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CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA**DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE**

Local Government and Public Services
Committee (Electoral Arrangements)
National Assembly for Wales
Assembly Offices
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Please ask for: Bob Carter
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Our Ref: RFC/DMP
Your Ref:
Date: 31 August 2006

Dear Sir/Madam,

Electoral Arrangements in Wales

In response to your consultation document, I would like to make the following observations. You will note below that I have answered the questions raised by yourselves in each chapter and have laid out my responses in that manner.

Chapter Two – Registering Voters

Here at Swansea we have always carried out a personal canvass and have obtained a response rate of between 91 and 95%. However, budget restraints and the timing of the annual canvass provide obstacles to achieving a higher return. The annual canvass is carried out in the autumn months where obstacles such as shorter days and bad weather conditions are imposed; often people will not answer the doors during these months when it is dark by 6.30pm. Many years ago if you failed to obtain a response, neighbours would often verify the information currently held on file, however that "community spirit" does not exist in many areas today and neighbours no longer know who they are living next to.

At Swansea we have not prosecuted any non-responder, mainly because past experience of other authorities using this mechanism have shown that the penalty imposed has been as little as £200.00 and court costs borne by the authority have cost far more.

I believe for prosecution to be effective it needs to be carried out by a body such as the Electoral Commission with maximum publicity given to the fact that they will prosecute if the form is not returned.

To maximise young people's obligation regarding registration, I suggest school leaver's pack could be given which would include information regarding registration and voting, Council Tax etc. A similar package could be given to every young person who signs on at the job centre for the first time.

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I believe in the principle of individual registration with a personal identification such as their national insurance number as it would go a long way to eliminate duplication and fraud, particularly if there was a national register and voting was carried out electronically.

However, I do not believe that individual registration with personal identification will increase registration. Many of the people who are currently missing off the register do so to remain anonymous for many different reasons such as the threat of being found by the Department of Working Pensions (Child Support Agency) or the possibility of partners they are living with losing certain benefits.

As the current law states that registration is compulsory, automatic registration would be one answer in producing statistics on what reflects your town's electorate /population, however I am not sure how that could be done other than via National Insurance numbers.

In order for members of our Black and ethnic minority communities to actively participate in registration and voting there has to be positive engagement with not just the leaders of these communities but the people themselves. We must be seen to be open and fair, encourage members of these communities to participate in working on elections as poll clerks and counters, carry out road shows in the communities enabling people to register and ask any questions about the election process. However I believe that the Political Parties also have a role to play here in encouraging more members from these communities and hence more candidates from Black and ethnic backgrounds which will in turn give the people faith in the voting system.

Chapter 3 – Ways of Voting

I believe that an all postal vote would work in Wales, provided that the electorate had faith in the system. Recent publicity on fraudulent postal votes has made many of the electorate question the integrity of the postal vote, at least at the moment people have a choice. If you took that choice away from them and they didn't have confidence in the only option open to them then many will not vote who would normally vote. The introduction of scanned in signatures on postal voting (to be used as a checking system on returned postal votes) will go a long way to re-establish some of that confidence

Research carried out over the last few years proves that people prefer to vote at home, where they have time to study candidate's literature before placing their cross, as opposed to feeling pressurised at the polling station to place their vote and leave the polling station. People leading busy lives are less inclined to stop off at their polling station to place their vote.

From an administration point of view we would require a substantial number of staff to carry out the issuing of the postal votes and the checking of returned postal votes. More resources are required up front to eliminate the practical problems associated with polling stations.

Voting by internet or on the telephone would be popular options providing the option to vote any time of the day. To offer the elector the option of voting via text or electronically you must be able to assure the electorate that it is a safe and secure way of voting.

At a polling station if the Presiding Officer doesn't turn up, we simply get another one, however if your electronic system goes down this isn't so easy to replace.

Any electronic system must be robust and secure against any unauthorised attempts to penetrate it.

Elderly people or people who have a fear of technology might not use this method of voting but would normally vote at the polling station.

I believe that we could explore the possibility of having polling stations at venues such as supermarkets, post offices; however this could only be achieved with an electronic register.

Chapter 4 – Voter Turnout

I believe that turnout figures at elections held here in Wales are at an all time low due to a number of factors. High numbers of our under 25s are not voting and will continue not voting as they get older. My experience has shown that the most common reasons that have been given for not voting are (i) they do not feel they know much about politics and (ii) they feel the present system of governing Britain works well. Many electors of the older generation vote out of civic duty; however, this sense of duty is not shared widely amongst younger voters.

With specific regard to the National Assembly, the position is complicated by the electoral arrangements. As an administrator it is hard to explain to the electorate why they are voting for a Constituency Assembly member via the traditional first past the post system and why they have a second vote for 4 Regional Assembly members via the proportional representation method.

For the last few years education of our children in secondary school has included teaching about politics and democracy. My Elections Unit are very pro-active in schools, running most of the primary school council elections in Swansea on an annual basis, however there has been a lower take up of invitations by the unit to run secondary school council elections. All the secondary schools in Swansea run their own School Council elections but do not highlight the event or use it as a tool to promote democracy. On occasions where the unit have been into secondary schools, they introduce a game where classes have to identify whether certain services are run by council or non-council. This game on every occasion highlights that the schools do not know what their local council is responsible for. Therefore it is important that young people are taught the basics such as what their local council is responsible for, how much money we have to run our services and how it is allocated to Education, Social Services etc – this would show them that the money does not go far!. It would be a good idea if each council had an open day and invited schools in to talk to representatives of each department; we must be seen to promote our councils as bodies providing services and local democratic representation.

I believe that young people need a basic knowledge of their local council/National Assembly before the teaching of basic party politics becomes relevant. It should be structured to illustrate to young people key policy differences between political parties.

In promoting democracy, all political parties have a role to play here, they should be seen to be reaching out to young people -after all they are tomorrow's voters. They should be seen to be involving young people in formulating their policies on such things as education and transport.

Here in Swansea we have an active programme of community engagement which involves an annual programme of school visits by the elections unit, annual local democracy weeks aimed primarily at young people. We also held a Local Leadership Members' Seminar earlier this year to look at how councillors work within the community, the outcome of this seminar has been fed into the Community Strategy in order to promote the councillor's role.

Chapter 5 – Access to registration and voting

The key issue for people with disabilities such as learning difficulties or the visibly impaired and the registration process is the Electoral Registration form. The content of the Electoral Registration form is prescribed by statute. Hence the form is non-user friendly, mainly due to the large amount of information that has to be included on the form. In order to accommodate all the information, the forms are produced in very small print.

In order to aid registration, here at Swansea we make available to the public this form in large print or Braille. For the 2007 register the electorate will have the option of registration (if there is no change) by telephone or by internet. We also have a telephone helpline and intend to hold registration workshops in certain communities of our city.

The key issue concerning the voting process and the disabled electorate of our community relates to polling stations. There are no purpose-built polling stations, most are not owned by the Returning Officer but rather hired for the day. Returning Officers have to consider the needs of all electors in allocating a polling location and at times there can be conflict between providing a fully accessible polling station and providing one which is in a convenient location.

In applying the Disability Discrimination Act, there is no precise definition of "reasonable" as this varies with what the premises are being used for. To justify the use of a premise as a polling station we have to prove that we have taken all reasonable steps to find an alternative. This can prove difficult in rural areas where there is not the choice.

Here in Swansea we carry out regular polling station reviews and have identified all current polling stations which do not fully comply with the Act and have adapted them with temporary ramps, handrails and hearing loops, however this is not ideal and is certainly not the answer to providing full disabled access.

However if the electorate are informed by their Returning Officer that their polling station is not fully accessible then it gives them time to consider and apply for a postal or proxy vote.

To provide further options of voting for the disabled, then the Government must consider a national electronic register and e-voting to enable the electorate to vote at any polling station or via internet or their mobile phone.

There should be agreed standards for the accessibility of registration, voting material and polling stations. At present some local authorities are much more pro-active in promoting access than other authorities, it is very much up to each Electoral Registration Officer/Returning Officer whether he/she provides the Electoral Form in Braille/large print, provide for registration by telephone/internet. The same applies to the Returning Officer and how he/she promotes access to voting.

Chapter 6 – Language

I do not think it would be feasible to equip all our polling stations with members of staff who are fluent in Welsh. Here at Swansea we can identify parts of our area where Welsh is predominately spoken and we do ensure that at least one member of the polling station staff in those areas can converse in Welsh. The Electoral Commission provide a very simple guide on how to vote which we make available at the polling station in English/Welsh and 9 other languages.

For the number of BME people registering and voting at elections to increase there has to be better community engagement. Many of the adult BME community have difficulty in completing the forms. Each authority must be seen to go into their communities, possibly via mosques, meeting places, community leaders and holding open days where they can register to vote.

As above, here at Swansea we can identify areas of Swansea that have a high record of BME electors, therefore we always seek to ensure that one member of staff employed at the polling stations would be able to converse in their relevant language. This appointment is made by involving the community groups.

The Electoral Commission produce a number of leaflets/posters in a variety of languages which are available free of charge to the Council. These should be made available at all polling stations/council offices and distributed via the community groups.

Yours faithfully,



R.F. CARTER
ACTING CHIEF EXECUTIVE

