RESPONSE TO MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION

1. I welcome the opportunity to submit observations for the consideration of the Committee. My response is particularly weighted towards voter turnout and registration (and how both might be increased) and, closely associated with this, reasons which may be relevant to those who decide not to cast their votes. Indeed, although these three elements are listed separately in your call for evidence, I have taken them together in framing my own response. I have also made comments on some of the other matters under consideration.

Voter turnout, voter registration and reasons for people not voting

2. In advance of any major election, it is this Council’s approach to highlight registration deadlines in our communications strategy, in press releases, on the front of the Council’s external website, on our election webpages and on our staff intranet. This also applies to other key milestones within the election timetable. In addition, in order to provide further information to those who may be voting for the first time, we habitually post our own “how to vote” films on our website.

3. We have a thorough post-election review process which involves issuing questionnaires to our polling staff, to candidates and agents and conducting research amongst voters by posting an online survey and sending a targeted questionnaire seeking responses on a number of matters relating to the voting process. We were fortunate enough to have a decent return from electors and the responses are particularly instructive. Most are of the view that voting is not inconvenient and that instead the greatest obstacle to those casting their votes is dissatisfaction with candidates and political parties. Amongst the specific reasons for not voting are poor campaigning by candidates (or indeed a lack of campaigning altogether), a lack of information provided by individual candidates in many instances, a general failure to engage with the electorate, unhappiness that the political party which had the largest number of councillors returned did not ultimately form the prevailing administration group within the Council, and a sense that Local Government Elections have become dominated by national rather than local issues. While most of those who did vote expressed the view that it was a positive and comparatively simple process, the specifics of the Single Transferrable Vote still cause some confusion. Based on responses which we received, most electors don’t like STV and a number are honest enough to admit that they don’t understand the system although they were still managed to cast their votes. One final suggestion for improving awareness of those standing in elections was the proposal that all candidates should submit photos to be reproduced on ballot papers.

4. A smaller number of electors cited lack of convenience as a reason for not voting and, more specifically, a lack of transport. As a means of helping to address this, particularly for elderly or infirm voters, Aberdeenshire Council conducted a pilot in Portlethen using a “community ambulance” whereby electors were able to contact organisers and book transport to their polling station at the elections in May, 2012. Although take-up of this facility was low, I am of the view that it is worth testing again
at future elections, supported by greater publicity and with the possibility of being trialled in alternative or additional locations.

5. Lastly, in order to increase voter turnout and engage with those who are disinclined to vote, our Council has developed an extensive electoral participation programme, overseen by a corporate officers group, and this led to the staging of large-scale and authentic elections in a number of secondary schools in Aberdeenshire prior to both the 2010 UK General Election and 2011 Scottish Parliament Election. The Council has endorsed the staging of similar events ahead of major elections in coming years. We also have a number of other initiatives aimed at increasing youth participation in local community councils, supporting representation in the Scottish Youth Parliament and developing outreach with primary school age pupils. Although it may take some years to measure any marked improvement in turnout, it is obviously my hope that these measures, designed to encourage greater interest in the democratic process, will have the consequent effect of embedding the desire to vote in those eligible to do so.

Proxy voting including postal voting

6. Based upon feedback received from electors, I would suggest that, wherever possible, an earlier issue of postal votes would be desirable and, in order to accommodate this, that deadlines for registering to vote at any particular election are correspondingly brought forward. Proxy voting, in contrast, is a comparatively little-used facility and further exploration should be made as to how it might be extended. The entitlement to access a proxy vote should, as previously recommended by the Electoral Commission, include anyone who can demonstrate any urgent circumstance which may have impacted upon their ability to vote in person or by post. Electors have also indicated in feedback received that current application forms for proxy voting should be made clearer and easier to complete.

Ordering of the Ballot Paper

7. While I appreciate the evidence from previous research which suggests that some electors may be inclined to vote for candidates at or near the top of a ballot paper, I am still of the view that applying the Robson Rotation Principle for ordering names on the ballot paper might well generate more difficulties than the current situation. Historically, being able to access printers with the facility to order candidates randomly on ballot papers has proved challenging although I accept that technological advances mean that this is more achievable now. However, printing in a random order would preclude the manual checking process currently in operation whereby staff will “flick check” or “spot check” ballot books to seek to ensure that ballot papers have been printed correctly. In addition, changing the order of candidates on the ballot paper would create difficulties for political parties, in particular in their campaigning approach for STV and in seeking to ensure that their supporters are aware which candidates they wish to encourage them to vote for. There is also the prospect that greater voter confusion would be caused generally by a randomised approach to listing candidates on ballot papers.

Diversity amongst voters (including eligibility to stand, donations and the nomination process), elections terminology and timing of elections
8. I have no particular observations to make regarding terminology used in and around elections but recognise that greater efforts are required to encourage electoral participation among foreign nationals settling in this country. Although perhaps only anecdotal, it would appear that there is a disinclination amongst those for whom English is not a first language both to register and cast their votes. Lastly, in respect of the timing of future elections, my view is that a co-ordinated approach should also be taken so that staging major elections on the same day should be avoided wherever possible, in order that proper focus can be brought to bear on each of those elections, their legislatures and what they represent.

9. I hope the foregoing comments are helpful to you.

Colin D Mackenzie
Chief Executive
Aberdeenshire Council

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