Dear Mr Crawford

Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill

I refer to the Committee’s invitation to give oral evidence as part of the discussion on the above Bill and can confirm that I will attend the meeting that will take place at 9am on Thursday 23 April 2015.

With reference to the desire for the Committee to have written evidence in advance, I have set down below a number of points that I hope inform the Committee ahead of the meeting next Thursday.

Since December 2014 electoral registration officers (EROs) in Scotland have been in close dialogue with both Scottish and UK government officials, the Electoral Commission and software suppliers in order to establish the options and set the delivery of the policy objective in train in parallel with the legislative process.

Ideally the pathway from policy objective to delivery is not as short as it is in this case, following a staged progression from policy through legislation to delivery with at least 6 months lying between the legislation being finalised and the delivery of the legislation’s intention. The principle of allowing a six month period was a recommendation that emerged from the independent review of the 3 May 2007 elections that was led by Ron Gould CM.

The current timeframe to reduce the voting age to 16 for voters participating in future Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections does not permit such a 6 month post legislative window for system development and operational planning prior to the commencement of the 2015 canvass, which will be the first full household canvass carried out under the new individual electoral registration framework. The canvass period runs for 5 months from 1 July to 30 November with the revised registers due to be published by 1 December 2015. All stakeholders must appreciate that the current strategy that involves formulation of legislation, system development and operational planning to run in parallel rather than series carries significant risk that could potentially impact on the ability of EROs to deliver and drive up costs incurred to reach the point of delivery.
20 April 2015

Bruce Crawford MSP
Convener

In anticipation and response to these risks, EROs have worked closely with stakeholders with the ERO Focus Group meeting Scottish Government officials on 20 January 2015 and a roundtable meeting in Edinburgh on 18 February attended by officials from both governments, EROs, software suppliers and the Electoral Commission. Regular dialogue has continued with meetings between EROs, software suppliers and Scottish Government officials as the provisions of the Bill were being drafted. The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) and the Scottish Assessors Association Electoral Registration Committee (SAA ERC) have also been meeting regularly and both governments and the Electoral Commission have a reporting role at these meetings of both the EMB and SAA ERC.

Legislation
At present, with the Bill just entering the first of three stages, EROs are examining the draft provisions with Scottish Government officials on an informal basis and will in time submit a formal response. The close working relationship means that issues are addressed as they arise in either the system development or operational planning processes that are essentially running simultaneously.

In its current form the Bill provides a legal framework for the reduction of the voting age and discussions are centred on ensuring that the proposed provisions sit comfortably within the wider and complex electoral registration legislation.

System development
The adaptation of existing electoral registration software packages, either provided by external suppliers that are used by 12 EROs or developed in-house by the remaining 3 EROs presents challenges.

Firstly, the development of IT systems has to be carried out in parallel with the development of the legislative framework that complicates project management and costing as the final requirements cannot be known until the Bill has completed its passage through Parliament; this is understood to be likely by mid-late June.

Secondly, EROs will be reliant on the software suppliers to deliver the necessary system adjustments to enable them to carry out a canvass in the autumn that will enable young citizens to be registered and registers published by 1 December that reflect the requirements of the Bill. The Electoral Commission reports on the revised electoral registers published in England & Wales (December 2014) and Scotland (March 2015) acknowledge that issues had arisen concerning the functionality of the registration software packages following the introduction of individual electoral registration. EROs are working extremely closely with software suppliers and Scottish Government officials to ensure that the software that is being developed to enable the registration of young voters does function correctly, but ultimately a risk remains that full functionality may not be delivered within the extremely tight timescales provided.
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Operational Planning
Whilst EROs are in the midst of preparations for the general election that takes place on 7 May operational planning is nevertheless underway to ensure that printing capability and canvasser resources are in place for the commencement of the 2015 canvass. In this regard, given that the Bill will not reach the point of Royal Assent until late July, EROs have adjusted their plans for the 2015 canvass so that in Scotland the canvass will not commence until the start of August. Such planning has been conveyed to the Scottish Government and Electoral Commission and I understand that the latter has arrangements in hand to secure suitable media campaigns timed to coincide with the postponed canvass commencement in Scotland. The Bill also requires prescribed canvass and voter registration forms to be adjusted and EROs have responded to requests from the Electoral Commission to provide comment on the proposed changes.

Taking the practical step of postponing the canvass commencement in Scotland to August so that Royal Assent is in place places means that EROs will be under significant pressure, not only to conduct the first individual electoral registration canvass in 4 rather than 5 months, but also deal with the increase demand on resources to ensure that the canvass effectively covers the new young voters.

In summary, the Bill succeeds in providing a framework that EROs will develop in partnership with the Scottish and UK governments, the Electoral Commission, software suppliers and other stakeholders to deliver its objectives. Whilst EROs are working hard to deliver the objectives of the Bill, the short timeframe creates additional risk that stakeholders must recognise.

Yours sincerely

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Member of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland

Difficult reading this? Contact Yvonne Gray on (01224) 664417.