



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Summary Note from the meeting held on 10 October 2016**

#### **Present:**

Dr Andy Mycock  
Councillor Fazila Fadia  
Councillor Andrew Marchington  
Councillor Andrew Palfreeman  
Councillor Cathy Scott

#### **Witness: John Turner**

John Turner is the Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) since 2006 and the Chair of the AEA's qualification and examination boards. Previously John was the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Public and Support Services at Norwich City Council. He held the statutory positions of Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer for the city. John has over 30 years' experience in electoral administration.

#### **Summary of Discussion**

##### **Registration**

John explained that Individual Electoral Registration (IER) is good as a matter of principle, it is more secure and it works. However, the system needs more attention in terms of the interface with citizens. At present it is not user friendly and does not take account of an individual's personal situation. Implementation of IER was a large step to take, there were some missed opportunities, as systems cannot talk to each other and the IER process relies heavily on the quality and accuracy of DWP information. This is not a criticism of the DWP data, as the accuracy of the data is reliant on interface with the public and how do you identify those people who may not be registered or whose data is not held by the DWP?

John's view is that using other data to populate the register is the correct approach. A national database could be developed created on the date of birth of a citizen. John cited Jersey as an example, Jersey has created such a system; at the point of this initial engagement with a citizen the data is recorded on a register (registers are held by the Parish) and the information is retained for life. It is a fairly accurate system and easier to maintain. The database can be continually developed and used rather than constantly having to start over on an annual basis.

John explained that at the time of the EU Referendum, electoral administrators experienced a surge in electronic registration applications, people wanted to make sure that they could vote, in some cases the same person registered up to 5 or 6 times, so that there were confident they could vote. These duplicate registrations created an enormous amount of work for electoral administrators.

At present there is no system that would prevent this happening again. Unfortunately, there is no national data base which would resolve the issue of duplicate registration. There are issues of data protection, who would manage a national data base and who would have access? Costs should not be a barrier to the implementation of such a system, national databases already exist for example DWP, DVLA, Passport office, TV licensing and Local Authority electoral registers could be converted into one national register.

John explained that any change to the date of a local elections to accommodate local students would have limited impact, additional changes would be required for example the timeline for the annual canvass would need to be changed as the existing timeline conflicts with the academic year. The Government might also need to be persuaded that the register used should be the last register used for an election. However, the register needs to be as up-to-date as possible prior to any election. John concluded that he was not sure any changes would address the issues of under registration of the 18-25 age group; this group is known to be the most difficult to engage.

John acknowledged that there is no panacea in attracting young people to vote. The problem of engaging with young people to register and vote has been a continuing trend for 30 years and there is no one solution that will change this. John explained that this may be a cultural matter, an attitude of 18-25 year olds to society in general rather than democracy in particular. Nothing to-date has helped to resolve this issue.

John explained that people register for reasons that have nothing to do with voting, for example the need for an address and identification to secure goods, loans and services etc. Government funding to other organisations to maximise registration is quite small and therefore such work has minimal impact and measuring the results is impossible.

In relation to voting age, John responded that this is a policy matter for government to consider and determine.

## **Turnout**

Historically statistical data evidences that turnout for a national election is double that of a local poll. A UK Parliamentary election will attract a higher turnout than other national elections, a local poll combined with a UK Parliamentary election will therefore benefit from the higher turnout. John explained that since the 90's the power of local government has diminished, as a result of legislation and/or financial constraints. The electorate are well informed and perhaps more intuitive, they know

that both funding and the powers of local government have declined. It is possible that the electorate feel that local Councils do not have the control or authority to make things happen.

Powers of the local authority, town hall decision making power has reduced or moved out of the local authority to Westminster, so it is possible that some feel that there is less reason to vote. John cited the matter of social housing as an example, 30-40 years ago, this was really important to citizens and the responsibility of the local authority. It is still a local issue of concern and interest, however, the funding, influence and role of the local authority has changed, with local councillors having less say in such matters as their powers have become eroded.

Multiple combined polls held on the same day (particular polls with different voting systems) can prove confusing and problematic for the electorate. The scheduling of the poll is also an important factor for consideration. The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections were held in November 2012, the poll attracted extremely low turnout nationally, the timing was wrong (November) and the lack of information regarding the position and the candidates was not helpful. The electorate did not fully understand or agree with the role. John acknowledged that voting for the combined authorities could be subject to the same risk(s). The electorate is unsure about the prospects, significance and what changes a combined authority might bring, so why would they vote? People do, however, identify with and focus on the local issues that are of significance to them.

John acknowledged that whilst holding a combined UK Parliamentary and a local election will improve turnout, this combination can also lead to the loss of some good local councillors, due to the trend in the voting at a national election. The national political environment can influence voting at a local level, particularly when these polls are combined.

There are different motivations for citizens to become engaged with politics in the British model than in other countries; for example people in Africa will walk 8 hours to vote because they believe local politicians can change the way they will live their lives. People do not have the same belief or incentive in the UK. The average turnout in the UK is around 30%. John explained his belief that politics has to matter, if politicians do something or are perceived to be able to do something that will drive change or affect someone's lifestyle, this will increase voter involvement and responses. Citizens will vote if they think it is worthwhile, whether there is some gain or incentive for them to vote.

## **Use of IT**

The use of electronic registers at polling stations could present problems, whilst it would allow electors to vote at any polling station there would need to be significant development in terms of infrastructure and investment to support this change and any power cut would adversely affect the poll.

John explained difficulties associated with electronic voting, Latvia currently uses an electronic voting system; however, he is not sure how well this system operates. To

date Latvia and others have not proven that their systems meet European standards. Electronic voting also involves other risks, for example it could be subject to fraud and/or challenge, which is far more difficult to sort out when compared to the simplistic audit trails of the current paper based system. No one has solved these problems and some countries have subsequently stopped using electronic voting as a result. There needs to be significant developments of electronic voting processes to address any fraud/security issues to convince stakeholders that it can deliver genuine results.

## **Voting, Elections and the Electoral Cycle**

John explained that the current British system of voting at a polling station is based on trust. However, there is likely to be a need for change and for voters to provide some form of personal identification at polling stations in the near future.

John explained that a strange situation is developing in the UK regarding combining national and local, it is now unlawful to combine a national and local election in Scotland on the same day and Wales could potentially follow suit.

With regards to how many elections should be combined on the same day, John explained that there was no simple answer; it depends on the different types of voting systems. John confirmed that probably he would suggest that 3 ought to be enough as a maximum; however, the type of election and voting system would also need to be considered.

In relation to polling stations, John stated that Local Authorities rely heavily on schools and the third sector for polling station accommodation which impinges on the possibility of weekend voting, as those venues may not be available to use. The loss of local authority premises has created a greater problem with regards to the availability of accommodation for polling stations; this situation is likely to get worse not better.

Voting over a number of days including weekends could present a range of challenges; electors may be reluctant to consider voting, if it impacts on their hobbies and/or religious activities. The staffing of polling stations also presents significant challenges for example additional costs, the availability and recruitment of polling station staff.

With regards to the electoral cycle, John explained that there is some merit for the electorate to speak on an annual basis on the work of the Council and its Councillors. From an administrative point of view there are cost savings associated with all-out elections although the actual cost of an election is shared when electoral episodes are combined. All-out elections may lower the accuracy of the register, if elections are less frequent, which could lessen the reasons for citizens to register on an annual basis. A change to all-out elections may run the risk that those people and staff who are involved in the running of elections will not retain the same skill set or they may not be available. A consequence being is that this could result in additional costs to retain staff and maintain training. John explained that if asked he would advise the Council to keep the electoral cycle as 1/3rds.

## **Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

John explained his experience of STV is limited to the Republic of Ireland. John stated that voters are quick to understand STV once it has been explained and used. The problem with STV is the administration aspect, as STV takes a lot longer to get any result. People generally want quick/immediate results. John's view is that he would rather see a complete and accurate result, regardless of the time it took. There is no impediment in introducing a new voting system, problems are however, exacerbated when different voting systems are mixed up on the same day.

## **Political Engagement**

John explained that at present candidates and political parties undertake less door knocking in the fallow years, which can then increase the burden when campaigning commences in the run up to an election. Votes cannot be guaranteed without personal engagement. People often say "I'm not voting because no one knocked on my door". However, you cannot engage with every single elector and even if you did some will still choose not to vote.

Political parties no longer have the same level of activists or resources as they once had. It has become more and more difficult for all candidates to engage with the electorate. John acknowledged that social media was a method now used extensively to engage with the electorate, and this is useful, if the electorate is engaged with this channel of communication. Research does not evidence that the use of social media is any better than the traditional methods of engagement.

John explained that there was a tension between independent candidates and candidates standing for the political parties. It is challenging for an independent to compete against a political party. Campaigning involves time and costs money and so it is almost impossible to achieve a level playing field. However, the active campaigning of the independent and smaller groups can also result in a significant increase in the turnout in some wards.

## **The Future**

In relation to the future landscape of electoral administration, John felt that the country was "facing a ticking time bomb". Since 2010, local government finances have been squeezed, with a reduction of local government staff; however, electoral administration has continued to be an area of growth. The government has invested money into electoral administration (IER, Neighbourhood Planning, PCC etc.) however; John fears that this funding may not continue. Electoral administrators will be expected to do more with less against a backdrop of churn within the profession. Trying to retain electoral administrators at the current levels is a serious challenge for local authorities; John drew comparison to the recruitment and retention of social workers. John explained that local authorities in the West Midlands are now competing with each other for experienced staff. This situation presents a serious issue, the cushion of funding will not last indefinitely and the retention and appointment of experienced staff may become a significant problem.

## **Regional Devolution**

Regional devolution and the creation of new structures and additional tiers could lead to resources being spread even more thinly, across more tiers of local government, all of which are trying to administer local affairs. Unitary authorities should be effective in delivering local government, starting with the local and working upwards and outwards etc. However, devolution could create a system where resources are spent on administration rather than delivering services to the community.