CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT OF: Chief Executive

TO: Civic Affairs Committee   14/9/2011

WARDS: None directly affected

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (IER) – PROPOSED RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S WHITE PAPER AND DRAFT LEGISLATION

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   The Government published a White Paper (and draft legislation) on its proposals for Individual Electoral Registration (IER) on 30 June. The White Paper is appended to this report (for the draft legislation http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf). The Government is encouraging views from the public and organisations with an interest in its proposals up to 14 October.

2.   RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to comment on a draft response to the White Paper attached to this report and agree that the Chief Executive consult and agree with the Chair and spokes the final version for submission to the Cabinet Office by its 14 October deadline.

3.   BACKGROUND

3.1   The Government's White Paper outline its plans to take forward the commitment in the Coalition Agreement to speed up the move to IER and tackle electoral fraud. The current household registration system will be replaced by individual registration. Every elector will have to register individually and provide identifying information which will be used to verify their entitlement to be included in the electoral register. Only once their application has been verified can a person be added to the register. The Government states that this will help to restore

trust in electoral system with 'proportionate and appropriate use of people's data being at the heart of its proposals'.

3.2 As part of the move to IER, the Government is also committed to taking steps to improve the completeness of the register. In June, the Government launched a series of data matching pilots to test how far comparing electoral registers against other public databases will allow eligible people missing from the register to be identified and asked if they would like to register. Based on the outcome of these pilots, a decision will be made on whether to roll this out more widely.

3.3 The White Paper sets out how the Government intends to accelerate the implementation of IER by 2014, ahead of the next Parliamentary election. It proposes that there will a transition period meaning that electors who do not register under IER in 2014 will be carried over onto that year's Register and will therefore not lose their entitlement to vote at the 2015 General Election. However, all new electors and anyone wishing to cast a postal or proxy vote in 2015, will have to register under the new system.

3.4 The Government also intends to take the opportunity to address the issue of those who are entitled to vote but are not on the Electoral Register – by making it easier for people to register. It is also proposed that Electoral Registration Officers will be allowed to offer people more choice on how to register (eg. online); that people take more control over verification of their eligibility; an end to the annual canvass as the primary means of maintaining the completeness and accuracy of the Electoral Register.

4. THE COUNCIL'S DRAFT RESPONSE

4.1 The White Paper has been written in a way that lends itself to a response covering a number themes rather than answers to direct questions. The draft response gives the Cambridge context and does highlight the particular issue we will face with regard to registering students, something that will not be common across the country and therefore important to highlight. The Electoral Services Manager has attended meetings with officials at the Cabinet Office to discuss the implications of IER and will continue to be involved, along with other electoral professional representatives.

5.   **IMPLICATIONS**

(a)   **Financial Implications**
It is too early to give any detail of what the financial implications will be and if Government is to fully fund the implementation and on-going costs. If funding is provided as part of the overall Formula Grant, the Director of Resources will work with officers in line with the Council's overall financial planning.

(b)   **Staffing Implications**
A report elsewhere on the Committee's agenda advises of the proposal for an additional post in electoral services which will ensure the Council is in a better position to implement IER.

(c)   **Equal Opportunities Implications**
The Government's White Paper has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (see Annex 2 at http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual -electoral-reform-impact-assessment.pdf). The Council will carry out its own EQIA prior to implementation.

(d)   **Environmental Implications**
None

(e)   **Community Safety**
None

Background papers used in the preparation of this report:
The Government's White Paper (http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/individual-electoral-registration-draft-bill).

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Date originated: 05 September 2011
Date of last revision: 05 September 2011

Cambridge City Council Response to White Paper on Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

Introduction

Cambridge City Council comprises a mainly urban area of 4,070 hectares with a population of 119,100.

The current electorate is 90,060, of which 16% are students resident in university accommodation, 13% are postal voters, 10% are citizens of the European Union and 10% are aged 70 or over.

Response to the annual canvass is generally poor, with a household response in 2010 of 89%, although this is increasing steadily year on year. The main challenge at canvass time is the highly transient student population, which involves maintaining clear communication channels with 35 separate university college admin contacts and ensuring a thorough canvass of the large number of houses of multiple occupation (HMO).

Rolling registration applications average 251 per month.

Executive Summary Response

Cambridge welcomes the changes to voter registration and the principle of individual registration. However, the large student population within the city will present a particular challenge to administrators, due to the numerous address changes that students make during their time at the university.

Detailed Response to the White Paper

Applications to register

- The standardisation of the voter registration application forms by the Electoral Commission (EC) is welcome, however the layout and format should be consulted with administrators. They will be in a good position to comment on whether the form is user friendly and compatible with software scanning systems.

- It is appropriate that applications can be made in ways other than by post, in order to bring the registration system up-to-date.

Verification of voter details

- The verification of an individual using national insurance numbers (NINO) and dates of birth (DOB) will help to ensure the application is not made under a false name. However, the process must be supported by a robust software system, which can allow automation of the verification process between the Electoral Registration Officer

(ERO) and the relevant organisation. Otherwise the large amounts of data in the system during peak periods, e.g. annual canvass, may slow the process and cause unnecessary delays.

- The removal of the requirement to provide a signature when registering is logical in the modern climate, as long as other verification methods can be relied upon.

- The requirement to provide NINO must be made compulsory rather than optional. Only those who do not have a NINO should be able to provide other forms of ID. This will ensure the system is maintained fairly for all and allow for a speedier verification processes – for example, verification can be automated through DWP, rather than time consuming 'other' checks.

- Requiring applicants to sign a declaration if they cannot provide any form of ID does not negate the possibility of fraudulent applications and is technically no different from the current rolling registration system.

- The process of verifying an applicant's association with an address must be vigorous enough to prevent landlords registering at places they are not resident at – this will not be resolved by the proposal unless address details can be verified with other sources. Simply sending a letter to the address is not secure enough.

- The current system for confirming an applicant's nationality is not robust enough and should be improved. ERO's should be able to check with other sources as appropriate.

The first canvass and beyond

- Implementing a transition period so that non-IER applicants are carried forward one year will, as stated, allow for electors to vote at the 2015 UKPE. It will also allow the administration processes to be managed and spread over a two-year period, rather than all electors in one year, which may test the system too much.

- If the offence of not responding to the annual canvas form is to be retained, it should be made a requirement rather a choice. Too few authorities currently carry out prosecutions of non-responders due to lack of resources and therefore further funding should be made available for this important task.

- The first annual IER canvass should be carried out at the same time across the UK in order to allow the EC to facilitate a publicity campaign. <u>However</u>, starting on 1st July is completely unrealistic and far too early in the year. European elections are due in June 2014 and the aftermath of these would clash with planning for canvass. Electoral Services offices are not resourced sufficiently for this. It is also not appropriate to start canvass this early in some areas, e.g.

Cambridge is heavily populated with students who do not take up residence until mid-October.

- The logical suggestion is to start after the deadline for 1 September rolling registration applications (10 Aug in 2011). This would avoid any unnecessary confusion for the public and allow ERO's to administer the closedown of the June elections and the planning of the canvass effectively. There would be no major benefit in starting canvass earlier than usual.

- The amendment allowing eligible electors to indicate a preference 'not to be chased' is at odds with the retention clause of non-responders to the household enquiry from (HEF). The householder must return the HEF, but can then choose to ignore the IER form. From experience it is noted that people will either not respond to the HEF or they will return it and then ignore the IER form, thus creating work for the ERO's office by chasing uninterested persons unduly.

- The new canvass process will seem overly complicated to householders and funding should be made available to cover local initiatives and publicity, as well as any national EC campaign.

- The requirement to follow up non HEF responders as well as non IER responders will require a longer period for personal calls and potentially the employment of more electoral canvassers: in order to conduct a full and proper canvass. Currently, here in Cambridge we have to make personal calls to 35% of our households during the last stage of canvass and it is likely this would increase under IER in order to chase individual non-responders as well.

- We suggest the non-responding provision be retained so that if a household fails to return an HEF for two consecutive years and the occupants cannot be established through other means, they are deleted from the register. Otherwise we could have electors registered for many years after they have moved away and this will artificially inflate the electorate.

- We agree that in time an annual canvass could become obsolete. Once IER is established and rolling registration is taking pace twelve months of the year, along with other ways of establishing changes to householders (data matching), an annual audit of the register seems unnecessary. A wholesale audit of the register every ten years, or when necessary, as suggested, seems about right.

Postal and proxy voters

- The requirement for postal voters to be registered under IER in 2014 is understandable. However, the new requirement for proxies to be registered as such (rather than just eligible voters as at present) will cause complications, unless transfer of information between local

authorities is improved. A number of proxies do live outside the elector's registered area and confirming this information before allowing the proxy will require speedy communication of confirmation.

- This issue will be particularly difficult at an election when the proxy deadline (Election day minus six) is after the registration deadline (E −11). Refusing a proxy after E −11 because they are not registered will disenfranchise the elector if a suitable new proxy cannot be found in time.

Registering students

- It is high time that the franchise of students was reconsidered. Under IER, it will be a requirement for students to register themselves and consequently that may result in fewer registrations in those areas. For an area such as Cambridge, where the population of students in college accommodation is around 14,500 there will be significant difficulties ensuring all students are registered and verified properly.

- Students are also very transient and can sometimes change accommodation three times a year. Having to validate their ID each time will also create extra pressures on the administration of IER.

- If students had the option to register by way of a declaration, which lasted the length of their course i.e. three, four, five years, then this would significantly reduce the amount of administration involved. It would also ensure students were registered correctly and only freshers be approached to register.

Conclusion

The introduction of individual electoral registration will undoubtedly ensure the system is more robust and focussed on targeting fraudulent registration.

While the results of the current data-matching pilots are eagerly awaited, any schemes to introduce an electronic and automated system to voter registration must be sturdy enough to cope during the busiest of periods. Software must be capable of handling sizeable data transactions so that the system does not rely on manual input alone, as at present.

As well as those categories of electors identified in the white paper, students must also be considered as an important group of electors whose registration under IER will require particular consideration.

Local authority resources must be adequate to ensure proper transition and maintenance of the new registration system. This and voter education, will be key to the success of IER.