

Electoral Registration Process

The proposed Electoral Registration Process is a very interesting, challenging and at first glance it appears to be a massive undertaking (approx.3.3000'000 records). But with good leadership, the correct computer hardware and most important the calibre of the staff employed, it can and will be done – but it could take some time to be completed.

While the proposed project relates to the capture of voter details, I wish to state that the work presently carried out regarding the preparation of voting lists and amending the various lists sent to polling centres is first class. This is especially true when constituency boundaries are changed and some constituencies cover more than one local council.

Back to the project.....

Initially it MUST be taken as a given that

- The data collected is Confidential and Securely held.
- Voters PPS must form part of their registration. It is best to use the PPS rather than to confuse people with a new personal number. By ensuring that a voter's PPS cannot be entered twice, it will prevent voters being registered more than once.
- The central hardware used must be top class and be well capable to process the required work in a timely manner.
- The software engineers who develop the computer programmes must be experienced and top class.
- The clerical staff must be flexible in their duties. Extra staff may be needed near election date to ensure that all "late" applications are processed on time
- There must be strict usage rules for those working on the project. Staff must be diligent and their work error free.
- To ensure that the project is carried out in a professional manner it must be located in one centre. Such a move will then ensure that the highest standards and expertise are in one centre and ownership of the project is NOT fragmented.
- The processing of Postal Votes should be part of the duties of the centre.

And

- The project must not be confused with any mention of Electronic Voting.
- Also, the comment "Data sharing in the future" should be removed from the proposals for the time being. (Unless it is specified with whom the data will be shared).
- There should be no deadline set for the completion of this process as it quite possible to take up to 5 years to reach all voters. (could depend on the number of elections each year).
- Because of its very nature, this project will be highly political, and some voters will be waiting for any excuse to complain.

Software developments required to the "Register of Electors Online Enquiries"

The voters' records on the website "Register of Electors Online Enquiries" will need a major overhaul to accommodate

- Voter's PPS
- A "username"
- A password
- A return eMail address
- Options to amend name (e.g. on marriage) or address.
- At least 2 extra unallocated fields that may be required in the future.

To ensure accuracy, the PPS must be automatically CDVed (check digit verify) with the Social Welfare file before the on-line transaction is completed.

Prior to implementing the project, all systems must be "system tested" by the technical staff and "user tested" by the clerical staff who will deal with relevant queries.

The Project must be planned with the main emphasis on

1. Getting Government approval and Budget for the project
2. The location of the Central site for the project
3. The purchase of the computer hardware.
4. The transfer/recruitment of staff
5. Agree a plan of action on the capture of PPS for all voters.

Agree a plan of action on the capture of PPS for all voters.

While items 1 to 4 may be seen as background to the whole process, item 5 – the capture of the PPS for all voters will be centre stage as it will impact the entire voting public.

So "How to obtain the PPS's for each voter" will be critical to the operation as the software engineers will need to have this process clarified before they commence work. Ideally a small number of the software engineers must be part of the planning team.

So how do we go about getting each voter's PPS?

The records already held for each voter are Name, Address, and "Distinguishing letters" - Codes for the various voter types.

With over 3.3 million on the register, this is a massive and very sensitive project, I suggest that the work starts slowly as it is vital to get it correct.

So, I recommend the following schedule.....

- There should be a gradual take-on of voters. At first it may be restricted to staff of some government departments.
- For the next phase, a small area (approx.3,000) should be selected and correspondence sent to all voters in that area.
- The correspondence to voters must give information on the procedures to access their VOTE RECORD. (Register of Electors Online Enquiries) and give precise details of how to complete the revised form.
- A "Help Desk" must be set-up in the centre and the phone number/email advised when sending correspondence to voters. (Should the Help Desk be only email?)
- A letter should be included to cover various issues such as
Voter no longer living here
Not known
The correspondence should be returned, giving reason for return, in an enclosed pre-paid envelope

Depending on the success of the initial take-on, a schedule for further expansion of the project must be drawn up. It is vital that such schedules do not put too much stress on the staff or the systems.

At this stage, detailed procedures for new voters applying On-Line must be approved. And the On-Line Register of Electors must be amended to reflect the changes both for new voters and any amendments.

If the new system is made available to all voters

Will the system get overloaded and it will lead to large numbers of queries that could be outside the capability of the Help Desk staff to manage.

And if it is made available

- All new applicants must use the new system.
- Voters who wish to make alterations to their Registration record will only be able to do so by first converting to the new system and then amending their record.
- Voters applying for a postal vote, must first convert to the new system.

How will voters react?

I consider that up to 60% of voters will respond in an accurate and timely manner. The remainder may be slow and the last 10% - well it may never happen in their lifetime.

Onwards

I am quite interested in elections, I was Presiding Officer at all 14 elections held since May 2010. In that time, I am not aware that the % votes cast was ever over 75%. So that leaves a lot of issues for a large number on the electoral lists

If a voter has not acted on the request to enter their PPS or a reply is not received within a month (??), staff must be employed to visit these homes. This work should be carried out in a similar manner to the Census-using part-time staff. The people with a good local knowledge would be best suited to complete this work. And ideally carried out on bright evenings up to 20.00.

Forms returned to the Central Point

To avoid any negative feed-back or if an error was made in returning a form, would it be possible, at the centre, to check back over the previous 2 or 3 elections to see if the vote was cast.

Some issues to be considered (when 70 to 80% are on the system)

There will be issues with voters who are, elderly, blind, have no computer, no email address or unable to use a computer, voters in the same dwelling having the same email address for more than one voter, non-Irish who have no Irish PPS. As with the census, access to apartment blocks will be a problem. And of course, some voters will not, for whatever reason, comply with the request to include their PPS.

Voters who have not completed the on-line entry of their PPS

Any voters, who have not entered their PPS on the Electronic system after a period of approx 2 years, should be allocated higher polling numbers so that they are to attend specific booths on Polling day – same as those presently on Supplementary lists. The Polling staff, (specific training required) will give and explain the relevant literature to these voters, so that they will know how to include their PPS on the Register of Electors.

The Future – voting cards.

For those voters who are on the on-line system, it should be an option that these voters can print off their polling cards or present their "voting" card electronically when voting.

Electorate who have not joined the on-line system will continue to get polling cards.

OR

With 3.3 million voters and if say 5,000 a day signed up to the new system, it would take a minimum of 3 years to complete.

So, once the system has been robustly tested, why not consider opening up the facility to all voters.

But would there be a limit on the number of records that could be processed each day?

How many "Help Desk" staff are needed?

Sorry, but more Questions than Answers.

Do you think that the overall project or some of the individual proposals will be positive?

The sheer size of the project may influence some people to be negative. And of course there will be a large number who will complain that they will not give their PPS. Chances are that a lot of these either do not vote or have no vote.

Do you see risks in some or all of the proposals and how can we reduce or manage these risks? –

The biggest risk I see in this proposal is its sheer size. Will the system be capable of taking on large numbers of entries or will the central system be capable of processing the files received. When the voter updates their record with their PPS it should be immediately CDVed with the Social Welfare file.

Risks can be reduced by a gradual take on and employing the correct calibre of staff both technical and clerical.

The present Postal Vote system appears to be open to abuse. Students can get a Postal Vote for their rural home address and also register in their "college" residence.

How would these proposals impact on you?

I will gladly partake in this process.