

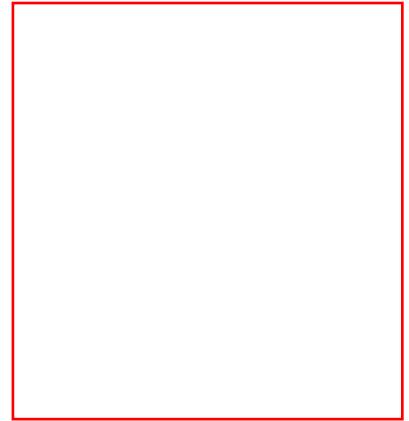
# **Local Government and Public Services Committee**

**LGPS(2)-04-07(p.5)**

**Date: Thursday 22 March 2007**

**Venue: Committee Room 2, Senedd, National Assembly for Wales**

**Title: Local Government and Public Services Committee Electoral  
Arrangements in Wales Scrutiny Project – WLGA resposne**



The WLGA responded to the Committee's original consultation and evidence gathering for the scrutiny project.

The following details responses to recommendations in the Committee's Report which specifically referred to the WLGA and local government.

## **Recommendation 2**

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association explore how joined up delivery of public services, in the light of the Beecham Report and the Local Government Regionalisation agenda, can contribute to tackling cost and capacity issues for Electoral Registration Officers.

The WLGA will explore this recommendation (and complementary recommendation 18) with the Electoral Planning Group as part of its ongoing work.

Electoral administration is a local service, it is a service which requires detailed local knowledge and expertise. Elections by their nature are locally provided services, tailored to individual wards or communities' demographics and the accessibility and logistics of suitable polling stations. A wholesale regionalisation of electoral administration could therefore dilute this administrative expertise and local understanding. However, in future it may be appropriate to adopt voluntary collaborative or regional approaches to deliver some aspects of electoral administration, for example to provide economies of scale to procure equipment or external expertise for any proposed introduction of electronic voting systems.

## **Recommendation 11**

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association encourage Welsh local authorities to apply to the UK Government to pilot methods of electronic voting.

The WLGA supports the introduction of pilot methods of electronic voting as long as it is part of a 'multi-channel' approach to elections. The development of the Coordinated Online Record of Electors (CORE) following the Electoral Administration Act 2006 should support the widespread adoption of alternative voting methods.

Electronic voting may prove an effective method of encouraging some members of the electorate to vote when traditionally they may not choose to participate, in particular younger people or those who are unable to visit a polling station. If electronic voting was introduced, it should be part of a range of other methods of voting (including the traditional ballot box and postal votes). Whilst electronic booths or voting technology at polling stations may improve the voter experience and potentially simplify administration, it will however have little or no impact on increasing turnout at the polling stations, which has been the fundamental concern of recent elections.

Any pilot approach or widespread introduction of electronic voting systems will require a substantial level of investment. Concerns therefore remain about the costs of implementing electronic voting and the reliability and integrity of such systems. We will observe in particular the ongoing developments relating to the recent high-profile problems relating to interactive and telephone voting run by major television broadcasters, affecting some of the most popular television shows, including Blue Peter and X Factor. At the time of writing, the Premium Rate Services Regulator (ICSTIS) was reviewing broadcasters' use of such telephone voting systems to

resolve these issues and "restore consumer trust and confidence" in interactive voting which, according to ICSTIS Chairman Sir Alistair Graham, is at "rock bottom".

A significant feature of electronic voting pilot schemes in particular is the reliance of Returning Officers on other agencies to deliver effective and robust systems and services. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the Returning Officer to be satisfied that risks to the delivery of the election are properly assessed and that there is confidence from both Returning Officers of the capacity of external agencies to deliver and crucially, confidence of the electorate in the security of the system of voting available.

## **Recommendation 15**

We recommend that targets are set for local authorities for the percentage of polling stations that are fully accessible to all abilities.

Any adoption of accessibility targets should be benchmarked on agreed assessments of current and potential polling provision, with targets designed to be incrementally attainable and seeking to encourage improvement.

Returning Officers already endeavour to provide polling stations that are accessible to all members of the community and according to recent national surveys, provision is improving. Significant improvements will require substantial investment, however, in many places there is no alternative to the current polling stations in use. There are often challenges in providing both a fully accessible polling station and one which is conveniently located, particularly in rural areas. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 states that an 'authority must seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to electors who are disabled'. The problem is more complex than locating a more accessible venue as proximity to population is also critical to encourage turnout. In line with the Electoral Administration Act 2006, reviews of polling stations need to be 'reasonable and practicable' to balance both accessibility and remoteness of potential alternative locations.

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 establishes performance standards to promote best practice in the administration of elections. The Electoral Commission has provided guidance to electoral administrators on accessibility and is undertaking targeted campaign work to encourage people with disabilities to register to vote. There is varying levels of accessibility provision across local authorities, including telephone help-lines, or forms in Braille or large font formats.

Local authorities undertake regular reviews of polling stations and identify those that do not fully comply with the Disability Discrimination Act, making appropriate alterations (such as installing temporary ramps) or seeking alternative provision. Polling staff are increasingly trained, with support for disabled voters a central part of this training. As noted in the evidence which has been previously presented to the Committee, pro-active advice or assistance could be given to electors or where it is known that a particular venue has limitations in terms of accessibility (but no suitable alternative is available) or other alternatives voting methods, such as postal ballots, is offered. Obviously such approaches would require additional planning and capacity implications for local authorities' electoral services teams.

## **Recommendation 17**

We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association encourage Welsh local authorities to apply to the UK Government in order to participate in any pilot schemes involving the use of alternative venues for voting.

The WLGA supports moves for alternative venues to be used as polling stations and will work with the Electoral Planning Group to explore options for use of alternative venues for voting.

Mobile polling stations can 'reach' people who have difficulty accessing traditional, static polling stations, however, there are issues of practicability notably the timetabling of routes and time-limited stop-off points and the potential of delays causing people to miss their 'window' to vote. Another more flexible approach is allowing Returning Officers the discretion to use a ballot-box (rather than establish a formal polling station) in such places as Care Homes.

Depending on the choice of alternative venue, additional challenges and pressures may be brought upon electoral staff to ensure that the current high standards of security and robust administration are maintained during the voting process. It is the responsibility of the Returning Officer to be satisfied that any risks are taken into account when organising an election to ensure the robustness of the process and the confidence of the electorate.

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