

CABINET DECISION

Corporate Management and Finance – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor David Harrington

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER) – UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION

1. Summary

This report provides an update on the implementation of IER.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the current position regarding the introduction of IER be noted.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

To advise Cabinet of the implications of the introduction of IER which will require significant changes to business systems, IT infrastructure and existing interfaces with the electorate, contractors and third parties.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members) should consider whether they have a personal interest in any item, as defined in **paragraphs 9 and 11** of the Council's code of conduct and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with and/or taking account of **paragraphs 12 - 17** of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 16** of the code, in any business of the Council he/she must then, **in accordance with paragraph 18** of the code, consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest and the business:-

- affects the members financial position or the financial position of a person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code, or

- relates to the determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission or registration in relation to the member or any person or body described in **paragraph 17** of the code.

A Member with a personal interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, may attend the meeting but must not take part in the consideration and voting upon the relevant item of business. However, a member with such an interest may make representations, answer questions or give evidence relating to that business before the business is considered or voted on, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under a statutory right or otherwise (**paragraph 19** of the code)

Members may participate in any discussion and vote on a matter in which they have an interest, as described in **paragraph 18** of the code, where that interest relates to functions of the Council detailed in **paragraph 20** of the code.

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

It is a criminal offence for a member to participate in any discussion or vote on a matter in which he/she has a disclosable pecuniary interest (and where an appropriate dispensation has not been granted) **paragraph 21** of the code.

Members are required to comply with any procedural rule adopted by the Council which requires a member to leave the meeting room whilst the meeting is discussing a matter in which that member has a disclosable pecuniary interest (**paragraph 22** of the code).

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

6 NOVEMBER 2014

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW
AND DEMOCRACY**

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER) – UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the implementation of IER.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the current position regarding the introduction of IER be noted.

DETAIL

Background

1. Further to the report to Cabinet in November 2013, this report provides a further update on implementation in respect of this three year project which has meant significant changes to how residents register to vote requiring business systems to be remodelled, IT infrastructure and functionality updated as well as the development of a comprehensive engagement strategy.
2. IER went live on 10 June 2014 with all new applications to register from this date needing to be made on an individual basis with applicants supplying date of birth and national insurance number as part of their registration. Transition to the new system will run over two annual canvasses from 2014 putting in place a safeguard for the General Election in 2015 so that existing electors who fail to register under IER in 2014 are not removed from the register until after the General Election. However, they will lose their absent voting rights if they have not made a successful IER application. Under the proposals, electors will also have the ability to apply to register on-line although this service is not digital end to end.

Completed Activities

Stage 1 – IER Pre Requisites

Hardware and Software Audit completed
IT upgrades implemented
Consideration of business implications
Implementation Team established

Stage 2 – Confirmation Dry Run

Electoral Registration database matched to the LLPG Gazetteer
Local Data Mining using suitable local data sources
Connectivity Testing for Dry Run

Staff complete Protecting Information Online course
Confirmation Dry Run and follow up survey completed
Local Authority Lead IER trainer nominated
Discussion with external suppliers and review of contract arrangements
Analysis of registration and matching rates across the Borough and development of ward profiles to inform the IER Engagement Strategy

Stage 3 – Analysis led resource planning

Analysis of data matching results and impact of the 5Ms – Machines, Methods, Money, Manpower, Management and Reporting
Engage with print suppliers to discuss forecasts of print volumes
Develop resource/ recruitment plans
Incorporate IER training schedule into work plans for 2014/15
Finalise IER Engagement Strategy

Stage 4 – Preparing the Authority for IER

Local Authority Lead IER Trainer training completed and local cascade of training for electoral services staff on IER processes
Wider authority staff awareness raising and training
EMS functionality training
Recruitment of additional electoral services staff
Review and update local contingency plans
Review and update business processes and documentation
Mop up training
Connectivity Testing for Live Run

Activities following Go Live

New systems up and running on 10 June 2014
EC compliant letter and forms in use
Ongoing dialogue with Cabinet Office, EMS suppliers and external suppliers on implementation of new business processes and IT functionality
Confirmation Live Run took place on 11 July 2014
Initial write out to all electors from 30 July 2014
Reminder letters mailed 28 August 2014
Canvasser Recruitment
Canvasser training developed and delivered
Door knocking to commence 23 September 2014
Publication of revised register of electors 1 December 2014

Summary of Confirmation Live Run Results (CLR) and Local Data Matching

3. In July 2013, a Confirmation Dry Run exercise was carried out to match Stockton's Electoral Register against Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) records. The purpose of the dry run was to test IT capability as well as give an indication of the likely match rates when the Confirmation Live Run was carried out. For Stockton, a match rate of 83.2% was achieved. The match rate increased to 88.4% following local data matching against Council Tax records.
4. Following the dry run, extensive data mining and engagement activity has led to an increase with the accuracy of the electoral register. The Live Run took place on 11 July 2014 and we experienced a higher match rate of 84.59%. This increased following local data matching against Council Tax Records to 91.96% broken down as follows:

131,504 electors (Green) – name and address matched against government records
2283 electors (Amber) – minor “miss-match” of name and/or address
19,752 electors (Red) – name and address not matched government records

5. Where electors match against DWP records, they can be transferred automatically to the IER Register. Where information provided does not match, electors will be required to provide national insurance number and date of birth to complete their registration. The high match rate will mean that only 8% of our electors will need to provide further details in order to complete their registration under the new system.
6. As with the Dry Run, the spread of red and amber matches is fairly even across the Borough although there is concern that a greater dip in registration levels may be experienced following the transitional canvass in wards where there is traditionally a lower return during the annual canvass as electors in these wards are unlikely to respond to requests to register individually. The effect of the transition will be clearer on publication of the revised register of electors on 1 December 2014 following this summer’s canvass activity.

The Transitional Canvass 2014

7. The transitional canvass in 2014 is critical to ensuring our register is complete and accurate and that all our existing electors transfer to the IER register on 1 December 2014. The canvass requires the following activities to be undertaken:
 - Individual confirmation letters to each elector who has been automatically IER registered following data matching (green electors)
 - Invitations to make an IER application (ITRs) to electors who have not matched (red and amber electors)
 - Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) to all properties where electors did not respond during the last canvass and have therefore been carried forward (a mixture of red, amber and green electors)
 - Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) to all empty properties
8. Returns to the write out reveal a 31% response for ITRs prior to reminder stage and a further 25% response rate prior to canvass stage. For HEFs, a 12% response rate had been achieved prior to reminder stage and a further 8% response prior to canvass stage.
9. Following initial invitations, legislation requires the Electoral Registration Officer to send reminders on at least two occasions including making a personal visit to each elector at a property to encourage registration. Stockton’s initial mailing took place from 30 July with reminders issued on 28 August and personal visits commenced on 23 September.
10. The canvass will be more challenging this year as we implement a new and more complex system that canvassers will be unfamiliar with. Canvassers will be required to collect multiple forms from households and individuals and extra care will need to be taken in collecting personal and sensitive information on the doorstep. The canvasser will also need to speak to individual electors in respect of invitations to register rather than the head of the household and this may involve multiple visits to the same property.
11. The transitional canvass will culminate in the publication of the revised register on 1 December 2014. Any electors who have not responded during the current and previous canvass will be automatically be deleted on this date and any existing non

confirmed electors who have responded during the last canvass but have not completed a successful IER application will lose their absent vote entitlement in next May's elections.

What has gone well?

12. Overall, the change to IER has been extremely challenging and has involved painstaking planning and preparation. There have been some "teething problems" and work continues to resolve issues as they arise. However, **key project milestones have been met** and the success of the transition to date has in the main been due to the **positive attitude of staff** in managing the change and the commitment to making the transition a success. The approach to **training** through the Local Authority Lead IER trainer proved to be an effective way of cascading training and was an important part of our readiness for the system going live.
13. As well as the 92% **match rate** of our registers against DWP records mentioned earlier in the report, there have been other positive aspects of the change. The most significant has been that we have experienced **channel shift** as the vast majority of residents are choosing to use the new on line registration facility. Between the system going live on 10 June and 5 September, 70% of registration applications have been made on line and a further 13% of applications have been made by residents calling the Electoral Services Helpline. This helps to reduce the amount of paper coming into the office and is quicker, easier and more secure for residents. Verification of new IER applications has also been quicker than we anticipated with the results of verification being received the Digital Service usually within one working day.

Challenges

14. Despite the channel shift, we are experienced a significant **increase in printing and postage volumes**; this is because IER has introduced additional stages into the registration process. For example, we are now required to send an acknowledgement of application as well as confirmation of successful verification matching and acknowledgement of any changes to an elector's registration such as acknowledgement of opting out of the open register.
15. In addition, all correspondence has to be sent separately to each individual elector and where a response is required, pre-paid business reply enveloped need to be provided. All communications are generating additional work. For example, confirmation letters to electors automatically transferring to the IER register has generated over 5000 requests for opt out of the open register with each of the changes needing to be acknowledged to the elector. Where possible email communication is used by staff but this is not an option in most cases and hard copy letters have to be used in certain circumstances.
16. The high volume of letters and also the **wording of some letters and forms** have caused confusion and sometimes complaints from the public. Most of the letters and forms are prescribed by the Electoral Committee following user testing and others are strongly recommended. Confusion and complaints have resulted in some wording being amended but this is usually after a deluge of calls into Electoral Services.
17. Other aspects of IER are proving to be **resource intensive** such as the exceptions process for when a resident's personal identifiers fail to match against central government records. The Cabinet Office is looking into the issue of name changes which may reduce the number of failed verifications. Another problem is the high number of duplicate applications received. Again, the Cabinet Office is investigating this issue to see if this can be addressed.

18. **EMS suppliers** have struggled to keep pace with the requirements of the new system. Electoral Administrators are in the position of using a system which is still being developed to meet the requirements of IER in a live rather than a test environment.
19. **Print suppliers** are also struggling to cope with the print volumes and the technical aspects of changes to IT systems. Problems have resulted in incorrect mailings in other Council areas. Robust proofing and careful project planning is in place to minimise the risk of errors and delays.

Engagement Strategy

20. Based on the Electoral Commission template and guidance, an Engagement Strategy for Stockton was developed. This Strategy was underpinned by ward profiles which have been developed setting out:
 - Population Estimates
 - Other key demographic Information from Mosaic
 - Registration levels
 - The results of the Confirmation Live Run
 - Engagement networks/ outlets within the ward
 - The proposed approach to demographic engagement within the ward
21. The strategy also builds on the extensive data mining activity which is undertaken by Electoral Services and national and local research on under registered groups. The Strategy was commended by the Electoral Commission as an example of best practice.
22. Delivery of the local strategy has commenced with a view to raising registration levels and awareness raising relating to IER running alongside the national awareness.
23. Individual Electoral Registration (IER) messages, materials and information have been integrated into the existing engagement and awareness framework.
24. The overall objectives of our IER Delivery Plan are:
 - to raise awareness that electoral registration is changing
 - to raise awareness and take-up of online registration
 - encourage people to pass the information on
 - ultimately to increase registration of unmatched and under-registered groups
25. Initially, the delivery plan has been focused on an extensive range of borough wide activities targeted at the general public and under registered groups (e.g. students, young people, tenants of social and private landlords, BME community). Borough wide activities have included widely circulating posters and leaflets and other publicity materials through networks and key contacts, attending events and outreach displays in supermarkets as well as outreach in schools and colleges. Press releases and social media have also been utilised.
26. To maximise our reach across the Borough, we have utilised our internal and external partners who have existing relationships or direct contact with target audiences. This is being complemented by proactive data mining with other Council data sets such as Council Tax and Customer Services and links with partners such as Tristar Homes.
27. The next phase of the delivery plan will become more Ward focused based on the response to of the IER write-out.

28. Having said that, Borough-wide voter registration awareness initiatives will continue up to the publication of the new Electoral Register on 1 December 2014 and then on to the elections in May 2015.

Funding

29. Funding received from Cabinet Office to support the transition to IER can be summarised as follows:

Additional funding allocation (following bid) 2013/14	27,821
Formula grant allocation 2014/15	76,000
Additional funding allocation (following bid) 2014/15	58,095
Maximising Registration Fund Allocation 2013/14	11,490
Justification Led Bid 2014/15	1,247
Total Funding	174,653

30. Based on our resource model, it was estimated that government funding would cover the additional expenditure for the transition. However, given that volumes of print and postage have substantially increased, this is being closely monitored through budgetary control.
31. Funding for 2015/16 onwards is unknown, however, in line with the New Burdens Doctrine, the Government is committed to ensuring that local authorities are not left with unfunded burdens.
32. Some of the additional funding has been used to fund an apprentice post in Electoral Service for 12 months up to July 2015. This has been essential to assist with the additional enquiries, mailings and processing registration involved with the transition. The increased volumes experienced are not anticipated to reduce and therefore it is recommended that a more permanent resource is considered.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial

33. Stockton's initial assessment of the move to IER was expected to be in line with the Cabinet Office impact assessment that the annual costs of transition are expected to increase by approximately 38%. This is currently being monitored.

Legal

34. To comply with the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013
35. To comply with Political Parties and Elections Act (2009) – Provision of identifying information and data to EROs.
36. To comply with Representation of the Peoples Act 1983 – EAA 2006 statutory duty to maintain an accurate and complete electoral register.

37. Section 9A of the RPA 1983 requires an ERO to take all necessary steps to comply with the general duty of maintaining the register, including sending the canvass form more than once, making house to house inquiries and inspecting records that the ERO is permitted to inspect.

RISK ASSESSMENT

38. The main risks are loss of electors from the register and lack of resources to manage the transition and maintain the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

39. The national Equality Impact Assessment states that the move away from a household electoral registration system should have an overall positive impact on equality, providing each eligible individual with the right and responsibility to register themselves to vote. It is not considered that a further assessment on behalf of the Council is required or necessary.

CONSULTATION

40. Discussions have taken place and will continue with internal ICT support services and also external providers (EMS system and external printers for electoral services). Electoral Services staff regularly attend briefings arranged by the Cabinet Office on the implementation of the project and regional meetings. MPs will receive a briefing after Cabinet consideration of the report.

Director of Law and Democracy

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Education related? No

Background Papers

IER Implementation Plan

Engagement Strategy

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors

Not Ward Specific

Property

None