

INDIVIDUAL ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

On 31 January 2013 the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 received Royal Assent. This legislation will lead to the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in Great Britain. This paper, prepared for the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee, explains the current system of electoral registration, sets out the UK Government's proposed plan of transition to IER. It also touches on the experience of IER in Northern Ireland and the timescale in relation to the Scottish Referendum.

Current system of electoral registration in Great Britain

In England, Wales and Scotland the registration of electors is carried out each year by means of an annual canvass. The head of the household at each address completes the canvass form giving details of all those eligible to vote who are living at that address. Electors may also register themselves during the year (rolling registration) if their details change by applying to the local Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). Until individual registration begins in summer 2014, the current system will continue.

The last canvass under the old system will take place in spring 2014. This is meant to ensure that the register is as up to date as possible for the 2014 European elections and for the transition to IER.

Individual Electoral Registration

The Labour Government made provision for a change in the law to allow for individual registration in the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. This was followed up by the Coalition Government's Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

After the provisions in the Act are implemented electors will register separately, each providing their own unique identifiers, such as National Insurance number and date of birth, so their information can be verified.

It is expected that around two-thirds of the public will not have to take any action to stay on the electoral register because those on the register in 2014 will be transferred to the new system automatically.

Where someone's details cannot be confirmed, which is expected to be around a third of the electorate, and where people are unregistered or move house after the final household canvass, people will be invited and reminded to register under the new system. Even if someone on the register is not captured by the automatic data matching process and fails to register individually, their details will be carried forward from the current register for at least a year after the introduction of the new system in summer 2014 and they will be able to vote in the 2015 General Election.

The UK Government believes that it is a civic duty to register to vote, and to support EROs in their duties a small civil penalty, akin to a parking fine, is being introduced which could only be applied to those who refuse repeated invitations to register. There will also be safeguards to ensure that EROs take specific steps to encourage an application. Under the current system of registering to vote, failure to provide information to an ERO is a criminal offence punishable by a £1,000 fine, leaving a criminal record. This will be maintained under the new system for information about households, to help ensure that the inaction of some does not lead to others being disenfranchised.

The transition to Individual Electoral Registration

The UK Government published its [implementation plan for IER](#) before the Bill was passed. The Government intends implementing its plan in partnership with Electoral Registration Officers, electoral administrators and the Electoral Commission and will publish further information later in 2013.

From August 2012 the Government ran pilot schemes to test the use of data matching to confirm existing electors in the transition to the new system. These will be followed by further pilots in early 2013 aimed at testing data sources for identifying potentially eligible electors currently missing from the register and identifying inaccurate, fraudulent and/or duplicate entries. The Government will consult with EROs and administrators on the draft secondary legislation, on the funding arrangements for the transition, and will work in partnership with them to develop the IT service required for implementation.

Once it has further evidence from the pilots and testing of the IT systems the Government intends to announce a firm timetable for the transition in early 2013, however it is expected that the transition will begin after the June 2014 European Parliament elections, either in July or September 2014. From that point onwards all new applications to register will have to be made individually using the new system. It will also be possible to register to vote online, which is seen as opening up more choice over how to register.

The transition will begin with the confirmation of existing electors. This means that if an elector's name is on the electoral register when the transition begins, the UK Government will try to match their name against information held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on its Customer Information System. If it can match it, that entry on the register will be confirmed, the elector will be told about this and they will not need to take any further action.

What EROs and Electoral Administrators will be required to do and when

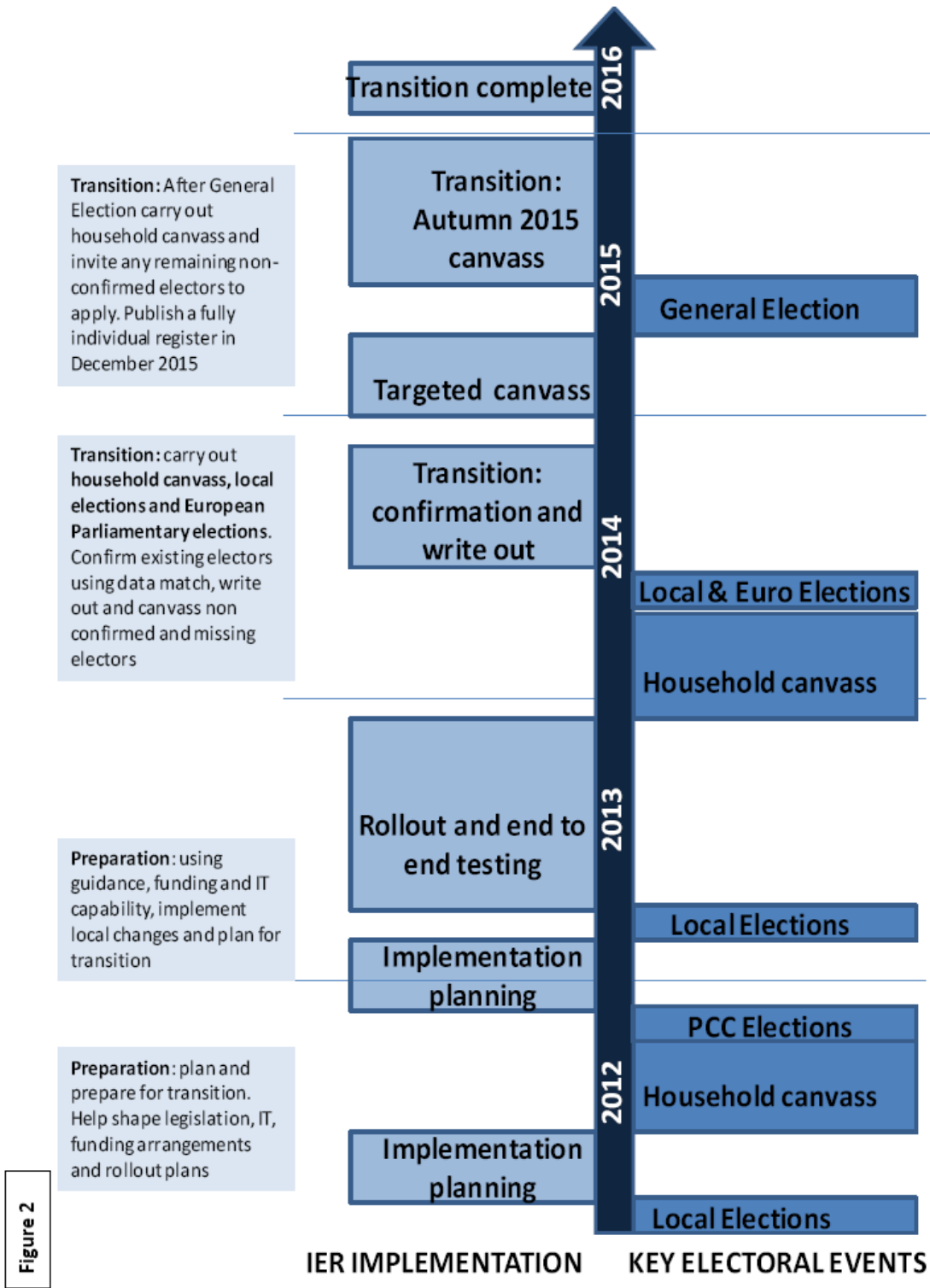
The implementation of IER falls into five stages over the next three years. Alongside this new work EROs and administrators will continue their work to run elections and carry out other related activities, including the normal canvass process.

The UK Government has talked to administrators, EROs and the Electoral Commission to ensure that its plans dovetail with their other work commitments.

The main events in IER implementation which EROs or electoral administrators, need to be aware of, or plan for, are set out in the table below:

Key activities	Timescale	Role for EROs/administrators
Designing, building and testing the new system	During 2012	Gave their views on draft secondary legislation and proposed grant allocation mechanism. If willing, took part in testing the new IT system and data matching pilots
	December 2012 to March 2013	Plan for 2013 transitional activities which are required for IER implementation
	From April 2013	Look out for guidance on the requirements of the new legislation, make plans to roll out the new system in 2014 and communicate the change to their local area. Work with their Electoral Management Systems IER supplier to implement changes to local IT systems
Preparing for delivery and roll out of the new service	By November 2013	Complete a full test of the matching and verification service, and confirm they have plans for sufficient staff and resources for transition in 2014 and 2015
	Spring 2014	Carry out the final old style household canvass
Transition begins with confirmation of existing electors and write out	In either July or September 2014	Begin the transition to the new system after the European elections (date will be confirmed once the IT and business processes for the transition have been tested.) Key activities will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matching Administrator's registers against the DWP database to confirm existing electors • Writing to all confirmed electors to explain that their registration will continue and there is nothing else for them to do • Writing out reminding any non-confirmed electors and inviting others who are potentially eligible but missing from the register to apply
	December 2014	Publish a new register, including all electors confirmed under IER, together with those on the spring 2014 register who have not yet re-applied
Completion of the transition with pre-election mini canvass activity, and post General Election household canvass	January to March 2015	Carry out targeted activity to invite further missing electors and those who may have moved, to update their registration. Also write to people encouraging those not on the register to apply
	Autumn 2015 and after the May 2015 General Election	Carry out a full household canvass. Every household should be asked to confirm who lives there and anyone new will be invited to register individually. Electors from the March 2014 canvass, who were not confirmed automatically and have not yet re-applied, should be canvassed again. If they still do not re-apply by December 2015, they will be removed from the register.
New system in place	2016 onwards	

The timeline reproduced below is taken from the UK Government's implementation plan and it summarises the key activities and responsibilities of EROs and administrators over the next four years. However the timeline does not include the proposed Scottish Referendum.



The Electoral Commission, which will have functions with regard to registration, for example it may be required to design a canvass form, is maintaining a web page on [IER](#).

Individual registration in Northern Ireland

Registration in Northern Ireland has been on an individual basis since a system was introduced by the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, this was in response to concerns about electoral fraud. The 'carry forward' of electors who do not respond to a canvass form but who nevertheless were added onto the next year's register was also abolished in 2002. The number of names on the new register in December 2002 fell by around 10.5% compared with the December 2001 register and in 2005 the 'carry-forward' was reinstated in time for the 2005 general election.

In 2006 the annual canvass was abolished in Northern Ireland and a system of continuous registration introduced; the Chief Electoral Officer was required to keep the register up to date by using information provided to him by specified public bodies.

The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 requires the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out a canvass of electors in 2016 if one has not taken place before the end of 2015. The Chief Electoral Officer did not recommend that a canvass should take place in 2011-12 because the 'the comprehensiveness of the register published in December 2010 showed an increase of 2.7% compared with the register published in December 2009' and was 86.7% comprehensive. Nor was a recommendation made for a canvass in 2012-13.

In November 2012 the Electoral Commission published a report, *Continuous electoral registration in Northern Ireland*. The report found that there had been 'a significant and worrying decline in both the accuracy and completeness of Northern Ireland's electoral register' since 2008. The Commission's research found that the register in use on 1 April 2012 was 78% accurate and 71% complete. The majority of the inaccuracies related to entries for people no longer resident at the address. The Commission pointed out that the inclusion of such a significant number of inaccurate entries was inflating the overall size of the register.

The Electoral Commission recommended an 'immediate and sustained programme of action...to address and reverse the trend identified in this report' and noted a risk that important elections held in Northern Ireland over the next four years could be using registers which failed to include hundreds of thousands of eligible electors and which contained many redundant entries.

Move to IER and the timing of Scottish Referendum

There does not appear to have been any major issues raised during the passage of the Bill relating to the implementation of IER in the run up to the Scottish Referendum. The only mention of the issue, in either House, seems to have been made by the Plaid Cymru MP Jonathan Edwards:

The Government have already announced a process of data-matching pilots and we shall watch their progress keenly. We welcome the moving of the autumn 2013 canvass back to spring 2014 to prevent significant deterioration of the registers before the introduction of IER, although that will presumably mean an 18-month gap and deterioration in the registers from this year's canvass until spring 2014. How will

that affect EROs and preparation of registers for the European elections of June 2014, and the Scottish independence referendum, which is due to be held later that year?

House of Commons Hansard 23 May 2012 Column 1229-1230

Mr Edwards' question did not appear to elicit a response from any other Member or from the Government Minister in his closing speech.

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