

A democracy that works for everyone?

Dave Jones asks if enough is being done to facilitate the registration of homeless people

The Minister for the Constitution Chris Skidmore in a speech "A democracy that works for everyone" (24th October 2016) declared "I want to ensure that we have a democracy that works for everyone. A democracy that treats every part of the United Kingdom as an equal and every British citizen as an equal partner. A democracy that works for those under registered groups, for vulnerable groups whose voice struggles to be heard.....". He also said "we seek to remove the barriers that prevent any under registered group from participating in elections; that we create a democracy that works for everyone."

He goes on to outline some of the changes being planned to this end, including "votes for life".

I would like to use the example of the time, thought and money that has been put into overseas electors and now the "votes for life" plans as a pointer to what needs to be done about registering what is perhaps the most marginal and unrepresented group in the UK today – those with "No Fixed Address".

The UK's [300,000](#) sofa surfers, along with tens of thousands of people in temporary accommodation, hostels, street homeless, travellers and boat dwellers are generally not registered to vote.

If my local authority were an average one, we'd expect to find over 1,000 potential electors in this category. (In reality, high-rent, low-wage areas, particularly London, are disproportionately affected). Yet such an average authority will in reality have a handful, a few dozen at most, registered as homeless electors via the "local connection" registration form. Many homeless are in temporary accommodation. These people can be included on our register as their accommodation is on the gov. uk property index. However it is difficult to achieve a high registration rate despite our extra work here. We can only presume that temporary residents feel less inclined to register at a temporary address. There are also many issues over the precise address in many such places with the result that just before an election we can end up with large numbers of applications in our "unknown address queue".



The contrast with the number of overseas voters we have is staggering. With over 130,000 British citizens living overseas registered to vote, that's over 500 on average for each local authority. And enough to swing the vote in some of the more marginal constituencies.

So what is the reason for the difference?

And what can we in electoral services do to ensure that homeless/NFA residents are registered to vote in similar numbers to the registration of overseas voters (a constituency that I will argue is of a similar size)?

The contrast between registering the homeless and registering overseas voters

In the speech referred to above, the Minister says "overseas voters are just one of the many under registered groups". In the sense that "only" 130,000

people are registered as overseas voters.

At first sight this appears to be the case as there are over [5 million](#) British people living abroad. It has been said that the “15-year rule” prevents many from registering. However, millions have moved abroad in the last 15 years and have chosen not to register. The government has put significant money, and electoral registration staff significant time into registering overseas voters since IER, with the result that the numbers registered leapt from around 30,000 to over 130,000. This is of course only a small proportion of the potential overseas electorate, so in that sense they are as the Minister says “under registered”. However, this group has a choice regarding registration, whereas other groups’ registration is a legal obligation.

It is debatable how many overseas citizens are actually interested in voting in a country they no longer live in. I am not aware of any data on this issue, but a quick survey of ten people in and around my office shows that none of us would register to vote if we lived overseas. We can presume that most of the overseas voters who were eligible within the 15-year rule that wanted to did actually register by 23rd June 2016 – overseas voters were more likely to take part in this referendum than any

other election. Perhaps half that number again wanted to register but were unable to. Which could have meant around 200,000 registered overseas electors. If the 15 year rule is scrapped, and the interest in elections from the half of overseas citizens who have been abroad more than 15 years is the same as those currently eligible (unlikely, but I’m being generous here), there may be as many as 400,000 overseas citizens wanting to be on the electoral register.

With as many as 300,000 sofa surfers and 100,000 officially homeless ([74,630 households officially in temporary accommodation](#)), it is clear that the numbers of homeless and overseas is broadly similar. Which begs the question are electoral services officers, under the direction of the government and Cabinet Office, putting in an equal amount of time and effort into registering these “under registered groups”?

Are overseas electors being prioritised?

Questions such as “should overseas electors have the power to swing an election result due to the number of overseas voters in some key marginals”, and “shouldn’t UK resident taxpayers including

the homeless (all pay VAT; of the 400,000, [47% in London](#) pay income tax too) be prioritised over those who choose not to live in and pay tax in the UK)” have been raised at the last two AEA meetings I was at. However, they are questions for politicians and journalists and are not within my remit.

My questions are more specifically related to the registration process, and the advice, money and guidance offered by the Cabinet Office.

1 Homeless people must be permitted to register online like everyone else

Since IER, all our publicity emphasises how easy it is to register. It only takes a few minutes. Whether you’re on a beach in Bali, serving with the armed forces in Afghanistan or homeless in the USA, so long as you fulfill the nationality qualifications and have internet access or a smart phone, you can indeed register online in a few minutes.

But not if you have no fixed address within the UK.

In fact homeless people are the only people expected to have a printer and print their “local connection” form from the [“about my vote”](#) website. The people in our society least

“The people in our society least likely to be able to afford to have a printer, never mind the room to house it, are the only ones expected to print their own form!”

likely to be able to afford to have a printer, never mind the room to house it, are the only ones expected to print their own form! Alternatively, they have to contact their local electoral services office. Patients in a mental hospital and many street homeless already have difficulties with officialdom. But even "average" electors could have trouble with this with many offices only accessible after being passed from call-centre pillar to call centre post. Our registration rates would be catastrophically low if all electors were expected to do this!

I can see only two reasons for not putting the form online.

Firstly – street homeless, mental hospital patients, property guardians (live-in security guards), or travellers, their address will not match the records our software use from the database of residential addresses.

However, the IT software already has (Xpress) the possibility of dealing with non-residential addresses not on our database. The system wouldn't need much tweaking to build that into a system for online registration of citizens without a permanent residential address. An "NFA online form" would need to be specifically designed to comply with the relevant information required, just as it has been done for overseas electors.

Secondly – it could be open to fraud with people registering at multiple non-residential addresses.

This is of course a danger we all strive to avoid. However, the same applies to overseas voters – what is to prevent an overseas elector registering with more than one local authority where they had been on a register? Of course, there is nothing to stop this. With the scrapping of the 15-year rule, and the proposal to loosen the requirement to have at least been on the electoral role somewhere in the UK, the potential for fraud is even greater. (Interestingly, the passport check of citizenship is also open to fraud as the "required field" of passport number that overseas electors must give is actually a placebo and can be got round by entering any 9 digit number!).

Furthermore, since people who own and live in more than one home can register more than once, we have no way of knowing if people are registered multiple times when they shouldn't be. The "CORE" address system was abandoned before the introduction of IER, so the "second home" question of registration forms is also a placebo and serves no purpose except perhaps making potential fraudsters think twice before registering twice. (Many people who own two homes also seem to think they are entitled to register and vote in

LA elections where they have holiday homes simply because they pay council tax there).

So while registering the homeless creates another potential fraud route, these already exist. The philosophy I was taught as a new electoral administrator regarding registration is to err on the side of inclusiveness. I am not aware that registration fraud is a serious problem for the UK in any case.

2 Homeless people must have the same resources made available to help with registration as overseas electors

The 130,000 overseas electors have received an enormous amount of resources from electoral registration officers over the last year. In our office, we had our two most experienced administrators working pretty much full time on overseas electors from April until the referendum. With the help of the guidance available, the online form, and extra money (though the £19,500 we received specifically for overseas electors' registration wasn't until May – too late to recruit or retrain) we were able to register or reregister getting on for 2,500 voters before the referendum. This was of course aided by the perseverance of the electors themselves – as many as 15 emails could be exchanged to resolve all the issues arising.

This is in complete contrast to the resources put into registering the up to 400,000 without a fixed address, even though registration is compulsory for them.

The guidance was minimal – contrast the [737 \(at the last count\) search results](#) on the Electoral Commission website with a mere [70 results](#) for homeless voters. Most of those 70 are duplicates for the 4 regions of the UK, too.

Finally, we have the huge amount of effort by the government to extend the right to vote for British citizens overseas, and the Electoral Commission's necessarily lengthy [response](#). A complete contrast to the time and thought that has gone in to the problems of how to register the up to 400,000 British citizens actually living in the UK.

Electoral administrators work to ensure that every elector is treated equally as our job is about ensuring that everybody is entitled to one equal vote. To find ourselves working within a system that makes it harder to register for the most disadvantaged while resources are thrown at citizens who are not even required to register does not sit easily with our professional conscience.

I don't know a great deal about law making – an explanation recently given to me about the difference between primary and secondary legislation was

news to me! Having briefly researched it, it seems unlikely to me that the changes needed to treat homeless electors equally would need primary legislation. I therefore see no reason why these changes can't be implemented before the 2020 election, thus ensuring that our democracy really does work for everyone.

This article started life as a discussion at an AEA regional meeting, and was originally written as an e-mail. Following further discussions that have arisen from the article, I would like to make the following additional three points.

Firstly, some have said that there aren't enough homeless applicants to warrant a specialised online form. I would say that we don't know what the demand would be until we make it available. Up to 400,000 people could be eligible to register using this route and we have a specific online registration form for Crown Servants and their partners, of which there are only 10-20,000.

Secondly, it has been said that a lot of money had to be put into overseas registration because it was a specific manifesto commitment. My feeling is that the requirement on the ERO to produce a complete and accurate electoral register means that the already existing legal requirement for

everybody to be on the electoral register should mean that equal resources are put in to all difficult-to-register groups. (Incidentally, MPs voted not to make manifesto commitments legally binding).

Thirdly, there has been some discussion about whether moving the paper Local Connection Form to an online version would require primary legislation, or whether a Statutory Instrument would be enough. I, some other AEA members, and some academics in this field, take the view that the latter would be sufficient, allowing such a change to be made in time for the 2020 General Election.

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Dave says: "Any views expressed in this article are my own and not the policy of my employing authority or its Electoral Registration Officer."