

Stop direct marketing companies gaining access to electoral register, councils urge

A new survey published today shows overwhelming support for a change in the law to ban junk mail companies from gaining access to voters' details through the electoral register.

The survey, carried out by the Local Government Association and the Association of Electoral Administrators, shows that well over nine in ten elections officers in councils around the country think that the Government should change the law to stop direct marketing companies gaining access to the electoral register. At the moment, by law councils have to comply with requests when they are made.

The survey also reveals that almost nine in ten believe that the practice of selling the electoral roll discourages people from registering to vote.

The survey of electoral officers shows that:

- 98% would like to see a change in the law to abolish the edited register that councils have to sell to direct marketing companies
- 88% believe that the current system deters people from voting
- On average councils raise around £1,900 from selling the register a year, although this is unlikely to cover the cost of administering registers and dealing with requests

The Government changed the law in 2002 to give direct marketing companies the right to buy an edited version of the electoral register from councils. Residents can remove their name from the list that is sold on by ticking a box on the voter registration form that is posted out every year.

In July, the Information Commissioner recommended that the Government change the law to stop the sale of the electoral roll.

Cllr Richard Kemp, Deputy Chairman of the LGA said: "The new survey clearly shows that town halls hugely resent having to pass the electoral roll to direct marketing companies. Most people hate junk mail and cold calling and councils don't want to be a part of the process that generates money for junk mail companies in this way.

"Selling the electoral roll undermines democracy, dissuades people from voting and gives people the impression that the council is profiting from selling their personal information. Ministers must change the law to ban junk mail firms from getting their information through the electoral roll.

"Keeping two separate electoral rolls is fiddly, costly and frankly a pain in the backside for councils. A change in the law would cut down on the junk mail that can infuriate homeowners and would also be a way of boosting the number of people who register to vote at a time when turnout is at an all-time low."

John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators said "We have constantly argued that the electoral register should be used for one purpose only, namely, the conduct of elections. Other uses compromise the register's democratic legitimacy and clearly act as a significant deterrent to the aim of persuading all eligible electors to register. The results of this survey are therefore not at all surprising.

"What is surprising is that, despite these and similar findings and the clear recommendation from the Data Sharing Review, there is still no real indication that the Government will act to remove the need for an edited register and the use of electoral registration information for such purposes."

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. 204 councils responded to the LGA and AEA survey that was carried out between 7 and 20 August