Information Governance
Individual Voter Registration Subgroup

Status Report Summary

March 2011

INDIVIDUAL VOTER REGISTRATION - LESSONS FROM OVERSEAS (Summary)

INTRODUCTION

Individual voter registration (IVR) will be introduced in 2014 under the Political Parties and Elections Act (2009) to ensure greater accuracy of electoral registers, to enable greater citizen confidence in the democratic system and to minimise scope for fraud. Data-matching trials during 2011 will allow volunteer local authorities to compare the electoral register with other public, and perhaps some private, databases in order to improve completeness at the same time. If successful, the trials will be rolled out nationally to help ensure that the maximum number of eligible voters is registered to vote at elections.

A focused study on the mechanics of electoral registration systems overseas by a EURIM working group on Information Governance has important lessons for the UK regarding their use of technology and approaches towards the two key measures of an electoral register: completeness and accuracy[1]. The terms of reference excluded electronic voting. The full report is available at: http://www.eurim.org.uk/activities/ig/1103-IVR_LessonsFromOverseas.pdf.

EURIM's main findings concern:
- the technical means of holding and transferring personal data between different authorities,
- how to transfer data securely,
- how to store data in a way consistent with privacy requirements,
- how current or emerging technology might help facilitate:
    i.   individuals' access to their electoral registration data;
    ii. the process of applying to be registered;
    iii. updating information (e.g. change of address);
    iv. ensuring information held by an Electoral Registration Officer is accurate.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Two distinct trends are discernible in the responses from overseas, between those countries which treat the electoral register almost exclusively for electoral purposes ('Commonwealth' or 'common law' heritage) and those that create a multi-purpose population register, either at national or municipal level ('continental' heritage).

2. Compulsory registration does not work unless underpinned by other processes: e.g. in Australia large numbers of voters may remain unregistered.

3. All sampled common law and continental countries require proof of identity to register the voter; only the UK does not.

4. Countries that operate data matching to maintain a population register, to transfer data with other public bodies, or that allow citizens to view or amend their personal data, do so through secured systems.

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[1] Accuracy refers to the registration being that of a true identity exercising a legitimate right to vote. Completeness refers to the register having on it the maximum number of eligible people in the district.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Compared with many countries, the UK's system is **overdue for an overhaul**.

2. **Compulsory registration** does not in all cases yield registration rates notably above those achieved in countries without compulsory registration.

3. **Proof of identity** for registration purposes (although not for voting) is the norm.

4. **Online access** may not be a pressing objective today, but the government should recognise that in due course it will be expected as an option for an increasingly IT literate nation, provided the security issues can be dealt with effectively.

5. When online registration is eventually implemented, use of **digital certificates** by the registering elector should be the norm.

6. **Data matching** or data sharing with other public bodies, online or offline, should be done securely, comply with data privacy laws, and be covered by formal agreements.

7. The Government should consider the advantages or otherwise of data matching with **private sector databases.**

8. For expatriate electors, the government might consider using the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's consular facilities to encourage and facilitate **registration overseas**.

9. To improve the registration of 'lost' voters, the government might consider linking electoral registration to the application for benefits or **to registration on other public databases**.

10. **ISO 27001** should be adopted in as an information security management system standard.

The points below are not part of the original EURIM study on IVR overseas, but emerged from analytical discussion at a well-attended EURIM meeting on IVR on 22nd November 2010 and subsequent comment.

RECENT EXPERIENCE and KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

- The Committee on Standards in Public Life has urged the Electoral Commission to use its status as the regulator to achieve a much fuller register well in advance of the transition to IVR, and has been critical of the Commission's failure to do so.
- IVR was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2002. After initial concerns e.g. about the drop in registration levels, it has been cited as an exemplar that works very well.
- The main concern is not about electoral fraud, but about increasing links to economic fraud and identity theft associated with the electoral registration process and the creation of fictitious entries (who don't vote). The register thus becomes inaccurate and a vehicle for misuse, with implications also for voter turnout figures and the democratic mandate.
- Key issues to be addressed include the timetable for change: concerns about technical issues include the funding of a new system with heavy transitional costs e.g. establishing the interface for access to DWP records for the NINO. This is a major change that cannot be accomplished cheaply; central funding should be ring-fenced.
- The introduction of IVR involves the issue of how long before an election an application to register can be accepted, given the need for adequate checks against identity and to protect against fraud, especially in the 11-day period before an election when the electoral office is under greatest pressure (e.g. the Slough local election of 2007, when a councillor and his agents were convicted for corrupt and illegal practices). On the other hand is the wish to enable changes to be registered as close to an election as possible.
- The private sector (e.g. Credit Reference Agencies) may be able to assist in improving the quality and integrity of the electoral register.