



Cabinet
23 February 2015

**Report from the
Assistant Chief Executive**

For Action

Wards Affected:
ALL

Promoting Electoral Engagement (IER) Task Group

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report brings to the Cabinet a report which contains findings and recommendations of the scrutiny task group's investigation into how to manage a successful transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). The IER system went live in July 2014 and is expected to fully supplant the current Household Electoral Registration system on 1st December 2015 with the aim of making the process of registration more convenient and secure.
- 1.2 The task group was established because members were concerned about the transition to IER, in particular, that a large number of Brent's residents may not be successfully transferred to the new system and thus removed from the electoral register. This could undermine civic engagement in the borough and negatively impact upon Brent's residents in a number of other ways such as making it difficult to undergo a credit check.
- 1.3 A number of demographic 'risk factors' which could lead to large number of people being accidentally removed from the electoral register have been identified. These include; high rates of population churn, large numbers of people living in the private rented sector and high numbers of students, all of which are prevalent in Brent.
- 1.4 In this context, the task group wanted to better understand the how the different service areas across the council are preparing for the changes and examine what could be done to ensure a successful transition to IER.
- 1.3 Given the timeframe for the roll-out of IER, it is hoped that the task group's work may assist service areas by providing timely recommendations to improve outreach with residents and ensure a smooth transition to the new system.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Cabinet endorse the recommendations in the report.

2.2 That the members of the task group be thanked for their work.

3.0 Detail

3.1 IER is different from the current system in that it requires each person to register individually, instead of one person in a household supplying the details of everyone living at that address. Online registration will be available from the start of IER and it is hoped this will help everyone who is eligible to vote to have control over their own process of registration.

3.2 The task group drew on a wide range of sources throughout the course of its work, which can be broadly grouped into four categories:

- **Quantative:** drawn from a range of sources such the DWP, the credit referencing agency Experian and the Office for National Statistics. Support has also been provided by Brent's Research and Intelligence team;
- **Qualitative - evidence given:** face-to-face evidence and presentations given to the task group by relevant experts and stakeholders;
- **Qualitative - consultation:** telephone and face-to-face consultation with relevant organisations such as the Electoral Commission; and
- **Qualitative – secondary research:** desktop-based collation of various pieces of policy literature and examples of best practice from elsewhere.

The task group's report would not have been possible without the help of a wide-range of internal and external contributors, who were an invaluable source of information and knowledge.

Brent Council:

- James Diamond (Communications)
- Sean O'Sullivan (Electoral Services - ERO)
- Peter Goss (Democratic Services)
- Dr John Birkett (Research and Intelligence)
- Jo McCormick (Partnerships and Participation)
- Tessa Awe (CVS Brent)
- Freda Owusu (Brent Housing Partnership)
- Tony Hirsch (Policy and Performance)
- Carl Holloway (Media Relations)
- Cllr Michael Pavey (Deputy Leader of the Council)
- Thomas Cattermole (Member Services)
- Nicola Mclean (Brent Youth Services)
- Dr Melanie Smith (Director of Public Health)
- Phillip Porter (Director of Adult Social Care)

External Partners:

- The Electoral Commission
- Francis Henry (Daniel's Estate Agents)
- Ann O'Neil (Brent Mencap)
- Lesley Spencer (Manchester City Council)
- Elisabeth Pop (Hope not Hate)
- Manpreet Chhokar (Hope not Hate)
- Chris Ruane MP (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee)

3.3 The work of the task group has encompassed the following three themes:

- The need to develop a comprehensive IER roll-out programme and communications strategy;
- The need for more effective working with partners including the voluntary sector, housing and other statutory and non-statutory partners; and
- The need for enhanced civic engagement with the community (e.g. improved civic education and greater outreach by elected members).

3.4 Grouped into the three themes outlined above, the report then makes the following recommendations:

Theme 1: the need for a comprehensive IER roll-out programme and communications strategy

1. Carry out further work to establish key target groups so that bespoke tactics may be used to reach more eligible voters. This would include an assessment the audiences attitudes, opinions and motivations as well as any potential language barriers there may be;
2. When developing the IER roll-out programme, the lowest matched polling districts and wards should be primarily targeted during canvassing;
3. The Electoral Services team should work with all council departments and partners to adopt an 'every contact counts' approach to ensure contact with residents is maximised, including email footers, automated messaging and library card and blue badge applications;
4. Proximity and broadcast messaging and social media should be considered as part of the communications strategy;
5. The communications team should engage young people to be actively involved in the development of communications materials aimed specifically at young people;
6. The communications team should develop messages around the benefits of civic participation and why it is important to register as well as the negative consequences of not being listed on the register;
7. Leaflets and posters about IER should made clearer and the headings made bold, snappy and straightforward to better communicate with residents with learning difficulties and visual impairments. A QR code¹ could also be placed on leaflets to direct people to the website;
8. Postal communications with electors should include a covering letter that is straightforward and easy to understand;
9. It should be made clear in the council's covering letter that unique identifiers other than an National Insurance (NI) number can be used to, details about unique identifiers should also be placed on the website; and
10. Brent's website should have a link directing people to the Jobcentre Plus website where they can obtain a NI number if they do not have one.

Theme 2: the need for more effective working of partners including the voluntary and community sector, housing and other statutory and non-statutory partners

¹ A code that by read by any imaging device (e.g. a smartphone) which links to further information.

11. Electoral Services should engage Adult Social Care (ASC), Public Health and external partners such as the NHS and Brent Mencap to ensure that potentially vulnerable residents are successfully registered;
12. Electoral Services should work with ASC to develop clear guidelines to inform both residential and domiciliary carers of their civic duties regarding those under their care, they must also inform residents under their care about IER as part of the 'making every contact count' programme;
13. The council's Public Health function should encourage sign-up to IER through its commissioned services;
14. The council should ensure that polling stations are fully accessible to disabled residents and that staff are appropriately trained;
15. Full advantage is taken of the opportunities presented by landlord licensing and that the information gleaned from licensing is fed directly into the IER roll-out programme;
16. Clear guidelines for canvassing Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) properties must be developed, the names and numbers of tenancy officers obtained and confirmation letters provided to canvassers by BHP;
17. Canvassers should also include visits to specialty shops catering to residents from different backgrounds;
18. Commonwealth, EU and new citizens should be encouraged to sign-up to IER by incorporating information and forms about IER into a welcome pack;
19. The Electoral Services team work with GP practices, dentists, opticians and pharmacies to encourage voter registration;
20. Electoral Services and Housing should monitor the developments around 'right to rent' for any impact it might have on information gathering and communication with residents;
21. Electoral Services should scope the possibility of working with estate agents in Brent to incorporate IER registration into potential welcome packs alongside council tax forms and utility company registration forms;
22. Electoral Services should scope the capacity to work with The University of Westminster and other higher education institutions such as the College of North-West London to be integrated into enrolment processes similar to a model used by Manchester City Council;
23. Brent Council should work with the Greater London Authority (GLA) to lobby Parliament to introduce legislation similar to the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA); and
24. Electoral Services should work with Brent Youth Services and Bite the Ballot to register young people.

Theme 3: the need for enhanced civic engagement with the community (e.g. improved civic education and greater outreach by elected members)

25. Electoral Services should work closely with Brent's Partnerships and Engagement team and CVS Brent to take full advantage of the VCS sector, both in terms of delivering registration services and in providing information to the council about outreach work in the community; and
26. The council and elected members work closely with Hope not Hate (HnH) to better engage with local VCS organisations and elected members should support Electoral Services to do this.

4.0 Implementation to the task group's recommendations

In further consultation with stakeholders, an action plan has been developed by the relevant service areas. This action plan sets out the council's response to the

recommendations made by the task group's report and will be used to monitor progress made at service level. It will also be used to report back to the Scrutiny Committee at regular intervals or when requested.

5.0 Financial Implications

The Government has acknowledged that local authorities may be put under increased pressure to deliver the changes to implement the new system. The Cabinet Office, therefore, has made it clear that any activities which create additional costs will be met by top-up funding to support the transition to IER. There is some concern that the new system will lead to a long-term increase in work which will not be matched by government funding. The task group has been told that such additional funds have been made available through yearly ring-fenced Cabinet Office grants to support the transition to IER. So far, these include the following:

- £11,000 in August 2013; and
- £217,641 in 2014/15.

Although funding arrangements have not yet been disclosed for 2015/16, Brent's Electoral Services team are expecting a similar level of grant funding for further work.

6.0 Legal Implications

6.1 The change to IER comes as result of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. The Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1983 requires councils in England and Wales to appoint an Electoral Registration Officer. The RPA also requires that the council's Electoral Registration Officer be responsible for compiling and maintain the council's electoral role and administering an annual canvass.

7.0 Diversity Implications

7.1 Throughout the course of the task group's work, a number of community groups potentially at-risk were identified, these include:

- Young people turning 18;
- Those aged 18 – 24 (including students);
- Tenants in the private rented sector (PRS);
- Postal voters;
- People whose first language is not English; and
- People with learning disabilities.

7.2 Ensuring that these groups are engaged is at the core of this task group's recommendations. However, of the above at-risk groups, only young people and people with learning disabilities are covered by the Equalities Act 2010. The task group recommended that further demographic research into under-represented groups covered by the Act should be undertaken to obtain clearer picture of diversity implications. It is hoped that these implications will be revealed in greater detail by the completed communications strategy and it's subsequent Equalities Impact Analysis.

8.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications (if appropriate)

8.1 Brent's Electoral Services team is set to take on temporary staff to aid with canvassing in the run-up to the election.

9.0 Contact Officers

James Curtis
Policy Officer
Tel – 020 8937 4594
Email – james.curtis@brent.gov.uk

Christopher Young
Senior Policy Officer
Tel – 020 8937 4349
Email – christopher.young@brent.gov.uk

Cathy Tyson
Head of Policy and Scrutiny
Tel – 020 8937 1045
Email – cathy.tyson@brent.gov.uk