

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT ELECTORAL REGISTRATION PILOT  
SCHEME (ENGLAND) (AMENDMENT) ORDER  
2017

DRAFT ELECTORAL REGISTRATION PILOT  
SCHEME (ENGLAND AND WALES) ORDER 2017

DRAFT ELECTORAL REGISTRATION PILOT  
SCHEME (SCOTLAND) ORDER 2017

DRAFT REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE  
(SCOTLAND) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS  
2017

*Monday 24 April 2017*

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**Friday 28 April 2017**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* SIR DAVID AMESS

- |                                                                 |                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| † Berry, Jake ( <i>Rossendale and Darwen</i> ) (Con)            | † Perry, Claire ( <i>Devizes</i> ) (Con)                             |
| Bradshaw, Mr Ben ( <i>Exeter</i> ) (Lab)                        | † Sheppard, Tommy ( <i>Edinburgh East</i> ) (SNP)                    |
| † Bruce, Fiona ( <i>Congleton</i> ) (Con)                       | † Skidmore, Chris ( <i>Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office</i> ) |
| † Chishti, Rehman ( <i>Gillingham and Rainham</i> ) (Con)       | Smyth, Karin ( <i>Bristol South</i> ) (Lab)                          |
| † Field, Mark ( <i>Cities of London and Westminster</i> ) (Con) | † Timms, Stephen ( <i>East Ham</i> ) (Lab)                           |
| † Frazer, Lucy ( <i>South East Cambridgeshire</i> ) (Con)       | † Trickett, Jon ( <i>Hemsworth</i> ) (Lab)                           |
| † Grady, Patrick ( <i>Glasgow North</i> ) (SNP)                 | † Turner, Karl ( <i>Kingston upon Hull East</i> ) (Lab)              |
| † Heaton-Harris, Chris ( <i>Daventry</i> ) (Con)                |                                                                      |
| † Lilley, Mr Peter ( <i>Hitchin and Harpenden</i> ) (Con)       | Ben Williams, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                                 |
| McDonagh, Siobhain ( <i>Mitcham and Morden</i> ) (Lab)          |                                                                      |
| † Milling, Amanda ( <i>Cannock Chase</i> ) (Con)                | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                                      |

## Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 24 April 2017

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

### Draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (England) (Amendment) Order 2017

4.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore):** I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (England) (Amendment) Order 2017.

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to consider the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (England and Wales) Order 2017, the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (Scotland) Order 2017 and the draft Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2017.

**Chris Skidmore:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

The instruments will together enhance the operation of electoral registration across Great Britain. Three of the instruments will enable piloting on the annual canvass in selected areas this year, while the fourth will enhance the operation of individual electoral registration in Scotland, to allow cost savings for electoral registration officers throughout the year. I will turn to an explanation of that separate measure after describing the pilot-related instruments.

Some Members will be aware that individual electoral registration was successfully introduced in 2014. For the first time ever, it enabled people in Great Britain to apply online to register to vote. Nearly 24 million people have applied to register under IER, 18 million of those online. It is clear that citizens want to register quickly and easily, and we are striving to build on the successes of IER and move away from an old-fashioned, paper-based bureaucratic system towards one that is modern and flexible, meeting what we all expect from electoral registration.

A key component of the electoral registration system is the annual canvass that takes place each autumn, when every household in the country receives registration forms. The fundamental objective of the annual canvass—namely, the maintenance of a complete and accurate register through regular data collection—is, and will continue to be, a Government priority. However, consultation with EROs and local authorities over an extended period has indicated that the annual canvass in its current form is not a sustainable way to achieve that aim and is time-consuming and expensive.

The process requires electoral registration officers to send an annual canvass form—the household enquiry form—to every property in their area. The HEF asks residents to set out whether there have been any changes in the composition of the household since the last year's canvass, so that EROs can identify whether any residents should be removed from the register or invited to make an application. Response rates to the HEF are significantly

lower under IER, as it is no longer a registration tool, and yet where no response is received, EROs are still required to issue up to two further forms and to carry out at least one visit to the property. Electors will therefore receive up to three letters and a visit from their local ERO team, even if they are already registered, solely for the purposes of information gathering.

The reality is that household churn across the country is only about 12% per annum, thus the majority of canvass activity is redundant. Over half of households do not even respond to the initial HEF, meaning that EROs are required to chase them, despite the fact that 88% of households will be a “no change” on the electoral register.

While the Cabinet Office currently provides direct financial assistance for registration linked to the introduction of IER, the total costs of the annual canvass are extremely high, at some £65 million per year. The process is therefore costly to EROs but also very frustrating for them. From knowing their local area or having access to local authority data, EROs may well be aware of the registration status of households in their area. The system currently in place by law, however, does not allow them to draw on their own expertise or other information held by the local authority. It does not allow citizens to tell us once of changes to their registration. It does not enable EROs to focus their resources in the most targeted and effective way.

What is needed is a more effective and efficient system that targets resources on reaching out to under-registered groups to add new names to the register, rather than confirming names that are already on the register. To ensure that ours is a democracy that truly works for everyone, the Cabinet Office is working with EROs across Great Britain to pilot alternative approaches to the current paper-based, inflexible and prescriptive annual canvass.

Three initial pilots were conducted successfully by the Cabinet Office during the 2016 annual canvass process in three areas of England: Birmingham, Ryedale and South Lakeland. The early results from the pilots last year were very promising, with provisional figures indicating that the cost of the alternative canvasses was substantially lower than that of the legislated canvass, due to the reduction in printing, paper, postage and staffing costs. For example, Ryedale estimated that the new methodology it employed resulted in an 89% saving in staff time and costs. Postage was reduced by 50,000 envelopes and simple household notification letters were issued, making the process for administrators and citizens much more straightforward.

Last year, I visited the electoral services team in Birmingham, which reduced its canvassing costs by £160,000 compared with the year before. Birmingham had already been using data to target its canvassing resource at areas of high churn—an innovative approach that is data-driven and efficient. The Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission are analysing the full cost data for the whole process.

The pilots are making a difference and building on the successes of IER. They are moving us closer to a system that is modern and flexible, as we would expect in the 21st century. Resources will be better allocated, less paper will be used and administrative time will be saved. We have learned from the 2016 pilots and refined the processes further, potentially leading to improved savings. The three pilots last year alone led to an estimated

reduction in canvassing costs of well over £200,000. That is why we are working with local authorities to trial further changes this year. We have an even greater ambition to test more approaches and alternative ways of canvassing that are just as effective as and more cost-efficient than the current process. By including Wales and Scotland, we are able to inform change to the annual canvass that works across the whole of Great Britain.

The three orders establish further pilot schemes under sections 7 and 9 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. As some Committee members may be aware, section 9D(3) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which was inserted by the 2013 Act, requires an annual canvass to be conducted in the manner prescribed in the Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 and the Representation of the People (Scotland) Regulations 2001. The orders we are discussing disapply that requirement for the 23 participating EROs in areas of England, Wales and Scotland.

The orders instead require EROs in the specified areas to attempt to make contact with a person at each residential address in the area for which they act at least once between the date the relevant order comes into force and 2 February 2018. The manner in which they do so, however, and whether they take further steps if no information is received at a particular address will be at the ERO's discretion. That will enable EROs to test new and innovative approaches to canvassing, including using data, such as council tax data, the local land and property gazetteer and internal local authority databases, to determine whether chasing responses to ERO inquiries is necessary. Such approaches have been developed by working closely with the Electoral Commission, which is supportive of the pilots.

**Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will my hon. Friend say whether EROs will be directed to make extra efforts where buildings or residences have a very high turnover of residents? I am thinking in particular of houses in multiple occupation, student halls of residence and old people's homes. Although it may be okay to send one letter to 88% of houses, a small number of houses have a disproportionately high turnover of residents. What steps will EROs be asked to take in that regard?

**Chris Skidmore:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which strikes at the heart of why the reforms are needed. We are not introducing measures that prescribe in law that every household should be treated equally, even though we know that 88% of households have no change. The resources that are freed up by these reforms will allow EROs to target individuals where there is a greater difficulty with under-registered groups.

Let me give some examples of innovative activity that has been trialled. In Grampian in Scotland, electoral registration officer Ian Milton has been developing a system by working with a tenancy deposit scheme company, which notifies him when tenants have left a property. That enables him to know that the building has been left vacant and that he needs to send electoral registration materials to the property.

In Sheffield, the Cabinet Office part-funded a pilot to the tune of £10,000, which enabled a data-sharing agreement to be developed between the University of Sheffield and

the Sheffield ERO. It has seen student registration rise from 13% to 76% at the University of Sheffield. EROs know their local area well and there are new ways in which they can target the people they know are removed from the register or change addresses frequently. EROs can use their resources more effectively to increase the size of our register nationally.

On the ongoing pilot schemes that we hope to take forward into 2017, the extra 23 areas in addition to Birmingham, South Lakeland and Ryedale were chosen using robust research methodology to ensure a spread of electoral register churn, population size, the pilot model chosen by EROs and region. In each area, the EROs will operate control groups and pilot groups so that the results of the approaches can be evaluated rigorously. Four models of piloting activities will run with the EROs in the 2017 pilot scheme, based on proposals from EROs themselves. Each participating ERO has chosen the model that they would like to apply in their area, based on their local knowledge and expertise.

Each innovative model reduces the number of paper communications sent to electors, utilising means such as telephone and email channels, and one model uses existing local data to determine where best to focus resources. Those ideas have all come from experts on the frontline and are designed to improve the citizen experience as well as ease administrative burdens on hard-pressed electoral teams. The elector will benefit from the local authority being able to redirect resources, as I have discussed, and target canvassing more effectively towards under-registered groups.

If successful, the pilots will demonstrate that the annual canvass process does not need to be so prescriptive and that a number of alternative methods to the annual canvass exist, which are just as effective and more cost-efficient, potentially saving at least £20 million nationally from the cost of electoral registration each year.

Although the Cabinet Office provides support for local authorities to offset the cost of the annual canvass—last year it was £26 million—the pilots will provide evidence for wide-ranging changes to free up local authority resources. It is important to note that the canvass itself is purely an information-gathering process. The pilots will not alter the requirements for the registration process and for individuals themselves to be invited to register to vote.

The Government have consulted widely, including with the Electoral Commission, on the pilot proposals. The commission has been very supportive of the plans and has been involved from the start in the early stages of the pilots' development. The Electoral Commission has also been consulted on the orders, about which it is content, following Cabinet Office confirmation that section 13 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 remains applicable to participating local authorities during the pilot.

Consultation has also taken place with bodies such as the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Scottish Assessors Association. That is in addition to the work that the Government have been doing with interested councils directly, which has helped shape the four pilot models. The Information Commissioner's Office was consulted during the development of the pilots and is content that the pilot orders do not raise any new or



[Chris Skidmore]

significant data protection or privacy issues. We have a privacy impact assessment also, which is set out on the Table. Equality impact assessments have been completed to ensure that under-registered groups, as well as groups protected by virtue of the Equality Act 2010, will not be negatively impacted by the pilots. Privacy impact assessments have also been completed to ensure that no new negative privacy impacts under the Data Protection Act 1998 will arise.

Although the purpose of the pilots is to give EROs the space to innovate and test alternative, more effective approaches in relation to the annual canvass, I want to underline that the integrity of the register will always and absolutely be maintained throughout the pilots. EROs have a duty under the Representation of the People Act 1983 to maintain their registers, and nothing in the orders will change that.

The draft Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 will allow Scottish EROs to benefit from the same cost optimisation measures that have been available to English and Welsh EROs since last year. That will be achieved by amending the registration application forms for Scotland to allow applicants to identify that they are the only person resident at the address aged 14 or over. They also provide discretion to EROs on whether to canvass a property within 12 months of an indication of single occupancy. Allowing EROs to make that choice decreases the amount of resources spent on processing applications and increases the efficiency and speed of the registration process.

Secondly, the regulations will modernise the system of registration by enabling Scottish EROs to send invitations to register and ITR reminders by electronic means if they wish to do so, replicating what has been in place in England and Wales since 2016. That will deliver a quicker and more efficient service to electors, who expect electronic communications when registering in this age, as well as enabling cost savings.

The regulations will allow an attester to an applicant's identity to be registered in any local authority area in Scotland; at present, both the attester and the applicant must be registered in the same local authority. That will assist those applicants whose identity cannot be verified using the usual matching process and who have to provide an attestation to verify their identity, and will result in more eligible applicants becoming registered to vote, as has happened in England and Wales. The provisions also aim to reduce unnecessary ERO correspondence and contact.

Preliminary estimations project that the regulations will reduce the overall cost of IER in Scotland by around £125,000 for the single-occupancy provision and around £400,000 for email ITRs per year. In addition, the regulations make a minor amendment to correct an error in the existing regulation concerning the requirement to provide fresh signatures following the rejection of a postal voting statement.

The Electoral Commission was consulted during the development of the measures and on the specifics of the regulations, and is supportive of the regulations offering the same provision to Scotland as already exists in England and Wales.

The Cabinet Office and I have worked closely with Scottish Government officials to ensure that the measures can be in place for the 2017 annual canvass and that Scottish EROs are able to participate in the aforementioned pilots. Last November, I met the Scottish Government's Minister for Parliamentary Business, Joe FitzPatrick, and we mutually agreed for the instruments to make provision in respect of both the parliamentary and local government registers in Scotland. That will be done before the commencement of the relevant provisions of the Scotland Act 2016, which will devolve competence in relation to the local government register in Scotland. That was agreed in order to ensure that Scottish EROs take advantage of these cost-optimisation measures in respect of both parliamentary and local government registers this year, and that local authorities in Scotland are represented in the canvass pilots.

With that in mind, the Government believe that the instruments, which allow for full annual canvass piloting, are a crucial step towards improving the annual canvass and the wider registration process. I therefore commend them to the Committee. I also hope that the Committee agrees that the instrument relating to cost-optimisation measures in Scotland will help to move electors and electoral administrators forward towards an enhanced IER system for both members of the public and EROs, as part of the continued successful implementation of IER across Great Britain.

4.47 pm

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Welcome to the Chair, Sir David. I know that you are always firm but fair in these Committees. I hope that you are firm with the Government and fair with us; I can hope, at least. I know that many Government Members are preparing for involuntary early retirement in a few weeks' time, given that we are expecting a surge for our party, so they will probably not want to be detained for too long here. You will bring me back to attention very quickly, Sir David, so I had better move on from those minor points.

The Minister made a reasonably convincing case for the instruments before the Committee today, but let me set out a few general points about how we see the Government's attitude and behaviour in relation to this matter, and then I will ask some questions. We feel that the Government's general approach to electoral processes gives the impression of regularly tinkering, rather than forming a firm solution to resolve the issue of electoral registration in the current century. There is an impression that they often make rushed decisions that then have to be changed after being implemented, and that the approach to those changes is bureaucratic and slightly over-centralised. An important value behind local government having EROs under its control is that we have a devolved system of administration, rather than a centralised democratic machinery. That is one of the great assets of the British political system.

My feeling, both from what the Minister said and the explanatory note, which I have no doubt all Members have read diligently, is that the measures are driven primarily by financial reasons, rather than the enhancement of democracy. I say that because threaded through almost every paragraph of the Minister's comments were expressions about the savings that will be achieved

by the pilots. The explanatory memorandum clearly tells us all that, in its current form under IER, the annual canvass

“is proving to be an unsustainable cost burden for local authorities to administer.”

There are two ways of approaching unsustainable costs: trying to find ways of saving money—we are definitely in favour of efficiency and cost-effectiveness—and ensuring that local authorities are properly funded, which the Government, lamentably, have failed to do. I will come back in a moment to general cost savings and the severe pressures on EROs.

By the way, if the Minister wants to say that this is not a cost-saving exercise or part of an austerity agenda—a kind of bargain basement democracy that some might call a Poundland approach to politics—perhaps he will indicate that he is happy for any savings achieved to be ring-fenced in local authorities for the further enhancement of democratic processes. Otherwise, some people might arrive at the conclusion—perhaps fairly—that this is about saving money, rather than enhancing democracy.

The Minister has not really explained why it was necessary to introduce the draft orders in the dying days of this Parliament. The orders will come into force on 30 June, but that is an arbitrary date. I will come to the date shortly, because it seems to me that it conflicts with other obligations on EROs to avoid making changes in the run-up to elections. Of course, all EROs face at least one election in the next six weeks, and most face two. An explanation must be given for why the draft orders could not wait until the next Parliament. Perhaps the Minister will reflect on that in his response.

I would like to raise several points on which I hope we will get clarification that helps us to decide how to approach the draft orders. More than 600,000 people were knocked off the electoral register as a result of the IER scheme. We know that quite a lot came back on because they wanted to vote for Brexit, but that was not a product of the IER scheme; it was a product of people’s political imperative to vote in the referendum. Is not the need for the pilot schemes due to the fact that IER is failing to register the whole population and producing the unsustainable cost pressures that I have referred to?

I talked a few moments ago about the pressure on local government, which is central to this matter unless we have a centralised electoral registration system. Perhaps the Minister will indicate that he does not intend to introduce such a system. Billions of pounds have been slashed from local government budgets since 2010. We accept that everyone has to tighten their belts, but there will be a £5.8 billion funding gap in local government by 2020. Is it not the case that EROs and councils as a whole are consequently under huge cost pressures? Is that the real reason why the draft orders were introduced?

The Association of Electoral Administrators has said that its members are increasingly overstretched. In fact, it recently published a document titled “Pushed to the absolute limit”. There will soon be two elections in most areas, and now we will run pilots. I struggle to understand why we are adding to the burden on EROs. The Minister needs to explain why he brought forward the draft orders today, beyond the need to make a few million pounds of savings.

The Minister said that there was wide consultation about the pilot schemes. He indicated that he spoke to the Electoral Commission and various other august bodies, but, as far as I can see, he does not seem to have consulted the wider public and civil society. Many citizens, in organisations and elsewhere in civil society, know how precious our democracy is and are really concerned. I do not think that he consulted any of those people. It may be that he thinks he should not consult political parties, which have an interest in these matters, but I do not think political parties were consulted. Were any third sector organisations or political parties consulted about the pilots? It would be interesting to know.

Something else that appears to be missing is local political oversight of the pilots. As far as I can see, it is intended that reports will be made straight back to the Cabinet Office. There have been some pilots that were administered by the Cabinet Office, but I cannot find where the results were reported, other than in the few sentences of explanation that the Minister just gave to the Committee. Will he commit himself to reporting the pilot results to the House, so that we can all look at what they have produced? We will want to use two measures, will we not? First, does it enhance our democracy? Secondly, is it cost-effective? Clearly, in these difficult times, every single pound and penny counts. Will the local authorities’ elected members have a role in monitoring the pilots?

The other day in the House, the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs reported on the referendum and it also referred to elections. It said—and this has been a matter of debate—that our electoral processes are to some extent exposed to risk from cyber-attacks, either by foreign powers or individuals with particular talents. Will part of the pilots be about making sure that the system is secure, so that it cannot be subjected to the kinds of cyber-attacks that we have read about and that horrify us, because we believe in an independent and secure electoral system to protect our precious democracy?

Finally, in the past few days 350,000 people have registered to vote, including a huge number of under-25s. I am sure that every one of us welcomes that interest in democracy and all those people coming on to the register. We want more to come on, as well. Has the Minister taken that surge in registration into account, and does he share my concern, which is felt widely around the country, that there are still hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of people not registered to vote and therefore not capable of taking part in our democracy?

We obviously welcome any cost savings or efficiencies that can be achieved, but we want reassurance that those will not imperil the democratic processes that are so important to us. We know the risks that arise when there is a breakdown of trust and confidence in the electoral machinery. In our country that machinery has always worked well, neutrally and independently of party politics.

Perhaps the Minister will have to write to us about some of the matters I have raised, but I shall be interested to hear what he has to say.

4.58 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We shall not offer any opposition to the orders and regulations, particularly as they affect Scotland. I note that they

[Tommy Sheppard]

have been discussed with Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Assessors Association.

It is tempting to say that when we moved from household to individual electoral registration, many people predicted some of the problems that are now being addressed by the regulations. The extra work burdens and costs generated by the process should not be a surprise to anyone. Tempted as I am to say that there is an element of “I told you so” in this, I note, as has already been noted, that the end of the Parliament is nigh and it seems hardly the time or place to engage in that wider debate. I simply wish those engaged in the pilot schemes well. I wish them success in their endeavours and hope that some corrective mechanisms will be brought forward.

I appreciate that we are talking about a specific area, so I do not want to widen the debate into a general one about electoral registration. However, the Minister referred to the importance of third party agencies in collecting information about the potential electorate. I hope that when the Cabinet Office considers the results of the pilot schemes, it looks again at the notion of automatic electoral enrolment, so that when a citizen interfaces or reacts with one part of the apparatus of the state or the Government, whether that is to pay a tax, claim a benefit or drive a car, the information that is collected is used to ensure that the processes are there to give them the right to vote.

I will not engage in that debate now, but I hope that the pilots that we are about to undertake and the information generated from them might provide some illumination in the months to come for those of us who may or may not be taking part.

5 pm

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank the Committee for the time it has taken this afternoon to scrutinise the instruments, which will enable EROs in England, Wales and Scotland to pilot new and innovative approaches to conducting the annual canvass, and allow EROs in Scotland to make use of email invitations to register and single occupancy provisions.

Important points have been made by the hon. Member for Hemsworth and the hon. Member for Edinburgh East, and I will conclude by responding to them. The hon. Member for Hemsworth raised the issue of funding. The Government are committed to ensuring that we have a democracy that works for everyone. In order to achieve that, we must have a democracy that is funded. The introduction of individual electoral registration—one of the greatest reforms to the registration process of the 21st century—cost £143 million. We are also funding local authorities to the tune of £26 million a year to implement IER.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the measures were simply to make savings or to foster democratic engagement. For me, those two go hand in hand. As we make savings from the pilots and the reforms, the costs that are released from the canvass procedures can be used to target individuals who belong to under-registered groups. That is a commitment that I made as a Minister when I introduced “A democracy that works for everyone”; I said that “every voice matters”.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth spoke about engaging civil society organisations as part of the process. I have toured the country speaking to many organisations, from UpRising in Birmingham to Bite the Ballot and the National Union of Students, right across every region in the country. We now have an early general election, but I was planning to publish a democratic engagement strategy, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East knows from the question he asked me in Cabinet Office oral questions last month.

I remain committed to ensuring that the Government strategy demonstrates how every section of society that is under-registered will be given the right to vote. I published a policy paper in March about the anonymous registration of women who are survivors of domestic violence. We will provide them with a mechanism to have an equal right to have their say at the ballot box. The hon. Member for Hemsworth may call that “tinkering” but I call it fundamental change. Therefore, I see savings and democratic engagement as two sides of the same coin.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth mentioned the timing on 30 June. It is important, if not critical, that local authorities that are registered for the pilots are given the opportunity to participate through measures passed in this Parliament. That will give them the planning period they need to begin canvass activity in July and August, as happens in most local authorities. He made valid points about whether it was a burden for local authorities to take part in the pilots. We have contacted all the participating EROs in recent days and all have stated that they are happy to participate. Indeed, they are keen and able to deliver. As I said in my opening remarks, we have 26 pilots taking place in areas that have been assessed for their capabilities, but there were 71 applications from local authorities. There is demand out there and this must be locally driven.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of having devolved machinery. He will know that under the Wales Act 2017 and the Scotland Act 2016, when the commencement orders on the electoral machinery come in, we will be devolving significant issues around elections and democracy to the devolved Administrations, within the local government framework. When it comes to further devolution, we are keen to ensure that local authorities are given this opportunity. On local authority scrutiny, electoral registration officers are independent of local authorities and must retain that independence if they are to have an effective role in our democracy.

On the wider issues that the hon. Gentleman raised about registration and the introduction of individual electoral registration, despite predictions that people were going to crash off the electoral register, it is clear now that it has risen from 46.5 million in 2015 to 47.35 million in the figures released a couple of weeks ago by the Electoral Commission. It is important that we have a complete register, as was stated in the Conservative party’s manifesto in 2015, and Parliament has talked about ensuring that we complete the register. However, we must also have an accurate register. Crucially, the Electoral Commission stated in its report released last summer that the accuracy of the electoral register has increased from 86% to 91%.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Hemsworth about the need to have a clear and secure system for our democracy. There is ongoing work on the issue of



cyber-security and attacks. He mentioned the outing of the gov.uk website in May last year. I have taken measures to ensure that I am confident about this general election and future ones. We now have at least double the capacity that we did when the website outed in May last year, and when it comes to monitoring this general election, all measures will be put in place to ensure that that cannot and does not happen again.

The hon. Member for Hemsworth mentioned the issue of trust and confidence. He is absolutely right that in our democracy, we want to ensure that there are as many people on the register as possible, that as many people as possible get the opportunity to vote and that we target our resources at under-registered groups. However, that will be worthless unless we have the processes in place to ensure that the people on the register are who they say they are and are able to vote in that capacity.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East mentioned auto-enrolment. We have had this discussion on the Floor of the House. The Government remain committed to individual electoral registration and will not be going down the path of auto-enrolment, but that is not to say that innovative measures cannot be taken forward. For example, when it comes to student registration and tenancy deposit schemes, which I have discussed, we can target effectively individuals who we know have failed to register and thereby maintain the accuracy of the register.

The proposals have support within the electoral community. The Electoral Commission stated on 14 July 2016 that it

“welcomed the Government’s commitment to conduct pilots in streamlining the annual canvass process”.

The Scottish Assessors Association and Electoral Management Board for Scotland stated on 7 December 2016 that they welcomed the fact that alternative means of carrying out the annual canvass were being piloted in Dumfries and Galloway and Glasgow, along with other registration areas in England and Wales. We would not take the piloting measures forward if we did not have the consent and commitment of the electoral community.

I end by saying that it has been an honour to serve on this Committee in my final engagement before the end of this parliamentary Session as the Minister for democratic

engagement. It falls to me to state, for the benefit of the House, our mutual respect, regardless of party politics, for those individuals who work behind the scenes tirelessly preparing for elections. A general election has been called. We have local and mayoral elections in some places on 4 May. When it comes to democracy, as Members of Parliament we are very much actors on a stage, and it is the people behind the scenes who ensure that our democracy is the best it can be and one of the best in the world. I pay tribute to the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the SAA for all the work they do behind the scenes to implement the law and ensure that our elections are the best in the world and as accurate as possible. As Members of Parliament, we depend entirely upon them and are in their debt.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (England) (Amendment) Order 2017.

**DRAFT ELECTORAL REGISTRATION  
PILOT SCHEME (ENGLAND AND WALES)  
ORDER 2017**

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (England and Wales) Order 2017.—(*Chris Skidmore.*)

**DRAFT ELECTORAL REGISTRATION  
PILOT SCHEME (SCOTLAND) ORDER 2017**

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Electoral Registration Pilot Scheme (Scotland) Order 2017.—(*Chris Skidmore.*)

**DRAFT REPRESENTATION OF THE  
PEOPLE (SCOTLAND) (AMENDMENT)  
REGULATIONS 2017**

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Representation of the People (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2017.—(*Chris Skidmore.*)

5.10 pm

*Committee rose.*





