

**Association of Electoral Administrators  
Wales Branch**

**PRESS RELEASE**

The Chair (Phil Johnson) and Secretary (Bob Screen) on behalf of the Association gave evidence to the National Assembly of Wales Equality of Opportunity Committee on Tuesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> March.

AEA Wales was pleased to report that considerable progress had been made since their last report, twelve months ago and significant improvements had been made since 2007. The vast majority if not all Returning Officers had made disability and access issues a high priority at compulsory training sessions for Polling Station Staff. The display of large print ballot papers and the availability of Voting Devices for the Visually Impaired had featured highly in these sessions, as was the need to ensure that all electors were given the opportunity to vote in secrecy and dignity, regardless of personal circumstances. It was further reported that every Polling Station in Wales should now have a low level voting booth suitable for wheelchair use.

AEA research has shown that Administrators in Wales had not logged significant complaints regarding access to polling stations, before, during or immediately after the European Elections in 2009.

Branch Chair, Phil Johnson reported that a recent survey carried out by the AEA in Wales suggested that as many as 95% of Polling Stations were now accessible to voters with a physical incapacity. It was emphasised that while the search for suitable and accessible premises was an ongoing and important concern for Electoral Administrators, the requirement to provide a voting venue for all electors, within each Polling District, presents problems, as many areas in Wales just did not have suitable buildings available. The Chair quoted an example of the Old Barn Estate in the St. Julian's area of Newport, which had a large number of houses but no school or community buildings, thus requiring the use of a Portable Station. The transfer of all electors to the nearest accessible station would be seen as unreasonable by the vast majority of electors and would place an unnecessary barrier to people wanting to take part in the election process.

Branch Secretary, Bob Screen, in his final appearance before the Committee prior to retirement, reminded members that no one organisation had a monopoly on disability / equality issues. The AEA were ready and willing to work with partners in the local government and voluntary sector to improve and raise awareness of disability and voting issues, which were not just about physical disabilities but should also include sensory impairment. Bob also responded to questions on the very tight timetable to organise and run elections, with a Parliamentary Election having to be held within 17 working days of the Prime Minister seeking dissolution of Parliament and the uncertainty of an actual election date to work to.

AEA Wales remains committed to working with the Electoral Commission and all organisations in ensuring equal access to democracy.  
Ends

For information: -

Phil Johnson is the Electoral Registration Manager / Deputy Returning Officer for the City of Newport.

Bob Screen is the Electoral Services Manager / Deputy Returning Officer for Caerphilly County Borough Council.

The AEA Wales draws its membership from the electoral administration staff of the 22 Principal Councils in Wales.

The Branch meets at least four times per year, usually in Llandrindod Wells.

The Branch is actively involved in working with the Electoral Commission, with regular round table meetings, the National Assembly Wales for Wales, with members on the Wales Election Planning Group and various Task and Finish groups involved with the planning of the National Assembly for Wales elections in 2011. At a national level the branch is represented on various Ministry of Justice working groups.