



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Summary Note from the meeting held on 31 August 2016**

#### **Witnesses: Tom Hawthorn and Andrew Scallan**

Andrew is the Director of Electoral Administration at the Electoral Commission. He joined the Electoral Commission in October 2006 from Manchester City Council where he was the Deputy Returning Officer and Head of Statutory Services. In that job, as well as elections, his responsibilities included the registration of births, marriages and deaths; the coroner's service, licensing; trading standards and environmental health. Andrew has worked in elections since 1983 and is an honorary member of the Association of Electoral Administrators, having served as Honorary Secretary and Vice-Chairman. He is a former joint editor of Schofield's Election Law and has been a trainer and consultant on elections in this country and in emerging democracies.

Andrew was appointed CBE in the 2016 New Year Honours for services to electoral democracy.

Tom leads the Electoral Commission's Policy Team, working on legislation, reporting and research across electoral registration, elections and party and election finance. He has worked at the Commission since it was established in 2001, with a short break on secondment at the Ministry of Justice in 2007. In that time, he has evaluated electoral modernisation pilot schemes, developed the Commission's performance standards framework and was responsible for leading on election and referendum reporting work. Tom is also responsible for overseeing the Commission's programme of work on preventing and detecting electoral fraud.

#### **Summary of Discussion**

##### **Voting and Voter Turnout**

Andrew explained that in terms of turnout an important consideration is that where people are generally content there is no incentive for them to turn out to vote. This links to the "nature of the contest" which may or may not encourage people to vote. Tom provided information derived from post-election research which asks people if they did or didn't vote and if not why not. The majority cite personal or administrative circumstances as to the reasons for not voting whilst 15-20% say they are "not interested in taking part in elections". Other significant reasons (30-40%) include "no candidate they want to vote for" or "don't know enough about candidate." The

research shows that there is certainly an appetite for more information about candidates. Furthermore, there are opportunities to make the voting process more accessible although it is not clear that this alone will encourage more voters to turn out as it is principally an enabler.

Tom explained that other academic research shows that what drives participation is a competitive pool of candidates and a feeling that your vote matters. When these drop away, so does turnout. Andrew added that when there is certainty about the impact your vote will have it encourages turnout e.g. the EU Referendum where every vote counted.

In terms of information for the public Andrew explained that the range of electoral episodes has separate statutory information requirements although this is not consistent. It is difficult to see how local authorities alone, in the context of the current legislative framework, can bridge some of the information gaps whilst having regard to the need to retain its independence. Democracy Club, which is an independent and separate organisation, have developed a set of open source materials and tools which provides a service within this context.

## **The Electoral Process**

Tom provided the Commission with details of the pilots which took place ten years ago. The Electoral Commission evaluated all pilots, with one of the main considerations being the impact on voter turnout. The full report is available:

[Connected2Voting An evaluation of accessibility of the local election pilots \(PDF\)](#)

By way of context Tom informed the Commission that all of the pilots were “one offs” which meant that there was not an opportunity to build up an ongoing understanding of the methods. Tom explained that the general findings were as follows:

- On-line voting / Electronic voting – increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. There were issues in respect of front end costs and concerns in respect of security and integrity;
- Early / weekend voting - increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. It was concluded that this approach would be worth implementing although there would be a cost to the Returning Officer who would need to provide facilities in a range of locations across the area;
- All postal votes (no polling stations) – improved turnout although voters who preferred to vote in a polling station were unhappy at having this opportunity removed. It is for this reason that the Electoral Commission did not recommend this as an option moving forward.

The Commission went on to explore the extent to which combining electoral episodes influences turnout, and in some instances adversely affects interest in local elections. By way of context Andrew explained that evidence indicates that voters can cope with combined elections and this has been the main area of focus for the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission has not undertaken any research

in terms of the impact on the actual results. Andrew explained that Scottish Government has legislated to ensure that they have stand-alone elections.

The Commission discussed the issue of lowering the voting age to 16, particularly in light of the recent events in Scotland. Andrew confirmed that the Electoral Commission had not changed its position on this issue since 2004 and continued to concentrate on the actual mechanics of voting, incorporating targeted campaigns aimed at young people.

### **The Electoral Cycle and Registration**

Andrew confirmed that there is no evidence that indicates changing the electoral cycle has a positive effect on voter turnout. Voter registration always increases when there is an electoral event, which has been positively affected by on-line registration.

With regards to registration Andrew explained that, in terms of the number of people who are turned away at polling stations on the day, the numbers are very low. Registration is now more flexible and straightforward and the numbers who are unable to vote is significantly low. In terms of registering to vote on the day of the election, Andrew acknowledged that there is no reason not to begin to explore this option. In countries which have registration on the day there is always an impact on the election itself, it changes the nature and complexion of the election. Work would need to take place to construct a system in order to understand all of the implications. Tom recognised that policy makers don't always fully understand that people want to participate on the day of the election as it is then when they actually think about voting.

The Commission went on to discuss the feasibility of a single register that allows citizens to vote at any polling station. Andrew acknowledged that this would be a desirable development as it would be flexible, although it is important to maintain the security and integrity of the system which allows citizens to vote anywhere. Andrew explained that there was a "vote anywhere" pilot in 2007. Such an approach is significantly dependent on having the right technological platform which would replace the current paper based system, will work on the day, can be updated and has public trust. Andrew explained that the technology may be a web based system which would pose some infrastructure problems in some areas in terms of connectivity. It is not impossible but would pose some significant challenges, not least changes to primary legislation.

The Commission discussed the issues around accessibility and a single point of entry linked to identification such as the National Insurance number. Andrew acknowledged that issues such as these should be explored in light of the fact that whilst society has developed and progressed, electoral processes and practices have not significantly changed in decades. Andrew explained that the Electoral Commission is currently undertaking a strategic review of its activities which will include exploration of key policy areas such as these. It is important that government has a modernisation strategy which looks at elections and associated processes holistically.

In terms of voter identification (with reference to the Pickles Report) Tom explained that it is difficult to predict the likelihood of this development being put in place in the near future. There would be a cost to introducing such an approach although it would address a vulnerability that currently exists in the system. Andrew explained that the type of identification used would need to be robust and have been “issued by officialdom”.

Andrew confirmed that collaborative work is taking place with the Department for Work Pensions to explore the opportunities to link electoral registration to the issuing of National Insurance numbers to 16 year olds. The Electoral Commission is generally encouraging government to raise the issue of registration across its web sites in order to increase the numbers registered to vote. Tom explained that the registration process is now more expensive for Registration Officers and the demographic profile of areas mean that it is increasingly difficult to maintain numbers on the register. The Electoral Commission is concerned this is not sustainable and there needs to be serious thought given to looking at different and cheaper ways of doing this. This will involve being able to use the available data more effectively and the Cabinet Office needs to give the Returning Officer the tools to do the job more effectively.