



# The completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain

March 2010

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# Executive summary

This research report relates directly to the Electoral Commission's objective of ensuring that the UK's electoral registers are as complete and accurate as possible. If participation in the electoral process is to be maximised, and electoral malpractice minimised, it is essential that the registers used at elections be recognised as having high levels of completeness and accuracy.

Our definitions of completeness and accuracy are provided in the box below.

## Box 1

### Definitions of completeness and accuracy

**Completeness:** 'every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered'

**Accuracy:** 'there are no false entries on the electoral registers'<sup>1</sup>

## Our approach

Our report is based on the most detailed research into the state of the electoral registers since 2005. This includes analysis of a range of national data sources and case studies of electoral registers in eight local authority areas across Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> The case studies consisted of three main elements – automated computer checks of the local registers ('data-mining'), house-to-house surveys designed to produce estimates of the completeness and accuracy of the registers, and interviews with local electoral administrators.<sup>3</sup> The case study areas were selected to provide for a mix of urban and rural areas with a wide geographical spread. They provide a useful insight into the challenges facing certain types of local authorities, although the findings cannot be used to report on national rates of completeness and accuracy. The case study areas were:

- Derby City Council
- Glasgow City Council
- Hambleton District Council
- Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
- The London Borough of Lambeth

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<sup>1</sup> Our definition of accuracy excludes minor errors, such as the misspelling of an elector's name, which would not prevent an eligible elector from being able to vote.

<sup>2</sup> This research study covered Great Britain only. There is a parallel programme of research in place for Northern Ireland, where a system of individual electoral registration operates.

<sup>3</sup> The research was conducted in two phases. Data-mining and the house-to-house survey in Knowsley were conducted in phase one. The remaining house-to-house surveys were conducted in phase two. Interviews with electoral administrators took place in each phase.

- South Ayrshire Council
- Swansea City Council
- West Somerset District Council

## Key findings

- The completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers remains broadly similar to the levels achieved in comparative countries.
- However, national datasets and local case study research suggest there may be widening local and regional variations in registration levels.
- While there is no straightforward relationship between population density and the state of local registers, the lowest rates of completeness and accuracy were found in the two most densely populated case study areas, with the most mobile populations (Glasgow city and Lambeth).
- Recent social, economic and political changes appear to have resulted in a declining motivation to register to vote among specific social groups. This is despite the fact that electors now have more options than ever open to them to register.
- The annual canvass continues, on the whole, to be an effective way to update the registration details of electors; but rolling registration, a tool introduced to maintain the register, has not prevented the completeness and accuracy of the registers declining between annual canvass periods.
- Under-registration and inaccuracy are closely associated with the social groups most likely to move home. Across the seven case study areas in phase two (therefore excluding Knowsley), under-registration is notably higher than average among 17–24 year olds (56% not registered), private sector tenants (49%) and black and minority ethnic (BME) British residents (31%).
- Each revised electoral register lasts for 12 months, from December to December; during that period, the rate of completeness is likely to decline by around 10 percentage points, owing mainly to population movement (although the rate of decline will be higher in inner London boroughs).
- The research did not uncover electoral fraud in the case study areas. This may indicate that where instances of registration fraud or malpractice do occur they are likely to be relatively rare local incidents (although it may be difficult to determine instances of intentional over-registration using a survey approach). The research successfully tested new techniques which could help identify some forms of fraud.
- There is clearly scope to introduce measures locally which would improve the completeness and accuracy of specific registers. However, there are limits to what can be achieved nationally using the current registration system.

## Completeness of electoral registers: historical trends

- Research into the state of the electoral registers during the post-war period is limited, although estimates produced using Census records in 1950 and 1966 estimated the maximum level of completeness was 95% in Great Britain.

- There is evidence of a gradual long-term decline in the completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers between 1970 and 2000. Estimates based on Census records suggest that the completeness of the registers was at 93.5% in 1980, 91–3% in 1990 and 91–2% in 2000.
- Evidence available from electoral statistics and surveys of levels of response to the annual canvass of electors suggests that there was a decline in registration levels from the late 1990s to 2006. The same evidence base suggests that the registers have stabilised since 2006, although it is likely that the completeness of the registers has declined since the last national estimate in 2000.

## Completeness of the registers: who is missing?

- The evidence also suggests growing local and regional variations in the completeness and accuracy of the registers, with metropolitan and unitary areas outside of Greater London experiencing the greatest levels of decline. This pattern of widening local variations was to some extent confirmed by the case study research into local authority registers.
- Such geographical variations in completeness are likely to have widened since the late 1990s. While the vast majority of local registers are likely to be more than 90% complete after the annual canvass, a growing minority of local registers are likely to be less than 85% complete.
- The case studies confirmed that, as in previous decades, under-registration is concentrated among specific social groups, with registration rates being especially low among young people, private renters and those who have recently moved home.
- The highest concentrations of under-registration are most likely to be found in metropolitan areas, smaller towns and cities with large student populations, and coastal areas with significant population turnover and high levels of social deprivation.
- The case study research indicated that some of those missing from the registers are unaware that they are not registered.

## Accuracy of electoral registers

- Based on limited available evidence, it is likely that the accuracy of the registers remains broadly similar to past decades. Among those who are on the register, the major source of inaccuracy remains electors moving home and not informing the relevant Electoral Registration Officer (ERO).
- The detailed case study research in eight local authorities revealed no significant concerns about inaccuracy arising from causes other than population movement and no evidence of inaccuracy associated with registration fraud (although it may be difficult to determine instances of intentional over-registration using a survey approach).
- While national level evidence on the accuracy of the registers is limited, it is likely that variations in levels of completeness are mirrored by variations in levels of accuracy – in large part reflecting variations in local migration rates.

- Further research using the 2011 Census records will be required to estimate the accuracy of the registers nationally, while targeted survey work may be needed to assess the extent to which there are significant problems with the accuracy of specific local registers.

## Case study findings

- The case study findings reinforce wider evidence that the completeness and accuracy of local registers declines significantly between canvass periods, owing to population movement.
- Only a minority of home-movers in each local authority appear to be making use of rolling and late registration provisions (ranging from about one-tenth of home-movers in Swansea and Hambleton to around one-quarter in Knowsley).
- Across the seven case study areas in phase two (therefore excluding Knowsley), 92% of people who have lived at their current address for five years or more are registered, compared to just 21% among those who have been at their present address for a year or less.
- Identifiable inaccuracies on local registers are mostly a result of registered electors moving home and not informing EROs via rolling registration procedures, or EROs incorrectly assuming that electors not responding to the annual canvass remain resident at that address.
- Both the automated register checks and the house-to-house surveys suggested that there were very few inaccuracies associated with the inclusion of duplicate entries or those not eligible to vote in the UK.

## Maintaining the completeness and accuracy of the registers

- Our current system of electoral registration was originally designed for a 'householder franchise', determined by ownership of property. This system adapted to the extension of the franchise to all adult citizens, but risks becoming less effective in light of changing patterns of household formation and population mobility.
- In the great majority of local authorities, the annual canvass remains a generally effective means of maintaining the completeness and accuracy of the registers.
- However, measures may be needed to reverse what appears to be a decline in canvass response rates in large urban areas outside London.
- The introduction of rolling registration means that electors who move house do not need to wait until the next annual canvass to change their registration details. However, the limited take up of rolling registration provisions means that the completeness and accuracy of the registers tend to decline between canvass periods.
- There is scope for some immediate improvements in electoral administration, principally through the more effective identification, dissemination and adoption of good practice among local authorities. This would be likely to partially lessen the decline in registration levels, particularly in metropolitan areas.

- However, for the electoral registers to be improved and maintained at higher levels of completeness and accuracy than are currently achieved, broader reforms to the electoral registration system would be required. These may include: much greater use of data-matching among electoral administrators, and between local councils and other public agencies; a fundamental review of the resourcing of electoral administration within local authorities; and changes to the timing of the annual canvass within the overall electoral cycle.
- The introduction of individual elector registration ('individual registration') on a voluntary basis over the next few years will provide a significant opportunity for the UK Government and other policy makers to review the entire system of electoral registration.

## Implications of the research findings

The findings from the research have implications for how the electoral registration system in Great Britain operates, and the particular approaches taken by EROs to building and maintaining electoral registers. We have identified key questions and actions for EROs and policy makers. Any resulting changes to the current system of electoral registration must be founded on the interests of voters. This means that those who are eligible to vote should be able to do so during an election. The registration process should also protect the integrity of the process, and should not allow those who are not eligible to cast a vote to do so; nor to allow any eligible electors to cast more than one vote at an election. Any proposed changes to the registration process should begin with this as the starting point.

## Box 2

### Actions for voters

There may be only a matter of months or even weeks before the next UK Parliamentary general election is called. **People can register to vote up to 11 working days before polling day itself.** This is a straightforward process.

Anyone who is uncertain as to whether they are registered to vote in this year's elections should complete a registration application form by:

- visiting our website: [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk)
- calling our helpline on **0800 3280 280**
- contacting their local ERO directly

Political parties and candidates can also play an important role in encouraging people to register in the weeks leading up to polling day. We expect them to make sure that any application forms are delivered to EROs as soon as they can be so that as many eligible people as possible are able to take part in the election.

Groups and organisations representing under-registered groups (particularly students, young people and members of BME groups) also have a key role to play in raising awareness about how to register to vote. The impact of these efforts can be enhanced by the print and broadcast media giving significant coverage to the issue in the run-up to the election.

### Box 3

#### **Actions for EROs and local authorities**

We expect that EROs will already be taking all possible measures to improve public awareness and to encourage those who are eligible to register to vote in the months and weeks before the 2010 elections. This includes making use of the guidance and resources that we have issued to support EROs in their duty to promote awareness and ensure complete and accurate electoral registers.

This report also identifies a number of steps that EROs can take over the longer term to improve the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers locally. These include:

- making full use of existing powers to inspect information from their local authority, as outlined in our comprehensive guidance to EROs, *Managing electoral registration in Great Britain*, available to download on our website<sup>4</sup>
- using data-mining techniques to identify possible anomalous entries in electoral registers and following up with personal visits or seeking other information to decide whether to review and remove the entry
- targeting registration promotion and canvassing activities in specific areas where there is evidence that under-registration is particularly concentrated
- learning from the experiences of EROs for comparable areas, focusing budgets and resources for electoral registration on activities which work, including making sure there is an appropriate balance between personal and postal canvassing

Local authorities must also ensure that the ERO appointed by them to compile and maintain the electoral register is provided with appropriate and sufficient resources – including both management level staff as well as canvass staff – to maintain the completeness and accuracy of the register. Local authorities should also make sure that electoral registration services can benefit from connections with other areas of service provision. This may include facilitating access to schools to promote registration among attainers, and ensuring that rolling registration forms are sent out to home-movers who have contacted the local authority for other purposes, such as council tax billing.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/electoral-registration/managing-electoral-registration-services](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/electoral-registration/managing-electoral-registration-services).

## Box 4

### **Actions for government and policy makers**

Given the significant changes to the electoral registration process which will be required as individual registration is implemented in Great Britain, there is an opportunity for policy makers, in particular an incoming UK Government, to consider a number of key questions about the future of electoral registration in Great Britain:

- Should the annual canvass continue to be carried out such a long time in advance of scheduled elections taking place?
- What is the role of the annual canvass process once individual registration has been fully implemented in Great Britain?
- How can population movements between each annual canvass be more swiftly and accurately captured by EROs?
- Is there a need for more resources for electoral registration, or a different process for allocating those resources?
- Are the current structures for the delivery of electoral registration functions appropriate and sustainable in the longer term?

Policy makers should also review the restrictions introduced in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 regarding who can access the register. At present, only the Commission can access electronic versions of the registers for research purposes. This limits the research that can be done to monitor the completeness and accuracy of the registers.

Provisions included in the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009 for small-scale trials of data-matching schemes will provide important evidence to help determine whether access to population information on a larger scale can help to improve the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers. The UK Government should continue to make progress in establishing these schemes as quickly as possible, and we will carry out independent evaluation to identify possible solutions for future use.

## Box 5

### **Actions for the Electoral Commission**

Our key responsibilities in relation to electoral registration are to promote public awareness of how to register to vote, to provide guidance and resources to support local EROs, and to monitor their performance. We also conduct research to support these activities and to provide a robust evidence base about the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers.

We will continue to deliver these responsibilities. For the immediate short term and during the next five years, this includes:

- Running national registration campaigns before the next UK general election to make sure that anyone who is eligible to vote is able to do so.
- Reinforcing the guidance that we have already issued to EROs on how to encourage people to register in the run-up to the election, through our existing network of contacts with EROs and their staff.
- Following up our assessment of the performance of EROs against our performance standards, which is published alongside this report. This includes improvement visits and specific activities with EROs where particular areas of concern have been identified.

All of these activities will be informed by our future research programme. This is likely to encompass further monitoring of the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers at a national and local level. It will also be important to consider whether those wishing to vote at elections are prevented from doing so because they have not registered in time.

## **This report**

This report sets out what can be established about the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain using existing published literature and available data sources. The report then goes on to review the approach to local case study research and our findings for each of the eight local authority areas. The implications of the national and local research for the practice of electoral registration and the policy framework are then considered. The report concludes with a summary of the research findings and recommendations for future research into the registers.

## Acknowledgements

This report has been compiled as part of our rolling programme of research into the registers, overseen by Gemma Rosenblatt (Research and Evaluation Manager), Tom Hawthorn (Head of Electoral Policy) and Andrew Scallan (Director of Electoral Administration and Boundaries). The lead author of the report was Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, of the University of Liverpool, who is currently undertaking a Research Placement Fellowship at the Electoral Commission co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). We are also grateful to Jenny Maguire and Phil Thompson from the Commission for the work they did on this project.

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We are also very grateful to all the members of our external reference group on electoral register research for their comments on internal papers which have informed our approach to this final report. The membership of the external reference group is as follows:

Philippa Baker	Ministry of Justice
Neil Bowie	General Register Office for Scotland
Brian Byrne MRICS	ER Committee of Scottish Assessors
Dr Rosie Campbell	Birkbeck College, London
Richard Cracknell	House of Commons Library
Professor Ed Fieldhouse	University of Manchester
Fiona Glen and Karen Jochelson	Equality and Human Rights Commission
Andy Hamflett	UK Youth Parliament
Mark Heath	Electoral Leadership Forum
Professor Charles Pattie	University of Sheffield
Nigel Tonkin	City of Westminster Council
John Owen and John Turner	Association of Electoral Administrators
Alison Whitworth	Office for National Statistics

# 1 Introduction

1.1 This report sets out the findings from our current programme of work into the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers. This has comprised detailed case studies into the electoral registers of eight local authorities, together with a review of available data on the state of Great Britain's registers. The report does not cover Northern Ireland, where a different system of individual electoral registration ('individual registration') has been in place since 2002, closely monitored by a separate programme of research. Both programmes of research support the Electoral Commission's objective of complete and accurate electoral registers by providing evidence on who is missing from the registers and how to improve registration practices.

1.2 Electoral registration is the bedrock of the democratic process. The purpose of an electoral register is to enable each eligible voter to exercise their right to vote, while preventing any elector from voting more than once at an election, or ballots being cast by or on behalf of ineligible or non-existent electors. The current system of electoral registration in Great Britain is summarised in Box 6 below.

## Our research programme<sup>5</sup>

1.3 We undertake research into electoral registers in order to:

- provide an overview of the completeness and accuracy of Great Britain's electoral registers
- inform our guidance for Electoral Registration Officers (EROs), based on an assessment of good practice across the country
- assist with the identification of types of authorities whose registers need to be improved, in order to complement our performance standards work
- provide up-to-date information on those groups that are more likely to be under-registered and thereby inform our approach to campaigns and public awareness material
- provide ongoing tracking of how electoral registers change in response to legislative developments, administrative change or population change

1.4 Since 2004, we have become the principal body in the United Kingdom undertaking research into the electoral registers. Following the publication of our 2005 report, *Understanding electoral registration*<sup>6</sup>, much of this work has been focused on the piloting and testing of new techniques for assessing completeness and accuracy. This concern with developing new methods has arisen from the limited scope to produce reliable estimates using existing

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<sup>5</sup> A parallel research programme is in place to monitor the comprehensiveness and accuracy of Northern Ireland's electoral registers.

<sup>6</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain* (2005)  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/47252/Undreg-FINAL\\_18366-13545\\_\\_E\\_\\_N\\_\\_S\\_\\_W\\_\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/47252/Undreg-FINAL_18366-13545__E__N__S__W__.pdf).

approaches in the periods between the Census of Population, which takes place every 10 years.

1.5 Initial pilot research was carried out into the completeness and accuracy of the registers in Greater London in 2007. The main technique used in that research was a telephone survey.<sup>7</sup> A more traditional (and significantly more costly) door-to-door survey approach was used in this study. Since 2004, we have also commissioned a series of studies examining the state of the registers in Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

1.6 Provisions to replace the current system of household registration with a system of individual registration were introduced by the Political Parties and Elections (PPE) Act 2009. Under individual registration, each elector will become responsible for registering to vote, rather than one member of the household registering all those who live at a property. Electors will also be required to provide personal identifiers when registering to vote (signature, date of birth and national insurance number).

1.7 Individual registration will first be introduced on a voluntary basis. A decision on whether to make it permanent after 2015 will be dependent upon a positive recommendation in favour of the proposed system from the Commission and subsequent approval by Parliament. The reporting requirements placed on us by the PPE Act make clear that measures of completeness and accuracy will be crucial to the assessment of whether there should be a full roll-out of individual registration. We will also be expected to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of electoral registration and whether a move to require personal identifiers from all electors would compromise the quality of the registers.

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<sup>7</sup> GfK NOP Social Research, *Completeness and Accuracy of the Electoral Registers in Greater London – A Pilot Study: Findings* (2007).  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/electoral\\_commission\\_pdf\\_file/0015/16206/Methodological-report-NOP-2007-10-17-V07-final\\_27634-20340\\_\\_E\\_\\_N\\_\\_S\\_\\_W\\_\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0015/16206/Methodological-report-NOP-2007-10-17-V07-final_27634-20340__E__N__S__W__.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Electoral Registration in Northern Ireland: Accuracy and Comprehensiveness of the Register* (2007).  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/64872/Accuracy-and-Comprehensiveness.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/64872/Accuracy-and-Comprehensiveness.pdf).

## Box 6

### Electoral registration – the basics

#### **What is the purpose of the electoral register?**

The electoral register is a record of the names and addresses of all people eligible to vote in elections held in the United Kingdom. In order to vote at an election, an individual must be listed on the electoral register at the address where they are currently resident. This 'general' register is also used to select people to undertake jury service and can be purchased by credit reference agencies to confirm any address(es) supplied by an applicant for a bank account, credit card, personal loan or mortgage.

An 'edited' register is also made available for purchase for any use – such as direct mailing or the construction of sampling frames for large-scale surveys. Any elector may choose to 'opt out' of inclusion on the edited register.

#### **Who is entitled to be on the electoral register?**

Entitlement to be on the electoral register comes from the entitlement to vote, as contained in the Representation of the People Acts. The right to vote in the UK extends to all adult UK, Irish and Commonwealth citizens who are ordinarily resident in the UK, with a small number of specific exceptions. For instance, all convicted prisoners currently lose their right to vote, as do some people detained in institutions due to severe mental illness. Anyone convicted of electoral offences will also be disqualified from voting for a specific period – usually three years.

Citizens of European Union member states resident in the UK are entitled to vote in local and European Parliament elections but not in UK Parliamentary elections. The same provisions apply to members of the House of Lords.

The age at which citizens become entitled to vote is 18, but the electoral register also includes records of 'attainers' – that is, 16 and 17 year olds who will turn 18 during the period in which the register is in force.

#### **Is there a single national register?**

No. Separate electoral registers are compiled and maintained by EROs for each local authority area. The building blocks of these local registers are lists of electors for individual polling districts and wards, enabling separate registers to be compiled for local, devolved, Parliamentary and European elections. The records against each register entry clearly distinguish between those electors who are entitled to vote in all elections taking place in the areas where they live and those who are entitled to vote in local, devolved and European Parliament elections only.

#### **What is the annual canvass and what is it for?**

The annual canvass is used to update the registers in light of population movement and demographic change. As such, the annual canvass is intended to help ensure that the registers remain as complete and accurate as possible.

Each autumn, all EROs in England, Scotland and Wales are required to send or deliver an electoral registration form to each household in the local authority (in Scotland, local Assessors generally serve as EROs). Every household is required to respond by confirming the names of anyone who is/will be resident on 15 October and who is entitled to vote in the UK. EROs use this information to revise the registers which are then published on, or shortly after, 1 December. In Northern Ireland, where a system of individual registration was introduced in 2002, there is no longer an annual canvass.

### **How is the annual canvass conducted?**

Forms are posted or hand-delivered to households using a list of residential addresses in the local authority. For households for which there are already entries on the register, the form will be pre-printed with details of the electors registered at that address. If the details remain correct, a member of the household will simply need to confirm that this is the case. Confirmation may be returned by post or, in many local authorities, via password-protected internet or automated telephone services. If details need amending, then it is the duty of a member of the household to add or correct the relevant information and return it, usually by post, to the ERO.

EROs are required under the Electoral Administration Act 2006 to take all necessary steps to ensure that households respond to the annual canvass. This means that EROs will be required to issue reminders to households who do not respond, including door-to-door visits (personal canvassing) where no response is achieved.

### **Is registration compulsory?**

It is an offence not to supply information when requested to do so at the time of the annual canvass. While it is possible that fines can be issued where householders do not disclose the information, this happens very rarely in practice. Moreover, the law does not specify that any particular member of the household is responsible for responding to the canvass. While it is frequently assumed that this responsibility rests with the 'head of household', there is no definition of this term in electoral law and nowadays the term is less commonly used (since 2001, the Census and other UK government surveys have instead used the term 'Household Reference Person').

### **Can electors be left on the register if they fail to respond to the annual canvass?**

An ERO may decide to 'carry forward' names on the register from one year to the next if a household does not respond to the canvass. This provision is not automatic and the ERO will need to be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for assuming that the details remain correct. However, local practice in the use of 'carry forward' varies and the provision is likely to be used more extensively in areas where levels of response to the canvass are lower.

### **Can eligible electors register to vote outside the canvass period?**

Yes. Once the register has been published it is updated on a monthly basis. Under the terms of the Representation of the People Act 2000, if an eligible elector has not been included on the register following the annual canvass or changes address after the canvass has taken place, they can complete a 'rolling registration' form and submit it to the ERO for the local authority in which they live. In most cases, applications received at least three weeks in advance will appear on the register published on the first day of the following month, although some applications may take longer to publish. Where the elector has moved from another local authority, the ERO receiving the form will also contact the ERO in that local authority to confirm that the elector should be removed from the other register. It is not possible to register in this way during the three-month canvass period (usually late August–late November) and the register is not updated at all in the 11 working days before an election.

### **What else do EROs do to maintain the electoral registers?**

It is standard practice for EROs to update the electoral registers by inspecting other records held by the local authority which appointed them, including Council Tax records, and by receiving notices of deaths from the local registrar. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is also able to request information from the National Insurance database held by the Department for Work and Pensions.

EROs have other powers which are less widely used. They may inspect any records kept by any person, including a company or organisation, providing services (including outsourced services) to that local authority. Any inspection should comply with the Data Protection Act 1998. In addition, EROs can also require any person or organisation to give information needed for the purposes of their duty to maintain the registers of Parliamentary and local government electors, including housing associations, private landlords, universities and colleges, among others.

## This report

1.8 The overall programme of research for this report is made up of three main strands of activity – case studies of the state of the electoral registers in eight local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales; a review of existing published research on the electoral registers; and a review of existing data sources from which direct, or indirect, measures of the completeness and accuracy of the registers can be derived.

1.9 The eight case study areas were selected to ensure a mixture of urban and rural areas. They also represent a cross-section of affluent and less affluent areas. The case study areas were:

- Derby
- Glasgow city
- Hambleton
- Knowsley
- Lambeth
- South Ayrshire
- Swansea
- West Somerset

1.10 The case studies comprised three main elements:

- automated computer checks ('data-mining') of all eight local registers to identify potentially inaccurate register entries, together with a small sample of follow-up interviews in each case study area to estimate levels of inaccuracy associated with these identified cases
- house-to-house surveys, based on a random sample of households, designed to produce estimates of completeness and accuracy of the local registers
- interviews with electoral administrators in each case study area to contextualise the findings, highlight the challenges facing electoral administrators arising from the registration process and identify examples of good practice

1.11 The case study research was carried out in two phases between March and October 2009. The phasing of the research enabled the house-to-house survey to be piloted initially in a single local authority (Knowsley) before being rolled out to the remaining seven case study areas. This meant that **the survey in Knowsley took place four to six months after the annual canvass, while the seven case study surveys in phase two were carried out eight to ten months after the canvass.**

1.12 The remainder of this report is divided into five chapters:

- Chapter 2 outlines what we can currently establish about the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers in Great Britain based on published literature and available data sources.

- Chapter 3 introduces the eight areas chosen as case studies. It looks at the characteristics of each of these areas. This information is used, together with the findings from Chapter 2, to make projections about the completeness and accuracy of the eight registers.
- Chapter 4 outlines our approach to 'data-mining', house-to-house surveys and interviews with electoral administrators in the eight areas. It considers the findings from each of these in turn. The case studies provide a useful insight into the challenges facing certain types of local authorities, but the findings are not used to report on national rates of completeness and accuracy.
- Chapter 5 then considers the implications of the research findings for the electoral registration process.
- The conclusion, Chapter 6, summarises the key research findings and makes recommendations for future research into the registers.

## 2 The national picture: what do we know about the electoral registers?

2.1 This section reviews what is known about the current state of Great Britain's electoral registers. It is based on published research findings, some of which have been updated using a range of existing sources, such as the data we collect from Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) as part of our performance standards framework and the electoral statistics published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

### Box 7

#### Key points

- Any estimate of the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers represents a snapshot at a particular moment in the lifecycle of the registers.
- Population movement post-cavass leads to a deterioration of around 10 percentage points in completeness and accuracy of the registers following the annual cavass (which currently asks for information of those resident in a household as of 15 October).
- Estimates from 1950 and 1996 suggest the post-war maximum for the completeness of the registers in the UK following the annual cavass was 96%.
- The completeness of the registers was already declining by the early 1980s, but it is likely that post-cavass registration levels stabilised at around 91–3% during the 1990s.
- Despite a shortage of research during the period 1998–2004, there are grounds to suggest that registration levels fell in this period, possibly to the lowest levels in post-war Britain.
- Registration levels appear to have stabilised since 2006, which is likely to reflect the impact of the duties imposed on EROs by the Electoral Administration Act 2006, including the development of our performance standards framework for EROs from 2007.
- Despite recent increases in the total number of people registered, there remains a high likelihood that the completeness of the registers has declined in the most densely populated urban centres outside of London since the late 1990s.
- Much of the difference between current registration levels and those achieved in previous decades is likely to have resulted from factors which are external to the system of electoral registration.
- Great Britain continues to rank relatively well in comparison to other countries at similar levels of economic development operating broadly similar systems of electoral registration.

2.2 The Electoral Commission's definitions of completeness and accuracy are provided in Box 8, together with a brief explanation of what we seek to measure based on these definitions. While completeness and accuracy are

distinctive, there is likely to be considerable crossover when producing estimates of each. This is because population movement may simultaneously render a proportion of the register incomplete and inaccurate: for example, a person moving house may not contact the ERO(s), meaning they are registered at their old property (an inaccurate entry) and not at their new property (an unregistered elector) (see Appendix B for further information).

## Box 8

### Defining and measuring completeness and accuracy

#### Completeness

Our definition of completeness is that **‘every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered’**.

The completeness of the electoral registers therefore refers to the percentage of eligible electors who are registered at their current address. The proportion of eligible electors who are not included on the register at their current address constitutes the rate of under-registration.

#### Accuracy

Our definition of accuracy is that **‘there are no false entries on the electoral registers’**.

The accuracy of the electoral registers is therefore a measure of the percentage of entries on the register which relate to verified and eligible voters who are resident at that address. Inaccurate register entries may relate to entries which have become redundant, are ineligible and have been included unintentionally or which are fraudulent (see Appendix B for a breakdown of possible inaccuracies).

2.3 The limited body of research into the electoral registers has primarily been undertaken by UK government statisticians, a limited number of UK academics and, since 2004, by the Electoral Commission.<sup>9</sup> Within this research, there are four different approaches to producing national estimates of completeness and accuracy. These approaches, and examples of key studies associated with each approach, are set out in Box 9. While it is widely recognised that there are problems associated with all these existing approaches, this chapter also demonstrates that there is considerable scope to use them to identify trends in registration levels over time, the social groups who are most likely to be absent from the registers, and likely geographical variations in the completeness of the registers.

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<sup>9</sup> Since 2004, electoral registration research in the UK has tended to be undertaken by the Electoral Commission, with academic work in this area becoming increasingly rare. The development of our research into electoral registration followed a period of seven years in which no detailed assessment of the state of the registers had been undertaken.

## Box 9

### An imprecise science: estimating the completeness and accuracy of the registers

All current approaches to estimating the completeness and accuracy of the electoral registers at a national level are imperfect, and there is no single dataset which can be used to derive regular and reliable estimates for the completeness of the registers. The main ways to produce estimates, and the problems associated with them, are summarised below.

**Matching Census records against the electoral registers:** A sample of Census returns, or data from the Census Coverage Survey, can be cross-matched against the electoral registers to derive estimates of completeness and accuracy. Using Census records allows additional analysis of the relationship between registration levels and key variables such as age, housing tenure and residential mobility, as well as scope to identify variations by black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and by region. Variants of this approach, which is widely recognised as being the 'gold standard' for producing estimates of the completeness of the registers, were used in relation to the 1965, 1980, 1990 and 2000 registers.<sup>10</sup> However, this approach also has three key limitations:

- The exercise can only be repeated every 10 years.
- Where Census records are matched against register entries, there is a high probability that many of those missing from the registers are also missing from the Census.
- Matching based on the Census Coverage Survey does not generally provide a sample large enough to produce anything much more than national estimates.

**Comparing ONS electoral statistics (the number of entries on the registers) with mid-year population estimates ('population estimates'):** These two datasets can be used to provide relatively crude estimates of the annual registration rates at national and sub-national levels. Under this method, the registration rate is calculated by using ONS statistics for the total entries on the electoral registers as the numerator and dividing this by the ONS estimate for the population aged 16 and above as the denominator. This method is currently the only means of providing annual estimates for individual local authorities or Parliamentary constituencies. While these estimates can be used between Census periods to highlight broad trends and possible under-registration, this approach has many limitations:

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<sup>10</sup> P.G. Gray and A. Gee, Electoral registration for parliamentary elections: an enquiry made for the Home Office. (HMSO: London, 1967); J.E. Todd and B. Butcher, Electoral registration in 1981 (HMSO: London, 1981); S. Smith, Electoral registration in 1991 (HMSO: London, 1993). The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain* (2005).

- It is not possible to derive a figure from population estimates for the proportion of the population whose nationality means they would be ineligible to vote.
- The accuracy of population estimates is likely to decline each year after the Census on which they are based.
- ONS electoral statistics represent entries on the electoral registers, not individual electors. It is not possible to quantify the number of entries which are duplicates or which are illegitimate using this approach. This means that the ONS figures are likely to over-state the number of registered electors.

**Using large-scale national surveys:** Large-scale, representative or random social surveys can be used to produce reliable estimates of the completeness of the registers. Typically such surveys use the postcode address file as a sampling frame and, ideally, cross-check self-reported electoral registration against actual entries on the electoral register to account for 'false positives' (i.e. people who think, or say, they are registered when they are not).

The main limitations of using surveys to estimate completeness are that:

- Non-response to the surveys is likely to be highest among those who are eligible but not registered – particularly where telephone or internet-based surveys are used.
- Large sample sizes are required, meaning surveys are very expensive to conduct.
- The only existing national survey which provides data on electoral registration and cross checks this against actual register entries is the panel survey carried out for the British Election Study which typically takes place only every 4–5 years.
- There are legal restrictions on the scope for researchers to access electronic versions of the registers to undertake register checks.
- Survey approaches offer no obvious means of estimating the number of duplicate entries across local registers.
- No existing survey is able to produce estimates for accuracy.

**Monitoring annual canvass response rates:** Since 2007 we have asked all local authorities to provide a figure for the proportion of households which have responded to the annual canvass of electors – either by confirming existing details or by amending them. These data can be used to calculate the canvass response rate at a local level, and to derive a national average for canvass response. Broadly equivalent data exists for the period 1987–96 from studies for the Home Office conducted by Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS), which centred on estimating levels of response to the annual canvass of electors and using this to identify factors that would improve canvass return rates.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> P. Young and J.E. Todd, *Compiling the electoral register 1988 and 1987*. (HMSO: London, 1990); S. Hickmann, *Compiling the electoral register 1991: a survey carried out by the Social Survey Division of OPCS on behalf of the Home Office* (HMSO: London, 1992);

These studies also pointed to the impact of specific canvassing techniques, particularly the use of personal canvassers, in raising return rates across all types of local authority. While the canvass response rate can also be used to help identify changes over time and also variations between local authorities, there are again a number of significant limitations with this data source:

- Prior to 2007, canvass response rates were calculated from surveys of local authorities and response levels varied year on year.
- There are significant gaps in the time-series of data available, with only limited data available for a few of the years from 1997–2007.
- The proportion of households responding to the canvass does not represent an estimate of completeness (although a high canvass response is clearly a pre-requisite for high registration levels).
- The canvass response rate offers no indication at all of the likely accuracy of the registers.

There are also a limited number of studies which have sought to produce local estimates for the coverage of the registers by cross-matching individual registers against other available datasets, such as medical lists or council tax records.<sup>12</sup> While limited as a basis for establishing a national picture, these studies confirmed that there were likely to be significant local variations in registration levels.

## The state of the registers: 1950s to 1990s

2.4 Evidence shows that universal electoral registration has never been achieved in Great Britain. Countries which derive their electoral registers from comprehensive population registers can generally come closer to this goal, but the annual canvass of electors in Great Britain did keep registration levels high in previous decades. As Table 1 shows, in 1950 and 1966 the maximum level of completeness of the registers was achieved directly following the annual canvass, with 96% of electors registered at the correct address. However, population movement following the canvass meant that only 85% of electors in 1966 were correctly registered on the last day of the registers' life.

2.5 **Since rates of completeness and accuracy decline as the registers age, it follows that any estimate of these represents a snapshot at a particular moment in the lifecycle of the registers.** The 'rule of thumb' which may be applied here is that population movement eroded the completeness and accuracy of the average local register by around just under 1% each month during the post-war period (although the completeness and accuracy of some local registers will decline more rapidly, particularly in

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D. Freeth, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1995*. (HMSO: London, 1996); D. Devore, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1996* (HMSO: London, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> A. Bowling, D. Hart and A. Silman, 'Accuracy of electoral registers and Family Practitioner Committee lists for population studies of the very elderly' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 43 (1989) 391–4; M.J. Garton, M.I. Abdalla, D.M. Reid and I.T. Russell, 'Estimating the point accuracy of population registers using capture-recapture methods in Scotland' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 50 (1996), 99–103.

Greater London). It also follows that the registers were less complete and accurate on election day than they were on the final day of the canvass. Indeed, seven of the 10 general elections held from 1945–70 were held using registers which were over seven months old and, therefore, likely to have been less than 90% complete.<sup>13</sup> At four post-war general elections (1951, 1959, 1964 and October 1974) the registers were at least 11 months old, meaning that completeness on election day may have been as low as 85%.

**Table 1: Proportion of electors correctly registered at their current address a) at the end of the annual canvass period; b) on the day of the registers' publication; and c) on the last day of the registers' life, 1950 and 1966**

	At end of canvass period (*)	On day of registers' publication (**)	On last day of registers' life (***)
1950	96	94	87
1966	96	93	85

Notes: \* 20 November 1949; 10 October 1965.  
 \*\* 15 March 1950; 16 February 1966.  
 \*\*\* 15 March 1951; 15 February 1967.

Sources: Gray et al (1950); Gray and Gee (1967).

2.6 Taking the registration levels from 1950 and 1966 (4% under-registration after the canvass) as a starting point, registration levels appeared to have fallen somewhat by the early 1980s. Estimates derived from matching 1981 Census records against electoral registers at the end of the 1980 canvass period found that 6.5% of eligible electors were not registered.<sup>14</sup> When broadly equivalent studies were conducted in subsequent decades, the estimates highlighted a possible increase in under-registration to 7–9% in 1990<sup>15</sup> and 8–9% in 2000.<sup>16</sup>

### Late 1990s onwards: a decline in the registers?

2.7 Trends in the indicative registration rate<sup>17</sup> provide further evidence of apparent long-run changes in registration levels – although these figures need to be treated with caution and cannot be compared directly to those for 1950 and 1966 cited above. An analysis of such data (entries on the registers and population estimates) for the period between 1983 and 1991 indicates that there was a drop in the registration rate during this period – from 97.8% in 1983 to 95.2% in 1991 (as shown in Figure 1). The registration rate then appeared to be stable during the 1990s, before beginning to fall again at the

<sup>13</sup> Figures for the age of the registers have been taken from Rallings and Thrasher (2009), pp.89–91.

<sup>14</sup> J.E. Todd and B. Butcher, *Electoral registration in 1981* (HMSO: London, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> S. Smith, *Electoral registration in 1991* (HMSO: London, 1993).

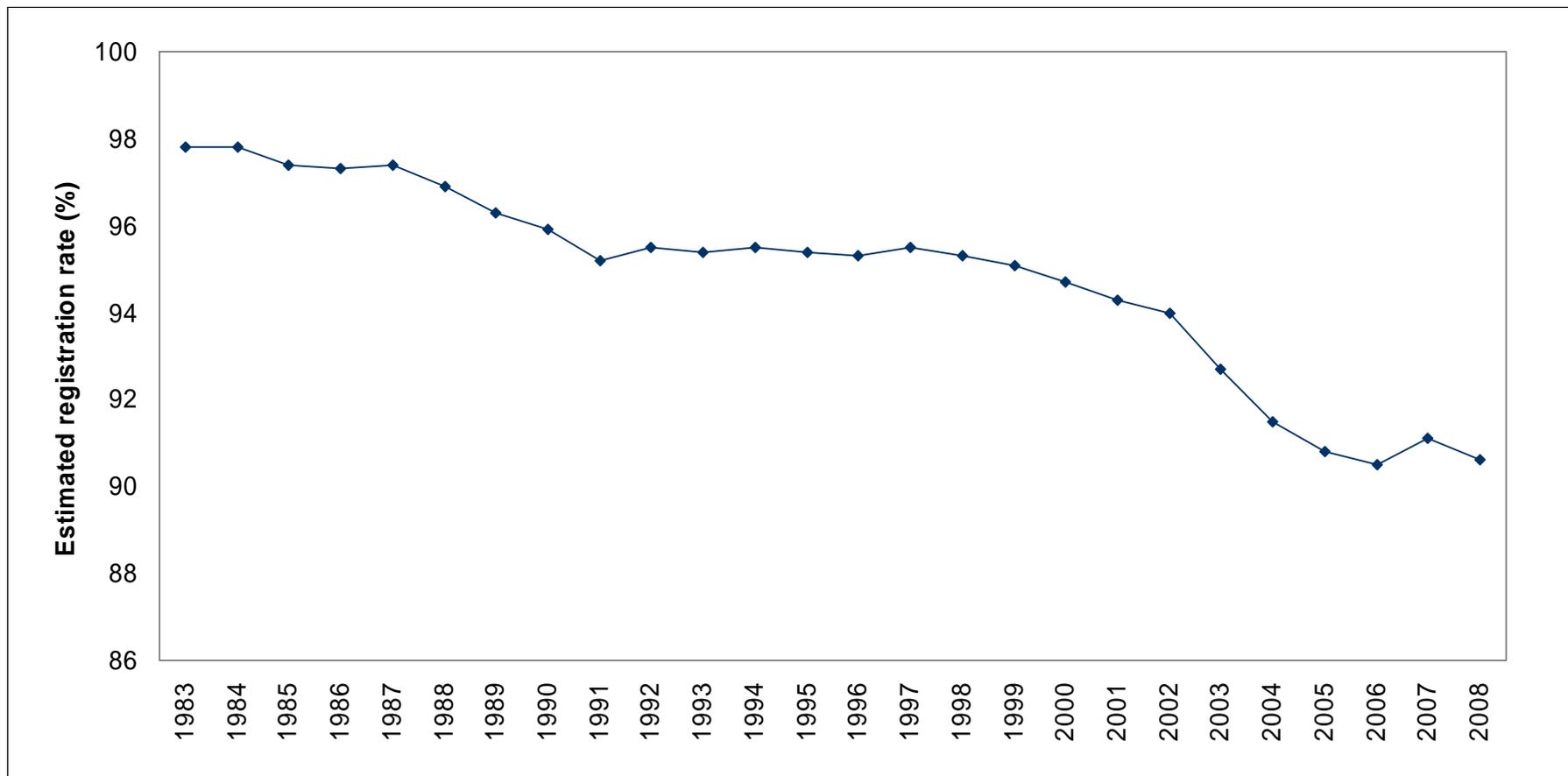
<sup>16</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain* (2005).

<sup>17</sup> See Box 9 for information on how the registration rate is calculated and the limitations of this approach.

end of the decade. By 2006, the registration rate for the Parliamentary register had fallen to 90.5%, since when it has appeared to stabilise around this level.

2.8 However, these estimates are based on the number of entries on the registers rather than the absolute number of people registered. This means they cannot take account of redundant or (often legitimate) duplicate register entries, and so it had previously been assumed that they over estimate registration levels. Indeed, the registration rate obtained using this approach for 1990 (95.9%) was above the range of the estimate based on comparison against Census records (91–93%). At the same time, the figures used to calculate registration rates do not record ineligibility to vote among the adult population. Since the 1990s, increased migration to the UK from non-Commonwealth and non-EU countries may have meant that the UK's resident population grew faster than the population who are eligible to vote. The impact of these trends cannot be quantified, but it is possible that a slight inflation of the estimate of the voting-age population (the denominator) has begun to cancel out the effect of duplicate and redundant register entries inflating the estimated size of the electorate (the numerator). As a result, the estimated rate may actually be more accurate than it would be otherwise.

Figure 1: Estimated registration rate, UK 1983–2008 (Parliamentary electoral register)<sup>18</sup>



Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates.

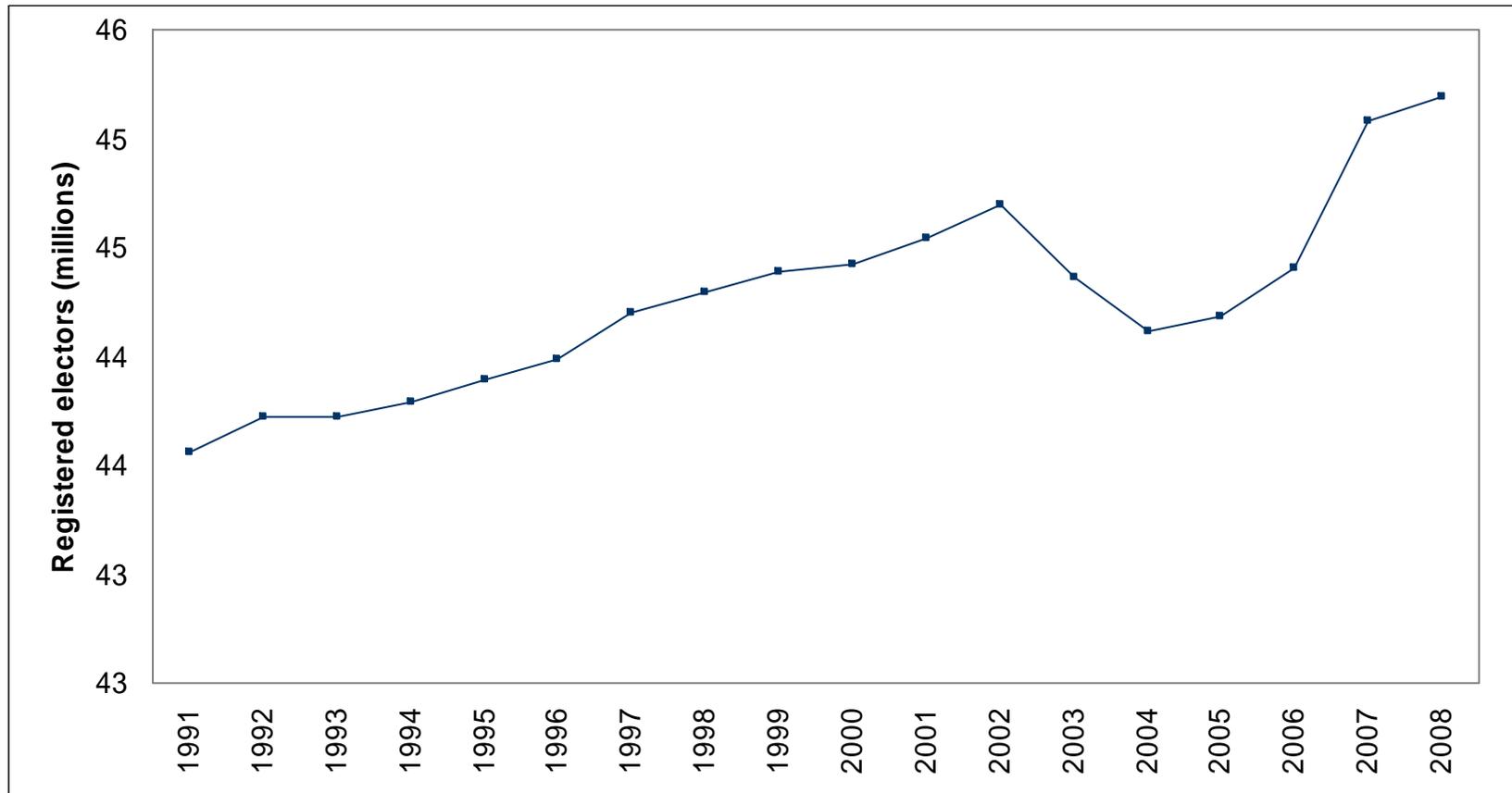
<sup>18</sup> Figures are provided for the UK rather than Great Britain as disaggregated data is not available for the 1980s.

2.9 However, there is wider evidence to support the view that registration levels fell between the late 1990s and 2006. The absolute number of registered UK Parliamentary electors fell by around 600,000 between 2002 and 2004 (see Figure 2). This period coincided with the introduction of individual registration in Northern Ireland, which saw a drop in the registration rate there from 95% to 86%.<sup>19</sup> However, the fall in registration rate in Northern Ireland cannot explain the numbers in the rest of the UK, as it only accounts for about one quarter of the total reduction in register entries.

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<sup>19</sup> This drop can be explained by the removal of carry forward practice and building the registers from scratch.

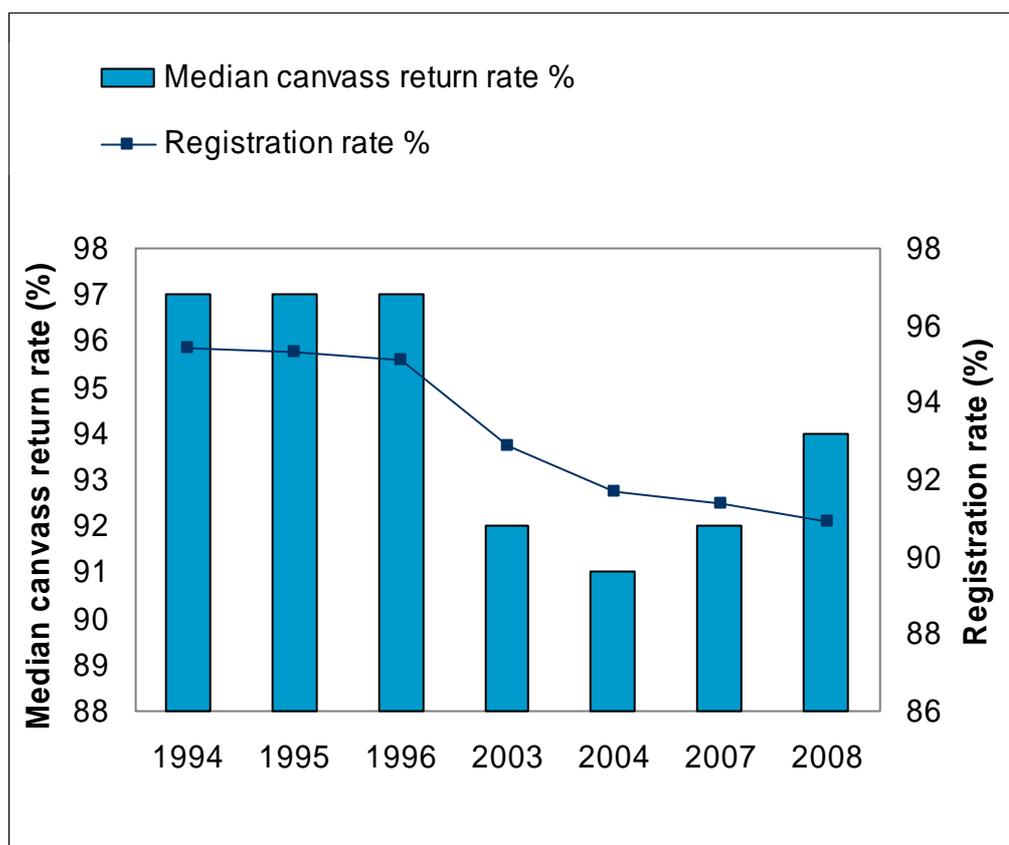
Figure 2: Total number of registered Parliamentary electors across the UK, 1991–2008



Source: ONS Electoral Statistics.

2.10 There is also evidence to suggest that EROs were reporting a decline in response levels to the annual canvass of electors after 2000. Figure 3 shows the estimated median canvass return rate for English and Welsh local authorities during this period. While median canvass response rates were consistently around 97% in the late 1990s, in 2003 and 2004 response rates were 92 and 91% respectively.

**Figure 3: Canvass response rate (median) and estimated registration rate, England and Wales (percentage)**



Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates; Devore (1997): LGC Local Elections Centre, University of Plymouth; The Electoral Commission Performance Standards data.

2.11 The decline in registration levels between 2002 and 2004 appears to have been greater than the last notable fall, in the early 1990s. That fall was largely attributed to attempts to evade payment of the Community Charge (Poll Tax). Estimates from the period suggested that up to 600,000 individuals had removed themselves from the electoral registers.<sup>20</sup> This was reflected in a brief decline in both the registration and canvass response rates in the early 1990s. As Figure 1 has shown, there was a dip in the number of registered electors in 1991, although registration levels stabilised again from 1992 onwards. Similarly, Table 2 highlights a decline in the canvass response rates

<sup>20</sup> I. McLean and J. Smith, 'The poll tax and the electoral register', in A. Heath, J. Curtice and R. Jowell (eds), *Labour's Last Chance?* (Dartmouth: Aldershot, 1994), pp.229–53.

in 1991, when 26% of local authorities reported a response rate under 90%, compared to 16% in the previous year. However, by 1994, canvass response rates had recovered and were higher than at any time since 1987. By contrast, the decline in registration levels from the late 1990s appears to have been deeper and longer-run.

**Table 2: Estimated final level of response to annual canvass, England and Wales**

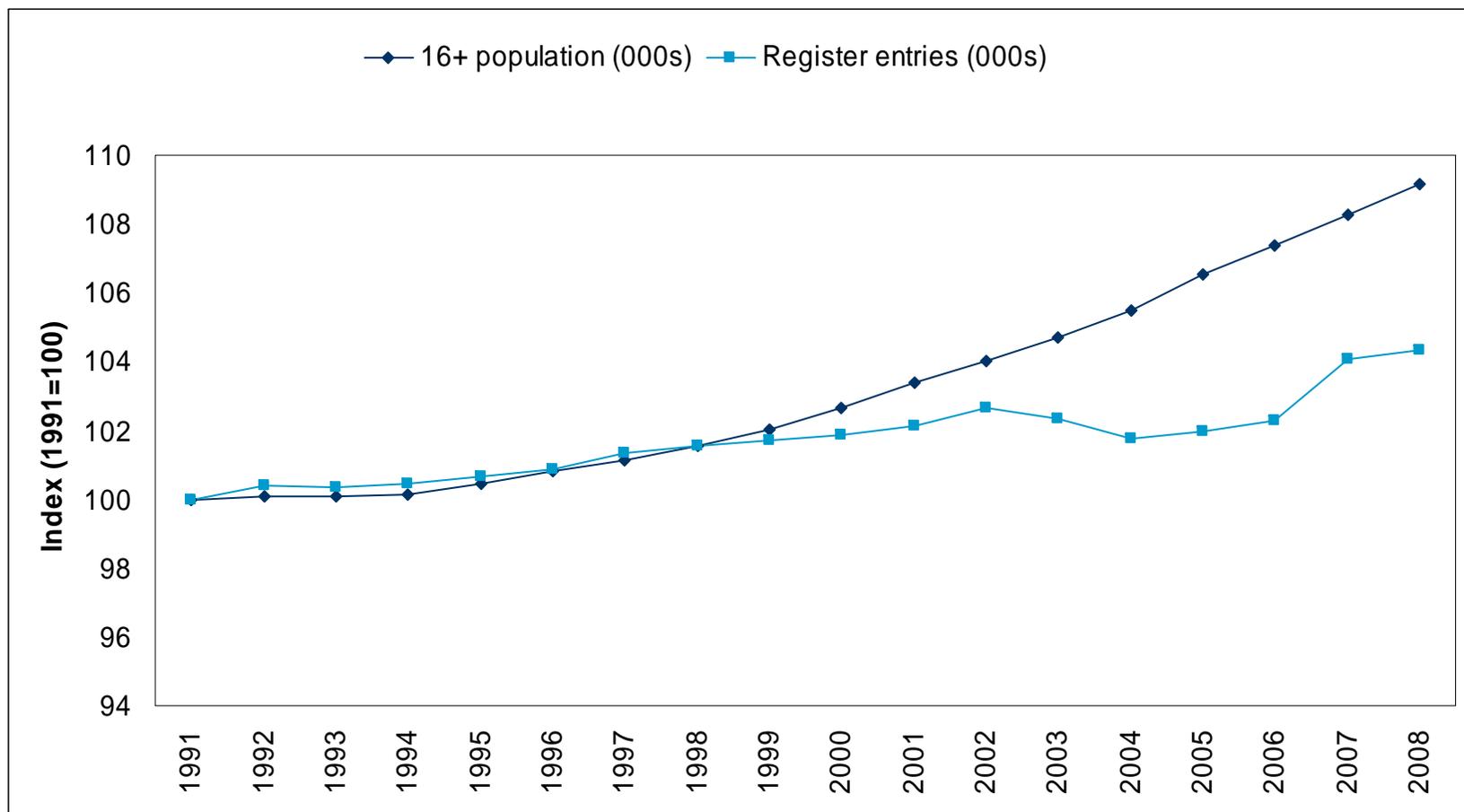
	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Less than 90	26	15	17	16	26	16	17	8	6	8
90-94.9	21	25	22	25	23	23	25	24	25	22
95+	53	60	61	59	52	52	59	68	69	71

Source: Devore (1997), p.30.

### Have the registers stabilised?

2.12 It is not clear whether registration levels have bounced back since 2006 in the way they did from the mid-1990s onwards. Figure 2 suggests that the decline of the registers has now stopped. Moreover, the increase in canvass response rates from 91% in 2004 to 94% in 2008 and the addition of one million additional entries to the Parliamentary registers since 2004 are indicators of a partial recovery in registration levels. However, both canvass response and registration rates remain 3–4 percentage points below those recorded in the mid- to late-1990s.

**Figure 4: Growth in the population aged 16 and above and growth in entries on the Parliamentary electoral registers, England and Wales, 1991–2008 (1991=100 indexed)**



Note: This chart shows the change in both the population aged 16 and above and in the number of register entries from 1991 onwards. It does this using a common scale based in indexed numbers. The indexed numbers are calculated by using 1991 as a 'base year', at which both of the two variables are set at a value of 100. The data for each subsequent year then measures the percentage change in each variable against the base year.

Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates.

2.13 Figure 4 reinforces these conclusions. It shows that additions to the registers kept pace with population growth in England and Wales from 1991–8 but that from 1999–2005 the population aged 16 and above grew much faster than the registers. While the rate of increase in register entries since 2006 has been in line with population growth, it has not been sufficient to return registration rates to the 95% level recorded consistently throughout the 1990s.

2.14 It is possible that part of the explanation for these trends was a sharp growth in non-eligible voters among the adult population, owing to higher rates of immigration from non-Commonwealth and non-EU countries from the 1990s onwards (see Box 6 in Chapter 1 for details of eligibility to vote among foreign nationals). However, immigration cannot account for the dip in the absolute numbers registered to vote from 2002–4 (and there was no significant increase in emigration during this period). The most likely alternative explanation is that a substantial number of eligible electors either ‘fell off’ or failed to get onto the registers from 1999–2005, and are yet to be restored to them, even though the registers are now keeping pace with fresh growth in the size of the eligible electorate. However, it is not easy to prove this; finding out how long non-registered voters have been absent from the registers would require detailed, and potentially difficult survey research. Nevertheless, existing evidence does offer some insights into which social groups are most likely to be missing from the registers and into those areas where under-registration is most likely to be concentrated.

### Missing from the registers: who and where?

2.15 Those who are absent from the registers are likely to be drawn from the same social groups as under-registered voters in previous decades. Variations in registration levels by age, social class and ethnicity have long been recognised – though it is predominantly densely populated urban areas with significant concentrations of mobile young people which typically have the highest levels of under-registration. As Table 3 shows, in both 1990 and 2000 under-registration was significantly higher in Greater London than it was in England and Wales as a whole.

**Table 3: Geographical and social variations in electoral registration: estimated percentage of voters not registered, 1990 and 2000**

	1990	2000
England	7.3	6.9
Wales	4.8	6
Inner London	20.4	18
Outer London	10.3	11
Other English metropolitan areas	6	7
English non-metropolitan areas	6.3	5
Men	8.3	8
Women	6.1	6
Born in UK, Ireland or old Commonwealth	6.4	*
New Commonwealth citizen (1991)/member of an ethnic minority (2000)	36.6	17

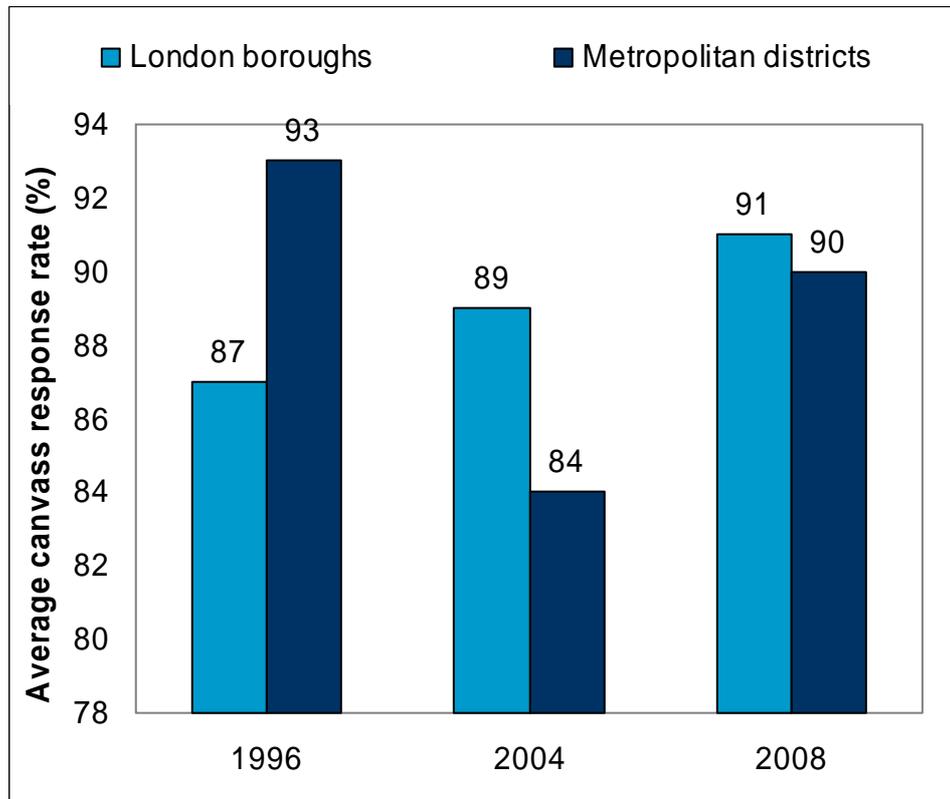
Sources: Smith (1993) cited in McLean and Smith (1994); Electoral Commission (2005).

Note: \*Aggregate data not available

2.16 However, there are some grounds to suggest that geographical variations in registration levels may have widened since the late 1990s. Available data sources suggest that registration rates in London appear to have stabilised, and may even have improved slightly, since the late 1990s. By contrast, English metropolitan districts<sup>21</sup> appear to have experienced a clear fall in registration levels. Canvass response rates show a similar pattern. In 1996, the average canvass response rates for metropolitan districts were 93%, significantly higher than the 87% achieved by the average London borough. However, by 2004 the average response rate among London boroughs had risen slightly to 89%, while it had fallen to 84% in the English metropolitan districts. Despite improved response rates among metropolitan districts in 2008, the 90% average remained just below the 91% figure achieved by London boroughs.

<sup>21</sup> The English metropolitan districts comprise the local authorities which were components of the former Metropolitan County Councils covering Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear and West Yorkshire, abolished in 1986.

**Figure 5: Average canvass response rate, London boroughs and metropolitan districts**

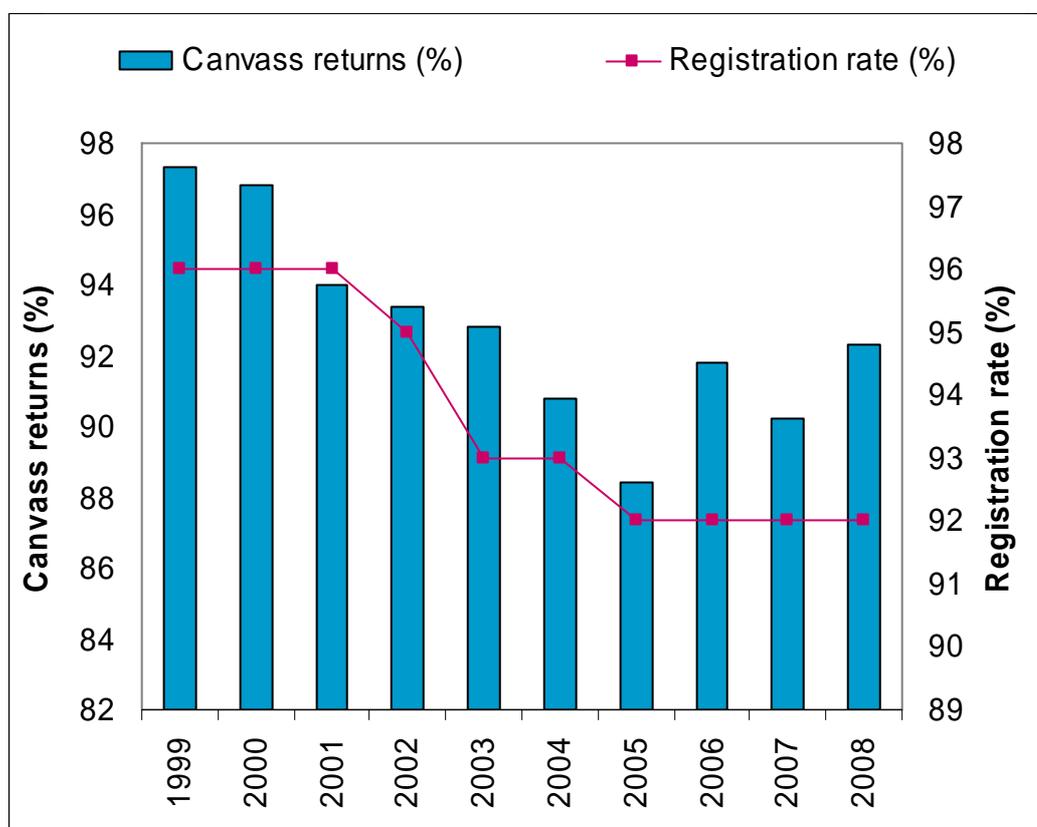


Sources: Devore (2007); University of Plymouth (2004); Electoral Commission Performance Standards data.

**Example one: Birmingham and the metropolitan districts**

2.17 Figure 6 illustrates the pattern of change in Great Britain’s most populous local authority, Birmingham. In line with the national trends highlighted above, both canvass response and registration rates fell sharply in Birmingham from 1999–2005. As a result, the number of registered electors in Birmingham fell by just under 11,000 during this period, despite an estimated increase of 23,000 inhabitants aged 16 and above. Given these patterns, and the fact that the combined populations of the metropolitan districts are roughly equivalent to the population of Greater London, it is likely that they account for at least one third of the decline in registration levels in England in the early 2000s.

**Figure 6: Canvass return rate and registration rate, Birmingham, 1999–2008**



Sources: Association of Electoral Administrators; Electoral Commission Performance Standards data; ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates.

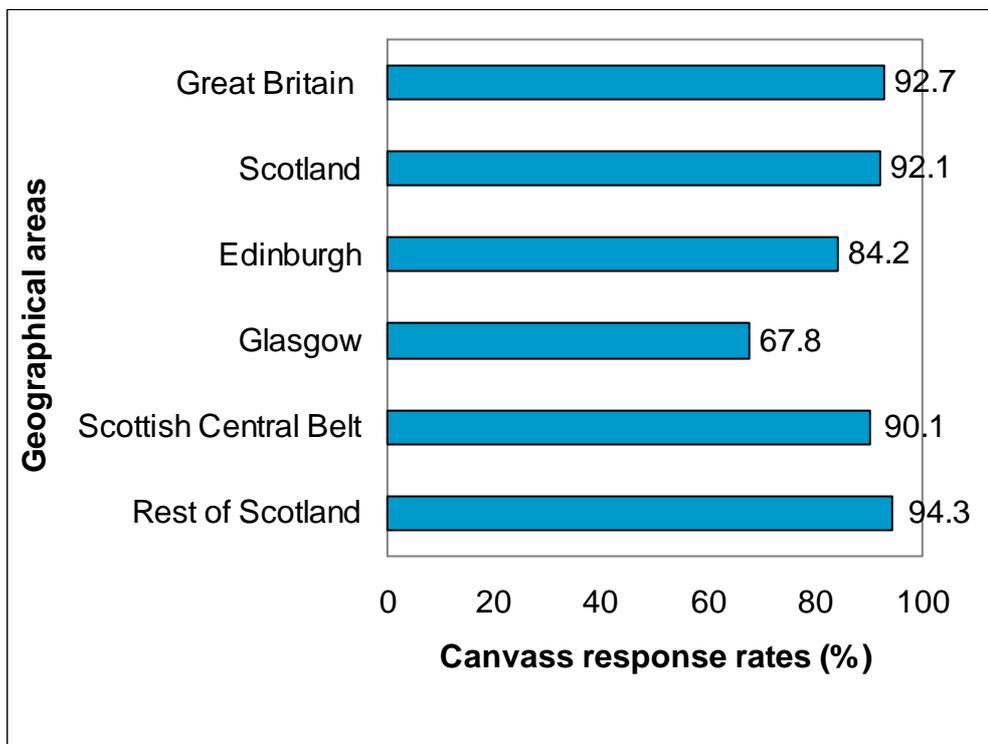
### Example two: Scotland

2.18 There are also signs that this pattern may be replicated in other parts of Great Britain, most notably the central belt of Scotland. Figure 7 shows that while Scottish unitary authorities as a whole achieved a median canvass response of 92.1% in 2008, just below the median of 92.7% for Great Britain as a whole, among the 13 authorities making up the central belt of Scotland the median was 90.1%. By contrast, the median canvass response for the remaining Scottish authorities in 2008 was 94.3%. Nearly half of the authorities in the central belt achieved canvass response levels below 90% and a geographical cluster of low canvass response levels is particularly notable in Glasgow (67.8%) and two other authorities within the Glasgow city region<sup>22</sup> – West Dunbartonshire (83.4), and North Lanarkshire (78.1%).

<sup>22</sup> The Glasgow city region comprises eight local authorities which work collaboratively on strategic planning as a local government Joint Committee – Glasgow city, East Dunbartonshire, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, East Renfrewshire, Renfrewshire, Inverclyde and West Dunbartonshire.

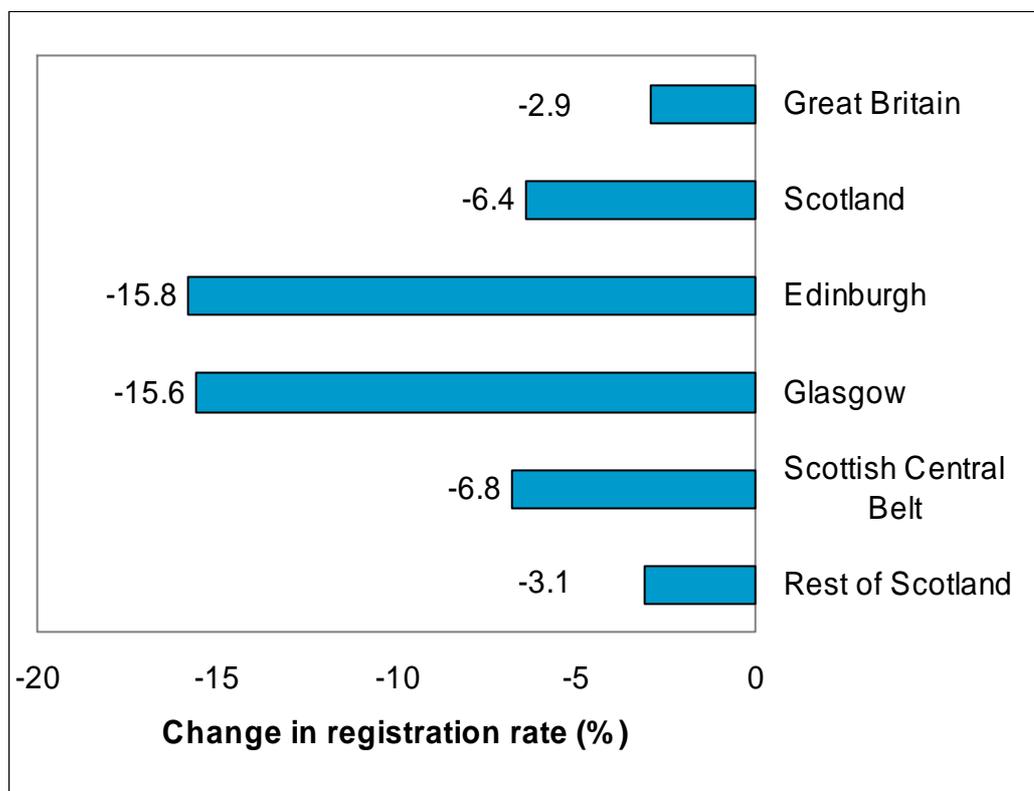
2.19 As Figure 8 shows, while there was an overall decline in Scotland's registration rate of 6.4 percentage points from 1999–2008, this decline was heavily concentrated in the authorities making up the central belt, where the average registration rate fell by 6.8 percentage points, compared to 3.1 in the rest of Scotland. Moreover, the two biggest cities in the central belt, Edinburgh and Glasgow, which account for around one-fifth of Scotland's population, experienced declines of close to 16 percentage points over this period. Strikingly, during this period, the cluster of these six authorities within the Glasgow city region highlighted above accounted for 13% of the growth of Scotland's population aged 16 and above, but 90% of the country's net decline of 97,000 register entries.

**Figure 7: Canvass responses rates 2008, Scotland and Great Britain**



Source: Electoral Commission Performance Standards data.

**Figure 8: Change in estimated registration rate, Scotland and Great Britain, 1999–2008 (local government electoral register)**



Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; General Register Office for Scotland (GROS).

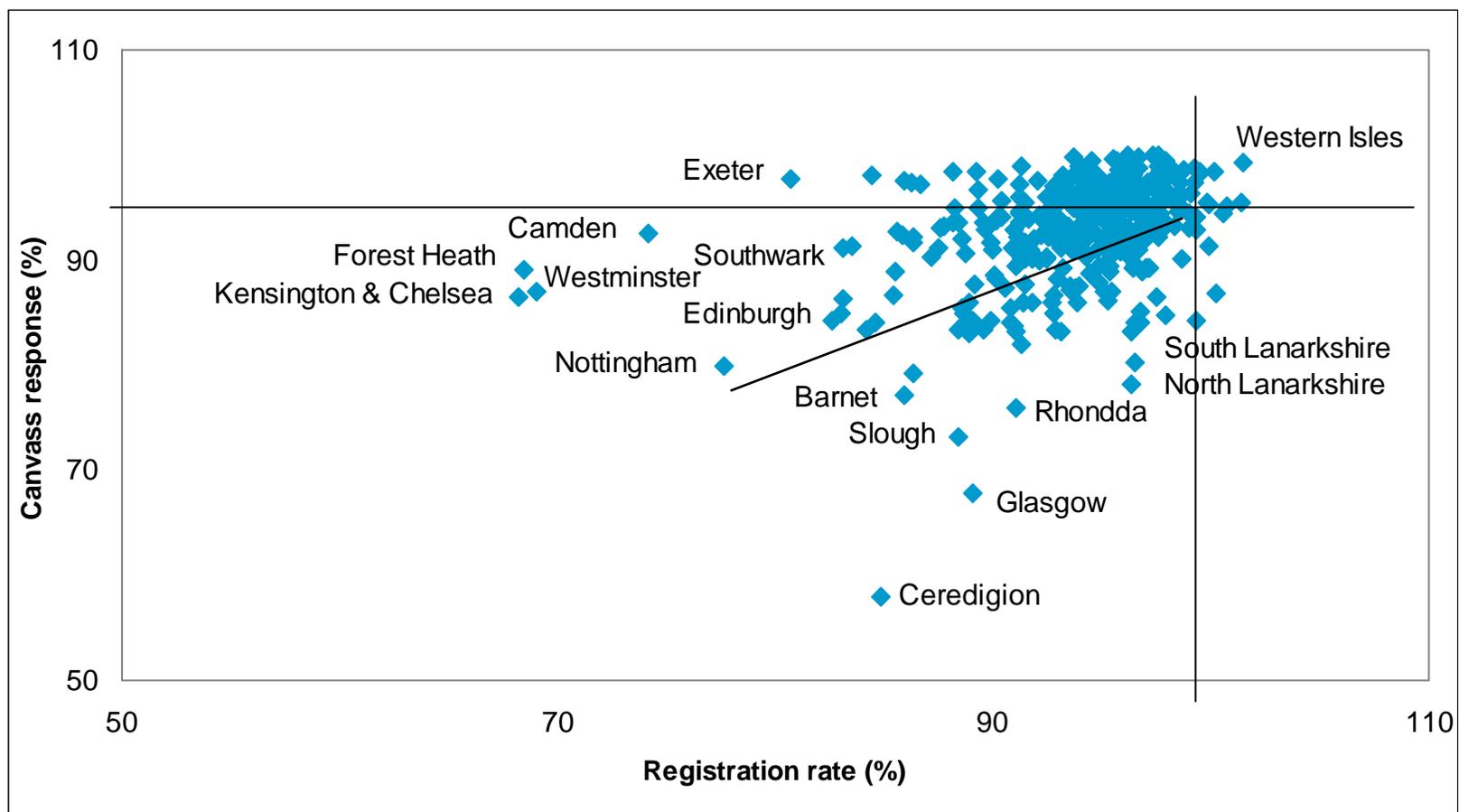
### Local and regional variations

2.20 While further analysis is needed, there is initial evidence to suggest that similar, though less marked, patterns can be identified in some former industrial districts of South Wales. Between them, the English metropolitan districts and unitary local authorities across South Wales, and the central belt of Scotland are therefore likely to account for the lion's share of the dip in registration levels after 1999. However, these are by no means the only areas where registration levels may have declined. There are a number of smaller urban centres in England which have similar patterns of decline in registration rates and below average canvass response, including smaller university towns and some coastal areas with high levels of population turnover.

2.21 In contrast to these localised patterns of decline in the proportion of people registered, the great majority of Great Britain's local electoral registers appear to be in a good state. As Figure 9 shows, in approximately three quarters of local authorities, both canvass response and registration rates are above 90%. Only a minority of local authorities, amounting to about 8%, are below the 90% threshold on both indicators. Among these outliers, there are four obvious types of locality:

- **Inner-London boroughs:** Camden, Hackney, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets and Westminster
- **Scottish unitary authorities:** Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire
- **English metropolitan boroughs:** Bradford, Coventry, Newcastle, Sheffield
- **University towns/districts with large student populations:** Cambridge, Canterbury, Ceredigion, Colchester, Nottingham, Warwick

**Figure 9: Relationship between canvass response rate and registration rate 2008\* – local authorities in Great Britain**



Note\*: Parliamentary electoral register. Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates; Electoral Commission Performance Standards data.

## Box 10

### International comparators

There is also evidence to suggest that national registration rates for Great Britain compare relatively well against valid international comparators. Data for the early 2000s suggested that the Commission's estimate for the completeness of the registers in England and Wales was broadly in line with reported estimates for Canada, New Zealand and France, and significantly above that for the USA. Notably, no country operating a comparable registration system achieves registration rates above 95%. Even Australia, which operates a system of compulsory voting, reported a maximum registration level of 95% of eligible voters in 2002 and 92% in 2008.

**Table 4: Estimates of electoral registration rates in six Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (percentage of eligible electors registered)**

Country	Year	Rate	Year	Rate
England and Wales	2000	91%	*	*
Canada	2000	93%	2007	94%
New Zealand	2000	92%	2007	95%
France	2001	90%	2007	91%
Australia	2002	95%	2008	92%
USA	2002	67%	2007	68%

Note: These figures should be taken as being for broad comparison only. Variations in the years for which the estimates apply (especially their timing relative to general elections) and in the methods used to calculate them mean that direct comparison is inappropriate.

Sources: Electoral Commission (2005); Pan Ké Shon (2004), p.145; Black (2003), p.21; File (2008): Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (2002), p.11; [www.elections.org.nz](http://www.elections.org.nz); [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov); [www.brennancenter.org](http://www.brennancenter.org).

\*No comparable data available for England and Wales

### Why did registration levels fall and local variations widen? Late 1990s onwards

2.22 The changes highlighted above raise two key questions. First, what explains the dramatic fall in registration levels in the first half of the 2000s and the reasons why they then stabilised? Second, why does there appear to be a gradual improvement of the registers in Greater London and a marked decline of the registers in some other parts of the country, most notably former industrial areas beyond the capital?

2.23 Answering these questions will require further research, which is beyond

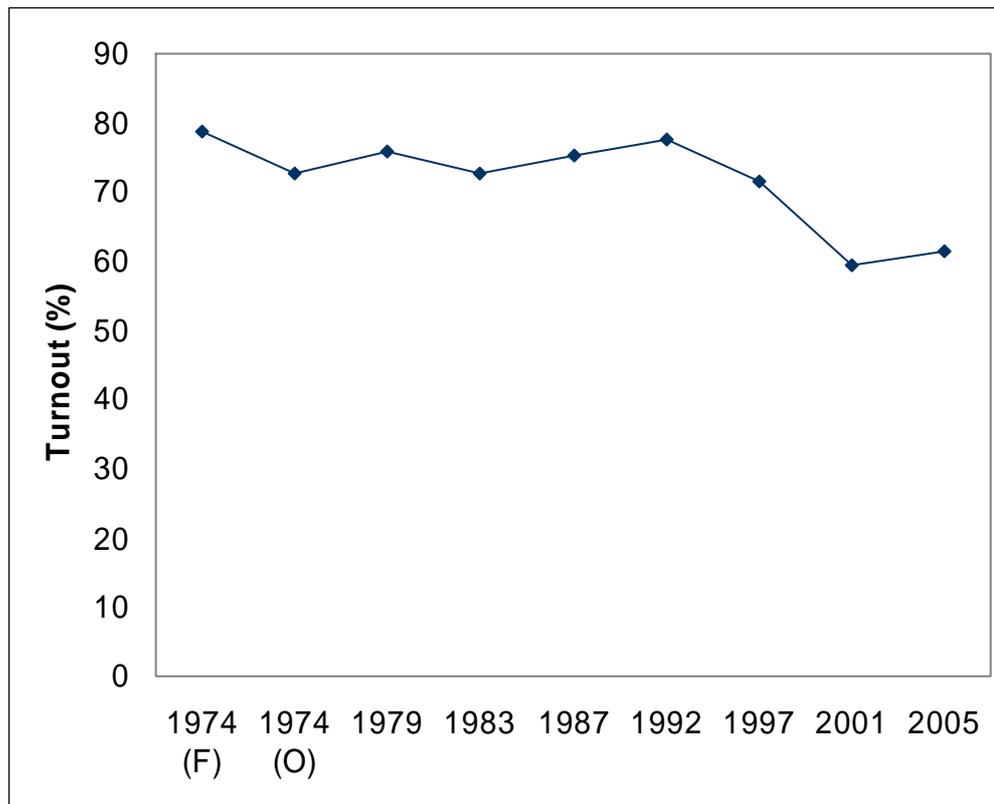
the scope of this report. However, available evidence suggests there are three potential, and connected, sets of explanations for the overall fall in registration levels which would be worthy of further investigation. These are that:

- A general long-term decline in interest in politics accelerated during the period 1998–2004, prompting a related fall in public motivation to register to vote.
- Changes in the approach to the annual canvass of electors after 1998 reversed the strides which had been made in improving canvass response rates over the previous decade.
- Growing levels of personal debt may have prompted significant numbers of individuals to remove themselves from the electoral registers in order to avoid detection by debt collection agencies.

### **Potential explanation one: declining interest in politics**

2.24 Declining interest in politics from the late 1990s was reflected in a series of historically low turnouts during this period and in the results of opinion polls about attitudes towards voting. Turnouts for all types of UK elections (local, general, European) reached record lows from 1998–2001 and have remained low since then. For instance, Figure 10 shows that following average turnouts of 75% at UK general elections held since 1974, the 2001 general election saw turnout drop to 59%, followed by a turnout of 61% in 2005.

**Figure 10: Turnout in UK general elections, 1974–2005**



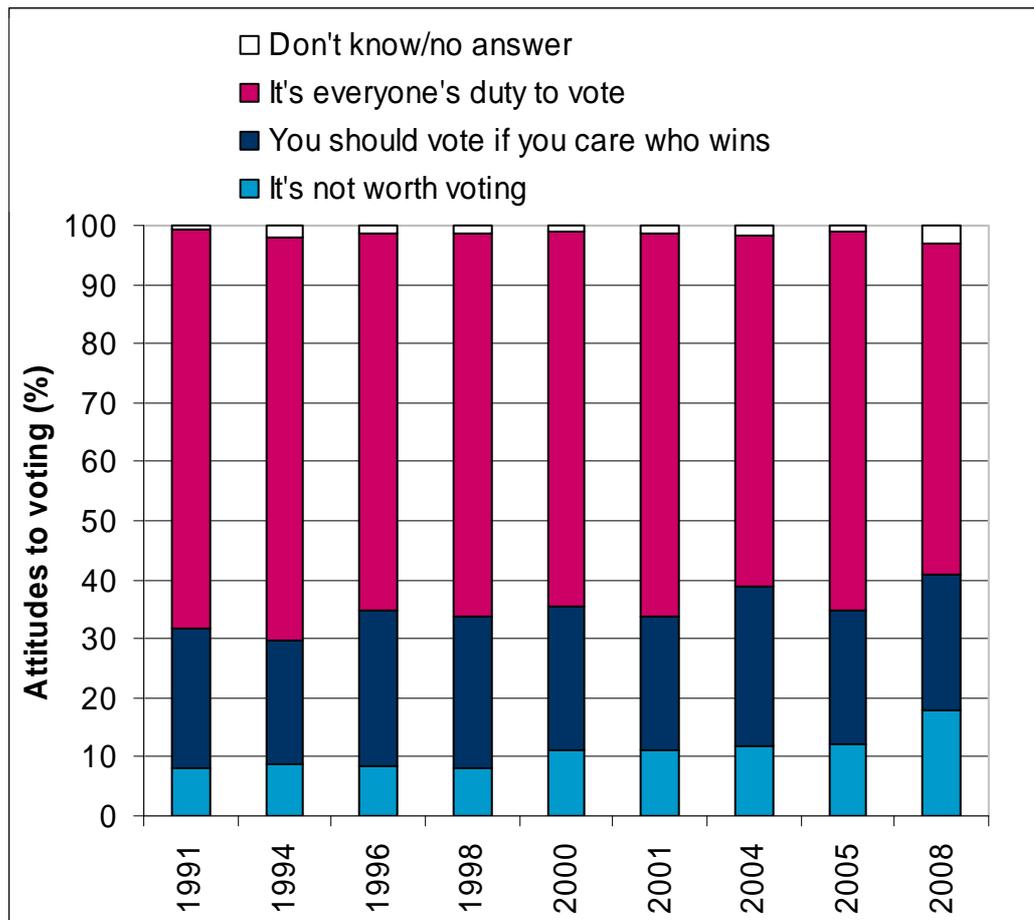
Source: Rallings and Thrasher (2009).

2.25 There is some evidence to suggest that this fall in electoral participation coincided with a drop in the proportion of the UK population expressing an interest in politics, which reached its lowest recorded level on the British Social Attitudes survey in 2004.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the British Election Study found that the proportion of the population expressing very strong identification with one of the political parties was just 9% in 2005, having fallen steadily from 45% in 1964.<sup>24</sup> The British Social Attitudes survey also recorded a notable increase in the proportion of voters saying that it was not worth voting from around 8% in the 1990s to 18% in 2008. It is clearly possible that such trends impacted negatively on the motivation to register to vote among parts of the electorate.

<sup>23</sup> National Centre for Social Research, *British Social Attitudes The 26<sup>th</sup> Report* (2009) London: Sage.

<sup>24</sup> D. Sanders, H. Clarke, M. Stewart and P. Whiteley, *The 2005 General Election in Great Britain Report for the Electoral Commission* (2005).

**Figure 11: Attitudes to voting, 1991–2008**



Note: The question put to participants was: 'Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections? In a general election: It's not really worth voting; People should vote only if they care who wins; It is everyone's duty to vote'.

Source: National Centre for Social Research, *British Social Attitudes The 26<sup>th</sup> Report* (2009) London: Sage.

### **Potential explanation two: approach to the annual canvass**

2.26 The second factor which may have influenced registration levels was the decision of a growing number of EROs to stop using personal canvassers from 2000 onwards, and a reduction in the overall amount spent on the canvass. These developments were in many ways an indirect, and unanticipated, consequence of declining levels of political engagement. Postal voting on demand was made available after 2000, and proved popular with sections of the electorate. This placed increasing strain on EROs who had to process large numbers of postal ballot applications with little or no additional resource. Reducing expenditure on the annual canvass allowed them to free up resources for managing postal voting.

2.27 The proportion of local authorities which switched to an all-postal canvass during 2000–6 is not known, but the practice appears to have been relatively widespread and the likely consequences well known to EROs. One local authority report from this period justifying the move to an all postal canvass noted that stopping the use of personal canvassers would result in cost-savings of around £15,000 but would see a ‘potential drop in response of 5–8%’.<sup>25</sup>

2.28 Although EROs tended to issue the same number of postal reminders, the main impact of these changes would have been in the reduced use of personal canvassers at those households which failed to respond to the canvass and to subsequent reminders. There is clear evidence from the 1990s that use of personal canvassers raised the response rate;<sup>26</sup> it is almost certain that a diminished use of personal canvassers after 2000 would have had the opposite effect.

### **Potential explanation three: growing levels of personal debt**

2.29 The possibility that electoral registration levels could be influenced by patterns of credit and debt in the UK has not previously been considered. However, given declining levels of political engagement, the use of the electoral registers by credit reference agencies may have become a more important motivation to register for many individuals than ensuring their right to vote. Given the dramatic expansion of personal credit since the late 1990s, it might be assumed that this would act to drive up registration levels. Yet, it is also possible that an increase in the number of people defaulting on their debt payments would prompt a fall in registration levels, particularly where individuals seek to evade detection by debt collection agencies.

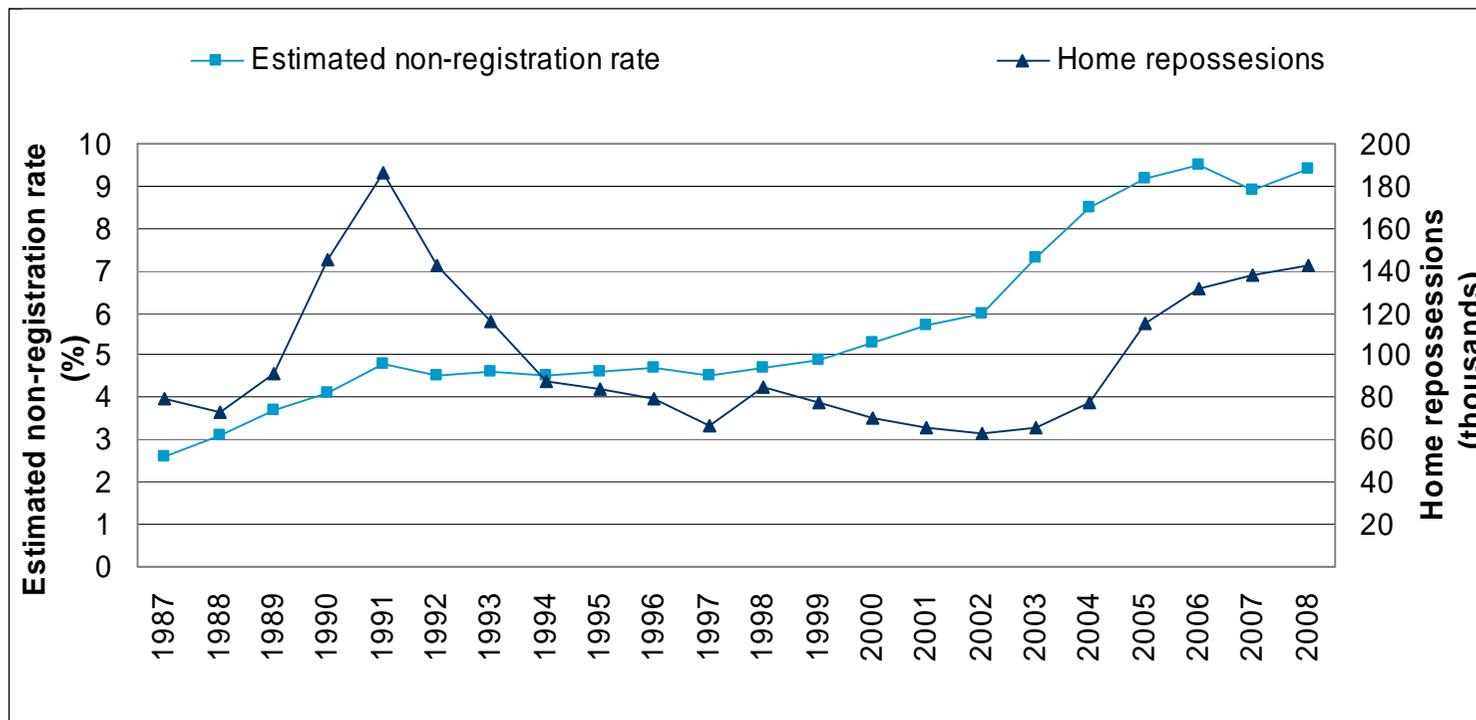
2.30 Our suggestion that there may be a relationship between personal debt and electoral registration is a tentative one, but there is some evidence to suggest it deserves further consideration. Figure 12 shows that the sharp rise in under-registration in the late 1980s and early 1990s is mirrored by a similar spike in the number of homes being repossessed (used here as a proxy measure of defaulting on debt). From 2003 onwards, the rise in repossessions also tracks the rise in levels of non-registration.

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<sup>25</sup> Doncaster Council, *Electoral Registration – Future Canvassing Arrangements* report to Elections & Miscellaneous Committee, 29 March 2004.

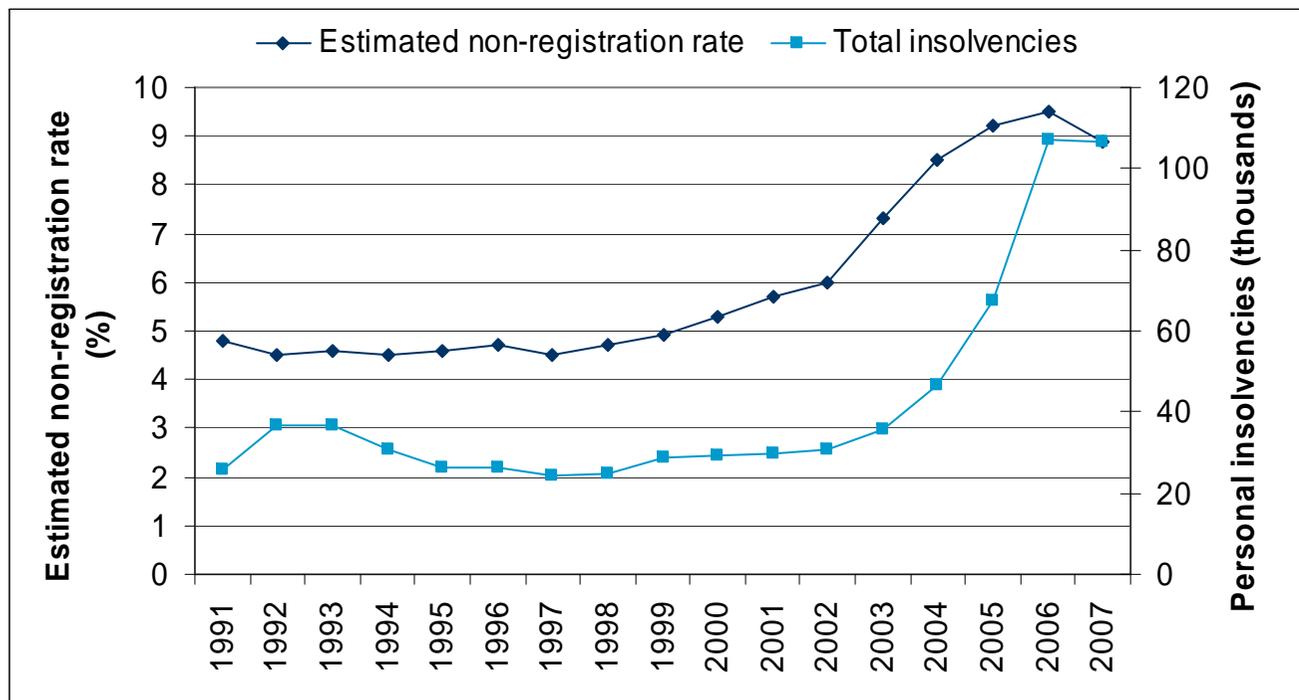
<sup>26</sup> D. Devore, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1996* (HMSO: London, 1997).

Figure 12: Estimated non-registration rate (Parliamentary electoral register) and home repossessions 1987–2008



Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates; Ministry of Justice.

Figure 13: Estimated non-registration rate (Parliamentary electoral register) and personal insolvencies 1991–2007



Sources: ONS Electoral Statistics; ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates; Insolvency Service.

2.31 Figure 13 suggests an even clearer relationship between personal insolvencies and under-registration since 1991, particularly in the period since 2002, when both began to rise sharply. However, while Figures 12 and 13 show parallel trends in non-registration and debt defaulting, this relationship may be coincidental; one may not have caused the other. Further research would be required to assess the extent to which the use of the register by credit reference agencies impacts on registration levels, both positively and negatively.

### How can regional variations be explained?

2.32 While we have undertaken some initial analysis of the factors which may explain the apparent decline in registration levels in specific types of locality, the task of identifying the factors responsible for variations in under-registration will require further research. However, two initial sets of findings can be reported.

**2.33 Resourcing of electoral administration:** We were unable to identify any general relationship between overall electoral registration budgets and canvass response rates. This finding is consistent with the Home Office studies from the 1980s and 1990s which demonstrated that highly resourced electoral registration teams did not necessarily achieve better results.<sup>27</sup> Given the limited data available for the period 1998–2006, it is not possible to assess whether reductions in expenditure on registration were associated with a fall in canvass response in particular areas. The one instance in which expenditure levels may have had an impact is in the London boroughs, which have retained a far greater level of expenditure on registration compared to other types of local authority. The willingness and capacity to resource electoral administrators in Greater London at a higher level, including the continued use of personal canvassers, is therefore likely to form part of the explanation for the relative improvement of canvass response rates in the capital over the past decade. We will continue to explore the possible impact of local variations in spending on canvass and registration operations on canvass response levels in future research.

**2.34 Socio-demographic factors:** Our initial analysis has found no straightforward link between key socio-demographic indicators (relating to employment status and housing tenure) and local variations in registration rates. However, the evidence does indicate that the interaction between social disadvantage and housing tenure may have a significant influence on the geography of under-registration. Taken as a whole, tenants in the private rented sector are significantly more likely to be absent from the electoral register than owner-occupiers or those in social housing. This pattern arises from the greater turnover of households in the private rental sector compared to other tenures as well as the associated concentrations of specific social groups in private rental accommodation, notably young people and students, and some BME groups.

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<sup>27</sup> D. Freeth, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1995*. (HMSO: London, 1996); D. Devore, *Compiling the Electoral Register 1996* (HMSO: London, 1997).

2.35 However, the proportion of private rental properties in an area is not a reliable indicator of likely under-registration. The association between private renting and residential mobility tends to be much stronger in urban areas than it is in rural locations. Indeed, rural local authorities often contain private sector rental markets which are proportionally larger than those in major cities, while the population tends to be more stable than in urban areas. Private rental housing does not, in itself, cause under-registration. Rather it is the socio-demographic characteristics of those who tend to live in privately rented properties in urban areas which are associated with non-registration. We consider the evidence to support this claim in more detail in the following chapters.

2.36 There are other socio-demographic factors which may influence local registration levels and which would benefit from further analysis. For instance, given the emerging evidence of declining registration levels in the English metropolitan districts, the central belt of Scotland and South Wales, it is possible that concentrations of under-registration may be associated with long-term job losses in manufacturing and levels of long-term benefit dependency associated with this decline. The interaction between the benefit system and electoral registration is also worthy of greater consideration. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some households may evade registering to vote because providing information about members of their household may have, or be perceived to have, implications for benefit claims.

## Conclusion

2.37 This chapter has highlighted the likelihood of a gradual long-term decline in electoral registration in Great Britain. This decline is particularly associated with identifiable dips in registration levels during specific periods since the 1950s, the most recent being between the late 1990s and 2006. However, registration levels almost certainly remain above 90%, and the UK continues to rank relatively well in comparison to other countries.

2.38 Although the registration rate appears to have stabilised since 2006, further research is required into the current levels of completeness and accuracy and to identify the most effective approaches to getting people on the register. This includes reviewing the impact of population movement on the completeness and accuracy of the registers following the annual canvass. The case study research set out in the following chapters marks the beginning of this process.

## 3 The local context: introducing the case study areas

### Introduction

3.1 We selected eight local authorities to look in detail at the completeness and accuracy of their registers. This section of the report introduces these eight local authorities. It sets out what is known about each of the authorities and then reviews how the data sources introduced in the previous chapter can be used to provide broad projections of the likely levels of completeness and accuracy of the eight registers. The chapter indicates that estimates using migration data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and data drawn from the annual canvass may be useful for predicting the completeness and accuracy of a register. The next chapter reviews the usefulness of this approach in light of the results from data-mining of the registers, house-to-house surveys and interviews with electoral administrators.

#### Box 11

##### Key points

- Factors likely to influence the state of the registers include: population density, the percentage of households in the private rented sector and the percentage of residents who moved in the last 12 months.
- Although housing tenure is linked with the rates of completeness and accuracy of a register (as noted in Chapter 2), this is dependent on the socio-demographic characteristics of an area. In urban and metropolitan areas, the private rental sector is much more likely to contain significant concentrations of young people.
- In areas with high rates of population turnover, annual canvass response is likely to be lower and/or the information gathered from the canvass less accurate.
- The annual canvass tends to account for 90% or more of additions to the registers.
- While carry forward can help to ensure that the completeness of the registers is maximised, it is also likely to increase the number of inaccurate register entries.
- Following the annual canvass, the completeness and accuracy of local registers declines more rapidly in densely populated urban areas with high migration rates than in less densely populated and predominantly rural areas.
- Rolling registration is used by at most one-quarter of electors moving to, or changing address in, Lambeth and by less than 10% of electors who do so in Hambleton and Swansea.

## Characteristics of the eight areas

3.2 The selection of the eight case study areas was designed to ensure a spread of geographical areas across England, Scotland and Wales, including a mixture of urban and rural areas. In line with their respective population levels, five local authorities were selected in England, two in Scotland, and one in Wales. As England has a complex local government structure, the selection had to include a mixture of local authority types, across as many English regions as possible.<sup>28</sup> The five English authorities chosen therefore comprise a London borough (Lambeth); a metropolitan borough council (Knowsley, North West England); a unitary council (Derby, the East Midlands); and two district councils (Hambleton, Yorkshire & the Humber; West Somerset, South West England). Within Scotland, which is made up entirely of unitary councils, a densely populated city council (Glasgow) was selected alongside a more rural unitary council (South Ayrshire). In Wales, Swansea City Council was chosen as an urban area with a large rural hinterland.

**3.3 The eight case study areas are not a nationally representative sample of electors and cannot be used as a proxy for a representative survey.** However, the eight areas do provide for a suitably diverse cross-section of the population of Great Britain. As Table 5 illustrates, the selection includes significant variations in the levels of social need across the eight case study areas, with the average level of worklessness matching the UK average. Similarly the eight areas provide for sharp contrasts in the ethnic mix of each local population, although the inclusion of an inner-London borough produces a mean of the size of black and minority ethnic (BME) population which is slightly above the UK average.

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<sup>28</sup> After several periods of local government reorganisation, most urban areas in England now have single-tier local government arrangements in which a single local authority is responsible for all service areas. These single-tier arrangements consist of the London boroughs, the metropolitan borough councils in the main conurbations around Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle, and city and unitary councils in most other urban areas. In predominately rural areas, the two-tier county and district arrangements introduced in 1974 continue to exist, although recent reorganisation has seen the two-tier arrangements replaced by unitary county councils in a number of areas (e.g. Wiltshire, Cornwall, Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire).

**Table 5: Overview of the case study areas**

Local authority	Country/ Region	Authority type	Population	Population Density*	Ethnic minority population **	Worklessness ***
Derby	East Midlands	Unitary	221,708	28.4	15.6	16
Glasgow city	Scotland	Unitary	584,240	32.9	5.5	20
Hambleton	Yorkshire & the Humber	District council	84,111	0.6	2	8
Knowsley	North West	Metropolitan borough	150,459	17.4	2.7	27
Lambeth	London	London borough	266,169	99.2	50.4	16
South Ayrshire	Scotland	Unitary	111,670	0.9	<1	13
Swansea	Wales	Unitary	223,301	5.9	4.3	19
West Somerset	South West	District council	35,075	0.5	2.5	14
		Median	186,084	11.7	3.5	16
		Mean	209,592	23.2	10.5	16.6
		UK	---	2.5	7.9	16.1

Notes: \* Persons per hectare (2001); \*\* Percentage of population not describing themselves as 'white British' (2001) – this definition of 'ethnic minority' therefore includes 'white Irish', 'white European', 'white Australasian' and so on; \*\*\* Percentage of working age population receiving a key benefit (2007).

Sources: Neighbourhood Statistics; Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics; General Register Office for Scotland (GROS); ONS 'UK 2005: The Official Yearbook of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (HMSO: London).

## Factors likely to influence the state of the eight registers

3.4 Brief socio-demographic profiles of the eight case study areas are provided below, with a particular focus on factors likely to influence the state of the electoral registers. This includes population density, the percentage of households which are in the private rented sector and the percentage of residents who moved in the past 12 months. In addition, this section examines ONS electoral statistics and our performance standards data for electoral registration to provide an initial assessment of the likely state of the registers in each of the local case study areas. Based on this analysis, initial estimates for the completeness and accuracy of each register are presented.

### Housing tenure

3.5 Chapter 2 noted that housing tenure may form part of the explanation for variations in the completeness and accuracy of local registers. However, it was also underlined that the significance of the private rented sector for electoral registration is not simply the scale of private renting alone. The different social groups present in private rented accommodation must also be considered.

**Table 6: The private rental sector and residential mobility in the eight case study areas**

	<b>Population density (persons per hectare, 2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage households which are in the private rented sector (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage residents who had moved in past 12 months (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Derby	28.4	3	8.8	5	12.5	3
Glasgow	32.9	2	8.3	6	12.6	2
Hambleton	0.6	7	13.3	3	11.3	6
Knowsley	17.4	4	4.7	8	8	8
Lambeth	99.2	1	20.6	1	17.7	1
South Ayrshire	0.9	6	6.7	7	9.3	7
Swansea	5.9	5	9.4	4	12.2	4
West Somerset	0.5	8	13.9	2	11.7	5

Sources: ONS; GROS; D. Rhodes, *The Modern Private Rented Sector* (York University Press: York, 2006).

3.6 Table 6 shows that Lambeth, an inner-London borough, is by far the most densely populated of the eight local authorities, has the largest proportion of households in the private rental sector and has the highest levels of residential mobility. However, in the remaining local authorities, the relationship between population density, private sector renting and population movement is less clear cut. Indeed, the two authorities with the second and third highest share of households in the private rental sector are also the two least densely populated and rank in the bottom half for population mobility. By contrast, Knowsley, with the fourth highest population density, has the lowest levels of private sector renting and residential mobility.

### Young people

3.7 In urban and metropolitan areas, the private rental sector is substantially more likely to contain significant concentrations of young people. Since young people are far more likely to move home in any given year, the share of 16–29 year olds in the local private rental accommodation is particularly significant. As Table 7 shows, Lambeth has the largest share of 16–29 year olds in its population, with this age group making up more than 60% of private sector tenants. For the remaining seven local authorities, the proportion of young people in the local population closely correlates with population density, as does the share of the private rental market associated with this age group. Thus, Glasgow ranks second, behind Lambeth, on both of these indicators, while the two least densely populated areas, Hambleton and West Somerset, are ranked seventh and eighth respectively. The proportion of the population aged 16–34 and private renters aged 16–34 are twice as high in Lambeth as they are in West Somerset, the least densely populated area.

**Table 7: Young people and the private rental sector in the eight case study areas**

	<b>Percentage households which are in the private rented sector (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage population aged 16–29 (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage private sector household reference persons aged 16–34</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Derby	8.8	5	19	3	54.7	3
Glasgow city	8.3	6	20.9	2	54.9	2
Hambleton	13.3	3	13.1	7	32.5	7
Knowsley	4.7	8	16.9	5	43.3	5
Lambeth	20.6	1	26.4	1	61.3	1
South Ayrshire	6.7	7	14.7	6	37.3	6
Swansea	9.4	4	18	4	49.8	4
West Somerset	13.9	2	12.3	8	26.5	8

Sources: ONS; GROS; D. Rhodes, *The Modern Private Rented Sector* (York University Press: York, 2006).

3.8 Within the population aged 16–29, rates of residential mobility peak dramatically among those in their late teens and early twenties.<sup>29</sup> With higher education participation rates now exceeding 40% of the age cohort, a significant proportion of these highly-mobile young people will be full-time students. As Table 8 shows, the proportion of the local population who are full-time students varies considerably, and is obviously dependent on the presence or absence of local universities. Glasgow, which is home to three universities, has the highest proportion of its resident adult population in higher education, followed by Lambeth, Swansea and Derby. Notably, the share of private renters who are students ranges between 23–37% in the university cities of Derby, Glasgow and Swansea. In contrast, despite being located immediately to the east of Liverpool, a major university city, Knowsley's student population is more typical of that found in rural areas away from university centres.

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<sup>29</sup> Tony Champion, 'Population Movement within the UK', in *Focus on People and Migration: 2005*. Office for National Statistics  
[www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_compendia/fom2005/06\\_FOPM\\_MovesWithinUK.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/fom2005/06_FOPM_MovesWithinUK.pdf)

**Table 8: Students and the private rental sector in the eight case study areas**

	<b>Percentage households which are in the private rented sector (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Students as a percentage of population aged 18+ (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage private renters who are students (2001)</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Derby	8.8	5	5.1	4	22.5	3
Glasgow city	8.3	6	7	1	31.2	2
Hambleton	13.3	3	1.7	7	4	8
Knowsley	4.7	8	2.7	6	6.9	6
Lambeth	20.6	1	6.8	2	10.3	5
South Ayrshire	6.7	7	3.2	5	12.2	4
Swansea	9.4	4	6.1	3	36.8	1
West Somerset	13.9	2	1.5	8	4.3	7

Sources: ONS; GROS; D. Rhodes, *The Modern Private Rented Sector* (York University Press: York, 2006).

## Population turnover

3.9 Residential mobility tends to compromise the completeness and accuracy of local electoral registers in two distinct ways. First, in areas with high rates of population turnover, annual canvass response is likely to be lower and/or the information gathered from the canvass less accurate. In such areas there can be significant population movement during the canvass period itself. In inner-London boroughs, for instance, population turnover will typically be in the order of 1.5% per month, meaning that up to 5% of residents may move during the three months in which the canvass is being conducted. An additional factor in university centres is that the annual canvass coincides with the start of the academic year, with sometimes tens of thousands of students moving into properties in individual local authorities during September and October. Second, population movement in the period following the annual canvass will serve to undermine the completeness and accuracy of the local registers. Clearly, the extent to which local registers are affected in this way will depend upon rates of migration as well as the degree to which eligible electors make use of rolling registration provisions.

## Maintaining the local registers: key comparisons

3.10 Figures collected as part of our performance standards framework provide us with some useful insights into the extent to which Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) are able to ensure that amendments to the register keep pace with population change. While these figures cannot be used to estimate registration rates, they do offer an indication of the reach of the annual canvass, as measured by the canvass response rate (see Box 9 in Chapter 2). In addition, data are available relating to the proportion of electors added and deleted during the canvass period and to the proportion of electors added via rolling registration provisions operating outside the canvass period.

## Canvass response rates

3.11 Table 9 indicates that the lowest canvass response rates are achieved in Glasgow and Lambeth, the two authorities with the highest levels of population movement, highest population densities and the largest share of 16–29 year olds in the local population. In the main, higher canvass response rates are achieved in those authorities which are the mirror image of Glasgow and Lambeth – lower population densities, lower population turnover and a smaller share of young people. It is notable, however, that canvass response rates are higher than might be anticipated in Swansea and lower than might be expected in South Ayrshire.

3.12 While Table 9 suggests significant variation in the coverage of the annual canvass, it does suggest that, year on year, the electoral registration process is successful in ensuring that the registers are updated in light of population movement. In four of the eight areas, annual additions to the registers equate closely to annual estimates of population in-flows. In

Lambeth and Knowsley, additions to the electoral registers following the 2008 annual canvass appear to be substantially greater than would be expected from migration rates in 2001, although it is clearly possible that migration levels have increased since the last Census. The more significant finding is that the annual canvass tends to account for 90% or more of additions to the registers. **By contrast, rolling registration is used by at most one-quarter of electors moving to or changing address in Lambeth and by less than 10% of electors who do so in Hambleton and Swansea.**

**Table 9: The 2008 registers in the case study areas – key statistics**

	<b>Canvass return rate (2007/08 average)</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Percentage residents who had moved in past 12 months (2001)</b>	<b>Percentage entries on electoral register added at annual canvass (2008)</b>	<b>Percentage entries on register added via rolling registration</b>	<b>Additions to register as a percentage of population inflow</b>
Derby	92.9	5	12.5	10.8	2.1	103
Glasgow city	75.7	8	12.6	9.2	2.8	95
Hambleton	95	1	11.3	9.4	1.4	96
Knowsley	94.1	3	8	7.8	1.9	121
Lambeth	84	7	17.7	20.1	4.4	138
South Ayrshire	91.5	6	9.3	7.1	2	98
Swansea	94.6	2	12.2	12.5	1.3	113
West Somerset	93.3	4	11.7	8.4	2.3	91

Sources: Electoral Commission Performance Standards data; 2001 Census.

## Use of carry forward

3.13 Use of carry forward has risen significantly since the mid-1990s, and it is likely that this has been a response to falling canvass response rates in many areas (for an explanation of this practice, see Box 6 in Chapter 1 of this report). While carry forward can help to ensure that the completeness of the registers is maximised, it is also likely to increase the number of inaccurate register entries. In 2008, there were considerable variations in the carry forward rate for each of the eight case study areas, ranging from 0% in Hambleton to 10% in South Ayrshire. As is clear from Table 10, two of the three authorities with canvass response rates at 97% or above (Hambleton and Swansea) made no, or very limited use of carry forward in 2008. In these two cases, we would expect inaccuracies arising from incorrect addresses to have been minimised. By contrast, the five local authorities with canvass return rates below 95% typically carried forward around 4% of register entries. This level of carry forward is likely to mean a marginal increase in the level of inaccuracy in these registers. The case of South Ayrshire is unusual since the canvass response rate is above 95%, but the carry forward is 10% – double the level in any of the other case study areas (this figure appears to be artificially high – see note to Table 10 for further explanation).

**Table 10: Use of ‘carry forward’ by EROs in the eight case study areas**

	<b>Carry forward rate percentage (2008)</b>	<b>Canvass return rate percentage (2008)</b>
Derby	4.1	93.9
Glasgow city	4.8	67.8
Hambleton	0	96.9
Knowsley	3.8	94.1
Lambeth	4.6	91.1
South Ayrshire	10*	95.8
Swansea	0.5	97.5
West Somerset	4.6	91

Note\*: South Ayrshire adopted a different approach to calculating their carry forward rate in 2008. It is likely that this is an inflated figure in relation to what would normally be understood as the number of electors carried forward. The most likely explanation for this is that the figure represents all electors who may potentially have been carried forward rather than those who actually were once other checks had been made.

Source: Electoral Commission Performance Standards data.

## Entries on the registers and population growth

3.14 Further evidence indexing registration levels against population change suggests that only Lambeth, Swansea and Hambleton have maintained

registration levels in line with population growth since 1999. Significantly for a London borough, Lambeth has seen its registration levels increase at a faster rate than estimated population growth, as a result of which its registration rate has improved over the past decade. While register entries in Knowsley and West Somerset have not increased in line with population growth, the absolute number of registered electors has increased in each case. In the case of Glasgow city, Derby and South Ayrshire it appears that register entries have failed to keep pace with population growth. They have also declined absolutely over the past decade.

## Projecting likely levels of completeness and accuracy

3.15 Using the data set out above, we produced initial projections of the levels of completeness and accuracy for the case study areas. The assumptions made and methods used in making these projections are set out below.

### Our approach to projecting the level of completeness

3.16 The maximum level of completeness was calculated by taking the canvass response rate or the registration rate (whichever was highest) and adding the figure for the percentage of register entries carried forward from 2007 (this assumes that 0% of entries that are carried forward are redundant entries).

3.17 The minimum level of completeness was calculated by taking the lower of the canvass response or registration rate and adding half of the carry forward rate (this assumes that 50% of register entries that are carried forward are redundant entries).

3.18 Both the maximum and minimum levels were then adjusted for the effect of migration. This was calculated in two steps. First, the estimated proportion of the local population who would have changed address in the period between the annual canvass and the survey being carried out was subtracted from both figures. Second, the approximate proportion of register entries accounted for by rolling registration over this period was added to the two figures.

### Our approach to projecting the level of accuracy

3.19 Projections for the maximum accuracy of the eight local registers start from the assumption that 1% of entries post-canvass are inaccurate.

3.20 The minimal level of accuracy makes the same assumption about 1% inaccuracy from canvass returns and that half of the proportion of register entries that are carried forward are redundant.

3.21 The calculation of the migration effect applied to the completeness projections was then also applied to these maximum and minimum starting levels for accuracy.

## Our projections

3.22 This approach produced the following results, ranked by the median of the range for completeness:

**Table 11: Initial projections of completeness and accuracy in the case study areas**

	<b>Completeness (range) percentage</b>	<b>Accuracy (range) percentage</b>
Knowsley	93–96	91–97
South Ayrshire	93–95*	85–94
Swansea	90	87–91
Hambleton	89–90	88–92
West Somerset	85–89	86–92
Derby	85–89	85–91
Lambeth	83–86	83–89
Glasgow city	63–87	85–91

Notes: \*Uncertainty about the actual level of carry forward in South Ayrshire (noted under Table 10) in 2008 is likely to mean that this projection is inflated. These are projections for the registers at the time these surveys were undertaken.

3.23 This approach is a crude means of projecting completeness and accuracy. In particular, these projections do not take account of either longer-term trends in registration levels or the profile of the local population and its link with housing tenure. In light of the patterns highlighted in paragraphs 3.5 – 3.9 above, and additional insights gained from interviews with local electoral administrators, we have therefore adjusted these rankings, making the following assumptions:

3.24 **Knowsley:** The house-to-house survey is likely to find that Knowsley has the most complete register for several reasons. The canvass response rate for Knowsley is relatively high – which will partly reflect their policy of ensuring personal canvassers make at least two visits to non-responding households. The relatively high use of carry forward should also compensate for canvass non-response, although this may increase inaccuracy on the register. Knowsley’s register is also likely to be more complete because population movement in the area is limited, and use of rolling registration is relatively high (around one-quarter of home-movers inform the ERO). Finally, the Knowsley survey was carried out within four to six months of the 2008 register being published, but for the remaining seven areas the surveys were carried out eight to 10 months after the registers were published.

3.25 **Hambleton:** This rural district’s register has kept pace with population growth, its canvass response rates are very high and it faces fewer of the challenges typical of electoral registration in urban areas. As in Knowsley, non-responding households receive at least two visits from personal canvassers. In addition, limited use of carry forward will help keep accuracy

rates high. However, while Hambleton's register is likely to be more complete and accurate than Knowsley's upon publication, the survey is likely to show a lower level of completeness because the completeness of Hambleton's register will decline more rapidly than Knowsley's due to higher population movement and a smaller proportion of home-movers in Hambleton make use of rolling registration. Finally, as mentioned above, a greater amount of time had elapsed between the canvass and the survey being carried out.

**3.26 Swansea:** The maintenance of Swansea's register suggests a very similar pattern to that observed in Hambleton, particularly in relation to high canvass response, a minimum of three visits to non-responding households, limited use of carry forward and the growth of registration levels in line with population growth. Swansea uses personal canvassers at every stage of the canvass. This means that canvassers become familiar with canvass areas early on, can identify unoccupied properties and have personal contact with the elector at the very first stage of the canvass. However, the completeness and accuracy of Swansea's register will decline faster over time than in Knowsley or Hambleton owing to its relatively high migration rate, the very limited use of rolling registration, and because students form a high proportion of the private rental market.

**3.27 South Ayrshire:** As a predominantly rural area, South Ayrshire's register would be expected to have relatively high levels of completeness and accuracy. However, while the canvass response rate is high, South Ayrshire's registration levels appear to be falling over time. Moreover, uncertainty about the actual rate of carry forward in 2008 means that the projection for completeness may be inflated – while the projected range for accuracy is likely to be artificially wide (particularly at the lower end).

**3.28 West Somerset:** For a rural district, West Somerset's registration rate has shown a surprising degree of decline since 1999 and its canvass response rate is slightly lower than the other rural case study areas. The relatively high level of carry forward is likely to help maintain completeness levels in line with these areas, but the accuracy of the register may be slightly reduced as a result.

**3.29 Derby:** While its canvass response rate is slightly above average for an urban area, Derby's register shows signs of medium-term decline in registration levels. The relatively extensive use of carry forward may also result in additional inaccuracies in its register.

**3.30 Lambeth:** For an inner-London borough, Lambeth's register appears to be in a good state of health, with registration levels growing marginally faster than the eligible population, a canvass response rate of over 90% in 2008, supported by a minimum of two to four personal visits to non-responding households, and around one-quarter of home-movers using rolling registration provisions. However, migration rates are very high across inner-London and Lambeth's extensive private rental housing stock will mean that population movement will rapidly erode the completeness and accuracy of its register following publication.

3.31 **Glasgow city:** All available indicators for Glasgow highlight likely concerns about the completeness and accuracy of its register. The canvass response rate is very poor and the registration rate has fallen sharply over the past decade. Students also form a high proportion of the private rental market in Glasgow. Given high levels of population movement, it is likely that the survey will point to levels of completeness of 75% or below. In addition, our interviews found that Glasgow's ongoing difficulties in ensuring a high canvass response had led to a reluctance to remove names from the register following two years of non-response. As a result, levels of inaccuracy in Glasgow's register are likely to be relatively high. It is likely that Glasgow will rank below Lambeth for either or both of completeness or accuracy.

## Conclusion

3.32 This chapter has reviewed the impact of population turnover and housing tenure. It has shown that the data sources introduced in Chapter 2 can be used to make projections for the completeness and accuracy of local authority registers. The following chapter reviews the findings of research into each of the registers and reports on the usefulness of the approach outlined here.

## 4 The local context: what can we learn from the case studies?

4.1 This chapter of the report provides detailed findings from the case study research conducted in eight local authority areas across England, Scotland and Wales. The case study research was conducted in two phases between March and October 2009 and comprised three distinctive research tasks: data-mining of the registers, house-to-house surveys and interviews with electoral administrators. The approach taken in relation to each of these elements of the research, together with the findings, is summarised below. A more detailed account of the methods used, including an overview of each of these two phases, the sequencing of the three main research tasks, and the research objectives for each, is provided in Appendix A.

### Box 12

#### Key points

- The completeness and accuracy of local registers declines significantly between canvass periods, owing to population movement and the under-use of rolling and late registration provisions.
- Identifiable inaccuracies on local registers are mostly a result of registered electors moving home.
- Under-registration and inaccuracy are closely associated with the social groups most likely to move home – across all seven areas in phase two (therefore excluding Knowsley), under-registration is notably higher than average among 17–24 year olds (56% not registered), private sector tenants (49%) and black and minority ethnic (BME) British residents (31%).
- There are a number of key social and demographic trends which have increased the difficulties associated with ensuring the registration of these social groups in recent years, particularly in urban areas.
- Producing and maintaining registers which are as complete and accurate as possible will require levels of response to the annual canvass and use of rolling registration to be maximised, and the use of carry forward to be minimised.

## Data-mining

### Our approach

4.2 The data-mining work was carried out in three stages. This exercise, and the findings from it, was reported in our interim report published in December 2009.<sup>30</sup> The approach is summarised here:

- Automated computer checks were carried out for each of the unedited local authority registers to identify potential anomalies in individual register entries. These included, among others, cases where individual households had significantly more register entries than the average for that postcode and where names were repeated within the same postcode area.
- The researchers then undertook 'eyeball checks' of all anomalies identified by the automated checks to ensure that apparently legitimate entries were removed from the list of anomalies. For instance, residential addresses such as student halls of residence, residential nursing homes, and army barracks, which inevitably contain an above average number of register entries, were removed from the list of anomalies.
- House-to-house follow-up interviews were then carried out using a small sample of the anomalies identified to check the details held on the electoral registers. The sample was selected according to the type of anomalies identified on each register.

### Key findings

4.3 The results of the data-mining exercise provide some evidence about two particular forms of anomaly on the eight local registers – repeated names, and households with an above average number of registered electors. Repeated names formed between 0.3% and 1.8% of entries on the eight registers. It was then estimated, using the house-to-house interviews, that 19% of these repeated names were inaccurate. Households with an above average number of names formed between 0.8% and 4.5% of entries on the registers. Approximately 23% of such entries were found to be inaccurate. Taken together, **this approach identified inaccuracies in just 0.2–0.6% of register entries in seven of the case study areas, and 2% in Lambeth.**

4.4 Based on these findings, we concluded that the data-mining process may have a potentially useful role to play in maintaining the accuracy of the electoral registers. In particular, the technique could provide electoral registration administrators with an effective tool for identifying specific problems with the registers, including duplicate entries arising from

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<sup>30</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Interim report on case study research into the electoral registers in Great Britain* (2009)

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/83305/Interim-report-on-case-study-research-into-the-electoral-registers-of-Great-Britain.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/83305/Interim-report-on-case-study-research-into-the-electoral-registers-of-Great-Britain.pdf).

administrative errors, or deliberate attempts to register large numbers of false electors at individual addresses. However, we also concluded that, since the inaccuracies identified represent only a small proportion of all inaccuracies on these registers, data-mining cannot be used to estimate levels of inaccuracy in the registers as a whole.

## House-to-house surveys

4.5 This section presents our approach to the house-to-house surveys and the findings from this research. It then reviews how well the predictions for completeness and accuracy, which are set out in Chapter 3, correspond to the findings.

### Our approach

4.6 House-to-house surveys were used in the case study areas, with interviews conducted at approximately 500 households in each area. Each interview aimed to gather information about all members of the household, meaning data could be collected for about 1,000 individuals in each of the eight areas.

4.7 Half of the sample for the survey was derived from the postcode address file and the other half from the electoral registers (see Appendix A for further details). The survey sample was based on a sample of wards (selected to ensure a broad social mix within each local authority). This approach increased the size of the sample which could be used within the available budget while ensuring that the sample population remained broadly typical of the population of the local authority as a whole. More information on our approach to constructing the sample is provided in Appendix A.

### Sample size

4.8 Table 12 provides an overview of the total sample for the estimates cited in this report. The base data for completeness estimates are made up of all eligible electors who were resident at the addresses surveyed. The base data for accuracy estimates includes all register entries at the addresses surveyed, plus all register entries at unoccupied or derelict properties in the sample.

**Where aggregate figures are reported in this report, they are for the seven case study surveys completed in phase two of the research.**

These aggregate findings have been weighted to take account of the varying population sizes of these areas. However, they do not represent a nationally representative sample.

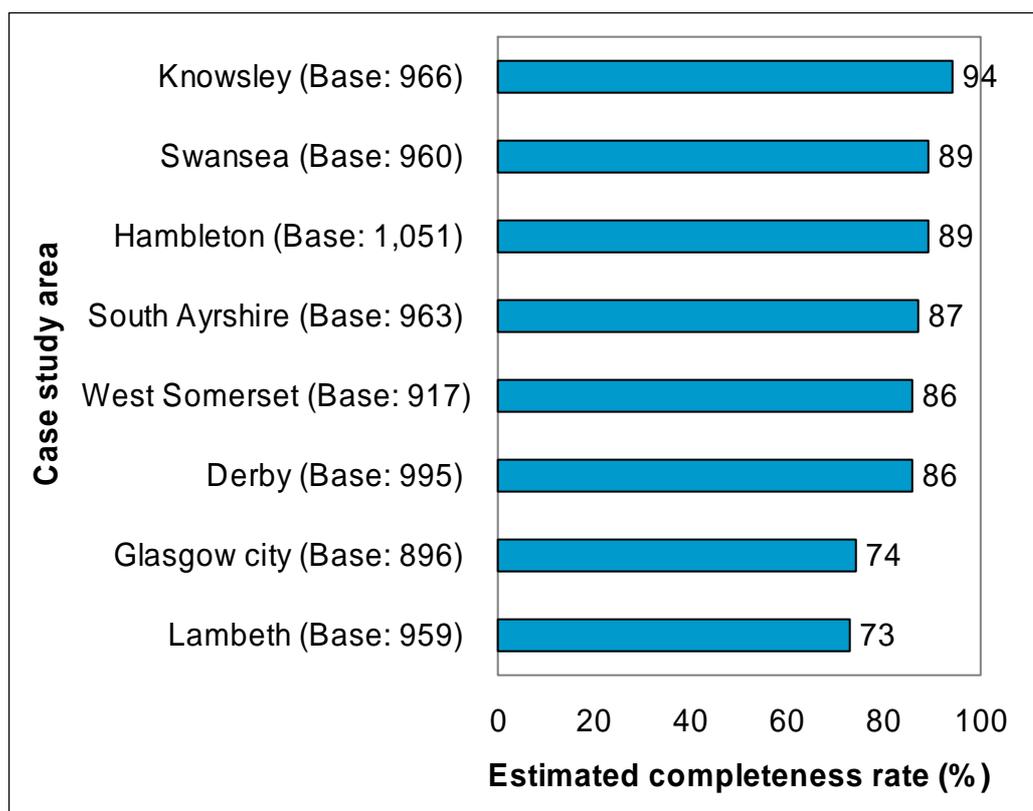
**Table 12: Base figures for completeness and accuracy calculations (unweighted)**

	<b>Total interviews (No. households)</b>	<b>Base for completeness estimates (No. people eligible to vote)</b>	<b>No. register entries at addresses surveyed</b>	<b>No. register entries at vacant properties</b>	<b>Base for accuracy estimates</b>
Derby	516	995	971	39	1,010
Glasgow city	503	896	881	63	944
Hambleton	542	1,051	1,039	16	1,055
Knowsley	449	966	963	40	1,003
Lambeth	493	959	935	30	965
South Ayrshire	510	963	934	29	963
Swansea	530	960	962	121	1,083
West Somerset	505	917	888	30	918
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,048</b>	<b>7,707</b>	<b>7,573</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>7,953</b>

## Key findings

4.9 Figure 14 presents the overall estimates for completeness in each of the eight case study areas. Completeness was found to range from 94% in Knowsley to 73% in Lambeth. The confidence intervals for this data are provided in Appendix A.

**Figure 14: Estimated completeness by case study area<sup>31</sup>**



Base: Unweighted (7,707).

Note: The survey was conducted in Knowsley four to six months after publication of the register. In the remaining seven areas, the survey was conducted eight to 10 months after publication of the registers.

### **What does this tell us about our projections?**

4.10 The survey results broadly confirm the projected levels of completeness presented in Chapter 3. In particular, Knowsley is confirmed to have the highest level of completeness, while Glasgow and Lambeth have the least complete registers and completeness rates in the remaining areas cluster in the mid–high eighties. In all but two cases, completeness rates fall within one percentage point of the range projected in Chapter 3. Moreover, while the projected range for Glasgow was very wide (63–87%), it is notable that the survey estimate falls within the middle of this range. In addition, the ‘ranking’ of completeness produced by the surveys is almost identical to the ranking put forward in paragraphs 3.24–3.31 above, in which the projections were contextualised via consideration of electoral statistics and other factors.

4.11 In two cases, however, completeness is significantly lower than projected – Lambeth and South Ayrshire. In Lambeth, where completeness is

<sup>31</sup> Fieldwork dates for Knowsley: 23 March–27 May 2009. Fieldwork dates for remaining seven local authority areas 6 July–17 September 2009.

10–13% lower than projected, this largely reflects the difficulty of projecting the completeness of the registers in a densely populated inner-London borough with very high levels of population turnover on the basis of available electoral and migration data. By contrast, the discrepancy of 6–8 percentage points between the projected and estimated figure for South Ayrshire is almost certain to reflect the concerns already highlighted that the data provided for carry forward in 2008 would serve to inflate the projection for completeness in this local authority.

4.12 Taken as a whole, these figures therefore appear to confirm a number of key assumptions made about the eight local registers. In particular:

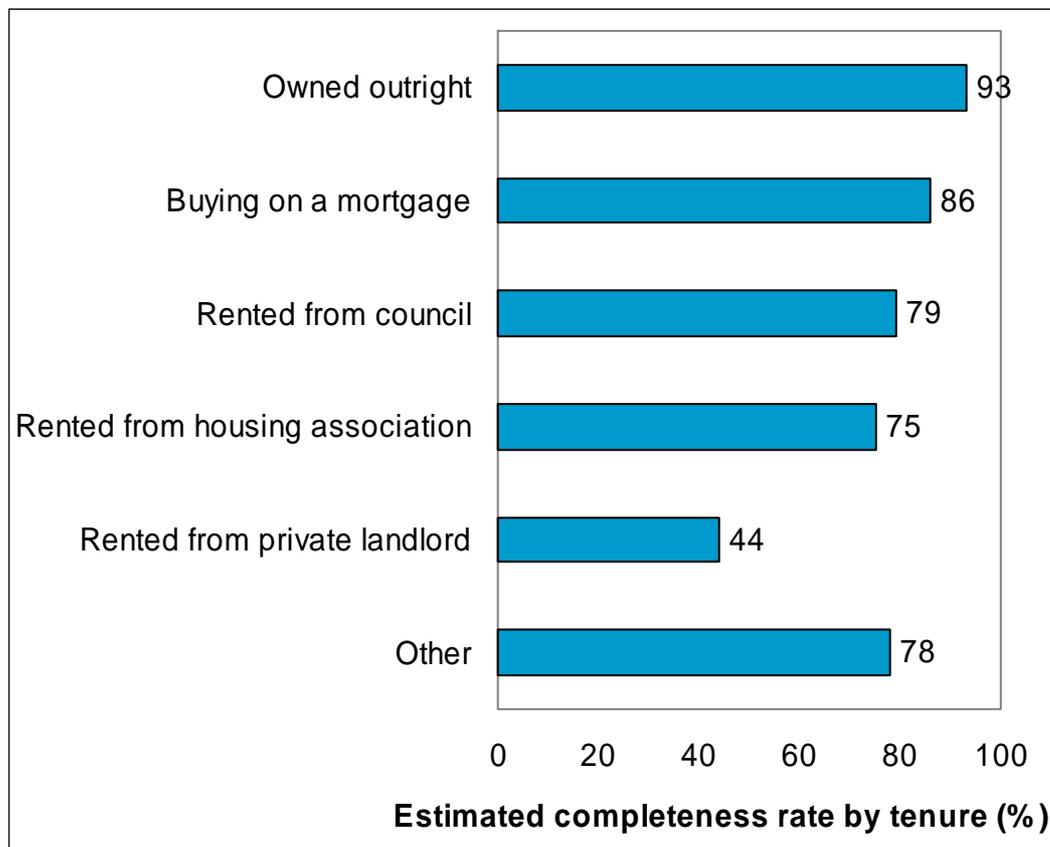
- Knowsley's low migration rates (which are reflected in its small share of private rental housing and small student population) combined with a relatively high use of rolling registration among home-movers and the fact that the survey was conducted shortly after the publication of the registers appear to be the key factors explaining its completeness rate of 94%.
- The evidence suggesting that Hambleton's and Swansea's registers are being maintained at high levels of completeness by the annual canvass is confirmed by the survey, once their relatively high migration rates are taken into account.
- The concerns highlighted about the likely state of Glasgow's register are underlined by the fact that its estimated completeness is effectively on a par with an inner-London borough with a significantly higher migration rate.

4.13 The local case studies also confirmed the validity of our assumptions that under-registration is likely to be significantly higher among tenants in private rental housing, young people, recent home-movers and members of BME groups, as examined below.

## Completeness by tenure

4.14 Figure 15 highlights that there are significant contrasts in the completeness of the registers associated with housing tenure. While registration levels among owner-occupiers are around 90%, the figure for those renting from private landlords is only 44%. The contrast between these figures will partly, but not entirely, be a by-product of the turnover of households in private rental housing. Likewise, the far higher levels of completeness among tenants in social housing, compared to private rental, is also associated with greater residential stability in council and housing association properties. In addition, many Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) will be able to access information relating to council tenants and some housing association tenants as part of their efforts to maintain the register.

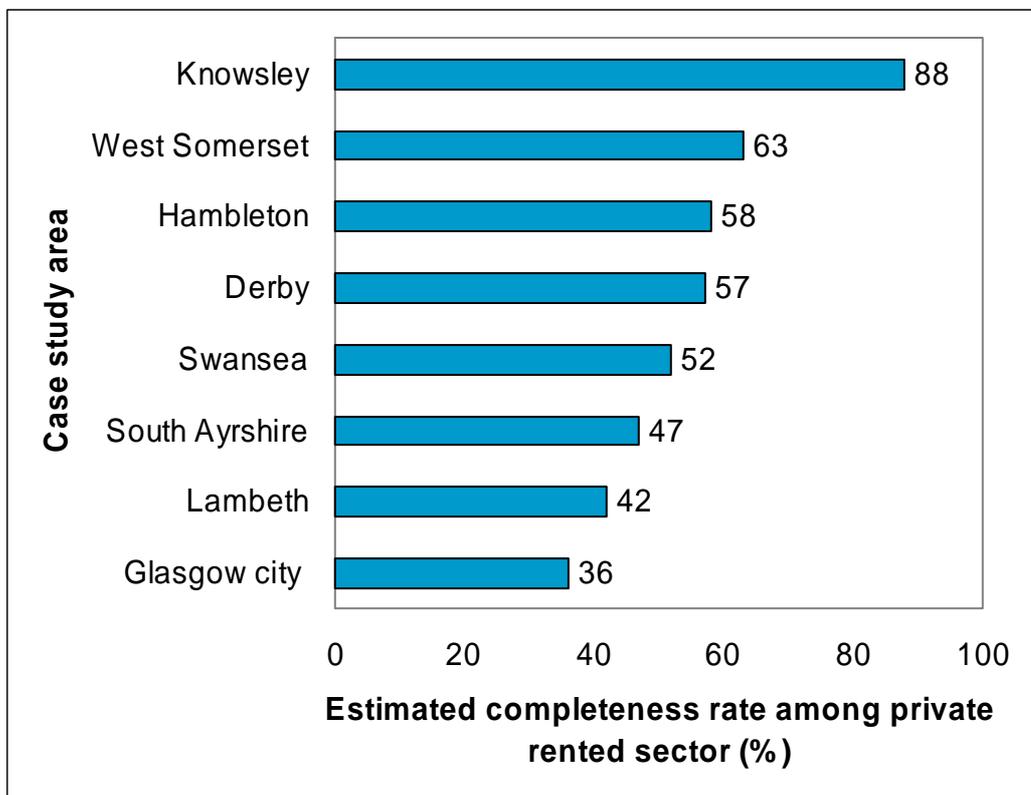
**Figure 15: Estimated completeness by tenure**



Base: Unweighted (6,741).

4.15 At the same time, there are equally dramatic contrasts between the case study areas in levels of registration among private sector tenants. As Figure 16 shows, an estimated 88% of private sector tenants in Knowsley are registered to vote, compared to just 36% in Glasgow. The low levels of population movement in Knowsley are clearly part of the explanation once again, which also explains the above average levels of registration among private sector tenants in West Somerset and Hambleton. In Lambeth, where population turnover is high, only 42% of private renters were found to be on the electoral register. Given that one-fifth of Lambeth’s households are in the private rental sector, turnover in this sector is likely to be the major factor influencing the completeness of the local register. There may also be some place-specific factors, explored in the section below, which explain the fact that two-thirds of private renters in Glasgow are not registered to vote.

**Figure 16: Estimated completeness of local registers among private sector tenants**



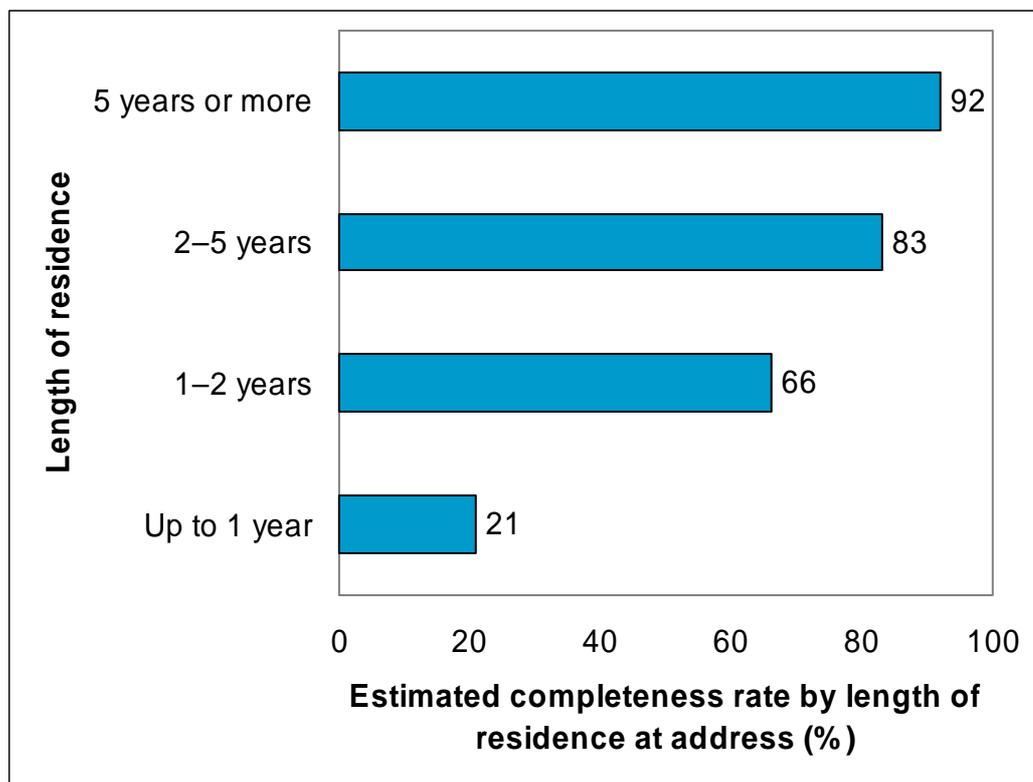
Base: Unweighted (839).

Note: The figures for completeness for private sector tenants have small base sizes. This means they are subject to large confidence intervals (see Appendix A for more information on confidence intervals for each local authority area).

## Population movement

4.16 The role of population movement in eroding the completeness of the registers is illustrated in Figure 17. This shows that registration levels average 92% among eligible voters who have been resident at the same address for five years or more. Completeness then falls among those who have been at their current address for between two and five years (83%) and between one and two years (66%). However, the contrast with those who have moved in the previous 12 months is dramatic – just 21% of those who have changed address in the last year are registered to vote. While these figures for recent home-movers would have been lower in the absence of rolling registration, they also reinforce the point that the vast majority of those moving home are not making use of provision enabling them to register to vote outside of the canvass period.

**Figure 17: Estimated completeness by length of residence at current address**

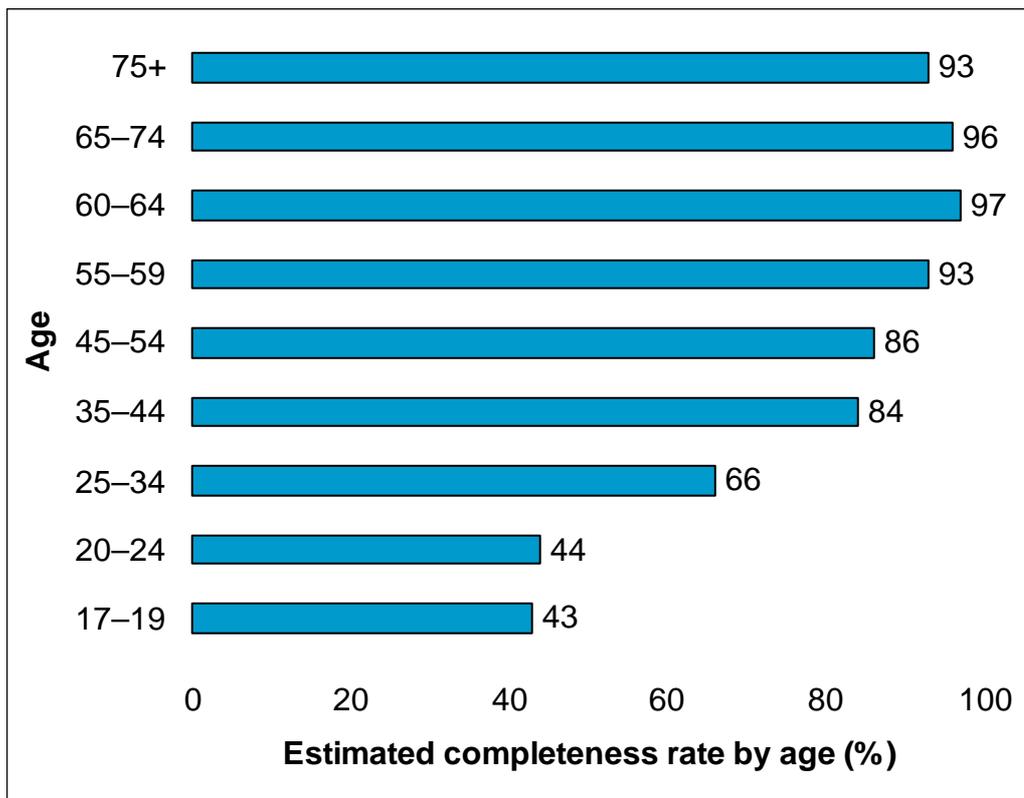


Base: Unweighted (6,711).

## Young people

4.17 Since young people are significantly more likely to change address and to be living in private rental housing, it is no surprise that registration rates are lowest among those aged 17–34. As Figure 18 highlights, for those aged 55 or over, registration levels are above 90% and among people aged between their mid-thirties and mid-fifties, registration levels are around 85%. Registration levels then fall off sharply among younger generations, with only two-thirds of 25–34 year olds and less than half of 17–24 year olds registered to vote at their current address.

**Figure 18: Estimated completeness by age group**

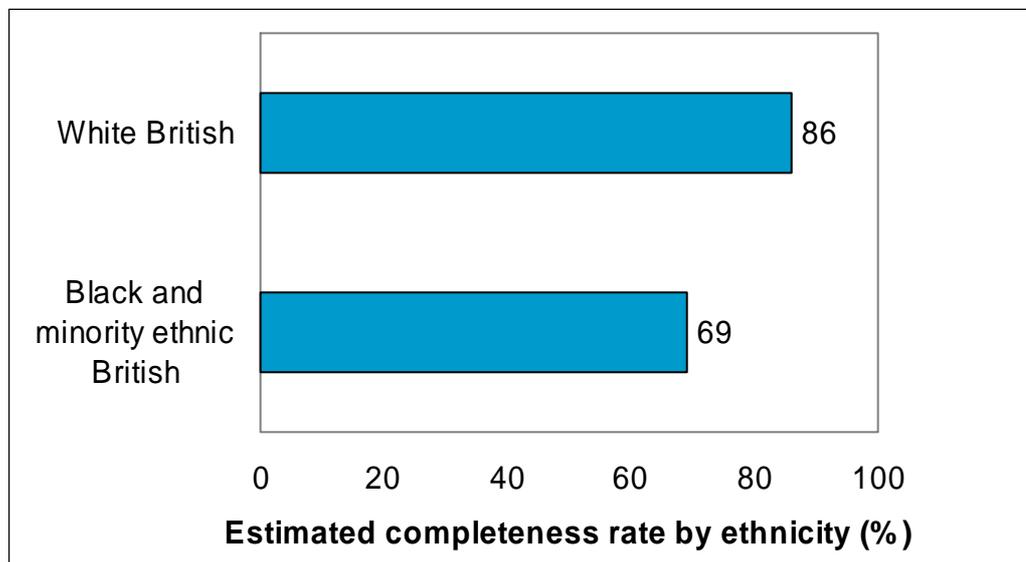


Base: Unweighted (3,581).

## BME groups

4.18 Finally, the fieldwork also confirmed that members of BME groups are also more likely to be absent from the electoral registers. While base sizes are too small to distinguish between different BME groups, Figure 19 highlights that registration levels were found to be significantly lower for eligible BME British electors (69%) compared to white British electors (86%). Further research would be needed to identify the extent to which under-registration among BME groups arises from confusion about eligibility to vote within some BME communities or from language difficulties, versus the extent to which it is largely because of the socio-demographic profile of BME British residents (who are, on average, younger, have higher levels of residential mobility, and are more likely to live in the private rental sector).

**Figure 19: Estimated completeness by ethnicity**

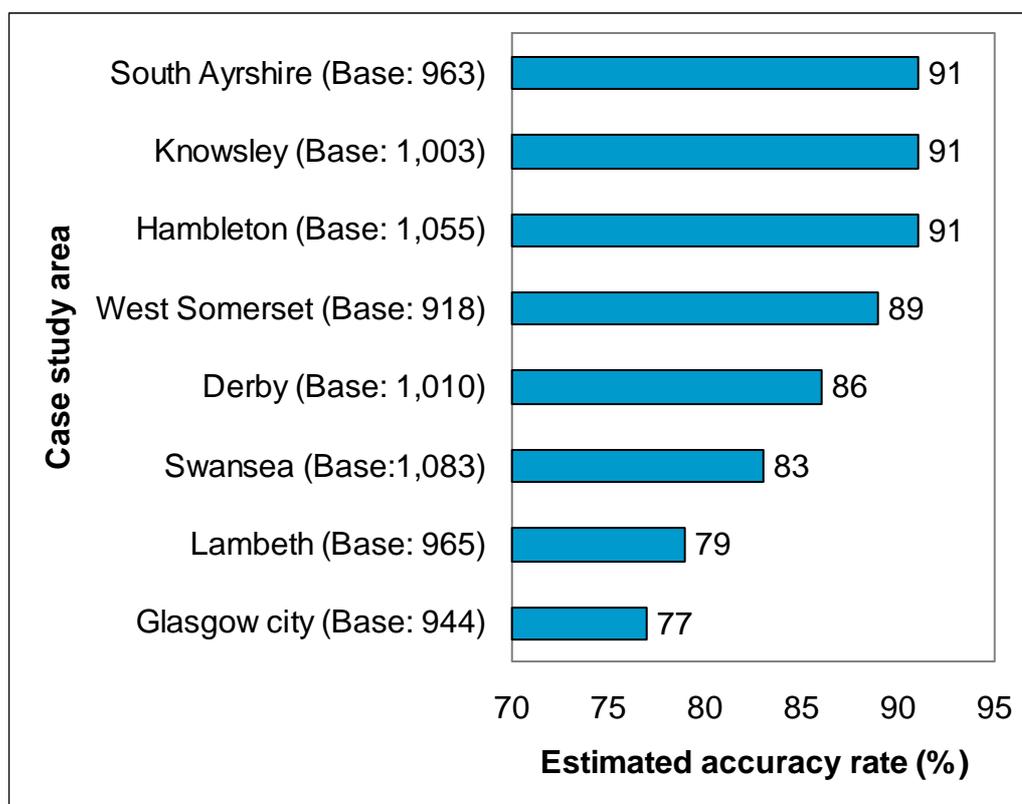


Base: 3,581.

## Accuracy

4.19 Figure 20 shows that estimated levels of accuracy for the eight local registers range between 77% in Glasgow and 91% in South Ayrshire, Knowsley and Hambleton. The figures produced by the surveys are broadly in line with those projected on the basis of electoral data, although the projections appear to have been less successful than those for completeness. In three cases – Swansea, Glasgow and Lambeth – the estimated levels of accuracy fall outside of the range specified in the projections. In addition, with the exception of Swansea, the ranking previously put forward is also found to be consistent with the survey findings. It is notable in this regard that the estimates for the accuracy of the registers in the case study areas tend to mirror the estimates for completeness, with accuracy rates tending to be a few percentage points higher in each case. This result would be expected, and is reflected in the projections, because of the impact of population movement. Just as population movement causes the registers to become less complete between canvass periods (adding electors who responded to the canvass, but have moved and not used rolling registration mechanisms to those who did not respond to the canvass), it also causes the registers to become less accurate (because register entries at addresses from which electors have moved will become redundant).

**Figure 20: Estimated accuracy by case study areas**



Base: 7,941.

4.20 Table 13 shows that, in the case study areas, inaccuracies related overwhelmingly to electors not being resident at the address where they were registered and that only a very small proportion of register entries were deemed inaccurate on grounds of incorrect information concerning nationality or date of birth. Assuming that the absence of an elector at an address implies that they have moved, rather than representing a fraudulent entry, it follows that accuracy rates are likely to be 3–7% higher than completeness rates in most localities (since accuracy rates concern only entries on the register, and do not include those people who would be eligible to be registered but are not).

### **Swansea: the impact of student populations**

4.21 However, in the case of Swansea the accuracy rate is estimated to be 6 percentage points lower than the completeness rate. One possible explanation for such a pattern would be that there is another significant cause of inaccuracy on Swansea's register which has resulted in the inclusion of significant numbers of redundant or fraudulent entries. We found absolutely no evidence to suggest that this was the case. Table 13 shows that no inaccuracies were identified on Swansea's registers relating to the inclusion of deceased voters and that inaccuracies relating to dates of birth or nationality were negligible, amounting to just 0.4% of register entries between them. These findings are confirmed by the data-mining exercise which did not highlight any particular concerns about inaccuracies on Swansea's registers. Likewise, Swansea's high canvass response and limited use of carry forward suggests that it is highly unlikely that inaccurate entries are inadvertently being kept on the register by the ERO's attempt to maintain completeness.

**Table 13: Types of inaccuracy, by case study area (percentages)**

	Derby	Glasgow city	Hambleton	Lambeth	South Ayrshire	Swansea	West Somerset
<b>Inaccuracies caused by elector not resident at address on register – of which</b>	12.4	21.7	8.9	19.7	7.6	16.2	10.1
The elector is deceased	0.2	0	0	0	0	0	0
The property is unoccupied	4.2	6.6	1.7	2.8	3.1	9.3	3.6
<b>Inaccuracies where elector is resident at address on register – of which</b>	0.9	1.1	0.3	0.6	0	0.4	0.6
The inaccuracy concerns nationality	0.6	1.0	0.3	0.5	0	0.3	0.6
The inaccuracy is caused by incorrect date of birth for attainer	0.3	0.1	0	0.2	0	0.1	0
<b>Accuracy or eligibility uncertain</b>	0.5	0.6	0	0.3	0.8	0.4	0.6
<b>Inaccurate register entries (TOTAL)</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>

4.22 What Table 13 does reveal, however, is that the primary cause of the higher than expected level of inaccuracy estimate for Swansea is that 9% of properties in the sample with register entries were found to be vacant – by far the highest rate in any of the case study areas. Closer analysis of the data for Swansea reveals that one of the wards surveyed (Uplands) had a significantly higher level of inaccuracy than the others. This resulted in very wide confidence intervals for Swansea’s accuracy estimate (see Appendix A). Analysis of 2001 Census records reveals that 26% of housing in this ward is in the private rented sector (compared to an average of 7% for the city as a whole) and that one-third of Uplands residents aged 16–74 are students. Moreover, 30% of Swansea’s student population lived in this single ward in 2001. Since the survey was conducted in the summer vacation, many of the addresses sampled in this ward would have been vacant. As such, **there are clear grounds to assume that the true accuracy rate for Swansea is substantially higher than suggested by the survey.**<sup>32</sup>

4.23 The surveys also revealed that inaccuracy mirrors completeness in others ways. In particular, inaccuracy rates are higher among BME British electors, private renters, and those who have been resident at an address for less than two years.

## Interviews with electoral administrators

### Our approach

4.24 The third part of the case study research involved interviews with electoral registration administrators in the eight local authorities. These helped us to understand more about their approach to the role and the challenges they face. The first set of interviews took place between 6 March and 1 April 2009 and were mainly conducted face-to-face. The set of follow-up interviews took place between 21 September and 7 October 2009, again conducted with electoral registration administrators. These were mainly conducted by telephone. Further details of the issues covered in the interviews are provided in Appendix A.

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<sup>32</sup> Difficulties associated with registration among students were highlighted in interviews with electoral administrators in the three areas where students comprise more than one-fifth of private sector renters – Swansea, Glasgow and Derby. It is possible that a large student population in Glasgow, and to a lesser extent in Derby, may have had a similar effect on the findings. However, none of the wards included in the Glasgow and Derby samples had concentrations of student housing equivalent to Swansea’s Uplands ward.

### Box 13

#### The roles, responsibilities and powers of EROs in Great Britain

EROs are appointed by local authorities and are responsible for the creation and maintenance of the registers of electors (and similar tasks in regard to the absent voters list). They receive support from electoral registration administrators. In Scotland, most local authorities have appointed Assessors to valuation joint boards to act as the ERO for the authority, and in several cases a single Assessor has been appointed as ERO for two or more local authorities.

EROs are required to undertake an annual canvass each autumn and to then publish a new register on 1 December. Subsequently, EROs are required to publish monthly updates to the registers (from January to September) on the first working day of the month. These updates are based on information received from individual electors via the rolling registration process before the last date for applications (usually three working weeks before the updated registers are published).

Section 9 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 placed a new duty on EROs to take all necessary steps to maintain the electoral registers. These steps include sending an annual canvass form to every household, issuing reminders and making house-to-house visits (personal canvassing) in certain circumstances.

EROs have a range of powers to assist them in compiling and maintaining the registers. These include inspecting other records held by the local authority and the right to request access to records kept by registered social landlords, institutions of further and higher education and other bodies. Such requests must comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 (see Box 6, Chapter 1).

The Electoral Commission has responsibility for issuing guidance to EROs on electoral registration, including advice on the activities that EROs must undertake to meet the duty defined in the 2006 Act. The guidance also provides suggestions on how to increase registration rates amongst under-represented groups. EROs must also report their performance against standards set and monitored by the Electoral Commission.

EROs are not responsible for the organisation and conduct of elections, which is the duty of the local authority's Returning Officer.

## Our findings

4.25 Set out below is a summary of issues raised by electoral registration administrators. This provides an insight into their practices and the challenges they face. We expect that future research will further map electoral practices against results from house-to-house surveys.

### **The annual canvass – getting people on the register**

4.26 All administrators expressed concern about decreasing response rates year on year, despite their efforts to promote registration. The approaches adopted for the annual canvass are reviewed below.

4.27 **Personal canvassers:** The methods used to prepare and carry out the canvass differed between local authority areas. However, almost all interviewees stated that personal canvassing increased response rates. This supports the data findings in Chapter 2. As one stated: ‘obviously the canvass is in the hands of the canvasser’. The use of personal canvassers is heavily influenced by resources – but the success of the canvassing is not only a matter of numbers; the personality and persistence of the canvassers is also important:

‘I still believe in the old fashioned way of doing it...door knocking is an expensive operation but it is effective work because you can get accurate information, properties unoccupied and stuff like that. You can’t rely on stuff coming back by post...’

4.28 **Access to properties:** Gated properties are a significant obstacle to conducting a door-to-door canvass. The interviews revealed that some canvassers are often ejected or denied access to private communal properties, despite explaining their purpose. Administrators do not always have the cooperation of property management organisations. Some areas present a threat to the personal safety of canvassers, with one administrator naming an area where canvassers have been mugged in the past. Another administrator actively discourages canvassers from entering certain areas because of the danger of being attacked – meaning that **a section of the electorate will never receive a visit from a personal canvasser**.

4.29 **Alternatives to door knocking:** Interviewees also described various experimental approaches used to increase response rates during the canvass. One told us how they had delivered postcards to properties, reminding occupiers in advance that the canvass would be starting in a number of weeks. Another local authority had introduced the practice of leaving calling cards after personal canvassers made a call to a property. One local authority outsourced the canvass for two years and found this to be a positive experience – although budget cuts meant this could not be sustained.

### **Low response areas – tackling under-registration**

4.30 Administrators also reviewed how they identify and respond to areas which have a low response rate.

**4.31 Identifying low response areas:** The demographic and geographic make-up of a local authority can determine the response rate to the canvass. Administrators generally use canvass response rates to identify which areas are problematic. While some local authorities have very obvious pockets of under-registration, for other areas under-registration is spread throughout the wards and cannot be easily pinpointed to specific areas. While low canvass response can be clustered to areas characterised by low socio-economic groups, this is not always the case. However, all of the administrators remarked that there is at least one BME group in their local authority area that is generally under-represented on the register.

**4.32 Targeting:** Some electoral registration administrators are reluctant to target specific low-response areas, arguing they could be accused of promoting registration in particular political party strongholds. Others are reluctant to target low-response areas because they do not believe this is an effective way to allocate resources. One local authority specifically targeted a low-response area with an additional canvass a number of years ago. They targeted approximately 30,000 properties and received responses back from about three and a half thousand properties. As the administrator pointed out: 'It was a very expensive exercise for a very poor return.'

### **Publicity and campaigns**

**4.33** The canvass is one approach to getting people to register. Publicity and campaigns are also used to complement this. All those we spoke to invested in this, making sure to advertise the annual canvass and the importance of registering to vote in the run up to an election. As mentioned above, registration is advertised through local papers, magazines, the radio, advertising boards, at bus stops and through leaflets and posters. However, most of the administrators did not have a publicity awareness strategy or targeted initiative plans, attributing this to a lack of time and resources. They also expressed frustration at being unable to accurately evaluate expenditure on advertising: 'It's very hard to quantify advertising and then, sometimes, advertising doesn't produce any effect at all.'

**4.34 Attainers and students:** Attainer registration rates do not seem to be monitored by administrators at present but some mentioned that they plan to for the future. It was pointed out that a lot of resources can be channelled into projects aimed at attainers and young adults with very little return, for example, expensive advertising in magazines which does not generate the interest that was expected. Almost all administrators claimed that getting lists of attainers or school leavers from local schools would help to improve completeness rates. They described the difficulties they encountered when trying to obtain the names of attainers from local schools.

### **Updating and correcting details on the register**

**4.35** The research has shown that the registers contain a degree of inaccuracy. This may arise due to mistakes on a registration form or because the details on the registers become out of date. This section reviews how

administrators identify potential inaccuracies and what steps they take to keep the registers updated.

4.36 **'Cleaning the registers'**: Those maintaining the registers are supposed to remove names from the register after the second year of non-contact. Some administrators undertook such 'dead-wooding' exercises on the register. However, **there was reluctance among some to be too vigorous when taking names off the register, as they feared disenfranchising an elector**. They did acknowledge, however, that their caution was likely to compromise the accuracy of the register.

4.37 **Data checking**: Administrators are conscious that the register goes out of date very quickly. They use a variety of sources to update the register in an attempt to capture deaths, home-movers, new nationals and attainees who reach 18 years of age during the life of the register. These include council tax lists; death registration lists; housing association datasets; building control lists; local land and property gazetteer; citizenship ceremonies; nursing homes and long-stay hospital data. However, these sources have limitations. For example, it was noted that council tax records can sometimes be misleading as they will only have the name of the person/people who pay(s) council tax; they do not include the names of all those who live at the property.

4.38 **Mistakes on the forms**: While administrators spend considerable time updating their register, some inaccuracies do make their way onto the register. Examples referred to by administrators arose from people not deleting names on pre-printed registration forms or mistakes in multi-occupied properties. Administrators made the point that it can be difficult to maintain the register because they are required to take information that comes back on the forms at face value:

'If people do not cross names off [pre-printed names on registration forms], we won't delete them and you know there isn't sufficient time within the canvassing period to cross check all the forms against other canvassing data if we've got suspicions that there is a large number of names on the forms.'

4.39 Administrators also pointed to a lack of knowledge about the registration process among some sections of the public, resulting in confusion between benefit and council tax applications and the registration process; this is regarded as a further contributor to non-registration. Such mistakes on the forms can be intentional:

'If people are going to lie about occupancy... if they are not going to complete it correctly, if they are not going to bother reading it because they can't be bothered...or if they do it incorrectly because it helps them live everyday by getting credit, there's not much you can do...'

4.40 Some members of the public are reluctant to complete forms because they do not have the capacity to do so on their own. Electors may enter incorrect information due to literacy problems or the person filling in the form on their behalf may also make an error. However, most administrators

monitored any property with a high level of postal vote applications and followed up when a property seemed suspicious. Lack of information from the elector plus time and resource limitations were used as reasons to explain why administrators did not do more to monitor entries that may be inaccurate.

**4.41 Rolling registration:** In most cases, electors move out of a property and do not update their address details on the electoral register. This is despite almost six in 10 of the public reporting an awareness of being able to register to vote at most points throughout the year.<sup>33</sup> One urban local authority pointed out that in parts of the authority, turnover stands at about 55% annually. Rolling registration was seen by some as increasing the workload and adding pressure to the team but bringing little return in terms of the completeness and accuracy of the registers. Moreover, most of the queries they receive about registration are from those electors who are already registered.

## Conclusion

4.42 This chapter has shown how case studies can be used to identify the extent of variation in the completeness and accuracy of local registers. The findings from the survey research were found to correspond relatively closely to the analysis in Chapter 3 of the likely state of the registers. In addition, while the aggregated figures for the case study areas cannot be read as national estimates, they do reinforce previous findings about the concentration of under-registration among specific social groups. Young people, students, members of BME groups and recent home-movers were all found to be less likely to be registered to vote at their current address. The next chapter looks at the implications of the research findings for the electoral registration process.

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<sup>33</sup> [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/84609/Ipsos-MORI-public-opinion-research-winter-2009-survey.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/84609/Ipsos-MORI-public-opinion-research-winter-2009-survey.pdf).

## 5 Implications for registration policy and practice

5.1 The findings from the research outlined in this report have implications for how the electoral registration system in Great Britain operates, and the particular approaches taken by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to building and maintaining electoral registers. This section considers the key questions for EROs and policy makers, including possible actions that could be adopted over the short term as well as longer term challenges.

### Box 14

#### Key points

- The current system of electoral registration in Great Britain originates from the nineteenth-century householder franchise; it adapted to the extension of the franchise to all adult citizens, but risks becoming less effective in light of changing patterns of household formation and population mobility.
- In the great majority of local authorities, levels of response to the annual canvass are high and annual turnover on the registers is generally consistent with local migration levels.
- However, rolling registration, a tool introduced to maintain the register, has not prevented the completeness and accuracy of the registers declining between annual canvass periods.
- There is significant scope for greater use of existing data-sharing and data-matching powers by EROs to maintain the electoral registers; the Political Parties and Elections Act (PPE) Act 2009 will enable more extensive use of data-request powers to be piloted.
- We are taking immediate steps to maximise awareness of rolling and late registration provisions in the run-up to the 2010 Parliamentary general election, including national registration campaigns and guidance to EROs.
- Over the next few years, the introduction of individual registration on a voluntary basis offers a wider opportunity to review the current system of electoral registration, and identify changes which would ensure that the registers used at elections are as complete and accurate as possible.

5.2 Much has changed politically, socially and economically over the past 100 years. During that period, the system of electoral registration has remained broadly unchanged. It is still relatively effective in ensuring high levels of voter registration, even when compared with other established democracies, but it is clear that many aspects of the system are now struggling to respond to these wider changes.

5.3 Introduced at a time when the right to vote was based on a 'householder franchise', determined by ownership of property, our electoral registration system has served us remarkably well. It adapted to the progressive extension of the franchise to include all citizens aged 21 and above in the period 1867–1928, as well as to the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1969.

But at the same time, the Victorian era assumption that electoral registration can be the responsibility of a 'head of household' seems increasingly outdated. As Great Britain prepares for the introduction of individual registration, there is clearly scope to ask some significant questions about how the delivery of electoral registration can be improved.

## The current system

5.4 This section reviews how the registration system currently operates and how effective it is in responding to the key challenges of maintaining complete and accurate electoral registers: identifying all eligible electors, and ensuring their registration details are correct and up to date. This includes the capacity of the current system to account for population movement – which this research has shown to explain many of the names missing from the registers and the inaccuracies that were found. The section focuses in particular on issues relating to the annual canvass, rolling registration and resources for electoral registration.

### The annual canvass

5.5 The annual canvass is broadly effective as a mechanism for identifying eligible electors at a given point in time in autumn each year. Returns and confirmations of no changes from households are generally above 90%, and additions and deletions recorded at the time of the canvass tend to correlate with local migration levels. A small proportion of local authorities have canvass response rates below 85%, and below average canvass response rates often tend to be associated with areas where the task of encouraging response is more difficult – due to higher levels of social deprivation or rapid population turnovers in areas with large private rental housing stock. Nevertheless, it is also clear that under-registration remains concentrated in specific social groups, often associated with these same areas.

5.6 The research has shown that personal canvassing is key to ensuring a high response rate. However, many EROs point to the increasing difficulties they now face in delivering a personal canvassing programme. This includes the increasing prevalence of gated communities, the reluctance of people to open their doors when the evenings become darker and increasing difficulties recruiting canvass staff.

### Rolling registration

5.7 The timing of the annual canvass process – often commencing in the early autumn months of August and September and concluding with the publication of revised electoral registers on 1 December each year – means that there are usually several months between the end of the canvass period and elections which normally take place at the beginning of May in the following year. Without an effective mechanism for identifying and capturing population changes (principally as a result of people moving house, but also including new citizens, for example) during this period, electoral registers would be expected to decline in both completeness and accuracy.

5.8 Rolling registration was introduced in 2000 to address this problem, but it does not appear to have been especially effective: in most authorities changes reported by electors using rolling registration represent only a small fraction of the likely annual population movement rate. The case studies suggest that there is a fall in completeness and accuracy rates as each month passes from the publication of the revised electoral registers in December.

5.9 While public opinion research shows that there are generally high levels of reported confidence about how to go about registering to vote, there also remain significant gaps in some people's knowledge about the registration process. This includes what information is required when registering to vote and the ability to register at most points throughout the year.<sup>34</sup>

5.10 EROs have a statutory duty to promote awareness and the availability of electoral registration opportunities, including rolling registration, but it appears to be much harder to persuade or encourage people to proactively update their registration details each time they move house. Some EROs supplement the annual canvass activity with a confirmation letter to electors in the January or February, designed to act as another reminder for those who did not register through the canvass and to provide an opportunity for people who have moved to update their details. Others ensure that rolling registration forms are sent to addresses where the ERO becomes aware that there may be new residents, through information obtained from land charges or council tax records for example, and also make registration forms available through estate agents or letting agencies.

### Accuracy of entries

5.11 The Representation of the People Act 2000 authorised EROs to carry forward names to the revised registers published in December in certain circumstances, as a means of maintaining the completeness of electoral registers. This approach represented something of a shift from Home Office guidance in the 1990s, which centred on maximising levels of response to the annual canvass. As a result, average levels of carry forward have more than doubled over the past decade. In part, this pattern may be due to the lower canvass response levels which many EROs have reported. However, while the use of carry forward may have helped maintain levels of completeness, it is also likely that the increased use of these provisions will have resulted in a rise in the proportion of register entries which are inaccurate. This would also explain our findings in the case study areas that a surprising proportion of those electors registered at the wrong address moved more than one year ago.

5.12 Accurate registers are also dependent on how members of the public complete the canvass or rolling registration form. One issue that arose during our interviews with electoral registration administrators was the inability or

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<sup>34</sup> [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/84609/Ipsos-MORI-public-opinion-research-winter-2009-survey.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/84609/Ipsos-MORI-public-opinion-research-winter-2009-survey.pdf).

reluctance of some members of the public to complete the form properly. This includes not deleting the names of previous residents.

## Resources and performance

5.13 There is good evidence to suggest that EROs now generally have to work harder to achieve broadly similar outcomes to previous decades. In London, for example, these efforts have required a higher than average amount to be spent on electoral registration, compared with other local authority types. Chapter 2 shows that there appears to be a gradual improvement of the registers in Greater London and a marked decline of the registers in some other parts of the country. Increased resources for electoral registration in other parts of Great Britain could have a similar effect to that seen in London, particularly if it leads to increased investment in personal canvassing.

## Improving the registers: immediate steps

5.14 We have identified above a number of issues and possible actions which should be considered by EROs. Given that the next UK general election must be held by June this year, we consider in this section the priorities for electoral registration over the coming months. There are immediate steps which can, and must, be taken to ensure that all eligible electors who wish to vote at the 2010 UK general election are able to do so. With an election looming and campaigns gaining more prominence, electors are more alert to the need to be registered and are likely to be significantly more receptive to campaigns highlighting the provisions for rolling registration. In 2005, we noted the high volume of phone calls (20,000 plus) we received about electoral registration as well as the 318,762 visitors to our public information website [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) in the three months prior to the General Election. This has risen in recent years, with 588,316 visitors to our website in the run up to the 2009 local and European elections.

5.15 However, our experience in 2005 underlines that efforts to promote late registration must begin well in advance of the likely date of an election. A significant proportion of the contact we received at that time came too late for unregistered electors to ensure they would be included on the register in time to vote at the election. As we noted at the time: 'There was a dramatic increase in the number of calls we received after the election was called on 5 April with thousands of callers disappointed to learn that they had missed the 11 March deadline for registering in time to vote at the 2005 general election.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: turnout, how many, who and why?* (2005) [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/47256/Election2005turnoutFINAL\\_18826-13874\\_\\_E\\_\\_N\\_\\_S\\_\\_W\\_\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/47256/Election2005turnoutFINAL_18826-13874__E__N__S__W__.pdf).

Similarly, for the elections in 2009, 149,880 registration forms were downloaded before the registration deadline, with a further 35,251 downloaded once the registration deadline had passed.

5.16 New provisions introduced since the last UK general election, which allow for registration to take place up to 11 working days before an election, should also help to improve access to electoral registration. We will be using this extension to the registration period to encourage people to register during the campaign period. This will include running national registration campaigns over the next few months to make sure that anyone who is eligible to vote at the general election is able to do so. We have also issued guidance to EROs on how to encourage people to register in the run up to the election. We will continue to monitor the number of people who successfully register to vote in the last weeks of the registration period.

5.17 As part of their preparations during the short time left before the next UK general election, EROs should also be taking steps locally to promote awareness of electoral registration opportunities and improve the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers. In January 2010 we issued guidance and resources to EROs to help support their efforts to encourage people to register in the run up to the election. While there may be only a matter of months or even weeks before the election is called, it is also important to recognise that interest in taking part will peak when the campaigns of the political parties begin in earnest.

## Improving the operation of the current electoral registration system: the next few years

5.18 The research has also shown that it may be possible to achieve improvements in the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers under the current system, particularly building on evidence of best practice. However, the capacity and resources available to EROs to deliver improvements may be limited, particularly given the likely constraints on public spending in coming years.

### Good practice

5.19 One of the central objectives of this research was to begin to inform and improve our guidance for EROs, based on an assessment of what works across different parts of the country. The research has shown the importance of ensuring the annual canvass is as effective as possible and that rolling registration is widely promoted. In particular, more could be done to ensure rolling registration captures a greater number of those who move house or become newly eligible to register to vote between each annual canvass.<sup>36</sup> Half to two-thirds of those not registered in the case study areas included in this report were people who had moved property in the last two years, so there is clearly capacity for significant improvement.

5.20 More can also be done to identify and communicate good practice, and to encourage more EROs to adopt improved working methods, with appropriate support from their local authorities. EROs can and should learn

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<sup>36</sup> We currently run a 'home-movers campaign' each February and March. We send rolling registration forms to the half a million or so home-movers across Britain, using a number of data sources.

more from the experiences of EROs from comparable local authority types. We will continue to use our research programme across Great Britain to identify and disseminate good practice. This will include developing a greater understanding of the specific challenges faced by certain types of local authorities and developing guidance and models of good practice that address these. We will also continue to identify ways in which our research connects to the data collected via our performance standards programme, enabling us to assess how the practices of EROs matches to the wider evidence about the quality of local registers.

## Data-matching and data-mining

5.21 A variety of data-sharing and data protection issues need to be clarified so that EROs can make full use of existing legal provisions for maintaining the registers using other data sources and population registers. EROs currently have the powers to check registration information against other data collected by the local authority. Some do not have the resources to be able to do this; others are uncertain about what is permissible or unable to negotiate access. The specific problem faced by EROs for district authorities in England who are unable to obtain access to data from county councils about people in their area could be resolved by a change to the regulations, and we understand that the UK Government intends to address this anomaly.

5.22 EROs should also check regularly the quality and accuracy of information on their registers through simple checks for duplicate or triplicate names and high number of entries at an address. The case study research found that anomalies on the registers can easily be identified through such a process, with follow-up visits from the EROs' staff helping to confirm which names should be reviewed before being removed from the register.

## Targeting registration activities

5.23 Greater targeting of specific local areas and key social groups where there is evidence that under-registration is particularly concentrated may help to increase registration levels, although specific guidance would need to be provided to avoid concerns about possible partisan impacts of undertaking registration promotion activities in specific areas. However, there are obvious implications for individual EROs relating to the costs of increasing electoral registration activities in certain areas. There are also significant questions about how more targeted or focused activities might be managed in the decentralised electoral administration structures currently in place in Great Britain.

## Research

5.24 This report has also identified a number of areas in which further research is required to inform policy and practice over the next few years. These include the need to identify the reasons for what appear to be growing local variations in registration levels and further research into under-registration among particular social groups. We will also be highlighting the

issues raised by the restrictions introduced by the Electoral Administration Act 2006 regarding access to the registers for research purpose. The difficulties now faced by academics undertaking research into the completeness and accuracy of the registers are likely to have limited the scope for university-based research into electoral registration. We outline an agenda for future research in the conclusion to this report.

## Resources

5.25 A priority is for resources to be invested to ensure people are registered and to make sure that funding arrangements are working as well as they can. Our 2008 report, *Electoral administration in the United Kingdom*,<sup>37</sup> noted that the service provided should not depend on the priorities of individual local authorities which control the funding available for the functions of the independent EROs. The report identified the complicated, opaque and inconsistent funding arrangements for electoral administration as a particular issue that risks undermining the delivery of a consistently high quality of service to electors. Budgets are not open ended, but about £80 million is spent nationally each year on electoral registration; so the money needs to be allocated to what works.

## Reforming the current system

5.26 Beyond improved guidance on good practice and increased resources for electoral registration activities, sustained improvements in the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers are likely to require consideration by policy makers of more significant questions about the fundamental basis for electoral registration in Great Britain.

## The context for change

5.27 Over the next couple of years, the introduction of individual registration on a voluntary basis will provide a chance to review in great detail what works in our current system and what changes could deliver an improved registration process. Should individual registration be rolled out on a permanent basis in Great Britain over the next five years, the approach taken to ensuring people are on the register is likely to come under further scrutiny. This may include consideration of whether to move, as Northern Ireland has done, to a system of continuous registration. There are also further changes to the electoral and democratic process as a whole that may improve the registration system. These are examined in the sections below.

5.28 Any changes to the current system of electoral registration must be founded on the interests of voters. This means that those who are eligible to vote should be able to do so during an election. The registration process should also protect the integrity of the process, and should not allow those

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<sup>37</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Electoral Administration in the United Kingdom* (2007) [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/37918/Electoral-Administration-in-UK-FINAL-v2.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/37918/Electoral-Administration-in-UK-FINAL-v2.pdf).

who are not eligible to cast a vote to do so; nor to allow any eligible electors to cast more than one vote at an election. Any proposed changes to the registration process should begin with this as the starting point.

## Timing of the annual canvass

5.29 This report shows that completeness and accuracy declines as the registers age. Indeed, population movement may erode the completeness and accuracy of the registers by just under 1% each month. Consequently, the greater the amount of time that elapses between the canvass and an election, the worse the quality of the registers is likely to be by polling day. The situation could be redressed through improvements in the proportion of people making use of rolling registration, but we have noted that there are relatively low levels of awareness of, and motivation to use, rolling registration. An alternative (or complementary to this) would be minimising the time between the canvass and an election, by holding the canvass later than the autumn.

## Using data from other sources

5.30 There is the potential for much greater use of data-sharing and data-request powers. Such powers could change the nature of an ERO's role and enable the registers to move towards being 95%+ complete and accurate. These powers will also need to be considered under a move to individual registration. The PPE Act also allows for the introduction of data-matching pilots. This will involve a small number of local authorities using a selection of data sources that are held outside of the local authority in order to determine whether they can be used to update the registers. We will be responsible for evaluating and reporting to the UK Government and UK Parliament on the effectiveness of these data-matching pilots in order to inform decisions about the long-term role of data analysis in the electoral registration process in Great Britain.

## Structures for the delivery of electoral registration activities

5.31 Our 2008 review of the structures for electoral administration in Great Britain<sup>38</sup> noted that a compelling case had not, at that time, been made for removing responsibilities for the administration of electoral registration from local authority appointed officers and reconfiguring them directly under a single body or officer. However, we also indicated that future challenges, including the introduction of individual registration and the development of the Government's proposed Coordinated Online Record of Electors (CORE) project<sup>39</sup>, could mean that it would be necessary to consider a more centralised electoral registration system, although not necessarily taken out of local administrative control and being run with whatever degree of

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<sup>38</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Electoral Administration in the United Kingdom* (2007) [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/37918/Electoral-Administration-in-UK-FINAL-v2.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/37918/Electoral-Administration-in-UK-FINAL-v2.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> CORE is an ongoing project run by the Ministry of Justice to develop a central record of electoral registration data for Great Britain.

decentralised delivery best guarantees the required balance of efficiency and access.

5.32 The challenges identified in this research support this conclusion. Significant changes to the process for electoral registration in Great Britain will inevitably challenge the capacity of current delivery structures. Policy makers and EROs will need to consider whether changes to the way electoral registration services are delivered will be required.

## Conclusion

5.33 We expect that EROs will already be taking steps to improve the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers in Great Britain, building on their own local knowledge of the communities they serve and taking advantage of resources we provide. Success in improving the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers will inevitably, however, require more resources to be provided for effective planning and management as well as delivery of the canvass and other activities, and it is not clear whether local authorities will always be willing or able to meet increasing costs for electoral registration activities. These are issues to which a new UK Government, formed after the 2010 general election, will need to give some priority.

5.34 In the longer term, improving or even maintaining the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers is likely to require more significant structural changes to the electoral registration system for Great Britain, including the way the system is delivered. The purpose of this report has not been to propose solutions to these future challenges – that is for the UK Government to consider, and for Parliament to approve. Rather, we have attempted to identify the key areas where new policy thinking is likely to be needed.

## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

### Introduction

6.1 Electoral registration must be understood in relation to wider democratic objectives. If the highest possible levels of participation in elections are to be realised, levels of electoral registration must also be maximised. Conversely, if electoral malpractice is to be prevented, all forms of inaccuracies on the registers must be minimised.

6.2 In order to improve the state of the registers, a greater understanding of the completeness and accuracy of the registers is required. Associated with this is the need to re-examine the practices and policies that can deliver better quality registers in light of the research evidence. This is particularly important as we prepare for a move from household registration in Great Britain to individual registration.

6.3 This report has therefore reviewed what is known about electoral registration. Set out below is a summary of the key findings of this report; our plans for future research; and an overview of how we plan to use research findings across our work.

### What the research has shown us

6.4 The completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers remains broadly similar to the levels achieved internationally; but there is no room for complacency. Although the registers now appear to have stabilised, the report does show that there was a dip in registration levels between the late 1990s and 2006. It is also likely that local and regional variations in registration levels have grown.

6.5 Incompleteness and inaccuracies on the registers are strongly associated with population movement. For this reason, there is a clear decline in the registers between the annual canvass periods. In the most densely populated urban areas, the completeness and accuracy of the registers may decline by as much as 10–15 percentage points over the lifetime of the registers. It is not surprising, therefore, that under-registration is closely associated with those social groups who are most likely to move home; this includes young people and those living in private rental housing.

6.6 Recent social, economic and political changes also appear to have resulted in a declining motivation to register to vote among specific social groups. Electors have more options than ever open to them to register: in addition to the canvass, electors can take advantage of rolling registration; many can confirm their details through text or internet; and public awareness materials highlight the importance of registering to vote. However, as this report shows, a combination of factors may have reduced registration rates. They appear to be associated with both registration practices (changes in the approach to the annual canvass after 1998) as well as matters of individual choice and circumstances (such as a decline in interest in politics). However,

more detailed research on non-registered electors is required to understand the relative importance of these, and other, potential factors influencing registration.

## Case studies

6.7 Examining eight electoral registers has allowed us to report on the completeness and accuracy of registers at the local level. The case study research consisted of data-mining of the registers (automated checks to search for particular types of anomalies, plus follow up interviews to find out whether these represent inaccuracies on the register); a random house-to-house survey in each of the areas, to assess the completeness and accuracy of the registers; and interviews with electoral registration administrators to learn more about their approach to updating the registers.

6.8 The eight local authorities, spread across Great Britain, have illustrated how the issues faced when registering electors can be specific to the local area and type of authority. For example, the challenges faced by urban authorities are different to those of rural authorities; those areas of high social deprivation and population movement will have to approach registration differently to those with a relatively stable population.

6.9 It is therefore not surprising that the research has found that completeness and accuracy rates can vary quite significantly between local authority areas. Knowsley (where the house-to-house survey was conducted a few months earlier than the other seven areas) had the highest rate of completeness, at 94%. This is an area where population movement is limited – in contrast to Lambeth, whose register had a completeness rate of 73%. Although it appears that Lambeth has a well maintained register for a London borough, it is a densely populated area with a younger than average population profile and high rates of residential mobility.

6.10 The accuracy of the registers is also determined by population movement, as well as the success of the canvass and how Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) choose to apply the carry forward provisions. The research did not uncover electoral fraud in the case study areas and – although it may be difficult to determine intentional over-registration using a survey approach – it is likely that where instances of registration fraud or malpractice do occur, they are relatively rare local instances. The data-mining activity did demonstrate, however, that there is more that local authorities could do to maintain the accuracy of the electoral registers.

## Implications

6.11 The case study findings have allowed us to examine in more detail the particular challenges faced by local authorities when updating their registers and reviewing how the current framework for electoral registration impacts on the quality of the registers. Although this is only the start of our case study approach, already the findings have identified areas of concern with regard to registration practices.

6.12 The annual canvass, and personal canvassing in particular, has been shown to be broadly effective. In contrast, rolling registration, which was introduced to allow for the registers to be updated between canvass periods, is not proving sufficient for keeping track of population movement. The changes to carry forward provisions introduced by the Representation of the People Act 2000 have also had varying consequences for the state of the registers. While the use of carry forward may have prevented eligible electors from falling off the register, it has also meant that many people who moved before the annual canvass remain registered at their old address.

6.13 Improving the registers is likely to require additional resources, a further review of the effectiveness of registration practices, and more consideration of changes to the current legislative infrastructure. The introduction of voluntary individual registration provides an appropriate setting for the review of those factors that form the foundations of our registration process: who data is obtained from, how and when. This means considering: increased targeting within and across local areas; how data matching provisions may work; and whether more fundamental changes need to be made to the canvass (such as when it takes place in the electoral cycle).

## Next steps for research

6.14 The techniques adopted for the case studies have proved to be effective at measuring the completeness and accuracy of local authority registers.<sup>40</sup> We intend to continue to review the state of local registers through random house-to-house surveys.

6.15 This research study has also shown the potential for data-mining techniques. It is worth examining whether such techniques can be used by electoral registration administrators as a tool for identifying whether false entries are an attempt to perpetrate electoral fraud.

6.16 We also plan to develop our understanding of the completeness and accuracy of registers at the national level. This may involve further analysis of national data sets, including:

- using the 2011 Census to report on the completeness and accuracy, of the electoral registers<sup>41</sup>
- using surveys undertaken at the time of the general election to support the reporting of the completeness of the registers at a national level<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> To undertake an equivalent survey at the national level would be very expensive.

<sup>41</sup> A repeat of the research undertaken for the Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration: the extent and nature of non-registration in Britain* (2005) [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/47252/Undreg-FINAL\\_18366-13545\\_E\\_N\\_S\\_W\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/47252/Undreg-FINAL_18366-13545_E_N_S_W_.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> The British Election Study (BES) (referred to in Box 9) and the Ethnic Minority British Election Study (EMBES). Both studies have been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The Electoral Commission is project partner for the EMBES survey and sits on the advisory board for the BES survey [www.essex.ac.uk/bes/2005/index2005.html](http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/2005/index2005.html).

- assessing data collected from EROs through our performance standards framework
- using population estimates and numbers on the registers to support our review of the proportion of the eligible population who are registered to vote

6.17 This research study has also identified a number of areas that would be useful to investigate further, including:

- Further analysis of the extent of local and regional variations in completeness and accuracy, using existing data sources and through additional case studies.
- Additional research into the reasons for the apparent decline in registration levels and the growth of local and regional variations, based on testing the significance of the likely factors pointed to in this report (approaches to the annual canvass, declining interest in politics, the use of the registers by credit reference and debt collection agencies).
- More detailed examination of the relationship between expenditure on electoral registration and registration outcomes in different types of local authority, with the aim of identifying specific forms of expenditure which appear to improve both canvass response and use of rolling registration.
- Additional analysis of the relationship between a range of socio-demographic variables and registration levels at a local and regional level, including consideration of the significance of variations in employment change (manufacturing job loss) and in levels of long-term dependency on social benefits.
- The continued refinement and development of national and local indicators of electoral registration, derived from electoral statistics, population estimates and performance standards data for EROs (including the scope to assess the differential impact of population movement on local registers).

6.18 Our longer term programme of research will be used to:

- Inform our guidance for EROs. This includes reviewing our advice about the usage of personal canvassers and actions that electoral administrators can take to review the accuracy of the information on their registers.
- Examine how local authorities can assess the quality of their registers. This may include developing tools that they can use to report on the levels of completeness and accuracy.
- Monitor how electoral registers change in response to legislative developments, the introduction of legislative and administrative change or population change. This will include assessing the potential impact on the registers of a permanent move to individual registration.
- Review our approach to assessing the performance of local authorities. (e.g. using quantitative data to inform our assessment of performance).
- Provide updated information on those groups who are more likely to be missing from the register and the reasons for this. This will support our approach to registration campaigns and materials. Alongside this, we plan

to examine different approaches to getting such groups onto the register and models of good practice.

6.19 The evidence presented in this report suggests that the majority of local registers in Great Britain are being maintained at high levels of completeness and accuracy. However, our findings also highlight some significant challenges facing electoral administrators, including growing local and regional variations in registration levels and the limited take-up of rolling registration provisions among home-movers. As a result of this report, we will be taking immediate action to ensure that eligible, but currently unregistered, electors are aware of the actions which they can take to ensure they are able to vote at the coming UK general election. The findings presented in this report will also inform our review of future options for electoral registration, with the introduction of voluntary individual registration providing a unique opportunity to ensure that our system of electoral registration is able to continue to adapt to changing social, economic and political circumstances.

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## Appendix A – Our approach to the research

1. The case study research was conducted in two phases between March and October 2009. Tables A1 and A2 (below) provide an overview of these two phases, showing the sequencing and objectives of the individual research tasks.

**Table A1: Phase one of the case studies**

Fieldwork dates	Lead agency	Research task	Research objectives
6 March–1 April 2009	The Electoral Commission	Initial interviews with electoral registration administrators	Introduce the research and discuss any issues or concerns. Obtain qualitative information from electoral administrators to help contextualise the findings. Obtain initial information on how each area maintains the completeness and accuracy of its register.
23 Mar–27 May 2009	Ipsos MORI	Data-mining of the registers (automated checks and follow-up interviews)	Assess the scope to use data-mining techniques to identify specific types of inaccuracies on local registers. Identify the proportion of register entries that are inaccurate due to specific errors such as duplicate entries, or ineligible overseas electors.
23 Mar–27 May 2009	Ipsos MORI	Knowsley house-to-house survey	Produce estimates of completeness and accuracy for the electoral register in Knowsley. Identify key socio-demographic variables influencing completeness and accuracy. Pilot the house-to-house survey in a single case study area to identify learning points for phase two of the research.

**Table A2: Phase two of the case studies**

Fieldwork dates	Lead agency	Research task	Research objectives
6 July–17 Sept 2009	Ipsos MORI	House-to-house surveys in remaining seven case study areas	Produce estimates of completeness and accuracy for the electoral registers for seven local authorities. Identify key socio-demographic variables influencing completeness and accuracy. Identify further learning points for future research into the electoral registers.
21 Sep–7 Oct 2009	The Electoral Commission	Follow-up interviews with electoral administrators	Present findings from phase one and allow electoral administrators to comment on the data-mining exercise. Obtain more detailed information about the local approach to the annual canvass and maintenance of the registers. Identify challenges and examples of good practice associated with electoral registration at the local level.

## House-to-house surveys

2. The decision to undertake house-to-house interviews for the case study research was informed by our pilot research on the completeness and accuracy of the London registers,<sup>43</sup> which had used telephone interviews. While significantly more costly, the benefits of household surveys based on face-to-face interviews are substantial when compared to telephone interviews. In particular, since a house-to-house survey means that the interviewer visits the address, it is possible to clarify issues relating to how addresses are recorded on the electoral register and vacant and derelict properties can be identified. In addition, a house-to-house survey reduces the risk of some parts of the adult population being excluded from the survey – a telephone survey is likely to miss properties which do not have landlines, which is increasingly common in households occupied by young people.

<sup>43</sup> GfK NOP Social Research, *Completeness and Accuracy of the Electoral Registers in Greater London – A Pilot Study: Findings* (2007)  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/electoral\\_commission\\_pdf\\_file/0015/16206/Methodological-report-NOP-2007-10-17-V07-final\\_27634-20340\\_\\_E\\_\\_N\\_\\_S\\_\\_W\\_\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0015/16206/Methodological-report-NOP-2007-10-17-V07-final_27634-20340__E__N__S__W__.pdf).

## Knowsley pilot

3. For the Knowsley pilot the aim was to conduct 350 interviews, while the remaining surveys aimed to carry out 500 interviews in each case study area. Each interview was conducted with a single member of the household, but covered every adult living at the address where the interview took place. A higher than expected response rate in Knowsley meant that the target number of interviews was significantly exceeded. As a result, data were collected for approximately 1,000 individuals in each of the eight case study areas. The piloting of the house-to-house survey in Knowsley during phase one of the research demonstrated the viability of the approach while also identifying a number of learning points for phase two of the research. The design of the survey, the initial piloting of the survey in Knowsley during phase one and the high response rate helped to minimise the risk of the findings being compromised by a possibly widespread refusal to take part among non-registered voters. First, minor amendments were made to the questionnaire, principally the removal of a question on community cohesion and the addition of questions to ensure that demographic information was collected about all members of the household aged 16 or over. Second, some changes were made in the instructions given to interviewers. Third, the phase one reporting process enabled a number of technical issues involved in the analysis of the data to be resolved, including the most appropriate ways of applying definitions of completeness and accuracy to the data.

## Sampling and weighting

4. The sample of addresses for the surveys was drawn in equal proportions from two sources – the postcode address file (PAF) and the electoral registers. The rationale for deriving the sample in this way was to mitigate any risk of PAF being an incomplete record of eligible residential addresses. Subsequent matching of the PAF sample against entries on the electoral registers, and of the sample from the electoral registers against PAF, underlined the validity of this approach. While PAF is recognised to be the most complete record of residential addresses available, it was estimated that between 1–4% of the addresses taken from the local registers did not appear on PAF.
5. The sample was a complex, multi-stage probability sample rather than a simple random sample, based on a 'stratified sample' of wards within each local authority and of addresses within each selected ward. Addresses were sampled from one in four wards: by 'clustering' the selected addresses in this way, rather than drawing addresses entirely randomly across each case study area, it was possible to significantly reduce the amount of time each interviewer spent travelling between addresses. Given the budget available for the research, this meant that a greater number of addresses could be included in the sample and that a higher number of return visits to non-responding households was possible.

6. The sample design meant that different people had a different probability of being selected to take part, for two reasons. First, large households were significantly more likely to be chosen from the electoral register than they were from PAF. Second, since the sample was drawn from two separate lists (the register and the PAF), addresses which appear on one of the two lists, but not on the other, also had a lower likelihood of being selected. The findings were therefore weighted to take account of and correct for the unequal probabilities of individual households being selected to take part. (This process is called 'design weighting', and is a standard feature of all complex probability sample surveys.)
7. The findings from a complex probability sample are subject to a wider 'confidence interval' than those from a simple random sample of the same size: in layman's terms, they have a wider 'margin of error'. This difference, which is called a 'design effect', arises from two sources. The first is the clustering of the sample: if, for example, the register is more complete in some wards than in others there is a chance that the wards chosen might be unrepresentative. To minimise this risk, the sample was drawn from a stratified selection of wards in each case study area. Wards were ranked by measures of the proportion of the population in the highest social classes (A and B), by population density and by turnover on the electoral registers. One in every four wards was then selected to ensure a broad social mix in the sample approximately in line with the local authority as a whole. Wards were not stratified by other possible socio-demographic variables, such as the proportion of private rented housing or the proportion of the population who are from black and minority ethnic groups or full-time students. The second source of the design effect is the different chances that different people within the selected wards had of being selected, which results in the over-sampling of some types of people and the under-sampling of others: weighting corrects for this, but only at the expense of wider confidence intervals. The ward-level variations in the findings and the degree of weighting required were both taken into account when calculating the likely margin of error in the estimates produced.
8. **Non-response weighting:** As with any survey, it is possible that non-respondents share particular characteristics which could have a significant impact on the reliability of the findings. In particular, it is possible that non-respondents are more likely than respondents to be absent from the electoral registers. The most effective way of guarding against this problem is to maximise response rates, which the surveys were largely successful in doing. At the same time, full consideration was given to the possibility of weighting the data for non-response. However, the analysis of data gathered from addresses where no response was achieved found that there was no significant variation in response rates based on the type or condition of housing. As such, and in the absence of further information about non-respondents, there was no justification, and no obvious evidence, for seeking to weight the data for non-response.

9. **Weighting for population-size:** In a number of instances, aggregate figures have been produced for the seven case study surveys completed in phase two of the research. Where such aggregate figures are cited, the data has been weighted to take account of the significant variations in population size between these areas. Knowsley has not been included in these aggregate calculations, principally because the survey in Knowsley was undertaken at a different point in the lifecycle of the 2009 registers.

## Fieldwork

10. Each household in the sample was informed via a letter that an Ipsos MORI interviewer would be calling and to ask for their assistance by taking part in the survey. In order to maximise response rates, up to six visits were made to each household in the sample. Where possible/appropriate the 'head of household'<sup>44</sup> or their partner was approached to participate in the research. The interviewee was asked about all adults (and 16–17 year olds) in the household, using a questionnaire designed to ascertain the completeness and accuracy of all entries on the electoral register at that address. The questionnaire also included questions intended to gather key socio-demographic data about the household and all residents aged 16 and above. For the seven case studies in phase two, a postal self-completion survey was left at each address where the interviewer had received no response by the end of the fieldwork period.
11. Average response rates were higher than had originally been anticipated at the start of the research. Having taken account of ineligible properties in the sample, the average response rate was 73%, with response rates of 75% or above achieved in five of the eight case study areas. However, response rates were significantly lower in Glasgow and Lambeth, most notably Lambeth where responses were obtained from a little over half of the sample. High response rates ensured that the target number of interviews was achieved or exceeded in all cases other than Lambeth, where there was a very modest shortfall of seven from a target of 500 interviews.

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<sup>44</sup> We defined head of household as the person whose name is on the mortgage or rent agreement (or their partner).

**Table A3: Overview of sample size, interviews completed and response rates**

	<b>Target no. of Interviews</b>	<b>Original sample issued</b>	<b>Additional sample issued</b>	<b>Interviews completed</b>	<b>Response rate (adjusted) *</b>
Derby	500	600	130	516	75%
Glasgow city	500	680	199	503	62%
Hambleton	500	720	0	542	77%
Knowsley	350	699	0	449	67%
Lambeth	500	899	0	493	56%
South Ayrshire	500	600	50	510	82%
Swansea	500	680	50	530	80%
West Somerset	500	599	50	505	81%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,850</b>	<b>5,477</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>4,048</b>	<b>73%</b>

Note: \* Excluding vacant and derelict properties included in the sample.

## Confidence intervals and weighting of the data

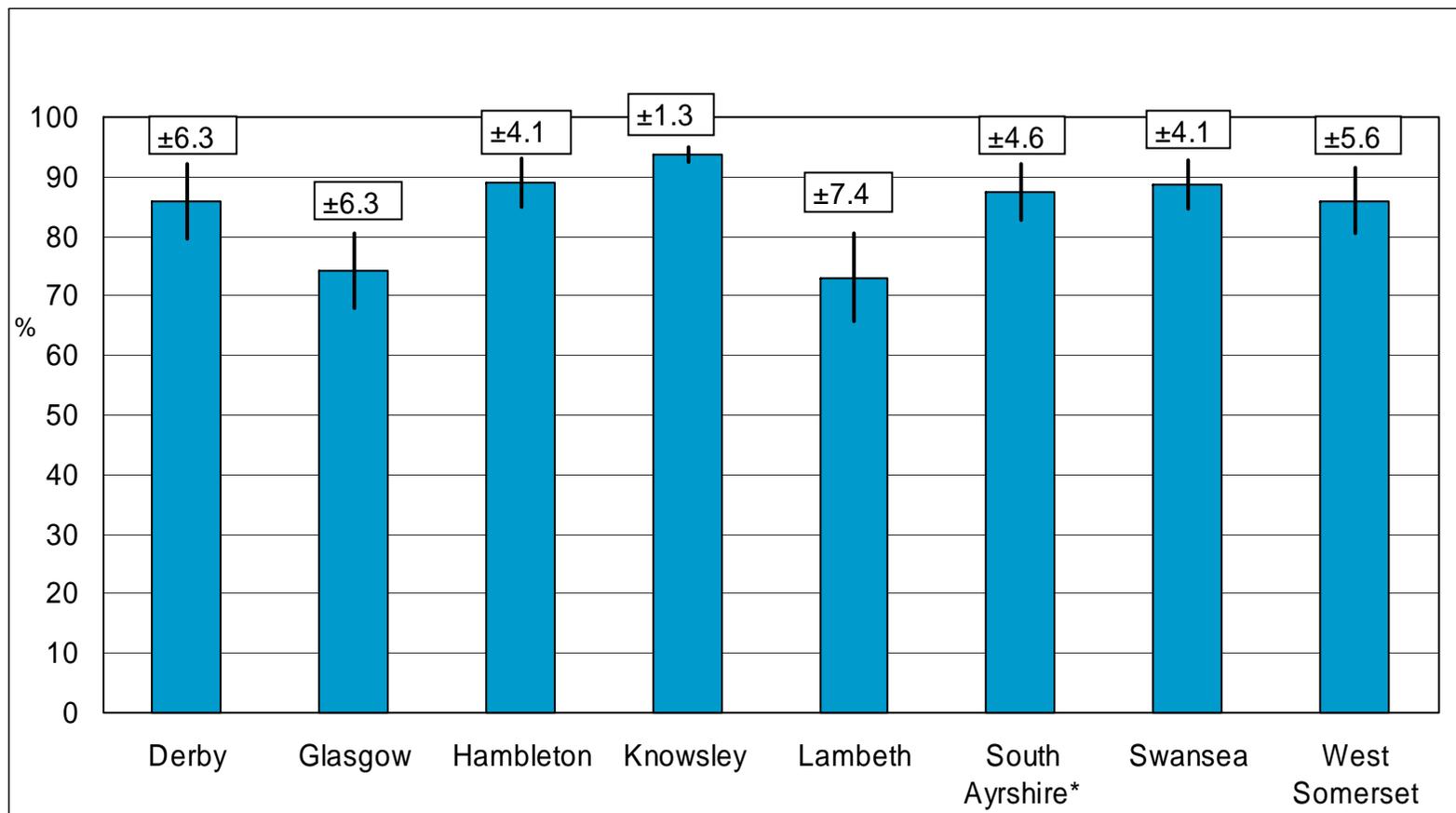
12. Surveys based on a suitably constructed random sample are widely recognised as being capable of producing statistically reliable estimates. However, since a survey is not the same thing as a census, in which data would be gathered from the entire target population, the findings are subject to what are known as 'sampling errors'. These are conventionally expressed as 'confidence intervals' showing what the likely margin of error would be in 95 out of 100 surveys carried out in this way. The smaller the sample size, the wider the confidence intervals. Also, wider confidence intervals apply to findings near 50% than to findings near 0% or 100%. With a simple random sample of 500 and a finding of 90%, the confidence interval would be plus or minus 2.6 percentage points.

13. As noted above, because the survey is not based on a simple random sample there is a 'design effect' which widens the confidence intervals. The design effect caused by weighting is the same for each measurement in the survey, but the design effect associated with clustering (selecting the sample only from certain wards) is different for each measurement, depending on how much that measurement differs between wards. The majority of figures for completeness and accuracy for individual local authorities cited in this report are subject to confidence intervals of between +/- 3 and +/- 6 percentage points, although in some cases the confidence intervals are higher.

14. A confidence interval of, say, +/- 4 means that, were the survey to be repeated 100 times, the result would be not more than four percentage points greater or lower than the cited figures on around 95 occasions. The 'true' figure is nonetheless most likely to be closer to the one cited than to the highest or lowest ones implied by the confidence intervals. The

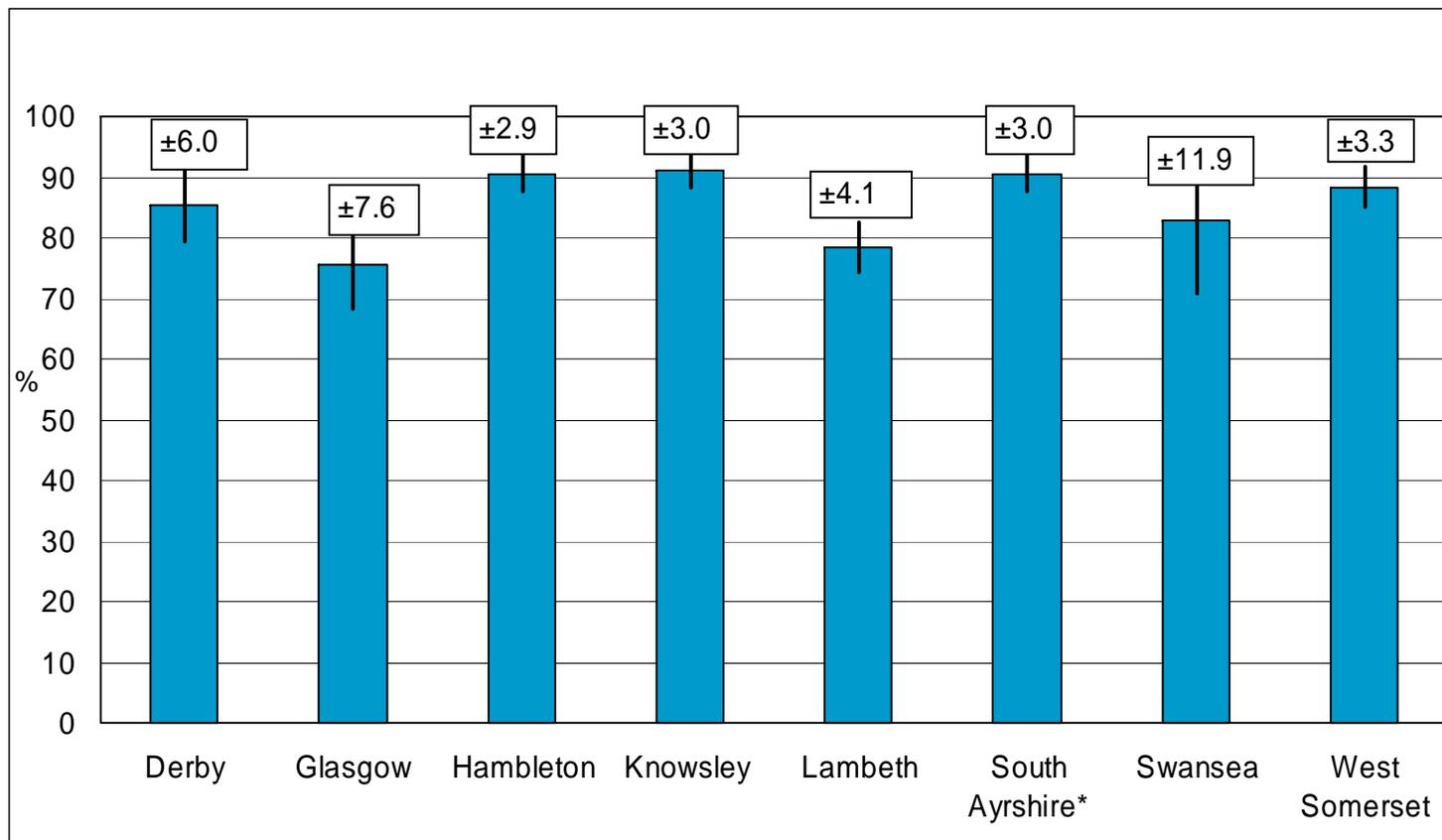
relevant confidence intervals are provided in Figures A1 and A2 below, alongside the headline findings for completeness and accuracy.

Figure A1: Confidence intervals for the estimates of completeness



\*In South Ayrshire, where the survey covered only two wards, we have assumed a design effect equal to the median design effect in the other six council areas, because it proved impossible to make a reliable estimation of between-ward variability in the findings. Strict adherence to the usual formula would give a design effect much less than 1% and would almost certainly exaggerate the precision of the survey estimate.

Figure A2: Confidence intervals for the estimates of accuracy



\*In South Ayrshire, where the survey covered only two wards, we have assumed a design effect equal to the median design effect in the other six council areas, because it proved impossible to make a reliable estimation of between-ward variability in the findings. Strict adherence to the usual formula would give a design effect much less than 1% and would almost certainly exaggerate the precision of the survey estimate.

## Appendix B – Measuring completeness and accuracy

1. This section reviews our definitions of completeness and accuracy of the registers. It sets out how the research has classified various forms of entries on the registers. The section also considers the impact that population movement can have on the completeness and accuracy of the registers.

### Completeness

2. Our definition of completeness is that: ‘every person who is entitled to have an entry in an electoral register is registered’. Under this definition, incompleteness (under-registration) includes voters who either:

- do not appear on any electoral register
- are registered only in a local authority in which they are no longer resident, or
- appear on the register in the local authority in which they live, but not at the address where they are currently resident

### Accuracy

3. Our definition of accuracy is that ‘there are no false entries on the electoral registers’. Under this definition inaccuracies (‘false entries’) may include:

- register entries which become redundant because an elector has moved or died since the canvass was conducted
- the inclusion on the register of people ineligible to vote, or information which incorrectly renders a voter eligible or ineligible to vote – these include incorrect dates of birth for attainders and incorrect information relating to nationality
- duplicate registrations, where the same person is registered more than once on the same local register – either at the same address or different addresses
- fraudulent entries resulting from deliberate attempts to register multiple times, to register ineligible or ‘ghost’ voters, or to register voters at addresses at which they are not resident – for the purpose of committing electoral, financial or other forms of fraud

4. Since Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) update the registers each month using updates of recorded deaths from the local registrar, redundant entries relating to deceased voters are minimal. As a result, the cause of the great majority of redundant entries will be a combination of:

- those electors who have moved out of or within the local authority after the annual canvass but have not notified the relevant ERO that they have done so

- those electors who have moved since the last annual canvass, and whom an ERO opts to 'carry forward' from the previous register in the absence of a response to the annual canvass

5. Unintentional inaccuracies relating to eligibility or duplication may arise from misunderstanding or errors on the part of the person completing the form or errors made by the electoral registration administrator processing the form. By contrast, fraudulent entries would involve either the submission of intentionally false information by a householder or other individual, or the intentional inclusion of false information by an electoral registration administrator. While court cases have found evidence of the former in isolated cases, in modern times there has never been a proven case of fraud perpetrated by a UK electoral administrator.

6. The following would not be classified as inaccuracies:

- register entries where the spelling on an elector's name or address is incorrect or there is a slight error in the recording of the address – neither of these would affect an elector's eligibility to vote and they are therefore defined as 'minor errors'
- register entries relating to electors, such as full-time students and second-home owners, who are entitled to be registered at two different addresses and are not currently at the address listed on the register – although such cases may prove to be difficult to verify in practice and therefore counted as inaccuracies

## Population movement and the state of the registers

7. Population movement has a significant impact on the completeness and accuracy of the registers. However, population movement influences the estimation of completeness and accuracy in different ways, depending on whether the individual in question has moved from a different local authority or within the area, and whether the house has been found to be vacant.

8. In the context of local case studies, where the completeness and accuracy of individual registers are considered in isolation, it follows that:

- data for an elector collected by the survey who is on the register in the same local authority, but at a previous address, will be counted towards both under-registration and inaccuracy
- data for an elector collected by the survey who is on the register in a different local authority, will be counted towards under-registration only
- data for an elector collected by the survey who is not on the register at all will be counted towards under-registration only
- data for an elector registered at a property noted to be uninhabited and where no survey has been achieved will count towards inaccuracy only

9. The various scenarios relating to the impact of migration on the completeness and accuracy of the registers are summarised in the table below.

**Table B1: The implications of changes of address for completeness and accuracy of a local register**

<b>Is the individual resident at address surveyed?</b>	<b>Is the individual on the local electoral register?</b>	<b>Is the individual on the register at address surveyed?</b>	<b>Does the individual claim to be on a different local register?</b>	<b>Impact on completeness</b>	<b>Impact on accuracy</b>
Yes	Yes	No	No	-1	-1
Yes	No	No	Yes	-1	0
Yes	No	No	No	-1	0
No	Yes	Yes	Unknown	0	-1

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To contact our offices in Scotland, Wales,  
Northern Ireland and across the UK,  
see inside back cover for details.

We are an independent body set up by  
the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and  
public confidence in the democratic process.  
We regulate party and election finance and  
set standards for well-run elections.

Democracy matters