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# **Electoral Register Quality**

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An Information Quality Management  
Perspective

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<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A Review of Proposals to Remedy the Electoral Register.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Conduct a Household by Household audit of the Register.....</b>	<b>2</b>
The Proposal.....	2
Merits.....	2
Negatives.....	2
<b>Establish a Commissioner for Electoral Registration (change Governance) and use data from 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisations to validate the Register.....</b>	<b>3</b>
The Proposal.....	3
Merits.....	4
Negatives.....	4
<b>Use data from General Register Office to remove deceased persons from the Electoral Register.....</b>	<b>6</b>
The Proposal.....	6
Merits.....	6
Negatives.....	6
<b>Use of Personal Public Service Numbers and the ‘Public Service Identity’.....</b>	<b>6</b>
The Proposal.....	6
Merits.....	7
Negatives.....	7
<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Process Improvement – the key to sustained quality.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Building Business Case – costs and risks of non-quality information.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Next steps.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Transcript of Speech by Eamon Gilmore to Dail Eireann.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Draft Article on Scrap and Rework (submitted to National media).....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Recommended reading references.....</b>	<b>22</b>
Articles/Papers.....	22
Books/Other publications.....	22
<b>About the Author.....</b>	<b>23</b>

## Introduction

In recent months various studies have identified and verified what has been anecdotally known for many years; our electoral register is substantially inaccurate and open to abuse.

Various proposed solutions have been put forward by political parties of all hues. All of these suggestions attempt to address the immediate problem of a defective register. Some of these suggestions also look to address issues of governance and control. The common element between them all is that none of them will, in the long run, succeed in improving the quality of the electoral register.

This paper sets out an Information Quality Management based assessment of the various suggested solutions and identifies the core merits and deficiencies of each proposal. This paper goes on to define a 'road-map' to sustained improvement in the quality of Electoral Register information based on proven Quality Management practices.

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## **A Review of Proposals to Remedy the Electoral Register**

A number of proposals have been put forward as to how to address the deficiencies in the Electoral Register by various parties. This section examines briefly the various proposals that have been put forward and assesses their merits and negatives in the context of an assumed objective of fixing the Electoral Register at this time and preventing future discrepancies of this nature.

### **Conduct a Household by Household audit of the Register**

#### **The Proposal**

This proposal has been put forward in many guises by both the Labour Party and Government parties, and currently it forms the apparent foundation of the Government's plan to address the deficiencies in the register.

The general gist of these proposals is to assemble a temporary task force to visit every household in Ireland to conduct an audit of the Register to validate its accuracy against reality and thereby have a cleansed electoral register in place by November 2006, the target date for the publication of the Draft Register of Electors.

It found initial form in the proposal by the Labour Party to combine an audit of the Register of Electors with the Census of Population to maximise the value of the Census process. This was initially rejected by Government but has been resurrected in recent weeks as part of the Government plan to cleanse the electoral register through the use of Census Enumerators and other personnel to do a full audit of the Electoral Register.

#### **Merits**

- An audit against reality is the only sure way to guarantee accuracy of information
- Something is seen to be being done by the electorate.

#### **Negatives**

- Unless the Census model is adopted whereby the forms are filled out and attested on a specific date, the Register cannot be certified as 'accurate' at a point in time. If the process of auditing is drawn out (Census takes 8 weeks approximately end to end) then the Audit may not take account of deaths, birthdays, or population movements in that time.
- The proposal does not address root causes for the current level of inaccuracy. Once cleaned, the Electoral Register will rapidly decay in quality and become inaccurate again before the next election unless the root causes of the inaccuracy are addressed and broken processes are fixed.
- This proposal amounts to simple scrap and rework – a non-value adding task that simply increases the cost of operation of a process without actually increasing the inherent quality produced.

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- 100% sampling of the population would be quite costly to undertake.
- The use of Census Enumerators or other 'external' staff may fall foul of Trade Unions representing the existing Local Authority staff who perform Electoral Register duties.

### **Establish a Commissioner for Electoral Registration (change Governance) and use data from 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisations to validate the Register**

#### **The Proposal**

This proposal was contained in a Private Member's bill put forward by the Labour Party which was voted down by the Government. This Bill also contained a proposal to adopt the Personal Public Service Number (PPS Number) as a unique identifier for a citizen in the Electoral Register which will be dealt with separately.

The proposal was to establish a Commissioner for Electoral Registrations that would oversee the activities of Local Authorities with regards to the creation and maintenance of the Electoral Register. This Commissioner was to be funded from Local Authority funds or, failing that, from a deduction from the monies payable to Local Authorities from Central Government funds.

The Commissioner was to be empowered to

- *“supervise generally, co-ordinate, monitor and report on the performance by local authorities of their duties relating to the registration of electors;*
- *carry out registration duties on behalf of local authorities, with their agreement or where they are in default of their statutory obligations;*
- *make recommendations to the Minister on amendments to the law on electoral registration, in order to secure a more comprehensive and timely registration of electors, whilst safeguarding the integrity of the poll;*
- *promote public awareness and information campaigns in relation to electoral registration requirements<sup>1</sup>;*

Furthermore, the Commissioner would be empowered to advise and recommend remedial actions by Local Authorities where he/she felt that an Authority wasn't meeting its obligations. If an Authority fails to comply with directions, the Commissioner would be authorised to do the action themselves with the local authority picking up the costs.

The proposed solution also would introduce changes to Electoral Act (1992) to entitle a local authority to *“require certain listed bodies to give the authority information relating to the names, addresses, ages, nationalities and personal public service numbers of persons resident within its area<sup>2</sup>”*. The list of listed bodies outlined thus far includes various statutory agencies and state bodies as well as Local Authority departments, landlords and utility companies.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Copy of speech to Dáil Eireann provided to me by Eamon Gilmore TD, copy included in Appendix 1 of this document.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

These proposals have quite far reaching implications and would, at first glance, appear to provide a sound solution to the problem of a defective electoral register. The Private Members Bill was voted down by the Government in April 2006. My opinion is that this defeat is an example of the Government doing the right thing but most likely for the wrong reasons.

### **Merits**

- The proposal identifies that a failure of Governance is a contributory factor to the current state of the Electoral Register. Hence the call for a Commissioner.
- The duties of the Commissioner would seem to imply some level of thought leadership in a co-ordinated manner. This would be a very positive step.
- Where the proposal calls for the Commissioner to be empowered to “*make recommendations for legislative changes to secure a more comprehensive and timely registration of electors*” one almost hears the phrase ‘Process Improvement’. This is also a positive step and shows a degree of mature thinking about the longer term solution.
- The proposal also identifies that verification of the Register against suitable surrogate sources of information may be a valid contribution to a more accurate register
- The proposal would appear to recognise the need for some form of measurement of the quality of the Electoral Register on an on-going basis, albeit without identifying how this would be achieved.

### **Negatives**

- The Governance model that is proposed is confusing and inherently self-defeating. Either Local Authorities have a role in relation to the collation and maintenance of an Electoral Register or they don't. As set out, the governance model gives mixed signals as to who has the Stewardship responsibility for the Register.

In Quality Management practice, W. Edwards Deming's<sup>3</sup> Point 1 is that Management should create a “constancy of purpose for the improvement of Product and Service”. The governance model here does not create a constancy of purpose as it allows for a change of tack on an Authority by Authority basis.

- The Governance model as set out lacks any connection to or engagement with either the Executive management (i.e. the Single consolidating voice that sets the ‘tone at the top’) or the Information Producers (the knowledge workers in the Local Authorities who manage the Electoral Register processes). This creates another organisational ‘silo’ or stovepipe and serves to reinforce and strengthen the existing barriers that exist between Government organisations (both Central and Local Government) that should have Stewardship for the Electoral Register information.

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<sup>3</sup> Deming, W. Edwards, *Out of the Crisis*, MIT Press, Boston MA, 1986

In essence, the model as conceived establishes a new organisation responsible for Quality (the 'Quality Department') who will be held accountable if the required improvements in quality are not met; and due to the structure of the Governance model these improvements will never materialise on a sustained basis. Furthermore, I would suspect it would be difficult to recruit and retain any senior staff or skilled in such an environment where one is set up to fail.

This lack of connection or accountability to Government was one of the points seized upon by the Government to vote this Private Members bill down. I suspect however that the motives were not necessarily grounded in a Quality Management view of governance.

- With regard to the acquisition of information from 3<sup>rd</sup> parties, this raises issues in the context of the 'Information Architecture'. Banks, Utilities etc. do not hold their information aligned with a given Local Authority boundary. As such they would most likely only be able to provide information on an 'all-or-nothing' basis. As we lack a central Register of Electors there would be no master data set to clash this data against. Furthermore, matching of data on the basis of name and address only in Ireland is complex and raises risks of false positive and false negatives in matching.
- Furthermore, it is not certain if all 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisations will have all the necessary information. For example, a utility bill contains the name of the person who is the registered account holder. It will not have a record of any of the other persons registered at that address.

In addition, the proposal is obviously based on an assumption that such 3<sup>rd</sup> party data sources are free of inaccuracies and correctly reflect the makeup of a particular household. Therefore, if they are fit for the purposes of billing and revenue collection for the Phone Company, then they should be fit for the purposes of the electoral register.

This is a dangerous assumption as the Phone Company does not, in the normal course of business, care who the people in the property are as long as the bill is being paid. The purpose of their database is not necessarily to have an accurate record of who is living where. I am aware of cases where the phone was left in the name of a deceased husband as the widow felt more secure with a male name appearing in the telephone directory. The legal stance of a Phone Company re debt collection in these cases is that once the service is used by someone at that address, the remaining householder, even if not named on the billing systems, can be held liable on the basis of acceptance of contract terms by performance (using the service).

- While the proposal hints at empowerment to recommend changes in process and procedure, and while the overall proposal looks like a radical change, it lacks any real focus or attention to root causes and seeks to address the issue through a flawed governance model and a plan to scrap and rework using other organisations' data as a 'template' for what should be right. Scrap and rework combined with an ineffective governance model does not deliver a sustained and optimised solution.

## **Use data from General Register Office to remove deceased persons from the Electoral Register.**

### **The Proposal**

This has been flagged by the Government as a 'work in progress' remedy to the Electoral Register issue. The Minister assures us that "electronic files" are available to the Local Authorities. However, it is unclear if Local Authorities are in a position to make use of them.

### **Merits**

- Remove the dead from the Register. This is important. This process should have been in place already.
- The provenance of the source data is without question, rather than relying on the knowledge of individuals.

### **Negatives**

- In the absence of a global identifier for persons across both the Electoral Register and the Register of Deaths, it is likely that these records will have to be matched by name and address. This process will be prone to error.
- If matching is not supported by appropriate toolsets for Information Quality management, then the matching processes will need to be developed from scratch using bespoke code. This introduces the likelihood of variance between local authority areas in their approach (differing match criteria) and their success rates.

## **Use of Personal Public Service Numbers and the 'Public Service Identity'**

### **The Proposal**

*" 'Public service identity' is defined by reference to the Social Welfare Acts and, essentially, consists of a person's PPS number, together with his or her name (including previous names), date and place of birth, sex, address and nationality"*<sup>4</sup>

This proposal was included in the Private Member's Bill on the Electoral Register Commissioner. Elements of it, specifically the use of the PPS number, have been latched onto by politicians on both sides of the Dáil as a panacea to the ills of the electoral register.

From the private analysis I have conducted of root causes of defects in the Electoral Register, the use of some or all of this type of information at various points in the Electoral Register process would address a number of material deficiencies in how this information is currently managed.

Unfortunately, there is limited detail on how any of the political parties would propose to use this information to address the electoral register information issues. Simply pointing to a potential panacea does not bring a solution into being. I will address my thoughts on

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<sup>4</sup> From Eamon Gilmore's speech to the Dail.



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potential uses later in this document when I look at some examples of potential root causes in the processes.

One further component of the proposal was to allow documents which feature a PPS number to be certified as valid identifying documents for the purposes of voting at a ballot.

### **Merits**

- Simplifies process of Identity validation against other Public Service databases such as Dept of Social Welfare or Revenue Commissioners.
- Provides a number of additional data elements for matching across data sets that do not use the PPS number and also includes some useful data for personal identify validation in any future processes to support on-line management of Electoral Registrations.
- May help address some root causes of error in the current electoral database.

### **Negatives**

- Appears to be a panacea and has distracted debate and discussion away from the urgent need to review and reform broken processes that have lead to our defective register.
- May give rise to Data Protection or Civil Liberties issues regarding the creation of a 'Single View of Citizen' – already there are concerns that the extent to which the PPS number is being extended in use may impact the privacy of persons.
- The use of documentation featuring a PPS number as valid proof of identity will give rise to greater scope for vote fraud give the number of items that a PPS number may be printed on, up to and including pay-slips. Without some form of photographic evidence of identity or additional checks of identity (perhaps against the 'Public Sector Identity') this will actually create a breach in the final control on our Electoral Register accuracy.
- There does not appear to be any clear definition of what would be done with a PPS number or Public Sector Identity outside of looking to capture it. Data captured without a process to make use of it cannot become information of value.

## **Summary**

We are faced with a serious problem in need of a solution that can be sustained and that will deliver the required levels of quality and restored confidence in the system. To date we have been presented with a number of proposals, most of which will not achieve the objective and are piecemeal in nature and others smack of a solution in search of a specific problem.

None of them look for or seek to address the Root Causes of this problem – the broken processes, the need for clear governance, or the abject failure of stewardship at all levels, from Local Authority to central Government.

There is no one panacea to this situation. The solution that will solve the problem of today and meet the challenges of tomorrow will have many components. It may consist of some degree of scrap and rework, of manual or automated audit of the Electoral Register to remove deceased or duplicated persons. It may consist of changes in governance. It may require changes in processes, roles and responsibilities and approach. One thing is certain. It will require a change in the way the parties involved think about the management of the Quality of Information in the Electoral Register.

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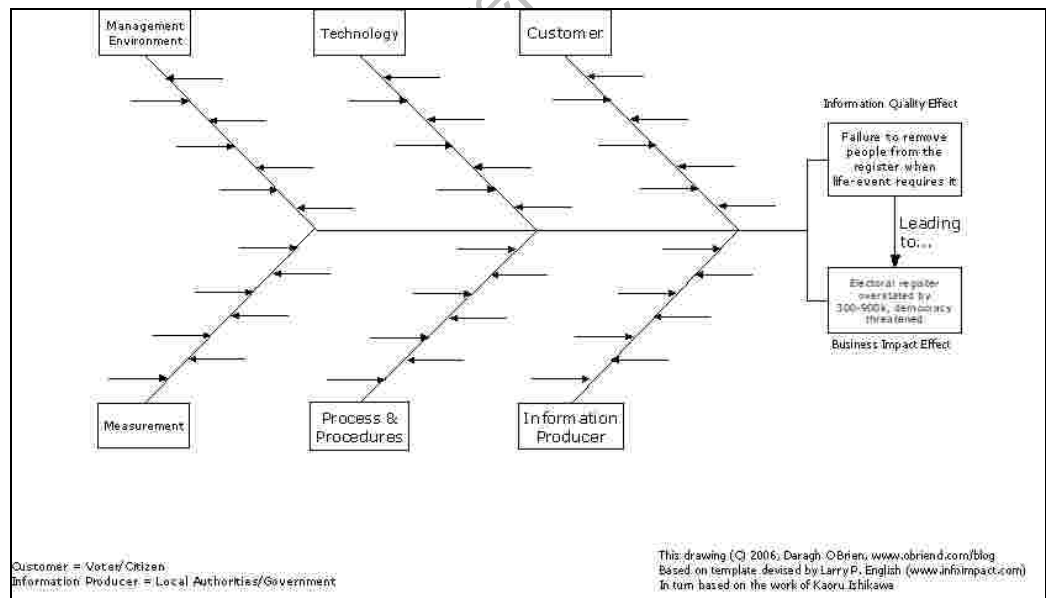
## Process Improvement – the key to sustained quality

It is recognised in Manufacturing Quality Management and Information Quality Management fields that the key to achieving sustained improvements in quality is not to engage in repetitions of scrap and rework: these just add cost and not value. The key is to look to the processes which create the product (be it a widget or a piece of information) and improve these to bring about an improvement in the quality of output.

This is explicitly identified in Deming's Point 5 "*Improve Constantly and forever the system of production and service*". Improvement is not a one time effort – that is scrap and rework. Quality should be built in to the process at the design stage. If there are defects in the item produced, then the cause of those defects are either in the process that created the item or the raw materials that fed the process.

The process of improvement of processes should be conducted on an effective model such as the Deming Cycle of Plan→Do→Study→Act or the Six Sigma model of Define, Measure, Implement, Assess, Control (DMIAC). Such frameworks implicitly and explicitly require a focus on improving the process continually to remove causes of error and reduce the cost of operation of the process while increasing quality.

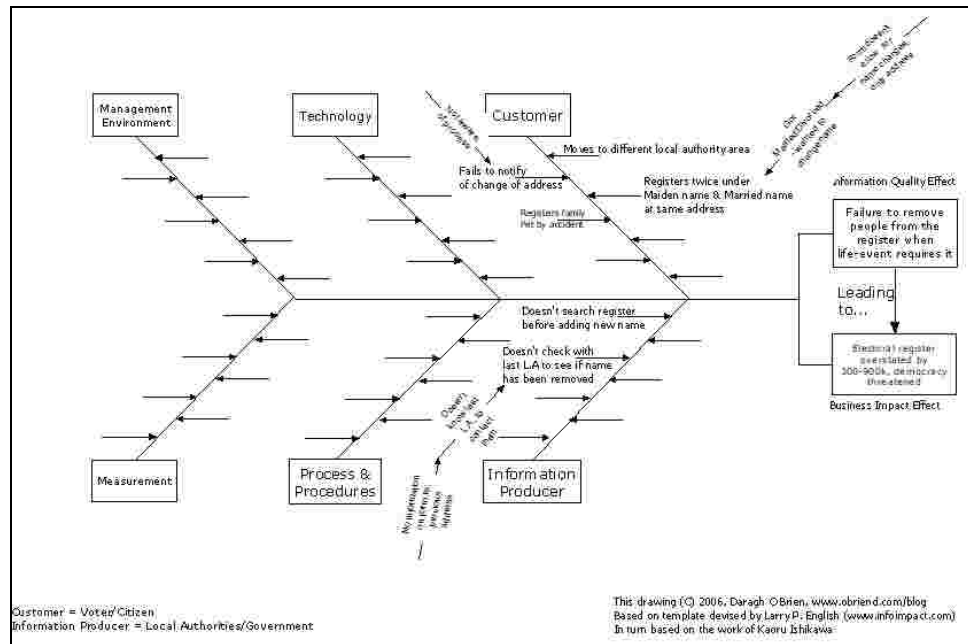
The key to improving processes it to look for the root causes of failure and eliminate them. To this end a number of tools and techniques have been developed over the years that have been proven to work. Among them is the Fishbone Diagram as shown in Figure 1 below.



• Figure 1 – An example of a Fishbone Diagram modified for Total Information Quality Management

By asking what factors, across the six headings, might be contributing to the identified problem, the key root causes can be quickly identified and prioritised for action. I have conducted a high-level fishbone analysis of some of the issues that have come to light in

the media and in discussion with co-workers, friends and family. I present this now as an example and the basis of further discussion.



• Figure 2- Worked example of Root Cause Analysis with Fishbone

Based on a very cursory analysis of the experiences of family, friends and co-workers I have put together a draft root cause analysis diagram (which requires completion).

From this root cause analysis I can identify that:

1. The electoral register form needs to be overhauled
  - a. It does not capture information on changes of name (e.g. as a result of marriage or divorce) and therefore it is possible that people are being registered twice at the one address due to the inability of the process to handle a standard 'life event'. This was not an issue until we awarded Universal Suffrage, so the choices are amend the form and related processes or roll back gender equality reforms dating back over a century.
  - b. It does not capture any information on previous address in Ireland if not resident at present address for a year or more. As a result, there is no mechanism to identify the relevant Local Authority to contact should a person have recently moved into an area.
2. An education campaign is required to
  - a. Inform electors what the process is for getting registered and verifying their entry on the Electoral register.
  - b. Inform electors what the criteria are for being entered on the Register of Electors and what the penalties are for submitting false or inaccurate

information. Prosecution of pet owners who get voting cards should be the norm.

Additional root causes that might be entered here could include:

- Lack of a Central Register of Electors against which all Local Authorities could search by name/PPS number etc. to verify that a voter was registered only once (Technology)
- A Management Culture that operates on a 'silo' basis and supports artificial boundaries between Local Authorities (Management Culture)
- An absence of reliable metrics for the level of potential duplication of entries on the Electoral Register (Measurement/Management Culture)
- A lack of a clear culture of Stewardship and a lack of effective senior leadership (Management Culture).

This analysis should ideally be conducted with representatives of the Information Producers (the knowledge workers - the local authority employees who input this information and the party officials who make use of the electoral register). It should be conducted on 'no-blame' basis. One approach might be to enrol the assistance of the relevant trade union to facilitate the study should 'official' sanction not be forthcoming from Government in the short term.

No where in the analysis I have conducted to date is there a manifest business case to make use of the PPS number as the sole primary identifier for person on the Electoral Register. On the basis of the 'straw man' root-cause analysis I have conducted, there is nothing to stop someone being registered in 2 or more Local Authority areas under the *same* PPS number. As such the PPS number is not a panacea to the issue, although it may form part of an overall solution.

The fact that less evidence of identity and evidence of address is required by persons filling out Electoral Registration forms than is required of people seeking to join their local library or open a bank account is an additional source of potential root cause and potential solution.

## **Building Business Case – costs and risks of non-quality information**

The key to getting buy-in for any change in process or practices is to have a clear business case. The two elements to consider are the costs and risks of non-quality Information.

A study of the 2000 and 2004 US Presidential Elections by Information Impact International on behalf of the Carter Centre for Electoral Reform in the US has shown that, had the Information Quality problems that befell the State of Florida in 2000 (the infamous butterfly ballot) or the State of Ohio in 2004 then there would have been a significant difference in US policies and actions in the past decade.

The immediate risk in relation to the Electoral Register is its abuse by interested parties to subvert the democratic will of the people. This is the risk that has been identified in the media and it is the big headline grabber.

However, there is a cost element to this also. How much does an inaccurate Electoral Register cost the State each year? What processes that rely on the Electoral Register are running sub-optimally and at greater costs than they should due to the level of error in the Electoral Register?

One of the functions of the Electoral Register is to provide the base data for Jury Duty selections. The question that needs to be posed is: "What is the cost to the Dept of Justice of mail-shots to deceased persons, or persons who have moved address due to the inaccuracy of the Electoral Register? What is the cost in terms of delayed trials?"

To date I have not been able to ascertain these cost items but I would suspect them to be substantial, unless the Dept of Justice has a process to cleanse the Electoral Register data that the rest of Government is unaware of.

## Next steps

The next steps that I would recommend would be:

1. Seek out training and a grounding in the basic principles of Information Quality Management to better inform discussion and debate
2. Define the key information elements clearly: What is a voter?
3. Implement a piece of work to flesh out the Root Cause Analysis of the Electoral Register issues to identify what actually needs to be fixed
4. Calculate the total cost of the problem to the State, not just in terms of Election issues but in terms of other functions of the State that are impacted
5. Once the Root Causes are identified, determine how they can be addressed and formulate revised proposals based on a proper study of what is actually broken. "Speak with data" is the mantra of the Quality Management world – once you have clear measurements of what is broken and how much it contributes to the errors then it is harder for a sustained argument against your proposal to be made.
6. Revise the proposal for a Governance model in line with the best practices of Information Quality Management. This may not require a totally new organisation but may require traditionally disparate organs of the State to be co-ordinated towards a shared goal.

## Conclusion

The Electoral Register is in a shambles. However the state of the Register reflects the culture it has been managed in and the state of the processes that control it. Simply fixing the Register through Scrap and Rework will not improve the quality of the Register. It will fix today's problem for a short period of time.

Sustained improvement in the quality of the Electoral Register requires a review root and branch of the processes to identify the real root causes of the problems. Sustained improvement in quality requires constancy of purpose, leadership and effective Governance.

These problems can be fixed. But we must first identify what exactly is broken and fix it as close to the source of the problem as possible. Any other approach will inevitably prove expensive and futile.

A key challenge in the resolution of this issue, as the Irish Times Editorial of May 10<sup>th</sup> identified, will be to prompt Government and Civil Service stakeholders to think outside of 'traditional' solutions. As Einstein said, "*The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them*".

Examining the problem from an Information Quality Management perspective provides the opportunity to break out of traditional solution mindsets and tackle the real root causes so that the problems of today are addressed and the problems of tomorrow are prevented.



## Appendix 1: Transcript of Speech by Eamon Gilmore to Dail Eireann

I welcome the opportunity to move the Second Stage of this Labour Party Private Members Bill, which aims to totally revamp the manner in which the electoral register is compiled and maintained and to take measures to stamp out electoral fraud.

The purpose of the Bill, the Electoral Registration Commissioner Bill, 2005, is to establish the office of the Electoral Registration Commissioner and to set out the duties of that office in relation to the supervision of the performance by registration authorities of their obligations in the preparation and publication of electoral registers.

In addition, the Bill provides for access by registration authorities to information held by third parties relating to persons resident within their registration areas and it makes provision for the use of personal public service (PPS) numbers in connection with the registration of electors and with establishing the identity of persons applying for ballot papers at elections. I will come back to the detailed provisions of the Bill, later in my contribution.

Ceann Comhairle, I make no apologies for saying that this is probably one of the most important issues to be considered by the House this side of the next general election. It is a vitally important issue involving nothing less than the integrity of our electoral system.

The electoral register is in a shambles. Politicians of all parties make regular use of it and they know, by direct experience, that it is incomplete and out of date. Virtually everyone involved in politics can recount experiences of canvassing in housing estates or blocks of flats where the names of the register bear little relationship to those actually living in these houses or apartments.

I could give many examples from my own constituency or from those of many of my colleagues. I will give just one example drawn to my attention by my colleague, Cllr. Dominic Hannigan, who has reported entire estates of new homes with house after house having no registered voters. Rath Lodge in Ashbourne, reports Cllr. Hannigan, has almost 200 homes but only a handful of registered voters. On a recent canvass in the area, he distributed scores or registration forms to residents who had never been offered them before.

Problems with the electoral register are not new. For as long I have been involved in politics the electoral register has been a problem, with errors and inaccuracies common. However, what is new and unprecedented is the scale of the errors and inaccuracies. Again this is something that is acknowledged across all parties.

Nobody knows just how inaccurate the register there is. Research carried out by political analyst, Odran Flynn, and published in the Sunday Tribune newspaper suggested that the current register may be wrong by up to as many as 800,000 names. This would include people who have moved into an area, but have never been included on the register; those who are dead; people who are entitled to vote but are not on the register; people who are double registered; and those who are registered in constituencies in which they have no entitlement to a vote.

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Mr. Flynn considered a number of factors when coming to this figure. He points out that the most recently published electoral register has 3.129 million people on it. This is estimated to some 300,000 more than the number of adult Irish and British adult citizens in the state who would be entitled to be on the register.

However, the 300,000 figure would assume that every citizen in the state is on the register. This is rarely the case and the international norm would be to expect 80% to 85% of the electorate to be on the register. On this basis he estimates that the new register may be wrong by anything between 719,000 and 860,000.

Mr. Flynn may well have over-estimated the scale of the problem. But even if Mr. Flynn is only half right, or even a quarter right, then we still have a huge problem. If the estimate is only half right, then the electoral register is out by 400,000. If the estimate is only a quarter right, then it still means that the register is out by 200,000 – well more than the population of Cork city.

Such a level of inaccuracy, gives rise to two principal areas of concern. Firstly the inaccuracies are clearly depriving a significant number of people of the democratic right to vote. Secondly the level of inaccuracy in the electoral register is such that it provides huge potential for electoral fraud. The outcome of the next general election may be determined by the outcome in a handful of constituencies. It is simply not acceptable that the will of the people could be frustrated by those who are prepared to take advantage of the shambolic state of the register to perpetrate electoral fraud.

Those involved in politics also know that no real and sustained effort is being made by local authorities – who are charged with maintaining the register – to keep the register accurate and current. It is not a core activity of the local authorities and does not rate very highly on their lists of priorities and they have not been given the finance or resources to adequately do the job.

It would have taken only a fraction of the almost €60m wasted on an insecure, unreliable and unwanted electronic voting system, to provide the local authorities with the resources, the facilities and the modern technology to guarantee a register that is as accurate as it is humanly possible to have.

The process of updating the register has not kept pace with housing developments and with changes in the workforce and in work patterns. Since the last general election there are now 300,000 new houses in the country. People are frequently out at work when local authority officials call to check voter registration. In addition, there has been a major increase in private renting – a sector with a high turnover of tenants. The growth of so-called 'gated communities', flats and housing developments with no access to outsiders has created an entirely new problem.

I am not suggesting that the government has made a deliberate decision to allow the electoral register to fall into such disarray, but I am suggesting that they have failed in the duty to ensure that we have an accurate and reliable register.

But there may be some involved in Irish politics who are unscrupulous enough to take advantage of the electoral register to perpetrate electoral fraud. In every recent general election we have seen the destination of seats in some constituencies determined by a handful of votes. We must not allow a situation where the genuine wish of the electorate can be frustrated by electoral fraud using an inaccurate electoral register.

Virtually from the introduction of partition up to recent years, electoral fraud was a major problem in Northern Ireland, but the authorities there have taken effective steps to curb this immoral, illegal and anti-democratic practice. A key part of this strategy has involved a

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much more robust approach to the compilation of the electoral register. For instance, I understand that following a major review of the system for registering voters, the number of entries on the electoral register fell by almost 20% in some constituencies. In the Falls Ward of Belfast, the electoral register was found to be 25% oversubscribed. Northern Ireland now operates a form of 'rolling electoral register', the integrity of which is constantly checked.

The situation in regard to the register has gradually been getting worse. Despite concern in all political parties the government has taken no action to improve the reliability and accuracy of the register. Indeed the government refused to avail of the unique opportunity offered by this weekend's Census to update the register on a national basis.

The Labour Party had suggested to the Government, prior to the conduct of the Census that Census Enumerators could and should be asked to carry a second form for the purpose of updating the Electoral Register. My colleague Deputy Ruairi Quinn told this House that this could be done in a way which would not infringe the confidentiality of the Census. Enumerators could present a second Voter Registration Form to households, have it completed, and have it returned separately to Local Authorities.

The Government has missed a great opportunity to correct the voter register, using the census process. Every single household in the country is being called to by enumerators, who will repeatedly call back to those households until all the forms are returned. This could have been the means to secure an accurate register, but the Minister and the Government failed to act on this.

There are now reports that the government is considering sending census enumerators back into the field to update the register. That would be a welcome development and would deal with the problem of the register for next year's election. However, it is not a permanent solution. There is a considerable gap between the taking of each census, while the register needs to be updated annually.

I would now like to outline to members the main features of this Bill.

The purpose of this Bill is to establish, at national level, the independent office of electoral registration commissioner. It spells out the duties of the commissioner in supervising the performance by local authorities of their statutory duties in preparing the electoral register.

Specifically, the functions of the Commissioner will be to –

supervise generally, co-ordinate, monitor and report on the performance by local authorities of their duties relating to the registration of electors;

carry out registration duties on behalf of local authorities, with their agreement or where they are in default of their statutory obligations;

make recommendations to the Minister on amendments to the law on electoral registration, in order to secure a more comprehensive and timely registration of electors, whilst safeguarding the integrity of the poll;

promote public awareness and information campaigns in relation to electoral registration requirements;

provide local authorities with advisory, technical support and other ancillary services in connection with registration duties.

The overall objectives of the Commissioner are set out as being to –

secure the comprehensive, accurate and timely registration of persons entitled to be registered as electors, in an efficient and economical manner, and

ensure that all necessary action is taken to prevent or detect the registration of those who are not entitled to be so registered and the registration of persons as electors in more than one registration area.

The expenses of the Commissioner are to be met by way of a financial contribution to be paid each year to the Commissioner by local authorities. The Commissioner is required to ensure that his or her own costs of operations are kept to a minimum and are not excessive.

In default of payment by a registration authority of any amount owed by it, the amount involved will be deducted from any sums payable to that authority by any Government Department and will instead be paid to the Commissioner.

The Commissioner will be entitled to issue to advice and recommendations to local authorities, in order to ensure the smooth and efficient registration of electors and to secure uniformity of procedure throughout the State. He will also be enabled to provide services, assistance and other support.

If the Commissioner believes a local authority has failed to perform its registration duties, or has performed those duties in an unsatisfactory manner, and the response of the authority to any advice or recommendations issued or services, assistance or support offered to it is also inadequate, the Commissioner will be entitled to give a direction to the authority to carry out any necessary ameliorative action, within a specified period.

It is the duty of a registration authority to comply with directions given to it by the Commissioner. If it fails to comply with a direction, the Commissioner can then carry out the necessary action himself or herself. The local authority will be responsible for the costs of any such action.

The Bill updates the provisions of the 1992 Electoral Act relating the cooperation a local authority can expect from citizens in the electoral registration process and the information it can require, both from electors and from third parties.

In order to satisfy itself as to the entitlement of a person to be registered as an elector, a local authority can require information sufficient to establish the public service identity of that person and his or her ordinary residence.

“Public service identity” is defined by reference to the Social Welfare Acts and, essentially, consists of a person’s PPS number, together with his or her name (including previous names), date and place of birth, sex, address and nationality.

A local authority will also be entitled to require certain listed bodies to give the authority information relating to the names, addresses, ages, nationalities and personal public service numbers of persons resident within its area. The bodies listed include –

Government Departments,  
the OPW,  
local authorities,  
the Health Service Executive,  
statutory bodies and agencies,

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State owned companies,  
financial institutions regulated by the Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority;  
the Private Residential Tenancies Board and any landlord who is obliged to register with  
the Board under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004;  
prescribed utility undertakings that supply an energy, communications or broadcasting  
services to the public.

It is stipulated that information given to a registration authority may be used in the  
performance of electoral registration duties and for no other purpose.

A local authority may share the personal PPS number and public service identity of  
registered electors with the Commissioner and with other registration authorities, in order  
to prevent multiple registrations. The information may also be shared with presiding  
officers at polling stations, at election time.

However, local authorities may not publish a person's PPS number or public service  
identity in or in connection with a register of electors or share that information with any  
other public body or any other person.

The Bill provides that documents relating to PPS numbers may be specified by the  
Minister for the Environment as documents that a returning officer or presiding officer may  
request a person applying for a ballot paper to produce.

In the longer term, Labour is committed to setting up an independent electoral  
commission, which will have full responsibility for all aspects of elections and referendums.

However, the immediate priority – one that must be faced before the next general election  
– is restoring regularity and accuracy to the electoral register

## Appendix 2: Draft Article on Scrap and Rework (submitted to National media)

The Minister for Environment, Dick Roche has announced that a major effort will be made to clean up the inaccuracies in the Electoral Register in time for the next election. The Taoiseach has admitted this will involve a significant expense in terms of staff and cash resources, including hiring people to travel door to door.

In Information Quality terms this plan represents a perfect example of what is known as "Scrap and Rework". On its own, it will ensure that despite this cost and effort we will be back in the same unhappy position by the time of the election after that.

This might seem unintuitive- after all, how can fixing something that is broken be the wrong thing to do? Perhaps a simple analogy might help;

Who likes chocolate cake? Isn't it a pain when your face gets covered in chocolate from mashing handfuls of cake into your gob? But you can wipe your face (usually in your sleeve) and carry on. That's scrap and rework. A better solution is to wipe your face and take a smaller division of cake (a forkful). That is a change in the process based on an analysis of why you keep getting a chocolatey face, coupled with a scrap and rework task to set a baseline of cleanliness for your face that you will seek to maintain.

The Minister is right, insofar as scrap and rework looks like a good place to start, and when you say "Data Quality" to most people that's what they think, under the labels "data scrubbing", "data cleansing" or similar. However, it doesn't address the actual source of the poor information quality, much as wiping your face in your sleeve doesn't stop your face getting covered in chocolate.

Therefore, once you clean your database, you will very quickly find it filling up with duff data again. This eventually results in another round of scrap and rework to fix things again. This then leads people to say that Information Quality management doesn't work and costs lots of money. But scrap and rework isn't information quality management. It is a process step to improving the quality of your information but it is just one step in many that range from culture change (from apathy to active interest) to process change to training etc.

Databases are like lakes. No matter how many times you clean the lake, if you don't address the sources of 'pollution' (root causes, cake-eating processes) then you will never achieve good quality.

To put it in terms that legislators might find familiar, scrap and rework is like apologising and offering some compensation every time you punch a complete stranger in the face. A far better solution is to examine why it is you punch strangers in the face and stop doing it. Your apologies and offers of money to the injured fix the historical damage but do not prevent future occurrences.

Scrap and rework is costly. Scrap and rework on a repetitive institutionalised basis is futile, creating a sense of doing something about your Information quality without actually getting anywhere but burning a pile of cash to stand still. It is an important step in any information quality management programme. However, understanding your data capture processes and the root causes of your poor quality data and then acting to improve those processes to address those root causes are the components that contribute to a sustained improvement in quality.

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Scrap and rework solves the problems of today at a short-term economic cost. However, it serves to bury the problems of tomorrow unless it takes place in tandem with process improvement to address root cause and the development of a 'Quality culture'.

To tie this back to the Electoral Register, to rely on scrap and rework would mean that we would get a clean register this time around at a point in time. However, over time the register would degrade in quality again, in the same way as your face gets dirty again if you don't change the way you eat your cake.

Now we have to put that chocolate cake down and get a fork!

Not for republication

## Appendix 3: Recommended reading references

### Articles/Papers

O'Brien, Daragh P, [e-Government and Information Quality](#), B-Eye Network, May 2006

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## About the Author

This paper was prepared by Daragh O Brien.

Daragh is a Senior Project Manager with a leading Irish Communications company. He has over 7 years experience of managing Information Quality in complex Information Management environments.

He is a member of the Irish Computer Society, and a Charter Member of the International Association for Information and Data Quality (IAIDQ).

He sits on the International Board of Directors of the IAIDQ and chairs their Irish Community of Practice, which operates in association with the Irish Computer Society under the 'IQ Network' brand.

Daragh has written many articles on the subject of Information Quality Management for magazines and journals in Ireland and Internationally. He has presented peer-reviewed papers at academic and industry conferences internationally. He has chaired a number of conferences on Information Quality Management in Ireland and Internationally and has sat on the "Experts Panel" at the IQ Network conferences in February and October each year and at the European Information Quality Conference in London and the Enterprise Information Quality Conferences in Sydney, Australia.

He is a regular poster on Irish Blog sites including his own ([www.obriend.com](http://www.obriend.com)) and Tuppenceworth.ie ([www.tuppenceworth.ie/blog](http://www.tuppenceworth.ie/blog)).