



THE ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

Formal response to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's invitation for views on Voter Engagement

1. Introduction and Summary

1.1. The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. Details about the AEA can be found in the Appendix to this paper.

1.2. This paper sets out the AEA's comments on the issues raised in the terms of reference and invitation for views on voter engagement in the UK announced by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on 28 January 2014. In accordance with the AEA's non-partisan and neutral position, this paper does not offer any views on the political implications raised in the terms of reference.

1.3. The AEA's primary concern is about the effect of any proposed changes to the law which would impact on electoral registration and the administration of elections which might arise as a result of the issues identified in the Committee's paper. Any such changes would need to be carefully considered in terms of the practical implications and the way in which the changes would be introduced and administered.

2. Specific questions posed

Reasons for and impact of low voter engagement

2.1. What are the main factors that have contributed to low voter turnout in recent UK elections?

Although the AEA would not normally comment on such matters, it is clear from the number of surveys published on this subject coupled with academic papers and media coverage that there is a general disaffection with politics and the political system. If this is the case, then the declining and/or low turnouts for some elections raise the issue of the democratic mandate. This has to be a concern for all those interested in the relative strength of the democratic system within the country and the continuing effect on the mandate for those elected by the system. For these reasons alone, it is essential that any changes to our democratic and electoral systems enjoy the confidence of the electorate and restores public trust in the overall political system.

2.2. What are the main factors that affect voter registration?

These factors have been well documented in the past and particularly in terms of the introduction of individual electoral registration. In our response to the Government's White Paper on this matter in October 2011, we made several points about this issue. These are reproduced below for the sake of completeness.

- "There is a need to better understand and address the potential impact of the new system in respect of individuals within certain groups in society that are currently considered to be less likely to register under the present system. These are generally considered to be BME communities, home movers and young people. There needs to be a more nuanced understanding of these groups as not all BME communities are less likely to register. Similarly, young people from specific BME communities may be less likely to register than other young people. The status of women within various communities also differs. Young people in Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) may be particularly vulnerable under the new system.
- It may be that certain groups of people who register under the present system may become 'at risk' under the new system. For example, some elderly people may be confused by the system, reluctant to participate, or not able to provide the identifying information. All these variables will need to be understood as fully as possible to inform public awareness campaigns, understanding of the changing composition of the electoral register and to help to support EROs and electoral administrators in understanding the potential risks and issues in their areas based on the particular demographics they face. There is a clear connection also with the potential for data matching and other channels to be targeted to address or identify individuals within specific groups."

2.3. To what extent does the public's perception of MPs, Parliament, the Government and events such as Prime Minister's questions affect voter registration and turnout?

What role does the media play in this context?

What socioeconomic factors affect registration and turnout and what, if anything, can we learn from this about how to improve voter registration and turnout?

We offer no comments on these questions as they relate to political matters or are outside our expertise and/or our areas of interest and focus.

2.4. What are the costs to society of low voter registration and turnout?

We believe that the major cost of both these issues is in terms of the democratic mandate of elected bodies and public confidence in those bodies as mentioned above. If voter registration drops as a result of the introduction of

individual electoral registration, this will have a considerable effect on democratic representation given that registration figures are used to determine electoral boundaries particularly at a UK Parliamentary level.

Improving voter turnout

2.5. What are the principal ways in which voter registration and turnout could be improved? What lessons can be learnt from other countries where voter registration and turnout is higher?

In the main, voter registration will only be improved by ensuring that it is a simple process that is totally accessible to all sections of society. That includes using i.t. systems to their full potential and replicating the way that citizens generally conduct their business and interact with both private and public sector organisations, particularly in terms of younger people.

We believe that voter turnout is largely a political matter and that logistical or administrative changes are unlikely to have a significant effect on increasing turnout. There are other issues that might have an impact on turnout and these are briefly set out below.

- The effect that a vote will have on influencing policy, the proportionality of the result and how closely the result reflects the will of the people, are three structural factors that are likely to have important effects on turnout.
- Ease of registration coupled with accessible and timely voting can be factors which effect turnout. Academics have argued that this two-step process can decrease turnout.
- Other methods of improving turnout include making voting easier through freely available absent voting, increasing the number of possible voting locations and lowering the average time it takes to vote.
- In some countries, electronic and internet voting are used as a possible solution. In other countries, voting is held on the weekend or on a working day which has been converted to a national holiday. Either of these approaches reduces the need for time off from work which is often quoted as a reason for not voting thereby leading to reduced voter turnout.

We are not convinced that there are lessons that can necessarily be taken from other countries where turnout is higher. Ultimately, we believe that it is interest in the political environment coupled with a sense of civic duty and the issues set out in the first bullet point above that will influence or persuade voters to actually vote. The turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2012 rather illustrated that point.

2.6. To what extent could electoral reform, rebuilding political parties or changes to party funding improve public engagement and voter turnout?

We offer no comments on these questions as they relate to largely political matters.

2.7. In what ways could new technologies be used to encourage people to vote?

As outlined above, electronic systems for voting are in use in a number of countries although it should be recognised that some European countries (e.g. Germany and the Netherlands) have reverted to conventional voting. IFES, the American electoral international organization, has recently published an extensive manual on the subject of electronic voting and counting which sets out in some details the issues to be considered in relation to the use of technology for these purposes. The manual can be found at

<http://www.ifes.org/Home/Content/Publications/Books/2013/Implementing%20and%20Overseeing%20Electronic%20Voting%20and%20Counting%20Technologies.aspx>

2.8. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of allowing voters to register on the day of an election?

Advantages – ensuring that everybody who is entitled to vote can vote without the fear of disenfranchisement.

Disadvantages:

- a) Potential for fraudulent voting
- b) Removal of objection opportunity currently provided in terms of registration applications
- c) Significant changes to law and practice to enable proper registration
- d) Communication of information
- e) Increased costs.

2.9. How can arrangements for British citizens living abroad to register for and vote in elections in the UK be improved?

The most straightforward approach would be to introduce the options of on line applications for registration and for absent voting together with the option of e-voting by internet means. Clearly, the necessary safeguards to prevent fraudulent applications and misuse of votes would have to be introduced. A policy decision would need to be made in terms of the current restrictions including length of time abroad and to what elections such rights should apply.

John Turner
Chief Executive

24 February 2014

Background information about the Association

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) was founded in 1987 and has since established itself as a professional body to represent the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. It is a non-governmental and non-partisan body and has some 1,750 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services.

The AEA encourages and provides education and training in electoral administration, in addition to delivering a range of commercial and professional services.

The AEA operates through a branch structure with 11 branches covering the United Kingdom. In Wales, the AEA branch meets three or four times a year, giving members the opportunity to discuss matters relating to the conduct of elections and electoral registration in addition to taking part in training activities.

The key **aims** of the AEA are to:

- contribute positively to electoral reform within the UK;
- foster the advancement of consistent and efficient administration of electoral registration and the conduct of elections in the UK;
- raise the profile of electoral administration both within the UK and internationally;
- enhance and maintain the AEA's reputation as the leading professional body for electoral administrators within the UK.

The AEA supports and advocates the principle that all those with a role in organising elections should consider the voters' interests above all other considerations.