ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

19 September 2016

Press Release – Pushed to the absolute limit: 2016 – the electoral year never to forget

Today the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) has published its report *Pushed to the absolute limit: 2016 – the electoral year never to forget* on the administration of the elections held in May and June's EU referendum. As well as the report, the Association has published an executive summary.

Once again, the Association calls for a fundamental rethink of the electoral process in the UK.

2016 will be remembered by the public for the Brexit outcome and not for any issues connected with the administration of the electoral process. That is as it should be.

Electoral administrators will however recall 2016 as the year that the system came closer to collapse than ever before.

The electoral community faced unprecedented challenges in 2016, with nationwide polls in May followed by the EU referendum in June, both coming on the back of the transition to Individual Electoral Registration, itself a monumental event.

In February 2016, it was announced that the EU referendum would be held on 23 June, which meant there would be an overlap in both the campaigns and the electoral administrator preparations for the May and June polls.

Electoral administrators and suppliers were stretched beyond belief. The complexity of running combined polls and the EU referendum back to back, the additional challenges faced as a result of the 48 hour extension to the registration deadline for the referendum and a number of other issues arising throughout the entire period brought the electoral community, who were already exhausted after the transition to IER, to breaking point yet again.

The AEA is acutely concerned that unless the issues identified in the report are properly considered and addressed, the structures, processes, available resources and people delivering electoral registration and elections will not be able to cope with the additional burdens being continually placed upon them.

It was only through their extreme efforts, professionalism and determination to deliver successful polls that the risks introduced to the process did not have a catastrophic effect, particularly on the referendum – but at what cost?

John Turner, Chief Executive of the AEA said:

"The AEA has long been of the view that what is required is a root and branch review of the whole arrangements for registration and the conduct of elections rather than more adjustment and change to a system so deeply rooted in the 19th century. Many of the problems that currently exist and which surfaced again at this year's elections are because of the historic nature of the systems in place and which are increasingly becoming unfit for purpose.

Our report[1] provides an account of the experience of electoral administrators in delivering the polls in 2016 and offers recommendations for improvements to the framework for electoral administration in the UK and which puts the voter at the heart of the process.

This will require urgent joint action by those with a role in shaping electoral policy and practice in electoral administration, and the AEA looks forward to actively working with Governments, the Electoral Commission and other key stakeholders within the electoral community in moving this agenda forward."

In the report, the AEA makes 91 recommendations, which include:

On legislation

- The UK Government should implement the Law Commissions' recommendations to bring forward a single Electoral Administration Act in accessible language setting out the high-level framework governing electoral registration, elections and referendums in the UK, with the operational detail of registration, absent voting, and elections

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[1] http://www.aea-elections.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/aea-rep-2016-pushed-to-the-absolute-limit-the-electoral-year-never-to-forget-with-links.pdf

contained in secondary legislation, all with the key aim of achieving the simplification and consistency of rules across all electoral administration matters (recommendation 2-1).

- Except in cases of unforeseen emergencies and proportionate to the need, changes to election law should not be applicable to any elections within a six-month period from the date the legislation comes into effect (2-2).
- The UK Government should publish an assessment of the risks associated with any proposed changes to legislation before making any legislative changes in the future (5-15).

On finance

- Other than in exceptional circumstances, Cabinet Office should ensure that expenses claims submitted to them are audited and settled within the same financial year in which the relevant poll was administered (2-3).
- The UK Government should continue to provide sufficient funding directly to EROs to administer IER so as to ensure an accurate and complete register is maintained (5-3).
- The UK Government should provide an exemption to the auto-enrolment for pensions in relation to staff working on elections and referendums (12-6).

On risk and integrity

- That the UK Government should urgently examine, with input from key stakeholders, the risks introduced by the combination of polls scheduled for Thursday 7 May 2020, and actively consider changing the dates of those polls so that they do not coincide with the UK Parliamentary general election in 2020 and in future years (4-4).
- The UK Government should look to formalise the roles and responsibilities in legislation in relation to tellers and the postal vote code of conduct, so as to be more effective in ensuring integrity (3-7).

On process

- A review of all election/poll timetables should be carried out with a view to extending some aspects, as well as standardising a legislative timetable which should apply to all UK elections, containing the key milestones in electoral administration, including the deadlines for registration and absent voting, and the reissue of lost postal votes (4-2).

- The UK Government should review the online service with a view to restricting the same person from registering more than once. In addition, consideration should be given to the possibility of a lookup facility to allow electors to check if they are registered before trying to register online (5-6).

- The UK Government should consider the registration and absent vote deadlines for overseas electors especially in view of the proposed introduction of legislation to remove the current limit of 15 years. Proper consideration needs to be given to the election timetable to allow a suitable practical solution to allow time for the significant volume of applications to be processed, so that "last minute" applicants are still able to cast their vote with absent votes being received and returned in time to be counted (5-18).

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Notes to editors:

1. The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) was founded in 1987 and is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. It is a non-governmental and non-partisan body and has some 1,933 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services.

2. Read the report in full **here**. Read the executive summary **here**.

3. The Association of Electoral Administrators – A Company Limited by Guarantee - Registered in England and Wales No. 2406897

4. Registered Office: Rice and Co, Harance House, Rumer Hill Road, Cannock, Staffs WS11 0ET.

5. Other relevant detail/ context / policy statements / reports...

   [AEA formal response to the Law Commission - Electoral Law: A Joint Consultation Paper](#)

   [AEA Report - Elections and IER - The challenge of 2015](#)