

Levelling Up Committee – follow up questions

Forms of automatic voter registration

- 1. The Committee has heard evidence that an automatic voter registration system may risk ‘auto re-registration’ of voters that may not wish to be registered. For example, those that may wish to be registered anonymously. How could an automatic registration system mitigate against this and ensure voters that wish to register anonymously can do so?**

The Committee is correct that any move towards automatic registration would need to consider how to mitigate the risk identified. It would be possible to build an automatic or more automated registration system which includes the option to opt out – for example, if there is a valid reason, which could extend to those whose safety would be at risk if they were registered as an ordinary elector. In practice, the Electoral Registration Officer could write to citizens giving them a period of time in which to explain the reason why they do not wish to be added automatically to the register, which could include their wish to apply for anonymous registration, or to provide another valid reason why the ERO’s intended actions are incorrect.

Most systems of automatic registration include some form of “opt-out”, where eligible electors are registered unless they actively decline the opportunity. The “opt-out” could either be restricted to those who have a valid reason for not wanting to be added automatically, or provide all with the opportunity to decline registration.

- 2. Has the Electoral Commission conducted any research into whether the public would support a move to a fully automatic voter registration system?**

In our [2023 public attitudes research](#), we asked respondents which option from a list of potential reforms would increase their satisfaction with the registration system. Of those who picked an option, the three options with the most support were:

- **18%** - Being able to check registration status online
- **17%** - Automatic registration when receiving their National Insurance number
- **12%** - Councils using other information they hold to automatically update the electoral register

- 3. In our session on 3 July, the Electoral Commission indicated their support for linking registration of attainers to the issue of national insurance numbers. What needs to be changed in order for Electoral Registration Officers to be able to automatically update the register when individuals receive their national insurance number? Would an ‘opt out’ option be necessary to include on the form?**

Our 2019 feasibility study looked at a number of potential reform scenarios, including an automatic registration model. In the scenario we considered, the ERO would identify potential electors from one or a combination of data sources (such as HMRC’s data on National Insurance numbers).

HMRC does not, however, hold information about children's nationalities, and NINOs are issued regardless of nationality. In addition, HMRC does not have a record for every child in the UK, as not every parent or carer makes a claim for child benefit, 30 hours free childcare or tax-free childcare.

This means that HMRC data in itself would not be sufficient to register attainers automatically, nor would it provide full coverage of this group of people.

Nonetheless, the data that is held by HMRC (name, address, date of birth and NINO) could still be shared with EROs and provide a basis for electoral registration applications. One potential option would involve EROs writing to individuals inviting them to supply the missing information necessary to complete their electoral registration application electronically. This could be achieved by the individual scanning a QR code, providing immediate online access to the pre-populated application, which could then be completed and processed electronically through the existing IER infrastructure.

Beyond NI numbers, we also looked at a number of potentially useful databases in the education sector which could help EROs identify attainers and other young people, such as data held by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, or the National Pupil Database.

Regardless of the data source, any option for more automated or automatic registration would require work to ensure data could be legally and efficiently shared with EROs. We set out some of the [solutions to these challenges](#) in our feasibility study, and will include further analysis of options for automatic and automated registration in our forthcoming report on the accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers.

4. In our session on 3 July, we also spoke about the potential for the Electoral Commission to convene a working group to consider a 'roadmap' or framework towards how you may move towards an automatic system. Who would be essential to include in this working group and what would need to be considered to ensure its success?

Changes to the way elections are run should be considered in consultation with the whole electoral community. The experiences of voters, electoral administrators, and political parties and campaigners are important considerations in building a registration system that works well for everyone, and to ensure all eligible voters can have their say at elections. And political engagement (and ultimately support) is of course essential, as any such reforms would require legislative changes.

Developing proposals to move towards more automatic or automated systems of electoral registration would need to involve a broad range of partners:

- Data source organisations (for example the DVLA/DVA, HMRC or HMPO) would bring their detailed understanding of the data and transactions that they currently manage, and would need reassurance that data sharing is operationally straightforward, secure and legally compliant.
- Technical partners, including electoral management software suppliers and the IER digital service which is managed by officials at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) supported by the Government Digital Service, would need to work together with the data source organisations to ensure the secure and efficient management of data and transfer to individual EROs.
- Given cyber security risks it would be essential to design any new systems in consultation with cyber security experts to ensure that they are cyber risk resilient and can be updated rapidly as new threats and risks emerge.

- EROs themselves would need to consider any changes to their teams and processes, so that they are able to integrate automatic or automated registration alongside the existing annual canvass and year-round online registration.
- Governments would need to legislate to create the necessary legal gateways for data sharing by data source organisations, and to specify the powers and duties of EROs to determine registration applications created using automatic or automated processes.
- The Information Commissioner's Office would need to provide advice and guidance on how to manage information risks relating to data sharing.

Registration

5. Those in social housing or private rented accommodation comprise some of the groups least likely to be registered to vote, particularly as they frequently move so their details are not up to date. How could the current system be changed to enable these individuals to register to vote?

Levels of electoral register accuracy and completeness among these groups could be improved by giving EROs access to high-quality data from other public service organisations. Depending on the quality and coverage of these data sets, this change could support automatic electoral registration, integrated electoral registration applications, or simply enable EROs to send targeted invitations to register to specific individuals not currently correctly registered.

Any data used in this way should be based on recent transactions, providing EROs with assurance as to its currency. Examples of how this approach could be used to enable recent home movers to register to vote include using tenancy deposit scheme data to target people who have recently started a tenancy; or integrating electoral registration into processes such as driving licence applications, student enrolment, or other citizen interactions with public bodies and government departments. Our forthcoming report on accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers will cover this in more detail.

6. Local authorities have the power to fine individuals that are not registered to vote. Does the Electoral Commission have any evidence of fines having a deterrent effect and encouraging people to register? How often are fines issued by local authorities?

We do not collect data relating to the use of fines by EROs so we cannot say how widespread the use is or the effectiveness in encouraging registration. Anecdotally, it does not appear to be an approach used in many local authorities.

Postal voting

7. Does the Electoral Commission have concerns about the trend of increasing demand for postal votes? If so, do the upcoming changes to absent voting in the Elections Act 2022 exacerbate these concerns?

We do not have any concerns in principle about increasing numbers of absent votes and postal voting in particular. It is a popular and secure method of voting which offers choice to voters; we know from our post-poll research that most voters (95%) were able to vote in the May 2023 elections using their preferred method.

However, consideration must be given to the impact on electoral administrators. The introduction of online registration in 2014 made it easy for people to submit an application, particularly close to the deadline. The launch of the online absent vote application services will likely result in a further potential peak in applications around the same time, presenting an additional challenge for EROs.

The changes introduced by the Elections Act 2022 will also create significant differences for absent vote applications between UK parliamentary elections and devolved Scottish and Welsh elections. We continue to urge the UK Government to share a timetable for the primary legislation needed to give Scottish and Welsh government ministers the option of legislating for alignment should they wish to do so.

Local authority resource and finance

- 8. The Electoral Commission told us that the remaining provisions of the Elections Act 2022 could have a larger impact on Electoral Registration Officers than the roll out of voter ID. Are you aware if new burdens funding is being granted to local authorities to deliver the remaining changes?**

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is responsible for decisions on funding for local authorities, including for the Elections Act changes. We have recommended that the UK Government ensures that electoral administrators have the necessary funding and resources to implement the changes.

- 9. It has come to our attention that local authorities pick up the cost for one-off postal vote applications for a UK general election. These costs have been generated entirely because of a UK general election but are not covered by elections funding. It is currently expected to be funded by the local authority as it is considered 'registration'. Who should be picking up these costs and is this a problem you are aware of?**

We are aware that some electoral administrators have raised concerns about funding for processing postal vote applications. In our post-poll report following the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election, we recommended that the UK Government should look at the funding model for future UK parliamentary elections to ensure EROs can handle large numbers of registration applications.

- 10. What is your current assessment of the capacity of electoral service teams to deliver safe and secure elections? Does the Electoral Commission have sufficient power to intervene when it has a concern around the capacity or resource of an electoral services team to deliver its statutory duties?**

While elections in the UK are well-run, the resilience of local authority election teams remains a concern.

At recent elections, funding, staffing and venue shortages have been significant challenges for electoral administrators, while EROs are also under pressure from event-led registration. With further significant changes to elections expected to be implemented ahead of polls in 2024, we have recommended that the UK Government ensures electoral administrators have sufficient time and capacity and fully functioning operational resources to support them.

The Commission supports electoral administrators by providing guidance and resources to help them deliver well-run elections. We keep these under review, working closely with

the electoral community to ensure our support offer provides what they need. We also have the power to set, monitor and report on performance standards for Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers. These form part of our work to support and challenge ROs and EROs and provide a robust framework for the delivery of well-run elections.

Voter ID

11. Considering the turnout figures at the election, what is your estimate of the total number of individuals that were unable to vote as a result of the voter ID requirement, including those who may not have even attempted to vote?

Our public opinion research found that around 4% of all people who said they did not vote at the May elections listed the ID requirement as the reason.

Public opinion surveys are estimates and as such are subject to margins of error which make it difficult to estimate absolute numbers accurately. However, these figures do suggest that the number of people impacted is likely to be significantly higher than the 14,000 who tried to vote at a polling station but were not able to because of the requirement.

Turnout at these elections was 32%. The electorate was approximately 27 million which means that 18.5 million people did not vote. Therefore 1% of non-voters would be 185,000 and 4% would be 740,000.

12. The Electoral Commission's initial analysis included a public opinion poll which showed that 4% of people indicated, unprompted, that voter ID was the reason they did not vote. Please could the demographic breakdown of these results be provided to us to enable us better understand if specific groups were more affected by the voter ID requirement.

We asked non-voters two questions about why they did not vote – one unprompted question where they could give any answer and one prompted question where they chose from a list of answer options. The tables below set out how the results varied for demographics where we see statistically significant differences.

Why did you not vote? (Unprompted response – I did not have the right ID)

Non-voter average	3%
Unemployed non-voters	8%
Disabled ('limited a lot') non-voters	9%

Why did you not vote? (Prompted response)

	I went to the polling station but did not have my photo identification and I left without voting	I did not have any photo identification and so I was unable to vote
Non-voter average	1%	3%
18 – 24 year old non-voters	5%	-
Black non-voters	5%	-
Mixed ethnicity non-voters	5%	-
Unemployed non-voters	-	9%
Disabled ('limited a lot') non-voters	-	10%

13. We have heard evidence that disabled people can find the registration process extremely difficult to navigate and that voter ID has added an additional layer of difficulty for some disabled voters. To what extent have you engaged with disability charities since 4 May 2023 about how voter ID may have impacted their voting experience?

As part of our research following the May elections we have been working to build a better understanding of the specific experiences of different groups of voters.

We directly contacted 37 disability charities in England, and have also engaged with DLUHC's Accessibility of Elections working group and the Electoral Coordination and Advisory Board.

We sought feedback from charities on their experiences of the May elections, and those of their members/communities. This included a partner survey to be completed on behalf of the people they represent, and a voter survey designed for them to share with their networks.

These surveys were available online, in British Sign Language and as Word documents. They covered voter registration, information, and people's experiences of voting. We asked about voter ID and the new accessibility measures introduced by the Elections Act.

We received 21 responses to the partner survey and 96 responses to the voter survey. While these were small, self-selecting samples and therefore not representative, they provided a valuable insight into disabled voters' experiences, and we have reflected these in our election reports to make recommendations for improving the experiences of disabled voters. We will also use the findings to inform the Commission's wider partnership, guidance and communications work.

We are also currently planning extensive engagement with the sector, to inform our approach to supporting disabled people to meet the voter ID requirement ahead of the next UK parliamentary general election.

14. Has voter ID improved public confidence in elections as expected and have you measured this?

Public confidence in how elections are run remains high, with most people being satisfied with registration and voting processes. Over two-thirds (68%) of people said they were confident that the elections were well run – this is consistent with the 64% who said they were confident at the last comparable elections in 2019.

Around one-in-seven (14%) people said they were not confident that the elections were well-run, in comparison to 10% after the 2019 elections. Those who did not vote were more likely than voters to say they were not confident. In 2023, the most chosen reasons were:

- people being unable to vote due to not having photo ID (46%)
- a lack of information about the elections or candidates (40%)
- the voting system being unfair, outdated or wanting a different voting system (32%)
- believing some people had difficulties registering to vote (26%)
- media, TV, and press coverage being biased (22%)

All those participating should feel confident in the voting process. This was the first-time voters went to the polls since the measure came into force. We will be observing changes in voter confidence over the coming years.