Pwyllgor Llywodraeth Leol a Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus

LGPS(2)-08-06(p10)

Dyddiad y cyfarfod: Dydd Mercher 17 Mai 2006
Lleoliad: Ystafell Pwyllgor 2, Senedd, Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Teitl: Prosiect craffu'r Pwyllgor ar drefniadau etholiadol yng Nghymru

Diben

1. Casglu sylwadau'r Aelodau ar fersiwn ddrafft yr adroddiad ymgynghorol ar Drefniadau Etholiadol Cymru, sydd yn Atodiad 1.

Cefndir

2. Yn ei gyfarfod ar 9 Mawrth 2005, cymeradwyodd y Pwyllgor y cylch gorchwyl isod:

* Ystyried materion yn ymwneud â threfniadau etholiadau llywodraeth leol ac etholiadau'r Cynulliad Cenedlaethol yng Nghymru, ac yn arbennig, cofrestru pleidleiswyr, canran y bobl sy'n pleidleisio, y bobl ifanc sy'n pleidleisio a phleidleisio dwyieithog
* Ystyried gwahanol fesurau a ddefnyddir o fewn systemau gwleidyddol eraill ar gyfer gwella'r ganran sy'n pleidleisio, cofrestru pobl ifanc a'u hannog i bleidleisio, ac i ba raddau y gallent gael eu cymhwyso i etholiadau llywodraeth leol ac etholiadau'r Cynulliad Cenedlaethol yng Nghymru.
* Ystyried a oes unrhyw fesurau ychwanegol yn ofynnol er mwyn sicrhau bod y trefniadau pleidleisio yng Nghymru yn gwbl gynhwysol.
* Cyflwyno argymhellion.

3. Ers hynny, mae'r Pwyllgor wedi cymryd tystiolaeth lafar gan amrywiaeth o unigolion a sefydliadau, ac mae wedi derbyn tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig. Yn ystod yr ymchwiliad, daeth sawl mater allweddol i'r amlwg ac mae ystyriaeth bellach y Pwyllgor yn seiliedig arnynt.

Gweithredu

4. Gofynnir i'r Aelodau roi sylwadau ar fersiwn ddrafft yr adroddiad ymgynghorol a nodi unrhyw newidiadau yr hoffent eu gweld.

Ann Jones

Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor
Swyddog Cyswllt: Virginia Hawkins, Clerc y Pwyllgor

Electoral Arrangements in Wales

A Discussion Document

National Assembly for Wales

Local Government and Public Services Committee

May 2006

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Local Government and Public Services Committee

1.1 The Local Government and Public Services (LGPS) Committee is one of the National Assembly for Wales' subject Committees.

1.2 The role of subject Committees is to scrutinise and advise the Assembly on legislation, budgets and policy issues.

1.3 The responsibilities of the LGPS Committee cover the Local Government and Public Services part of the portfolio of the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Public Services. The Committee's role is to look at the wider issues that affect local government and public services in Wales (rather than specific areas such as health or education).

1.4 The Chair of the Committee is Ann Jones and the Committee currently has 8 Members representing all the parties in the Assembly.

The Committee's scrutiny project

1.5 There has recently been a great deal of debate in England and Wales about electoral arrangements. The debate has ranged from how to counteract falling turnout and registration to issues surrounding postal voting and the security of the vote in general.

1.6 In December 2004, the Committee agreed look at electoral arrangements in Wales. Although many of the powers to change electoral arrangements in Wales are not devolved, the Committee considered that there were many things that could be done within the powers of the Assembly to deal with the issues that were being debated.

1.7 In March 2005, the Committee agreed the following terms of reference:

- To consider the issues surrounding the arrangements for local government and National Assembly elections in Wales, in particular, voter registration, voter turnout, the participation of young people and bilingual voting.
- To consider a range of measures used within other political systems to improve voter turnout, registration and the participation of young people and the extent to which they could be applied to local government and National Assembly elections in Wales.
- To consider if any additional measures are required to ensure that voting arrangements in Wales are fully inclusive.

To make recommendations.

1.8 Since May 2005, we have taken evidence from people and organisations from both the UK and other European countries. A full list of all those giving evidence is at Annex A.

1.9 This report gives details of the evidence we have received so far and our thoughts on it. We ask various questions in the report and would welcome your answers to any or all of them. These questions do not cover all the issues raised in the report and we would welcome any comments you have on anything in the report (or anything that you think has been missed).

1.10 We have deliberately avoided addressing issues such as proportional representation which are very political. We think that these are best discussed separately from this project.

How to let us know your views

1.11 As everyone in Wales is part of the electoral process, we welcome views from all. You do not have to answer all the questions, we value your views on any of the issues in the report.

1.12 All of the evidence sent to us will be published as part of our final report which will be published on our internet site.

1.13 We would prefer your replies to be sent to us electronically by email. The address to send them to is:

Local-Govn.comm@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Alternatively they can be sent by post to the following address:

Local Government and Public Services Committee (Electoral arrangements)

National Assembly for Wales

Assembly Offices

Cardiff Bay

CF99 1NA

The closing date for submissions is Monday 14 August.

1.14 If you would like more copies of this report, please contact:

Spencer McGarry on 02920 898505.

It can also be downloaded from our website at:

http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubassemlocgovpubsvs/index-e.htm

where you can also find out more about the Committee.

1.15 There is also an online consultation aimed at finding out young people's views on voting on our website.

Chapter 2 – Registering voters

2.1 Registering for the Electoral Role is compulsory for everyone in Britain who is (or will be during the coming 12 months) 18 and over and eligible to vote.

2.2 Figures from the Electoral Commission show that the number of people registering for the Electoral Role in Wales is falling. It is estimated that in 2000, 6% of people who were eligible were not registered to vote in Wales, compared with 4.8% in 1991. Although this figure is lower than in England (where 6.9% of the population are estimated to not be registered), it is still something we are concerned about.

2.3 There are many reasons for not registering to vote, but just over half of the people not registered were either living at home with parents, had moved within the last 6 months or were renting from a private landlord. A lot of young people and those eligible to vote for the first time are included in these three categories.

2.4 In his evidence to the Committee, the Chief Returning Officer for Wales, Bryn Parry Jones, told us that:

- The system of voter registration is the keystone for running a good election. I know that I and my colleagues spend a lot of time seeking to ensure that we have as good an electoral register as possible. The canvass undertaken every year is extensive. The forms of information used by local authorities are available for this purpose, such as when new houses are completed, and we take account of the registers of deaths and so forth. We seek to use other sources of information to keep that register in good order. However, there are limitations in our capacity, due to data protection, to be able to achieve the sort of information sharing that might be useful, in terms of ensuring that the register is as close to complete as possible, and also to avoid the possibilities of fraud.

2.5 In many European countries, registration is automatic, with everyone being added to the role when they become 18. It is usually linked to the civil registry or a national citizens' registry of the country.

2.6 There are proposals in the new Electoral Administration Bill which is going through parliament that the current system of household registration be changed. The proposals include pilot schemes for individual registration where each person who wants to register has to provide individual identification (such as a signature and national insurance number). A similar system is used in Northern Ireland.

- 2.7 In a report for the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association, Dr Jonathan Bradley of the University of Swansea suggested that there may be as much as 10% of the Welsh Black and Ethnic Minority community was not on the Electoral Register. There are several reasons for this including:

- A lack of understanding both through language difficulties and of the political process in Wales;
- A lack of Black and Ethnic Minority representatives standing in elections;
- It is less easy for Black and Ethnic Minority people in Wales to feel Welsh than to feel British.

2.8 There was little evidence of any special arrangements for Black and Ethnic Minority groups to assist them with voting in any of the European countries we took evidence from. There was a presumption that, if a person was a citizen of that country, they should understand the language and political process.

Question 1

Although registration is compulsory in Wales, the penalties for non registration are hardly ever used.

Should penalties be used and would this encourage more people to register?

Question 2

What methods could be used to ensure that more people living with their parents, who have moved recently or are living in rented accommodation register?

Question 3

Will individual registration with personal identification help to increase registration?

Will it help to make voting more secure is the personal identification has to be produced before you can vote?

Question 4

Should there be some form of automatic registration as in other countries?

If yes,

What sources of information could be used to ensure that everyone was automatically registered.

Question 5

What methods could be used to encourage more Black and Ethnic Minority people to register?

Chapter 3 – Ways of voting

3.1 The way in which we vote in Britain has changed little for many decades. We feel that, in the 21st Century, there may be a case for introducing other methods of voting.

3.2 Postal voting has been the most used form of alternative voting in the UK.

There have been some high profile court cases in recent years involving postal voting fraud and pilot all postal votes in England have not been an unqualified success.

3.3 Some of the proposals in the Electoral Administration Bill are aimed at 'securing the vote' such as individual registration and voter identification.

3.4 There have been various suggestions for alternative ways of voting, including over the internet, by telephone and by text. Many of these are seen as appealing to younger voters who are used to voting for reality TV shows by text or email.

3.5 Other countries around the world have tried alternative methods of voting. In Europe, the most

popular methods are electronic and centre around using a computer terminal to vote at a polling station.

3.6 The examples of different computerised polling station systems we saw in The Netherlands and Belgium were though of by both officials and the electors as being fast and reliable. We were told that there had been very little objection to their introduction and that they were seen as being easy to use.

Question 6

Would an all postal vote be workable in Wales?

Please give your reasons for your views.

Question 7

What forms of electronic voting (e.g. internet, text, at polling stations) could be used in Wales?

What could be the benefits/problems of using the methods you have suggested?

Question 8

Could alternative venues be used as polling stations? (e.g. supermarkets, post offices etc)

Chapter 4 – Voter turnout

4.1 The percentage of people voting in Wales is low and has been falling over the past few decades. The table below shows turnout at the last 8 elections in Wales.

Election	Year	% Turnout
National Assembly for Wales	1999	46
Welsh Local Government	1999	49
European Elections Wales	1999	28
UK Parliamentary Elections Wales	2001	59
National Assembly for Wales	2003	38
Welsh Local Government*	2004	42
European Elections Wales*	2004	42

UK Parliamentary Elections Wales	2005	63

*Held on the same day.

This pattern is similar to the rest of the UK and many other European countries.

4.2 If the figures are broken down further, even more worrying trends emerge. The turnout by under 25 year olds in the Assembly Elections in 2003 was 16% - one of the lowest turnouts by young people in Europe.

4.3 There are several reasons given for young people not voting but research carried out by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) indicates that if a person has not voted by the third election after they are eligible, they will be unlikely to vote during the rest of their life.

4.4 We also received evidence from IDEA that resources aimed at encouraging people in the 14 – 25 age group to vote were much more cost effective than those aimed at older age groups.

4.5 In Sweden, there is a high turnout amongst all voters (around 90% at each election) with turnout amongst young voters being around 85%.

4.6 We were told that one of the reasons for this was the way in which children are taught about democracy and politics in schools. The youth wings from the major political parties (which are funded by the state) are often invited into schools to initiate and join in debates about various topics and to teach the students about their parties' politics. Students are also encouraged to debate issues affecting their schooling and school councils are very highly regarded and listened to. Many young people in Sweden are also members of non political groups or clubs outside school which also encourage debate and democratic participation at a local level.

4.7 Several young people we spoke to in Sweden expressed surprise that awareness party politics is not widely taught in schools and that the political parties do not visit schools on a regular basis. They asked how young people in Wales know who to vote for if they are not given the information they need.

4.8 We know that there are some examples of good practice in teaching democratic involvement and politics in both inside and outside the PSE curriculum in Wales. We would like to see the good practice applied throughout Wales.

4.9 We believe that getting young people involved in democracy and voting at all levels are the keys to improving voter turnout and having a more informed electorate.

Question 9

Why do so few young people in Wales vote?

Please give any examples you have come across (leaving out any personal details)

Question 10

Are young people given enough information in schools to make an informed decision abut how they are going to vote?

Question 11

Should party politics be taught in schools?

If so, how?

If not, why not?

Question 12

Should political parties be involved in informing young people about politics in schools and other youth groups?

Question 13

Are there examples of good practice in informing young people about politics in your area?

Please tell us about them (leaving out any personal details).

Chapter 5 – Access to registration and voting

5.1 At the 2003 Assembly elections, 'Polls Apart Cymru' surveyed around 150 polling stations in Wales and found that 77% did not meet its criteria for accessibility.

5.2 In his evidence to the Committee Bryn Parry Jones stated:

- On accessibility for disabled people, there are practical issues, which will remain the case despite the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I suspect that a number of buildings that must be used for polling stations, particularly in rural areas where there is little choice, do not have ideal facilities for welcoming disabled people.

5.3 We heard evidence that, although electoral administrators and returning officers try to accommodate

a range of needs for registration and voting, there is no statutory standard for access to registration and voting documents or polling stations.

5.4 Several groups are currently lobbying the UK Government to include better provisions for access in the Electoral Administration Bill.

5.5 Although the Netherlands and Denmark has similar problems to Wales with access to polling stations, mobile ballot boxes are used in both countries for people who have difficulty in getting to the polling station.

5.6 We were also told about a requirement in the Netherlands for managers at each polling station to produce a report at the end of each poll, outlining any difficulties they have come across during the polling period. This covers not only access issues but also any other problems voters have encountered at the polling station. These are submitted to the returning officer who in turn is required to submit a report on issues raised to the Dutch Electoral Council.

Question 14

Is there enough provision for people with disabilities to help with the registration process?

If not, what practical things could be done?

Question 15

Is there enough provision for people with disabilities to help with voting?

If not, what practical things could be done?

Question 16

Should there be statutory standards for the accessibility of registration and voting material and polling stations?

Question 17

What are your views on the use of mobile ballot boxes for people who have difficulty getting to polling stations?

Question 18

Should polling station managers be required to produce a report similar to that in the Netherlands?

Chapter 6 – Language

6.1 It is important that the documents and advice used for registration and voting are able to be read and understood by those who want to vote.

6.2 In Wales, all the official forms and much of the written advice are available in a bilingual format. There are still questions, however, about the support and advice available through the medium of Welsh, especially at polling stations.

6.3 In Canada, there is a requirement for all polling stations workers to be fully bilingual. Where there was a problem in recruiting bilingual workers, cards were provided in both languages explaining how to get advice and a toll free number was available to give advice in either English or French.

6.4 Guidelines on accessibility to forms and advice in languages other that English and Welsh are given by the Electoral Commission. In their evidence to the Committee, AWEMA indicated that lack of understanding of documents and advice available only in English and Welsh was one of the reasons for BME people not participating in registration and elections.

6.5 We received evidence from Roger Morris that one of the problems with the all postal vote pilot in England had been that the documentation that was included with the postal ballot papers was very long and complicated.

- When you are confronted with a slab of instructions, you think to yourself, 'Oh my goodness, there is a lot to this, I do not have time, and I will do it later'. In fact, all it really needed to say was, 'Put a cross like you always do, put it in the envelope and shove it in the box'.

Question 19

What are your views on the availability of help and advice available bilingually at elections in Wales?

Question 20

What could be done in terms of documents and advice to encourage more BME people to register and vote?

Question 21

Do you consider the forms and information given about registration and voting to be straightforward and easily understandable?

Summary of questions

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