SUBMISSION FROM COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Thank you for your invitation to respond to the Committee’s Inquiry into the Local Elections held in May 2012.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar would make the following comments to the Inquiry:

VOTER TURNOUT

Although the Western Isles, as is customary, saw a higher percentage of voters turning out to vote (53%, compared to an overall Scottish turnout of 40%), that figure itself showed a reduction in turnout from the 2007 Local Government Election. This is despite an ongoing increase in the number of postal voters.

The Comhairle supports the comments made by the Electoral Management Board for Scotland in recognition that the first stage of increasing voter turnout is to ensure that all those who are eligible to vote are registered to do so, and would request that all relevant bodies, particularly the Electoral Management Board and the Electoral Commission, working with Electoral Registration Officers, use all possible means to remind citizens to register and to vote.

While turnout itself depend on a number of factors, and recognising that it is, of course, an individual’s right not to cast a vote, the Comhairle noted that it is always helpful for voters if candidates provide some information about their policies, and their background. The lack of such information can be an issue in Elections where the majority of candidates are independents, and perhaps this is a matter to which the Electoral Commission can give some consideration before the 2017 Local Government Election.

The Comhairle also recognised that special efforts are being, and will require to be, made to ensure that sixteen and seventeen year old voters appreciate, first of all, their right to register and vote, and are thereafter offered assistance with their participation in the electoral process. Particular care should be taken regarding younger postal voters, whose signatures may be more likely to be rejected by the electronic checking systems, on the basis that younger peoples' signatures are often less settled, and may change significantly in a comparatively short period.

PROXY AND POSTAL VOTING

The situation faced by voters who may be called away from their place of residence at short notice, for example, Marine or Off-shore workers, is a particular issue in the Western Isles, where many residents actually work outside the area. Such voters may well have selected a postal vote option, but may not be at home to receive the postal package which, unless forwarded in time, can have the effect that the voter loses the right to vote for which they have made dedicated arrangements. While the Comhairle recognises that a “Power of Attorney” option would not be valid, owing to the difference of signature, the Comhairle felt that greater prominence could be given to the right to vote by proxy in pre-Election publicity.
The Comhairle remains concerned that a number of postal votes have to be rejected because of a mismatch in the signatures, where it is often relatively clear that these cases relate to older people whose signatures have deteriorated with age. Where Returning Officers and their Deputes have all received training in the forensic analysis of handwriting, and statistically very few postal votes are rejected on this ground, the Comhairle felt that the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Management Board, Electoral Registration Officers and Returning Officers should encourage, by active publicity, older people to re-submit their applications for postal voting if they feel that their signature has deteriorated or changed to such an extent that it may no longer be recognisable.

ORDERING OF THE BALLOT PAPER

The Comhairle felt that the order of names on the Ballot Paper should be determined by lot, chosen by the Returning Officer.

OTHER ELECTORAL ISSUES

While not specifically within the remit of the Inquiry, the Comhairle wished to reiterate its wish that consideration be given, in good time for the 2017 Local Government Election, to a reduction in the number of Councillors for the Comhairle’s area. The Comhairle has previously made these views known to both Scottish Government and the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland, and it is generally accepted within the Comhairle that a reduction of around one third (31 Councillors, to be reduced to 21 or 22) would be acceptable. Allied to that request would be a further request that they be greater flexibility in the numbers of Councillors per Ward, moving away from the current, rather inflexible, requirement that the numbers of Councillors per Ward be either three or four. While the Comhairle full recognises and supports the wish to ensure proportionality and fairness in the process, where the number of Councillors to be reduced, as the Comhairle believes is appropriate, but the number of Councillors per Ward were to remain at three or four, this could result in Councillors representing very large geographical areas, some of them separated by sea, with the consequent risk that the sense of “natural community” could be lost, which in itself could be detrimental to voter turnout. The Comhairle would request that, in appropriate and exceptional circumstance, there be an allowance that some Wards consist of only two Elected Members; conversely, for representation of medium-sized towns such as Stornoway (population, with neighbouring villages, around 10,000) and where Ward boundaries are arguably less relevant, an increase to five, six or seven Councillors per Ward could be equally desirable.

The Comhairle hopes that these submissions are of interest to the Committee, and looks forward to hearing the results of the Committee’s Inquiry in due course.

Malcolm Burr
Chief Executive