HM Government

Simplifying the transition to Individual Electoral Registration

An evaluation of the 'confirmation dry run' – using data matching to confirm electors on the electoral register

Summary

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Acknowledgements

Ministerial foreword

The electoral register is a key building block of our democracy. The Government sees both registering to vote and voting as civic duties and we strongly encourage people to do both. The introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in Great Britain will modernise the way people register to vote, help to tackle electoral fraud and improve confidence in the electoral register. Registration will become an individual responsibility rather than an act carried out by just one person in each household.

The transition to IER is scheduled to begin in 2014 in England, Wales and Scotland in line with the Implementation Plan we published in summer 2012, although this timing will be confirmed later this year. In Scotland, the transition will be delayed until after the Independence Referendum on 18 September so that these two important events do not overlap and potentially cause confusion for electors. Any new applications made after the transition has begun will be an IER application and must include the applicant's date of birth (DOB) and National Insurance Number (NINO) so that their identity can be verified, increasing the integrity of the register.

The first major step in transition will be the matching of existing electoral registers against records held by the Department for Work and Pensions – 'confirmation'. This report sets out the findings from a complete national test carried out in the summer of 2013 of the process which will automatically confirm the majority of electors on the register during the transition to IER in 2014. The test (the confirmation dry run) involved the matching of all 380 registers, with around 46m people, against Department for Work and Pensions data, using the process, IT, and people who will do it for real next year. The results are very positive: 78% of electors matched, higher than achieved by our previous pilots in 2012 and 2011, and local data matching has the potential to add an average of 7%. This means that most electors will not need to apply under IER unless their circumstances change (e.g. they move house), and that the risk of a drop in the register during transition is therefore significantly reduced. However, we are aware that there is still work to do to register the remaining electors who will not be confirmed as well as those who are currently not registered.

We have identified lessons to be learned from this exercise, but it is a positive example of collaboration between the Cabinet Office, Government Digital Service,

Department for Work and Pensions and Electoral Registration Officers (and administrators), their suppliers, using data to simplify the citizens' experience of public services. It has also shown the success of the IT system in place to help ensure the change happens as smoothly as possible.

Introduction and methodology

The current system of electoral registration is based on an annual household canvass sent to each address, which is completed by one individual on behalf of everyone who lives in the house. In 2014 this will be replaced by a system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and individuals will have to provide personal identifiers such as National Insurance Numbers (NINOs) and dates of birth (DOBs) to register.

One of the key aims of the Government is to ensure that the electoral register remains as complete and accurate as possible under IER. The Cabinet Office have conducted a series of data matching pilots since 2011 and these have identified the use of data held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to confirm individuals currently on the electoral register without requiring them to provide personal identifiers – these people can be 'passported' across to the new system. This will allow electoral administrators to focus their limited resources on the minority of electors who cannot be confirmed as well as those currently not registered.
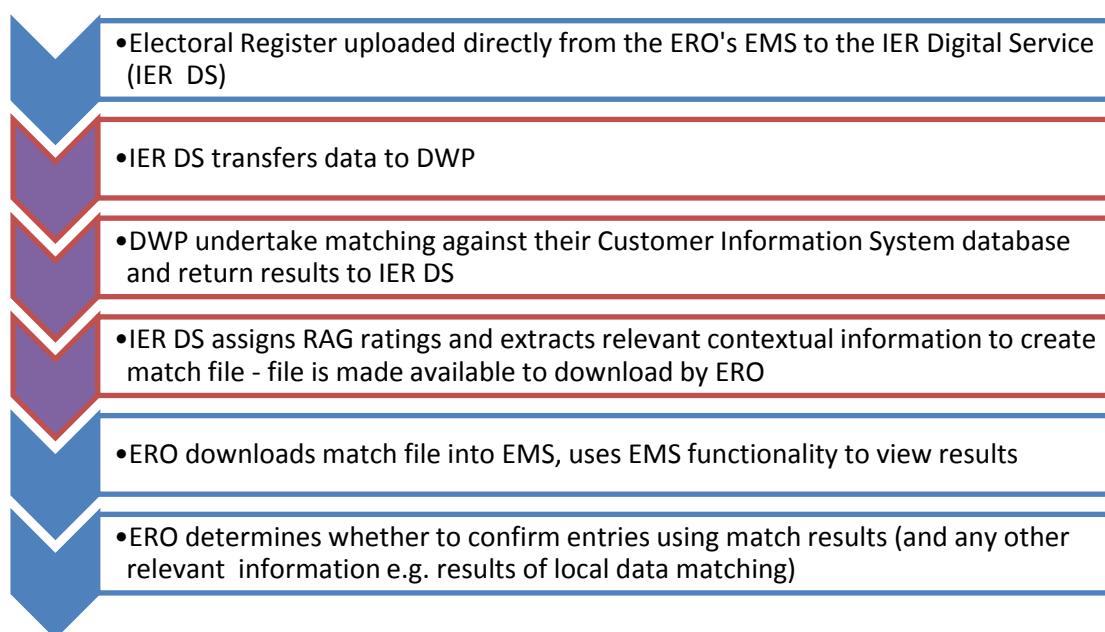
Pilots conducted in 2011 suggested that 66% of existing electors might be confirmed using this process. However, those pilots did not set out to test confirmation and so further pilots were undertaken in 2012 to specifically test data matching for the purposes of confirmation and to check the accuracy of the data. These pilots found that around 70% of electors could be confirmed. The pilots also found that the vast majority of electors who were matched in the pre-canvass register (95%) were subsequently confirmed as resident at the same address during the annual canvass – showing that we can be confident in the accuracy of the data.

The confirmation pilots in 2012 took place in 14 areas and were a chance to develop the matching algorithm – working with both technical experts at DWP and five 'beacon' local authorities – and test the accuracy of the data. They were not, however, able to fully test the IER Digital Service (IER DS) as the connections to transfer the data from the local authorities to the IER DS and from the IER DS to DWP were not ready (and were not planned to be at that stage). The data was therefore transferred, as planned, to and from the pilot areas by secure courier and was sent as CSV files rather than via reports within Electoral Management Software

(EMS) – meaning that Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) were required to analyse the data independently as opposed to using reporting functionality in their software. The Confirmation Dry Run (CDR) was therefore planned and conducted during the summer of 2013. This was an opportunity to test a fully IT enabled dry run of the confirmation process ahead of it happening in a live environment in 2014.

Every local authority in England and Wales and all Scottish Valuation Joint Boards were required to participate in the CDR. The figure below sets out the process for matching.

Figure 1: Outline confirmation process (Steps in light blue require no action from the ERO)

- Electoral Register uploaded directly from the ERO's EMS to the IER Digital Service (IER DS)
- IER DS transfers data to DWP
- DWP undertake matching against their Customer Information System database and return results to IER DS
- IER DS assigns RAG ratings and extracts relevant contextual information to create match file - file is made available to download by ERO
- ERO downloads match file into EMS, uses EMS functionality to view results
- ERO determines whether to confirm entries using match results (and any other relevant information e.g. results of local data matching)

Notes: Steps in light blue require no action from the ERO. In live-running, once the steps outlined above are complete local areas will carry-out follow-up action, including writing to individuals who have been confirmed to notify them their details have been transferred to the IER register and issuing invitations to register for those individuals who have not been confirmed.

All areas were scheduled to upload their registers on a specific day and could then download their match results 5 working days afterwards. The results were available in their EMS system which then allowed electoral administrators to view their match results – electors were given a red, amber or green rating. A green match indicated a positive result, amber indicated a possible match and a red match indicated that no match could be found. Some contextual information was also provided to inform administrators what for example had failed, e.g. address.

Administrators had the option of conducting additional local data matching if they chose. This had the potential to confirm additional electors using local sources of data such as council tax or housing benefit data. They could also check DWP green matches if they chose to but this was used less frequently.

Reports were produced within the EMS system and sent to the Cabinet Office (and subsequently the Electoral Commission (EC) for their independent evaluation) to provide statistics on match rates, broken down by elector type and wards. Additional

reports were sent where an administrator had conducted local data matching. The Cabinet Office and EC also designed a joint survey which administrators were requested to complete to provide feedback on the process of CDR, their views on the matching and how they might use the data in a live environment, as well as information on local data matching and how things could be improved in the future. The Cabinet Office, EC and EMS providers also provided guidance to administrators on how to interpret their results and conduct their CDR process. The results of CDR will help local authorities and Valuation Joint Boards to plan their workloads for next year and will help the Cabinet Office award funding to different areas.

It should be noted that all percentages presented in this report have been rounded.

Summary of findings

Overall, the results of the CDR are better than expected with an average match rate of 78% and a median rate of 81%. Local data matching has shown the potential to add on average a further 7% to the overall match rate. Feedback on the process of CDR was largely positive, but some lessons and possible improvements have been identified for the Cabinet Office to work on ahead of confirmation in 2014.

Views on the process of conducting the CDR

Most administrators who responded to our survey were satisfied with the guidance they received in preparation for CDR but a reasonable number would like one source of guidance and some asked for more detailed guidance on how to conduct local data matching. Both of these suggestions have been addressed by Ministerial Guidance which was incorporated with the EC's own guidance and published in October 2013. In terms of the IT, the vast majority of survey respondents found it easy to upload their registers for matching and were satisfied with the way their match report was downloaded back into their EMS system. However, there were some problems with some duplicate records being uploaded and some found that it took a long time for their results to be downloaded. There was also a presentational issue with the matching algorithm in the early stages of CDR with records where the elector could not be matched automatically changing the address RAG to red; this was resolved by the Cabinet Office, the affected local authorities were all given the opportunity to re-run their register, and their overall match rates were not affected.

Most administrators found it easy to analyse their data but there is a varied skilled set for this type of work amongst the electoral community and some relied on support from their IT department. Some were also unsure of the reasoning behind the matching and why some individuals might fail to be matched. From a matching perspective this is difficult to resolve – there could be a large number of reasons why an individual record has a red or amber RAG – so instead there is a need to improve understanding of the matching process and manage expectations of administrators. Some also queried the accuracy of DWP data. While we accept that some records will be inaccurate and/or out of date, testing from the pilots in 2012 showed that we can be confident in the accuracy of the matching and so again there is a need for the

Cabinet Office to reassure administrators about the quality of both the data and the matching process to build their confidence.

However, overall, most administrators said they would be confident in using confirmation results, would treat green matches as confirmed and issue them confirmation letters, carry out local data matching on amber and red records to see if they could increase their match rate, and then write out to those they were unable to confirm.

The Cabinet Office will look into the possibility of providing a breakdown of confirmation match results by polling district, a separate list of mixed RAG households, and percentages in the download reports wherever they are meaningful. The Cabinet Office have already provided (in the recently-published Ministerial Guidance) information in plain English on how RAG statuses are awarded, what an amber status means, and how to conduct local data matching.[1] It will continue to monitor feedback on this guidance and seek to provide more information to EROs where necessary.

DWP match results

The national average match rate was 78%; this ranged from 47-86%, with a median rate of 81% – showing that most local authorities had a match rate towards the higher end of the spectrum. This is a better rate than anticipated prior to CDR and shows that the majority of existing electors will be confirmed in 2014. We know from our previous pilots that some groups are less likely to confirm – students, people living in privately rented accommodation, people living in communal establishments and recent home movers (there are clearly some overlaps between these groups). In addition, we know that some address types are more difficult to match due to their more complicated formatting e.g. rooms in student halls of residence. These findings were replicated in the CDR with 19 of the 20 areas with the lowest match rates being predominantly urban areas, including London boroughs where there is a high churn, lots of flats and sub-divided properties and a high proportion of privately rented flats, and areas with high proportions of students such as Oxford and Cambridge.

As with our previous pilots, some groups seemed more likely to confirm once they were on the register – notably attainers. Academics at Plymouth University have conducted regression analysis using the ward level data on matching and data from the Census to look at which demographic groups are more or less likely to confirm. Results can be found in the EC's evaluation of CDR, available at www.electoralcommision.org.uk.[2]

If an electoral administrator has reason to believe that an elector is still at a property but hasn't responded to the canvass, they can choose to 'carry forward' that elector and keep them on the register. During live running of IER in 2014, electors who are confirmed but who are carry-forwards will not be treated as confirmed in the same way as other electors (because of the possibility that their details may be less current

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[1] Available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/162576/Part-3-The-transition-to-IER-in-2014-15.pdf and
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/162578/Part-4-Maintaining-the-register-throughout-the-year.pdf.
[2] Available November, 2013.

and accurate). Instead their residence will be sent a household enquiry form (HEF) and if they are named on that form they can then be treated as confirmed. It is not possible to know how many of the confirmed carry-forward electors will be truly confirmed in live running by replying to a HEF but we were interested to assess what the match rates for carry-forward electors were during CDR and the effect of this on the overall match rates.

The average match rate for carry forward electors was 53%, ranging from 5-85% and with a median of 55%. This is much lower than for non-carry forward electors, which is to be expected given that their details on the register are more likely to be out of date or inaccurate due to their lack of response to the annual canvass. When carry-forward electors are removed from the dataset the overall match rate falls to 76% but we would expect many of these to confirm via a HEF and therefore do not expect to see a large effect on the overall national match rate during live running in 2014.

Local data matching

Most respondents to our survey said that they conducted local data matching as part of their normal canvass activities and also did it for CDR. The most commonly used source of data for both was council tax information. Based on the reports submitted to the Cabinet Office (138 local authorities), local data matching has the potential to add an average of 7% to the national match rate. This ranged from 0-34%, with a median rate of 7%. The use of local data matching seemed particularly helpful in areas with lower DWP match rates, as might be expected.