Dear Sir/Madam

Local Elections Enquiry

Thank you for your email communication of 28 January 2012 inviting views or comments on the Local Elections Enquiry being conducted by the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in respect of Local Elections.

Your email invites views or comments on particular areas. I have addressed each area as undernoted, referring to the evidence discussed by the Committee on 28 November as appropriate.

Voter Turnout And How This Can Be Increased

As Returning Officer, I would support any action or initiative that aims to increase turnout at local elections.

The table below shows turnout for local elections in North Ayrshire since 1995 (excluding by elections). It is evident that turnout has dropped off significantly since the high of 1999.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average turnover per ward</th>
<th>Lowest Ward Turnout</th>
<th>Highest Ward Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995 (30 wards)</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 (30 wards)</td>
<td>58.73%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 (30 wards)</td>
<td>49.19%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 (8 wards)</td>
<td>52.87%</td>
<td>48.48%</td>
<td>59.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 (8 wards)</td>
<td>39.56%</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>47.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increasing turnout will require a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders including political parties, professional bodies and practitioners. Political parties in particular could do more to engage with voters locally.

/....
The Committee heard evidence that the majority of local authorities no longer permit political parties to display campaign posters on street furniture. Clearly as things stand this is a matter for individual local authorities.

In North Ayrshire we have considered such a ban but in the end did not implement one. The extent to which political parties use campaign posters is however variable. There could be a case to argue that Returning Officers should use non political posters to raise awareness of elections and/or to direct voters to their polling place.

**Voter Registration And How This Can Be Increased**

I understand that the Scottish Assessors Association has submitted evidence direct to the Committee in this regard.

Responsibility for voter registration in North Ayrshire lies with the Electoral Registration Officer at the Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board. In the 2012 Performance Standards return made by the ERO to the Electoral Commission, the ERO reported a canvass return rate of 94% inclusive of secondary checks, and 80% excluding secondary checks.

I am aware that the Commission has followed up on the return made by the ERO and is encouraging more action to target those households which were not subject of a personal canvass visit. The aim is to get as many people on to the register as possible.

EROs utilise a range of methods and information sources to ensure that the electoral register is as complete and as accurate as it can be.

The move to individual registration will require to be monitored to assess the impact it will have on the completeness or otherwise of the electoral register.

**Proxy Voting Including Postal Voting**

In North Ayrshire, there are approximately 15,350 registered postal voters and around 70 proxy voters from an electorate of approximately 109,000 (as of February 2012).

The issue, receipt and processing of postal votes is now business as usual for Returning Officers. From experience postal voters can have a significant and positive impact on turnout figures for elections. Return rates are usually very high and the low rejection rates would seem to indicate that for the most part postal voters understand what they are doing.

Managing the postal voting process is not however without its problems. In particular, in respect of the impact of the tight timescales imposed by registration deadlines. We have also experienced the same issues with Absent Voter Identifier checks referred to in evidence.

I note that the Commission intends to review the issue of postal voting as a whole.

/....
The Terminology Used In And Around Elections

Whilst I have not undertaken any research around the issue, I am not aware that voters are put off by the use of terminology such as ‘polling place’, ‘poll card’ etc. Clearly research in this area may be useful.

My experience is that candidates are concerned about what constitutes the ‘polling place’ as opposed to the ‘polling station’, particularly in relation to canvassing voters. I now regularly address the distinction in my pre-election briefings to candidates in order that a consensus can be reached. I have also previously asked that the Commission look at strengthening the guidance they offer to candidates around the issue of canvassing to make the distinction clearer.

Whatever terminology is used, it must be consistently applied across all forms of election to ensure consistency and remove ambiguity. I would support some research around this issue.

Reasons Why People Do Not Vote

Clearly it is important to understand and address the reasons why people do not vote e.g. disillusionment with politicians, inadequate local arrangements etc.

I would support the need for further research in this area.

Robson Rotation In Respect Of The Ordering Of The Ballot Paper

There have been a number of consultations and studies in relation to the ‘Robson Rotation’ system of ordering candidate’s on ballot papers.

Clearly it is for the Parliament to determine whether it would wish to adopt such a system for local government elections in Scotland.

It will be important however that any proposed change to the alphabetical listing of candidates is properly thought out and consulted on prior to implementation.

Diversity Amongst Voters And Elected Representatives

North Ayrshire has a small ethnic minority community.

In the run up to elections we consult with Ayrshire Minority Ethnic Community Association to ensure that we are addressing any particular needs the community might have in relation to the arrangements in place for the conduct of the poll. We also consult with groups representing the disabled and the elderly when in relation to their particular needs. Training of Polling Station staff covers issues around diversity and accessibility. Diversity among voters does not tend to raise significant issues in terms of the arrangements put in place for the conduct of the poll.

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In terms of diversity among elected representatives, 25% of candidates who stood in the 2012 election in North Ayrshire were women. We have never had a member of the ethnic minority community of North Ayrshire stand for election to the Council. No prospective candidate has ever been rejected in North Ayrshire due them failing to meet relevant eligibility criteria.

**The Timing Of Future Elections With A View To Minimising Clashes**

There has been much discussion and debate since the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary and local elections, and in the wake of the Gould Report, around the issue of the timing of the elections.

The Gould Report recommendation that Scottish Parliamentary and local elections should be decoupled has now been implemented. Next day counts have also been held in recent years for the 2011 Referendum and the 2012 Scottish Local elections.

The decoupling of the Scottish Parliamentary and Scottish Local elections is to be welcomed. It would be interesting however to assess whether this may have contributed to the noticeable drop off in turnout for the 2012 local government elections.

Yours sincerely

Elma Murray
Returning Officer