicity and communications campaigns were more frequently proposed for targeting young people and attainers. Within this EROs also aimed to target particular barriers faced by different URGs in registering to vote. Publicity campaigns were therefore also often chosen for young people, particularly attainers, for their awareness raising potential. This builds on research which has suggested young people often lack knowledge and understanding of registration processes and eligibility<sup>8</sup>. Partnerships with housing networks was in contrast sought to tackle the challenge of frequent home movement of social and private renters.

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<sup>8</sup> GfK NOP (2012) *Under-registered groups & individual electoral registration*. London, The Cabinet Office. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/under-registered-groups-and-individual-electoral-registration>

## Chapter 3

# Methodology

In order to evaluate the registration fund and the activities supported by the funding all 24 LAs were requested to return to the Cabinet Office evaluation forms designed to capture a range of numerical data and written feedback. The aim was to receive information through which impact and process could be assessed<sup>1</sup>. There was a response rate of 92 per cent with 22 of 24 LAs returning evaluation forms. The type of data and feedback within this was varied – not all aspects of the evaluation were necessarily relevant to all activities while impact was often harder to quantify for publicity activity versus targeted canvasses. It has nevertheless been possible to analyse the responses and figures so that the experiences of every LA contribute to this report. Completed written feedback was received from 21 of the responding LAs. There are some cases of missing data in the quantitative evaluations, not least due to the accepted difficulties in estimating completeness and accuracy, particularly among URGs<sup>2</sup>. Sample sizes are referenced throughout the report.

With this relatively small sample of LAs, the 24 projects covering over 60 of the UK's 380 LAs, a word of caution must be issued. The findings in this report reflect the views of only a minority of LAs and cannot be used to generalise the impact that the maximising registration activities could experience elsewhere. Equally, the LAs do not form a random sample.

The evaluation feedback nevertheless provides an indication of what activities might work and among which group. It supports the identification of key lessons which LAs and VJBs might like to consider and where these are implemented, tested further. LAs and VJBs will be best placed, based on their local knowledge and expertise, to determine if and how these suggestions can be incorporated into their existing registration activities.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 4 in 'Maximising Electoral Registration: An evaluation of local activities' and Annexes B, C and D.

<sup>2</sup> Wilks-Heeg, S (2012) *Electoral registration in the United Kingdom: A literature review for the Cabinet Office Electoral Registration Transformation Programme*. London, The Cabinet Office.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/78883/IER\\_Literature\\_review\\_Feb\\_2012.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78883/IER_Literature_review_Feb_2012.pdf)

## Chapter 4

# Key findings

- Across sixteen of the 24 LAs there was a total increase of 116,311 names on the electoral register between 1 October 2013 and 17 February/10 March 2014. Across eight LAs there was a decrease of 16,317 electors (n=24)<sup>1</sup>. In many instances this reflected improvements in accuracy ahead of IER. This resulted in a total net increase of 99,994 electors across the funded authority areas (just under a 1 per cent increase).
- 30,633 new URG registrations related to maximising registration activity were recorded across the authority areas (n=17). These were identified by colour coded and marked registration forms and through the collection of registrations at scheduled events. A further 27,318 new young people were estimated to have registered in two cross-LA projects based on levels of engagement with the activities, amounting to a potential total of 57,591 new URG registrations.
- The average success rate (for all activities taken together), reflecting the number of electors registered from the number of unregistered individuals in the target URG population, was 32 per cent (n=18). This ranged from 3 per cent to an estimate of 85 per cent. The median suggests just under a third of those targeted (30 per cent) were registered through the activities. It should be acknowledged that these figures relate to registrations as a proportion of the outstanding target population. It is therefore not wholly unexpected that this average is not higher given the target populations in many cases meant a large number of individuals needed to be targeted within the relatively short timeframe of the activity and reporting period.
- Completeness of URG registration rates improved on average by nine percentage points (n=18). URGs increased their representation on the electoral register in all reporting cases.

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<sup>1</sup> Scotland and Wales ran a delayed canvass, publishing their electoral registers 10 March 2014. In England the register was published by LAs 17 February 2014.

- From the eighteen LAs for which such data is available, intensive canvassing, typically converted 46 per cent of targeted unregistered individuals into new electors (n=9). Publicity and communications campaigns had an average success rate of 21 per cent (n=5). Partnership activities demonstrated the least success at 13 per cent (n=4).
- On average, the cost per elector targeted was £1.84 (n=20) and cost per new registration (of the target group) directly resulting from the activity was £16.20 (n=19) with a range of £0.90 to £140.06 and a median cost of just over £5.00 (£5.86). This compares to an average expenditure per elector across England, Scotland, and Wales during the annual canvass 2010/11 of £1.12<sup>2</sup>. It is not wholly unexpected that the figures from the evaluation are higher than this average given the barriers to registration URGs often face and their habitual non-response to the annual canvass.
- Publicity and campaigns activity was the most expensive on average at £30.25 per registration although this figure is skewed by an outlier of £140.06 and affected by two estimated figures. If only the two activities for which actual figures have been reported are averaged, the outlier excluded, publicity campaigns report a cost of just £1.71 per registration making these the most cost-effective (but this is a small sample). Intensive canvassing activity recorded an average cost of £10.87 while partnership working was £11.96 per registration.
- The biggest expense reported was for staff (n=20). A total of £122,300.75 went towards meeting staff costs at an average of £6,115.04. This included employing additional canvassers, extending canvassers' contracts, allocating existing staff to maximising registration work, and appointing dedicated URG or maximising registration co-ordinators. In only one LA were there no additional staff costs incurred. Printing and design also created significant costs for the projects, but these were limited to only some of the activities. Design costs were incurred by seven of the activities, ranging from £150.00 to £5,500.00, while printing amounted to a total of £17,080.20 across sixteen activities, an average of £1,067.51. These included registration forms as well as posters, leaflets, flyers and further paper-based resources.

In addition to the key findings above, written feedback from the LAs provides valuable lessons on what worked well and among which URGs, how activities could be improved and/or made more cost effective, and the extent to which activities could be rolled out more widely and replicated in the future. More in-depth analysis of this qualitative data can be found in the full report. Focused on the three main activity types, the evaluation discussions have been used to highlight a number of lessons.

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<sup>2</sup> Electoral Commission, The (2012) *The Cost of Electoral Administration in Great Britain*. London, The Electoral Commission.  
[http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/152899/The-cost-of-electoral-registration-in-Great-Britain.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/152899/The-cost-of-electoral-registration-in-Great-Britain.pdf)

They present examples of good practice and suggestions for maximising URG registration in the future.

## Chapter 5

# Conclusion and lessons learnt

The experiences of the 24 LAs successful in receiving funding as part of the first stage of maximising registration activity present a large body of evidence to inform future strategies aimed at registering new and missing electors. Their feedback provides numerous examples of good practice as well as cases of where certain activities have been less successful, be this particular elements of an activity or their effectiveness in targeting some URGs versus others. Significantly, the activities have demonstrated that it is not impossible to encourage registration among individuals for whom non-registration and non-response to the annual canvass is habitual.

From the evaluation a number of lessons can be identified. These present a suggestions which electoral services teams may wish to consider as they seek to maximise registration rates in their areas in the future. They relate to each activity type as well as maximising registration work as a whole. EROs are best placed to determine which of the activity types will be most appropriate for their local areas and which groups they wish to engage. Nevertheless it is hoped that these suggestions will support LAs and VJBs in designing and planning maximising registration activities, and so meet ERO performance standards and increase the number of individuals on the electoral register.

Alongside this, Cabinet Office will continue to explore potential ways of improving the completeness and accuracy of the register beyond the launch of IER in Great Britain. While acknowledging the small sample size, the considerable amount of evidence collected through this exercise will be very important in helping to achieve this aim. In particular the findings of this report will play a vital role in informing future maximising registration strategy for this financial year and beyond.

## Lessons learnt

### Intensive canvassing: LAs and VJBs

**Lesson 1:** LAs/VJBs could explore the scope for using both national and local data, including previous canvass records, to identify specific non-responding properties to which intensive canvassing activity could be targeted, particularly in areas with high levels of social and private renting. Where possible this process could be used to permit personalised letters and information tailored specifically to the individuals being targeted.

**Lesson 2:** LAs/VJBs could consider the scope for maximising the number of personal visits to non-responding properties. One option to consider could be employing full-time canvassers to support additional visits during a shortened timeframe.

**Lesson 3:** LAs/VJBs could provide canvassers with URG and non-responding property specific training on registration issues specific to the group or community being targeted and on dealing with difficult customers.

**Lesson 4:** LAs/VJBs could consider the scope for offering payment-by-results financial incentives to canvassers as evidence suggests this is an effective way of driving more registrations.

**Lesson 5:** Council chief executives and the heads of key council departments could support electoral services and their canvassers by writing out to external partners such as property owners and housing associations ahead of any canvass activity. This can be used to inform individuals about their statutory duties, provide reassurance and prepare them for scheduled canvass visits.

**Lesson 6:** Intensive canvassing could be scheduled throughout the year based on local circumstances, planned events, and the URG being targeted. LAs/VJBs have the local knowledge to best determine when activity should occur either inside or outside the traditional annual canvass period.

## Partnership working: LAs and VJBs

**Lesson 7:** LAs/VJBs pursuing activities aimed at young people, students and attainers could give consideration to partnership working with council youth services which already possess the skills, knowledge and contacts to develop this type of work. This can extend to canvassing and publicity campaigns aimed at young people.

**Lesson 8:** Before embarking on any maximising registration activity, electoral services teams could try to assess their skills, knowledge and resource gaps and scope out both internal and external partners who may be able to fill these. This could be achieved through an internal skills audit alongside assessments of the target URG.

**Lesson 9:** Planning of partnership activity might want to allow time for key relationships to develop prior to activity delivery. This includes timing events/activity based on partners' expert knowledge as well as ensuring partners are free within their own work plans to commit time and resources to any activities.

**Lesson 10:** Where partners are delivering activity on their behalf, LAs/VJBs could consider whether these partners would benefit from training in registration and electoral processes in advance.

**Lesson 11:** Electoral services teams could benefit from seeking out opportunities to incorporate some degree of partnership working in the design and delivery of any form of maximising registration activity. This can have a longer-term impact and allows them to utilise existing skills, resources and networks within the council and community.

## Publicity campaigns: LAs and VJBs

**Lesson 12:** Publicity campaigns can be wide reaching and adopt a multi-channel approach which utilises a range of digital, social and print media alongside a significant focus on face-to-face outreach. They could still be targeted however, and backed up with smaller-scale tailored interventions.

**Lesson 13:** LAs/VJBs could think about how publicity campaigns can be developed beyond an initial activity period and to consider how they can be re-used and run alongside traditional canvass activity.

**Lesson 14:** Where it is important to reach a wide and diverse audience, electoral services teams could explore the scope for working with existing communication channels within the council as a relatively inexpensive way of transmitting messages across individuals in the authority area.

**Lesson 15:** When planning activities, electoral services could consider working with relevant URGs and partners to design and develop resources, messages and materials. This might involve focus groups, surveys, consultations and/or partnership working and would look to cover issues of tone, content, language and graphics.