



Cabinet Office

# **The UK Government's Response to the Electoral Commission's reports on the 2017 UK Parliamentary General Election**

***Incorporating a response to the Association of Electoral Administrator's report on the 2017 UK Parliamentary General Election***

November 2018



# Foreword

The UK is admired around the world for its democracy. We have worked for centuries to build our democracy and continue to protect it from the ever-changing forces that seek to threaten it. We inspire countries across the globe not just because of our achievements - we have a record number of people on the electoral register - but also because we demonstrate our commitment to defending democracy through action.

I am pleased to publish the Government's response to the Electoral Commission's (EC) reports on the 2017 UK General Election, which also responds to the Association of Electoral Administrators' (AEA) review of the 2017 General Election. Their reports help us to ensure that our democracy remains world-leading by identifying current challenges and opportunities. On behalf of the Government I would like to express my gratitude to the EC and the AEA for their comprehensive reports and continuous support in upholding the integrity of our electoral system.

I welcome the EC's finding that overall the 2017 General Election was well run. I am grateful to all of the organisations that contributed to the effective running and monitoring of the election, especially in light of the relatively short notice period prior to the early General Election. We recognise that an unscheduled poll of this nature requires significant effort to implement and run successfully.

As the EC pointed out in its report, the 2017 General Election had the highest turnout at a UK General Election since 1997. I am pleased to see such a high level of engagement and we will continue to work towards delivering the most inclusive election ever by 2022. This will be undertaken in line with ensuring our elections are secure, and whilst continuing to improve the accessibility of the registration and elections processes.

The Government's response examines the relevant issues raised by both the EC and the AEA. It looks at the administration of elections, the regulation of electoral campaigning and finance, and electoral registration, and it sets out the Government's intention to act on some of the recommendations made.

We also recently published a response to the Call for Evidence on Accessibility of Elections<sup>1</sup> which takes into account issues relating to disabled people and access to

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<sup>1</sup> Government Response Call for Evidence: Access to Elections. Available online here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/736710/Government\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_Call\\_for\\_Evidence\\_on\\_Access\\_to\\_Elections\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/736710/Government_response_to_the_Call_for_Evidence_on_Access_to_Elections_.pdf)

elections. We have not incorporated that here but it will be helpful for readers to also look at that response.

The UK is already a world-leader when it comes to defending democracy. This Government wants to improve our systems even further. We recognise that the best way for voters to have confidence and pride in our democracy is by making sure every voice is able to be heard.

**Chloe Smith**  
**Minister for the Constitution**

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# Introduction

The Government welcomes the Electoral Commission's (EC) reports on the 8 June 2017 General Election: '*The administration of the June 2017 UK general election*', '*Electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election*', and '*Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election*'. The Government is also grateful for the Association of Electoral Administrators' (AEA) report on the 2017 General Election '*It's time for urgent and positive Government action*', which we have looked at in conjunction with the EC's reports.

As the reports reflect, the early 2017 General Election took place one month after the May 2017 Local Government Elections. The early election saw the largest amount of people ever registered to vote for any UK-wide poll, and had the highest turnout of a UK General Election since 1997. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in running the 2017 elections, and encourage the continued engagement of electors across polls.

The Government is committed to building a democracy that works for everyone. As such it is crucially important that we continue to ensure that our electoral system is fair and secure and efficiently run. In the past 12 months the Government has undertaken a range of projects aimed at improving the electoral process. In May 2018 voter ID pilots were trialled in 5 local authorities. In June the Individual Electoral Registration Digital Service was successfully launched in Northern Ireland. In the same month we also launched the public consultation, *Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information*, which seeks views on proposed measures aimed at ensuring a healthy and vibrant political debate. We also recently published the *Government's Response to the Call for Evidence: Access to Elections*, which sets out actions that will be carried forward to ensure that elections are accessible.

The Government is committed to ensuring a flourishing and secure democracy and through these measures it is acting to promote the integrity of our electoral system.

We have taken the time to reflect on the issues and recommendations raised in the EC and the AEA's reports. This response addresses the majority of those recommendations, and sets out the actions we are taking to improve our elections. Section 1 deals with the administration of elections, section 2 addresses the regulation of electoral campaigning and finance, and section 3 looks at electoral registration.

# Section 1: Administration of Elections

## Electoral Fraud - Pickles report

The EC recommended that *“The UK’s Government should introduce legislation required to implement the relevant recommendations from Sir Eric Pickles’ review of electoral fraud. The UK Government has already responded and has accepted the majority of Sir Eric’s recommendations, and it should set out its plans for implementing them.”*

The EC outlined its continued support for the recommendations made by (the then) Sir Eric Pickles to strengthening the integrity of the proxy voting system.<sup>2</sup> In particular the EC noted support for the recommendation to clarify the offences around compelling or preventing someone applying for a proxy vote.

As set out in the Government’s response<sup>3</sup> to the Pickles report we accept the majority of the recommendations made. The Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) Board, whose membership includes the EC, the AEA and the Cabinet Office, is overseeing delivery of the Government’s response to the Pickles report. The Board is considering the way forward on a number of recommendations made in the report, including recommendations made on proxy voting. We will continue to consider how to improve the integrity of electoral processes more generally, with the intention that this becomes a programme of work.

One issue identified in the Pickles report was that voters should be required to produce a form of identification before being allowed to vote. In line with its manifesto commitment the Government intends to legislate to ensure that a form of identification must be presented before voting. The EIP Board is currently prioritising the delivery and implementation of voter ID and the process was tested through pilot schemes at the May 2018 elections. In order for us to have a deeper understanding of how voter ID will work on a wider scale and what works best for voters, we plan to continue to pilot voter ID at next year’s local elections. The evaluation from the poll will be taken into account and used to shape how the final policy will look when it is introduced.

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<sup>2</sup> Securing the ballot - Report of Sir Eric Pickles’ review into electoral fraud. Available online here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/545416/eric\\_pickles\\_report\\_electoral\\_fraud.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/545416/eric_pickles_report_electoral_fraud.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> A Democracy that Works for Everyone: A Clear and Secure Democracy Government response to Sir Eric Pickles’ review of electoral fraud. Available online here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/Government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/580514/Government-response-sir-eric-pickles-review-electoral-fraud.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/Government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/580514/Government-response-sir-eric-pickles-review-electoral-fraud.pdf)

## **Absent voting**

Several recommendations were made by both the EC and the AEA in relation to absent voting procedures. In particular concerns about emergency proxy voting, overseas voting and postal voting were raised.

### ***Emergency proxy voting***

The EC referred to concerns raised at several recent elections about the law on emergency proxy voting and recommended that emergency proxies should be extended to allow people to appoint an emergency proxy if they have:

- unforeseen caring responsibilities; or
- experienced the death of a close relative.

Similarly the AEA recommended the circumstances and criteria for emergency proxy applications should be reviewed. The AEA also stated that their members have seen an increased volume of emergency applications and they queried whether the current deadline of 5pm on polling day to request an emergency proxy vote remains appropriate.

There are provisions for electors to apply for an emergency proxy in the event of a medical emergency and on the grounds of business or military service. Nonetheless the Government recognises that certain circumstances may arise close to polling day that render electors unable to get to their polling station to vote.

The Government takes the view that in order to maintain the integrity of the electoral process, the emergency proxy provision should not be drawn too widely. However, although it is not possible for legislation to cover all possible circumstances which may prevent an elector from voting at short notice, the Government will consider the process of emergency proxy applications and the circumstances in which they can be issued.

### ***Overseas voters***

A significant number of overseas voters participated in the 2017 elections, and this number has increased since the 2010 and 2015 General Elections. We want to ensure that the voice of every eligible elector can be heard and we acknowledge the issues raised by the EC and the AEA in relation to the arrangements for overseas electors.

The EC recommended that access to the overseas voting process should be improved. It noted that it would work with *“the UK Government and Returning Officers to develop workable and effective proposals to make it easier for overseas electors to cast their votes in time to be counted at elections, which could be included in future legislation to extend the franchise for British citizens overseas.”*

The Government is committed to making our electoral system as accessible as possible. In line with our manifesto commitment, we will legislate for votes for life for British overseas electors to remove the 15 year restriction that prevents overseas citizens from participating in elections.

The AEA pointed out that that some electors have limited understanding of the process of voting from overseas and expressed concern about the significant number of overseas voters who did not seek an absent vote when registering to vote. This led to issues in subsequently organising voting arrangements. The AEA recommended that overseas electors should be required to make suitable absent voting arrangements at the time they register to vote.

The EC also highlighted that in some cases there was not enough time to ensure that an overseas elector could receive, completed and return a postal vote to the returning officer before close of poll.

The Government recognises the difficulties with postal voting from overseas and has already amended the timetable for parliamentary elections to maximise the time available for postal vote packs to be printed, posted and returned. It also recognises the pressures on Electoral Administrators when dealing with last minute requests.

The Government must look to strike the right balance between providing a system which is accessible to overseas electors, workable for electoral administrators and protects the security and integrity of electoral registration. We agree that overseas electors should be encouraged to register as early as possible ahead of the registration deadline and will look to further improve the messaging on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) to more clearly highlight the need to make an absent vote application and the choices open to people living abroad.

The Government will continue to work with the EC and the AEA and other relevant stakeholders to improve the voting process for overseas electors.

## ***Postal voting***

The EC found that just under 18% of the total electorate requested to receive a postal vote for the 2017 General Election. Given the take up of postal voting, it is essential that this method of voting is efficiently run.

We recognise the additional pressure that was faced in administering the 2017 General Election given the relatively short notice of the election. We appreciate the EC's commitment to work with Government, and through the Electoral Coordination and Advisory Board to improve this process. We will continue to work with the EC, Royal Mail, electoral administrators and suppliers to seek to ensure the system can work effectively.

In its report the AEA recommended that the involvement of campaigners in handling and/or assisting with the completion of postal ballot papers should be prohibited. The Government agrees with this approach. There is currently a Government supported Private Members' Bill in the House of Commons which aims to introduce this policy and to apply a limit on how many postal votes a person can hand in at a polling station. It is important that the public can have confidence in the electoral process and that we address areas of concern that can lead to negative perceptions.

The AEA also recommended that postal vote applications requesting a signature waiver should require an attestation. We note that a similar recommendation was made by (the then) Sir Eric Pickles. The Government supports this recommendation, and will look for an opportunity to implement it.

## **Double voting**

The EC highlighted concerns of potential 'double voting' by some electors, and recommended that the Government should "*explore mechanisms to reduce risk of people voting in more than one constituency*". The EC recommended that "*the Government should also consider other options for reducing this risk, such as requiring people who are lawfully registered to vote in local Government elections for more than one local authority area to choose which of those addresses they will vote at for UK Parliamentary general elections.*"

The Government takes reports of people voting twice very seriously. Some electors, such as those who study or work away from home on a long term basis, are entitled to be registered to vote in more than one local authority area. However it is illegal to vote in more than one location at a General Election or at other national polls such as a referendum.

We are grateful to the EC for its offer to work with Government to tackle this issue including considering options to make it clearer to citizens that voting more than once at a General Election or other national polls is illegal.

Additionally, following the 2017 General Election, Ministers convened a meeting with the Electoral Commission and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) on the issue of double voting, with the NPCC confirming that the police had undertaken thorough and comprehensive investigations into any reported cases of double voting. Going forward, the Government plans to continue this engagement with the Electoral Commission and colleagues at the NPCC every 6 months, in order to ensure we can continue to review progress and work together in reducing the risk of double voting.

### **Commonly used names on ballot papers**

Both the EC and the AEA made recommendations in relation to updating the law on candidates' commonly used names.

The EC recommended that *“For all elections where it is not already the case, the UK’s Governments should ensure that the law does not require that a candidate’s commonly used name must be different from any other forename or surname that they have. The law should retain existing safeguards that Returning Officers may reject a commonly used name on the grounds that it is likely to mislead or confuse electors, or it is obscene or offensive.”*

The AEA made a similar recommendation.

The Government is aware of the issue around the use of commonly used names on ballot papers and it supports the recommendations made. We will keep this matter under review and we will look for an opportunity to consider amending the relevant legislation to clarify the use of commonly used names on ballot papers.

### **Restriction of home addresses**

We note the AEA’s concerns about the requirement for candidates’ home addresses to appear on ballot papers. Similar concerns have also been raised by others, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, in its report *‘Intimidation in Public Life’*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Intimidation in Public Life. A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Available online here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/666927/6.3637\\_CO\\_v6\\_061217\\_Web3.1\\_2\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/666927/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1_2_.pdf)

The Government is working to address this issue and to make appropriate amendments to secondary legislation to implement the recommendation that the requirement for candidates' home addresses to appear on ballot papers at local and mayoral elections should be removed. We are currently working through the detail, and how the provisions could be implemented in practice. As part of this, we have sought the views of the EC and the AEA and are grateful for their helpful input to date.

The AEA also recommended that the requirement for election agent's home address to be published should be removed. We are considering this recommendation as part of our work to remove candidates' home addresses.

## **Electoral timelines**

The AEA made several recommendations to amend electoral deadlines, including the period to return deposits, the absent voting registration deadline, and the time in which the counting of votes must commence. Each of the current timelines for the various polls and actions are set out to take into consideration the circumstances of both electors and administrations. The Government has no plans to amend current timelines.

The Government also notes the AEA's recommendation to undertake a review of the combination of polls. This is an area that the Government recognises can raise challenges. The Government has worked with the EC, the AEA and Returning Officers in recent years on this matter and we will continue to work with stakeholders to identify issues and how they can be addressed.

## **Legislation**

The AEA suggested a number of legislative amendments and clarifications, which we will take into consideration in due course. In particular the AEA commented on the complexity of electoral law and recommended that "*a single Electoral Administration Act should be brought forward*".

The Government's priority in this policy area is to address specific issues with targeted legislation, rather than seeking to wrap all electoral proposals up into one overarching bill that, by its nature, could not be dealt with quickly.

## **Funding**

The Government notes the AEA's recommendation to review the funding of national elections. We are currently in the process of reviewing several aspects of the funding

system, as it relates to use of the Consolidated Fund monies provided to statutorily independent Returning Officers, including a review of the funding model to ensure that funding allocations accurately reflect the cost of national elections moving forward. As part of this process, a full review of the Returning Officers' guidance, the expenses claim form and the current processes is also underway.

Registration funding is separate from elections funding, with registration processes largely funded through the Revenue Support Grant provided by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Significant additional funding is also provided by the Modern Registration Division at the Cabinet Office via a separate two-stage process which supports the costs of Individual Electoral Registration. Including payments for the registration process in the funding allocations for the conduct of national polls would entail fundamentally reviewing the current sources of funding. It would also require changes to primary legislation as the funds for running elections are paid directly to Returning Officers, whereas it is the Electoral Registration Officers on the other hand who are responsible for the registration process.

The Government is working closely with the AEA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE - which represents Returning Officers) on issues related to the funding of polls.

## **Electoral processes**

The AEA made several recommendations to examine different electoral processes, including a recommendation to review nomination arrangements. The provisions currently in place for the nomination process each have a particular purpose. For example the requirement that a candidate must have subscribers is in place to ensure that any candidate can be shown to have a level of support within the electoral area. The requirement for a deposit is to deter candidates who are not serious about standing. These provisions are not intended to restrict participation in the democratic process, and the Government does not plan to review these nomination arrangements.

They was also recommended that the feasibility of electronic forms of counting should be examined. Whilst electronic counting (e-counting) is used in a small number of polls in the UK, this is for specific purposes (for example the complexity of counting STV ballots or the need for a result by a particular time). There is no intention for the Government to consider its use more widely given concerns about costs, transparency and the integrity of the counting process.

## **Other recommendations**

The AEA reiterated its previous recommendation to introduce a formal complaints system to provide for a local system of accountability. As the AEA noted the Government has previously accepted a similar recommendation made by the Law Commission. We continue to work with the Law Commission to progress with this recommendation.

The AEA recommended that “*EROs should be given responsibility for the subdivision of UK parliamentary constituencies into polling districts, and ROs for the designation of polling places within those districts.*” The Government considers that the current arrangements whereby local authorities are responsible for designating polling places and carrying out reviews, ensures that there is a clear and consistent approach, and a clear line of accountability. There are no plans to change these existing arrangements.

We note the AEA’s recommendation to evaluate the use of the International Business Response Licence for postal votes. The Government intends to continue its use as recommended by the EC and will consider how its effectiveness can be evaluated.

# Section 2: Regulation of electoral campaigning and finance

## Electoral Commission powers

In its November 2017 report, *'Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election'* the EC recommended *"that online campaign material produced by political parties and non-party campaigners should – like its printed equivalent – be required to include an imprint stating who has published it. This would enable voters to identify who is spending money on trying to influence them at elections. Our recommendation would require secondary legislation to be introduced by the UK Government and approved by the UK Parliament. It will also require secondary legislation to be made by the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales in relation to elections to those legislatures."*

On 29 July 2018 the Government launched the *'Protecting the Debate: Intimidating, Influence and Information'* consultation, which included a section on whether the rules on imprints, which currently exist for printed electoral material, should be extended to online electoral material. The consultation covers high level questions around the definition of electoral material, the timeframe for when the rules could apply and what forms of digital communications could be covered. We are awaiting the outcome of this consultation, which will inform our thinking in this area. The consultation will close at midnight on 22 October 2018 and it can be found online at [gov.uk](http://gov.uk).

The EC also made the following recommendations concerning sanctions for breaches of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), and the enforcement and sanctioning for breaches of the candidate spending rules:

*"We continue to recommend that the Commission should be able to impose sanctions that are proportionate to the levels of spending now routinely handled by parties and campaigners."*

*We continue to strongly recommend that the Electoral Commission's investigative and sanctioning powers at major elections should be extended to include offences relating to candidate spending and donations, as well as for political party and non-party campaigners. This would help ensure compliance with the rules at national elections and strengthen voters' trust in the regulatory system."*

The Government is considering these recommendations in the round, alongside other recommendations made recently by organisations such as the Information Commissioner's Office and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.

The Electoral Commission has civil sanctioning powers that apply to referendums and elections. More serious criminal matters can and are referred to the police, and then considered by a court of law. The courts have the power to levy unlimited fines. Political parties are voluntary organisations; the Government is also mindful of the need to avoid disproportionate regulation which could discourage volunteering and undermine local democracy.

Electoral rules relating to candidates are set out in the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1983, whereas a system for regulating parties and campaigners did not exist until the introduction of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which legislated for the creation of the EC. Given that the rules relating to candidates are set out in the RPA 1983, any change in this area would require primary legislation.

### **Spending returns**

The EC recommends that Returning Officers should be required to publish candidates' election spending returns online to ensure transparency. The EC also suggests that the rules should be amended to ensure that spending returns provide detailed breakdowns of spending. The EC recommends that spending rules should be reformed to provide sufficient transparency of the money that political parties spend on staffing for their election campaigns.

The spending return framework is also addressed by the AEA, who recommend that there should be a full and thorough review of the processes that deal with the recording of candidates' expenses, including the reporting of, expenses to Returning Officers and the possible provision of online reporting and inspection mechanisms.

The Government will continue to work with the AEA, the EC, SOLACE and other stakeholders to review the reporting mechanisms and regulations around spending returns. This includes spending returns in the context of technological advances and the growing use of social media in election campaigns.

The Government will also work with the EC on the creation of Codes of Practice for registered political parties and candidates. The Codes will provide guidance on election expenses for the purposes of reporting.

## **Non-party campaigners**

In the report '*Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election*', the EC suggest that there could be misplaced perceptions about the non-party campaigning rules which could limit their participation in campaigning. The EC outline their aim of ensuring that candidates, political parties and non-party campaigners can understand and follow the rules.

The Government will continue to work with the EC to ensure that the political finance rules are clear and provide effective regulation of non-party campaigners.

## **Access and supply of the electoral register**

The AEA made the following recommendation concerning access and supply of the electoral register, "*A full and thorough review of the access and supply arrangements that apply to the electoral register and the lists of absent voters should be undertaken, to include consideration of those that relate to candidates, political parties and third parties such as Credit Reference Agencies.*"

A balance must be struck between ensuring that only genuine candidates have access to the register, while also ensuring that there is a level playing field for both independent and other candidates. The Government will consider this issue with the EC, the AEA and other stakeholders, to examine what might be done in this area. On other issues, the Government is content with the access and supply provisions which apply to both the full and edited/open electoral register, and does not intend to make any change to these arrangements at this time.

## **Referendums**

The AEA made the following recommendation about the administration of the referendum, "*The UK Government should consider legislative provision for the appointment of sub-agents for future referendums.*"

Referendums held under PPERA have not previously allowed for sub-agents to be appointed by referendum agents. This is a matter we will consider further with the AEA in light of the points they have raised.

## Section 3: Electoral Registration

With the aim of delivering the most inclusive election ever by 2022 we have embarked on a series of projects to promote registration in addition to improving the registration system for administrators, such as with Canvass Reform. Given the limited availability of parliamentary time, as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union, the options to legislate in this area will be limited.

### Individual Electoral Registration Digital Service

#### *Changes to the Register to Vote website*

Our approach to the operation of this highly successful service reflects a determination to continually improve it. We find the insights of key stakeholders, such as the EC and AEA, into the functioning of the website, valuable in this context.

Recent action to improve the website includes improving the content on the homepage of the Register to Vote website to help reduce the number of duplicate applications, by making clear the circumstances under which it is necessary to submit an application to register to vote. Results have been positive, with one benefit being the more effective triaging of citizens. There has been a significant decrease in the number of users submitting unnecessary applications, with a corresponding increase in the numbers exiting the homepage since the change was made. This suggests the reforms are having the desired effect.

Furthermore, we have also:

- Completed an accessibility audit to ensure the Register to Vote website is accessible for all UK citizens. The recommendations were implemented swiftly, meaning the service is easier to engage with for people with visual impairments. From now on, such audits will be conducted annually;
- Ensured the website supports recent changes to the law to make anonymous registration easier, by adding a link to the application from the homepage, making the anonymous registration application easier to find;
- Reviewed the technical operation of the postcode database to allow more regular updates, ensuring citizens living in new homes with new postcodes can apply to register to vote more easily;

- Changed the communication preference option in the user journey to default to email to help make it easier for EROs to contact citizens about their application – as a result nearly 9/10 online applicants now enter their email address;
- Provided more guidance about how citizens with protected national insurance numbers can apply to register to vote;
- Improved information for applicants on how long it will take for their application to be processed, therefore managing their expectations and reducing confusion, and
- Added a ‘what happens next’ page at the end of the user journey to further explain the application process, which has also helped to reduce queries to EROs and enhance the user experience.

We will continue to work with the electoral community, and act on feedback, to ensure the website meets user needs and retains consistently high user satisfaction ratings.

### ***Voter Registration Online Look Up Tool***

Both the EC and the AEA raise the issue of duplicate applications to register to vote and the adverse impact this may have on administrators’ ability to effectively and efficiently maintain their local electoral register.

We recognise that large numbers of duplicate applications in the run up to an election represents an administrative burden at what is already a very busy time. We note that some have advocated the introduction of an online tool for checking registration status in order to reduce the volume of unnecessary re-applications.

We have investigated the feasibility of implementing an online ‘look up’ tool. Our investigations revealed that there would be very significant barriers to building such a tool, including security barriers. Even if these could be overcome, the citizen demand for a look up tool is not clear and the results provided by a tool may not be comprehensible to many citizens. What is more, the costs of a look up tool are estimated to far exceed the cost of duplicate applications. However, we intend to keep options for addressing unnecessary duplicate applications under review. As part of this commitment, we recently held a workshop to discuss this issue with partners, including electoral administrators, the Electoral Commission and electoral software suppliers.

## ***Northern Ireland***

We note the EC's comment that '*online electoral registration has transformed access to elections and referendums for voters in Great Britain, and we want the Chief Electoral Officer to make progress to extend online registration to Northern Ireland as quickly as possible*'. The digital service was successfully introduced in Northern Ireland on 17 June this year, and has a user satisfaction regularly above 90 per cent. This clearly reflects that the Government's Register to Vote website is responding to and satisfying the needs of the modern citizen in this digital age.

## **Annual Canvass**

### ***Canvass Reform***

The current canvass process is widely seen to be too paper-based and too prescriptive in addition to being unsustainable and the Government agrees with the EC and the AEA about the need for reform.

Along with the EC, we published our findings from the 2016/17 Canvass Pilots in June and have since embarked on developing plans for delivering canvass reform. The evidence from the pilots points towards a hybrid model for canvass reform, taking the best bits from each of the pilot models. At the centre of this new model will be a data discernment step using national and local data. In developing canvass reform, thought will be given as to how to ensure EROs are able to effectively access and utilise the data required to support them in this data driven approach. The Government is now working in partnership with the EC and organisations representing administrators to develop the detail of this hybrid model.

The Government aims to deliver reform in time for the 2020 Annual Canvass and is now consulting on the proposed model with the electoral community and wider interested parties, ahead of laying legislation in Parliament next year. We are grateful to the EC and AEA for their input into these plans.

### ***Better use of Data***

Both the EC and AEA highlight the potential positive use and impact of Management Information (MI) data to assist EROs in managing and maintaining accurate electoral registers, especially when it comes to better targeting resources more effectively.

EROs currently have access to a select range of Management Information (MI) which is collected through their Electoral Management Systems. The Cabinet Office is running a Better Metrics project in conjunction with the EC which aims to explore

the benefit to EROs of developing, enhancing and focussing MI reporting functionality so that it is clear, reliable and easy to access.

Over the last 18 months, the Cabinet Office and the EC have been working on this project, alongside the SAA, AEA and a number of ESMs. The aim has been to create a supply of high quality and comparable metrics which will help inform both the EC and EROs on issues of registration activity and performance.

## **Electoral Registration in the UK**

### ***The costs of electoral registration***

We share the EC's concerns about the costs associated with electoral registration. Finding ways of reducing the cost of the annual canvass was one of the primary objectives of the 2016 and 2017 canvass pilots and our subsequent plans for reform. Before these reforms are introduced, we are committed to funding the net additional costs arising from Individual Electoral Registration. Last year, we allocated £18.2m in initial allocations and additional funding, as a result of the Justification Led Bids (JLBs). The Cabinet Office notes some opposition to the current process of dual funding for electoral registration. However, the Government has no plans to change the way payments are made to Local Authorities.

### ***Understanding registration barriers***

We note the AEA's recommendations to promote registration amongst under registered groups, such as those residing in care homes and students. As part of our commitment to building a democracy that works for everyone, we want to continue to build our understanding of how citizens interact with our democratic processes. We will continue to develop policies and projects in partnership with others who know those under registered groups best, with the collective aim of increasing voter registration and democratic participation.

Last December we published a Democratic Engagement Plan<sup>5</sup> which sets out how to tackle democratic exclusion and increase participation among under registered groups, over a 5 year period. This includes the projects being delivered as part of the Suffrage Centenary Fund and National Democracy Week, which took place in July.

As part of that plan, work to promote student electoral registration continues. A condition on student electoral registration was included in the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017. The aim of this provision is to improve

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<sup>5</sup> Every Voice Matters: Building A Democracy That Works For Everyone. Available online here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/669130/democratic\\_engagement\\_strategy\\_2017.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669130/democratic_engagement_strategy_2017.PDF)

understanding among Higher Education providers of their legal duties to comply with ERO requests for information and promote electoral registration within their student populations.

Earlier this year Government issued Ministerial Guidance<sup>6</sup> to the Office for Students (OfS) who are responsible for implementing the provision among registered Higher Education (HE) providers. Since then, the OfS has finalised its guidance to the sector<sup>7</sup>, which includes a number of examples of good practice. We believe the approach being taken to student electoral registration will benefit both universities and EROs by increasing providers' understanding of the requirements of existing legislation and in turn increasing registration rates among student populations. This work will be evaluated in due course and the Government will continue to engage with the EC and AEA on this issue.

### ***Integration into other public services***

The Government notes the EC's points regarding integrating registration with other public services. We currently publish reminder register to vote messages on our high traffic GOV.UK pages, such as DVLA and HMRC in the run up to electoral registration deadlines and remain open to further opportunities in the future.

### ***Automatic registration***

We take note of the EC's points regarding automatic registration. The Government is not considering introducing automatic registration which is not compatible with the fundamental principles of IER – of which the EC was a strong advocate.

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, *Facilitating Electoral Registration, Guidance to the Office for Students*. Available here:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1113/facilitating-electoral-registration-guidance.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Office for Students, *Guidance for providers about facilitating electoral registration*. Available online here:

[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/a7f9baff-47bd-444f-a215-0cf2a5f57951/ofs2018\\_36.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/a7f9baff-47bd-444f-a215-0cf2a5f57951/ofs2018_36.pdf)

# Conclusion

The unscheduled early UK General Election in June 2017 posed a significant challenge for all involved in delivering elections in the UK. The Government recognises and appreciates the efforts of stakeholders to ensure our elections were successfully delivered.

We welcome the reports of the EC and the AEA as a means of identifying issues to be considered for the future. Their analysis helps the Government to monitor the effectiveness of elections and to ensure electoral policy continues to develop to address current challenges.

This response has sought to address their concerns and to demonstrate the Government's electoral priorities. We look forward to continuing to work with the EC, the AEA and other organisations to progress electoral policy and to maintain a democracy that works for everyone.