

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES
21 SEPTEMBER 2011

EXECUTIVE
4 OCTOBER 2011

**GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON THE INTRODUCTION OF
INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report sets out the Government's consultation proposals on the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER) and the issues they raise.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At present, electoral registration is undertaken by an annual household canvass, where all eligible electors' details are returned to the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) for entry onto the electoral register, which is published on 1 December each year. The return of this household form is compulsory and failure to provide the information requested is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine of up to £1,000. A declaration is required to be signed by the person completing the form.
- 2.2 Additionally, electors can update their entry on the register each month between January and September each year. Unlike the annual canvass, this is not compulsory.
- 2.3 In July 2009, the Political Parties and Elections Act legislated for a move to IER via a voluntary phase with pilots of data-matching schemes that would aim to improve the quality of the register.
- 2.4 In May 2010, the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition agreement made a commitment to speed up the introduction of IER and to achieve this before the next scheduled General Election in 2015. In June 2011 the Cabinet Office published its White Paper setting out the draft legislation and inviting comments and views, by Friday 14 October 2011.
- 2.5 The White Paper drops the previous Government's plans for a voluntary phase of IER and speeds up the implementation of IER to 2014, so that it is in place before the next Parliamentary election. It makes proposals on all aspects of the intended process for the implementation of IER. The main points can be summarised as follows:
- (i) IER will be introduced with a canvass of all registered electors from 1 July 2014. This will be about 3 weeks after the planned European Parliamentary election, which may be combined with Exeter City Council elections. In Exeter, this will require the ERO to send a form to about 90,000 electors requesting two personal identifiers, which are intended to be a date of birth and national insurance number. A revised register will be published on 1 December 2014.

- (ii) The White Paper states that it is not the intention to require electors to provide a signature, though the legislation retains an option for a signature to be prescribed.
- (iii) It will not be compulsory for electors to return the form which requests the provision of the two identifiers. Indeed an elector can return the form instructing the ERO not to make any further requests for the provision of identifiers. For the first canvass, anyone not providing identifiers will have their entry on the register carried over, so that they will not be disenfranchised for the planned 2015 Parliamentary election.
- (iv) A household form will be sent to any property which does not have any registered electors. The household form will require the householder to notify the ERO of any registered electors in residence. The return of the household form will remain compulsory. The ERO will then be required to write to those electors shown on the household form, requesting identifiers before they can be added to the register. The return of the form requiring identifiers will not be compulsory.
- (v) From the canvass held in 2015 and for subsequent canvasses, the ERO must send a household form to every property. If the form is returned showing electors who have already provided their identifiers, they will not be required to provide further information and they will remain on the register. Only new electors will be required to provide identifiers but will not be compelled to do so. The ERO, in keeping with his statutory duty, will be required to follow up the non-return of forms, including making house-to-house enquiries where necessary.

2.6 The aim of the move to IER is to make electoral registration and access to democracy a personal responsibility, rather than it being potentially reliant on the actions of another person. It also aims, through accompanying systems of data matching, to improve accuracy and completeness and to tackle fraud.

2.7 The following paragraphs outline some of the main administrative consequences and issues in implementing IER:

- (i) It is likely that a move away from a registration system based on the compulsory theme attached to the current household canvass, to one where registration will depend on the non-compulsory provision of identifiers, will mean a decrease in the number of registered electors, at least in the first few years. In urban areas with a mobile population this effect may be particularly marked. In Exeter, for example, many of the electors currently registered by means of a bulk household return at Student Halls of Residence, would have to be written to and asked for their identifiers. It is probable that a large number of students, who will also potentially be registered at their home addresses, may decline to do so. There are currently just under 4,000 students registered in Halls, the majority of whom are within the Duryard ward. This could have an effect on not only the numbers of registered electors for the Duryard Ward (which has total electorate of about 4,300) but also the City as a whole. This may cause an electoral imbalance. Fewer registered electors may also affect the numbers to be considered in any Parliamentary boundary reviews.
- (ii) Currently, electors can register up to 11 working days before an election and it is very likely that anyone not registering at any other time of year will leave their registration to be completed just before an election. If unsolicited applications are received the ERO will be compelled to establish a connection between an individual and an address to determine residence. To do this it is proposed that a unique identifying number be posted to the applicant's address. The applicant

will be required to return the unique identifying number to activate their registration. This may delay the process and will inevitably place a large operational burden on the ERO. At the Parliamentary election of 2010, 2,500 applications were received in the Electoral Services office within a 2-week period.

- (iii) The electoral register is used by the Courts Service to select jury members. A further consequence of non-compulsory registration could have an effect on the numbers of people available to serve on a jury.
- (iv) It is inevitable that the levels of administrative work carried out by the ERO will increase significantly. Whilst the City Council has been proactive in this approach by ensuring robust levels of staffing within the electoral services office following the passing of the Political Parties and Elections Act of 2009; the levels of work are likely to increase significantly. Some of this additional work may be absorbed through careful management of staffing resources but inevitably overall costs will increase.
- (v) The White Paper estimates that the overall cost for implementation of IER will be £108.3 million. The Government is committed to fully funding implementation costs to local authorities but does not appear to make any provision for ongoing costs from 2015 onwards.

3. PROPOSALS

- 3.1 As the forward to the White Paper states, 'the electoral register is a key building block for our democracy' and the implementation of IER is the biggest change to the system in a hundred years.
- 3.2 It is proposed that the Chief Executive respond to the Government's consultation on IER regarding the issues raised in this report and particularly Exeter City Council should comment on:
 - (i) The potential effect that non-compulsory registration will have on the late registration facility available during the election timetable and the affect on, for example, student registration.
 - (ii) The consequences relating to the selection of juries.
 - (iii) The effect that the implementation of IER will have on resources and the need to ensure that adequate funding for the initial and on-going additional costs are adequately provided for.

4. RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 That the Chief Executive submits a response along the lines suggested in paragraph 3.2 above.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:

Individual Electoral Registration – White Paper and draft legislation – Cabinet Office June 2011
<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf>