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**Key highlights from the report of the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee into Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and Electoral Administration**

- 1 The report was published on 4<sup>th</sup> November (and therefore too late for inclusion in the formal papers sent to the Leadership Board- though we had discussed the likely key highlights of the report with the Committee Chair so this supplementary papers amplifies points made in the first report).
- 2 The report follows the publication of the initial White Paper, but is published in advance of the actual legislation. It therefore has been conducted as pre-legislative scrutiny.
- 3 All the witnesses spoke in favour of the principle of IER, the contributions therefore focused on the implementation.
- 4 The key recommendations are similar to the key elements of the submissions from the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators. In particular the Committee
  - 4.1 Argues against the proposed “opt-out” option. Given the near universal questioning of this, and the fact that an (unintended) consequence of the proposal as so far advanced would be a fundamental change in the principle of jury service (making this optional) it is likely that the Government will revise its proposals (though the final form may be weaker than at present).
  - 4.2 Proposes a full household canvass in 2014. However Government was more robust in its defence of its preferred option of more targeted canvassing (see below for the implications).
  - 4.3 Is in favour of more directive powers for the Electoral Commission (The Minister in giving evidence made clear the jury was out re that particular proposal, “I think it is fair to say the Electoral Commission are quite keen for a bigger role. At the moment, that is unproven”.) The Minister also stated “The Electoral Commission talks about consistency. What we want is consistency of outcome. This may mean differences in how you go about doing things to suit local circumstances, and I am very keen that we let registration officers have the ability to flex what they do to be the most successful, depending on their particular local circumstances”.
5. The detailed submissions and evidence given to the Committee also highlight some other issues.
6. First, however optimistic/pessimistic people are re the transition (most of those giving evidence were more pessimistic than Government about the short term implications) all the evidence suggests that the register compiled in 2015 will have less voters than the register used in 2015 for the General Election. In particular we know from Northern Ireland that there was a very significant drop off in registration following their change to IER. Northern Ireland’ register is still

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nearly 10% less complete than those for England, Scotland and Wales. Government proposes the carry over to address this issue for the 2015 elections- but even now nearly ten years after the switch in Northern Ireland, whilst there has been some significant increase in registration compared to year one, there are less people today on the Northern Ireland electoral register than there were in 2002, despite the fact that the voting age population of Northern Ireland has increased by over 100,000 during that time. In addition to the transition problems we know that some people only bother to register when they think a general election is due. In 2015 people will know that such an election will not be until 2020. Eleanor Laing MP (one of the select committee members) pointed out that her electorate dropped 3000 in 2011 compared to 2010(the register used for the general election). However at present the proposals are that it will be this register that will be used for the redetermination of parliamentary boundaries (which now will happen every parliament). That register will also be used for the local boundary commission review of authority ward boundaries.

7. In his evidence to the Select Committee Peter Wardle (Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission) stated “It summed it up for me in the impact assessment that the Government published with the White Paper. They say the June 2014 register, the one that will be used as the basis for the 2014 write-out, is likely to contain inaccuracies. Approximately 20% of people eligible to re-register under IER may not be invited in that invitation process.”
8. Secondly, the Government proposals for 2014 imply quite targeted use of resources for compilation of the register (and not the full household canvass). This raises the issue of how such resources are distributed and whether they should be ring fenced.
9. The Minister in giving evidence implied a desire for a non ring fence solution, though recognised the pressures against that. However given the very specific submissions re this (and the fact that any differential performance between authority areas will be clear pre election) the tone of his replies suggests we may have some one off ring-fenced transitional grant arrangements.
10. As reported to the last executive in the new parliament the majority of MPs will have constituencies which straddle more than one authority. MPs will therefore become very conscious of different levels of engagement by different authorities. (With the Chair of the Select Committee about to have a constituency covering three different authorities we can assume a future select committee will return to this issue in due course).
11. We know that the most difficulties regarding registration are in Inner City areas, where there are strong concentrations of the demographics with the

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least likelihood of responding. This is not just a question of poverty. In Tower Hamlets for instance 7% of properties are gated and private blocks (and as any canvasser knows success rates for contact can be very low). University towns also have very significant churn- so Cambridge has one of the largest electoral turnovers every year. One of the Select Committee members is a Bristol MP. He commented that in 2013 2500 first year students will live in Bristol North West; 2450 of those will leave in October 2014 and be registered in Bristol West (but they will all be registered as living in Bristol North West for the purposes of the 2015 register.

12. The Government anticipates that data matching will be a key element of the new way of compiling the register. We await the results from the pilots. However the pilot in Tower Hamlets with DWP highlights one of the particular challenges. Electoral registers are basically property based registers, which temporarily assign specific electors to that property. The National Insurance data base is essentially a people based register which temporarily assigns an address to each individual. How people describe themselves and how they record their addresses vary so there is scope for significant misfit.
13. To illustrate the consequences of those differences according to DWP in Tower Hamlets there are 174 people on their register aged over 111 years! Part of the explanation for this is that whilst there is a process by which deaths are captured by DWP data that process does not work if the person has moved overseas and dies abroad for instance.
14. This switch to data matching will therefore have implications for how electoral registration offices are staffed and organised. This is like for political groups recognising the difference in skill sets between the best canvassers, and those who can subsequently crunch data, use MOSAIC etc.
15. In his evidence to the select committee the electoral services manager for Southwark stated "Going forward...gone are the days of the gangmaster driving the team of canvassers to bang on as many doors as possible and get a result, and in comes a much different level of skills around data matching and examining IT systems and so on".
16. Whilst there will be a number of arguments about the scale of additional resources required Government is able to point out that there was an election Participation Fund with £2.5 million available, where the take up was so low that there was a £2 million under-spend.
17. The Government estimates that the present system costs £83 million pa, and the new system £108.3 million (but it also anticipates the possibility of efficiencies in future through data matching, online registration etc).

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18. The Electoral Commission has advised Government that for the scheme to work there needs to be a plan for implementation by March 2012 and the necessary legislation in place by December 2012.