



## **ELECTORAL REGISTRATION**

### **Joint Inquiry – ODPM/Constitutional Affairs Committees**

#### **RESPONSE BY SOLACE**

SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) is the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector. The Society promotes public sector management excellence and provides professional developments for its members who come from all areas of the public sector. Whilst the vast majority of its members work in local government it also has members operating in senior positions in health authorities and central government. SOLACE spans all of the United Kingdom, having membership in Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England.

Members are drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds and are:-

- local authority Chief Executives (the bulk of whom are Returning Officers/Electoral Registration Officers)
- senior executives of local authorities (or other related organisations)
- members of related international organisations
- past service members

SOLACE is uniquely placed as a professional organisation to take an overview of all public sector issues, especially those in local government and not simply electoral issues. In particular, the Society is interested in all new management/leadership developments to improve service to the public and responding to numerous central government initiatives.

The Society organises its work into a number of programme areas and one of these is Electoral Matters. A panel of experienced practitioners meets regularly to discuss and comment upon current issues and problems; this panel is chaired by David Monks, Chief Executive of Huntingdonshire District Council, who has been a Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer for more than 20 years.

Although SOLACE would accept the view of the Electoral Commission that registration is the lynchpin of the electoral system it does not have a high profile in the culture of local government administration. Essentially, it is work carried out at a moderately low level in the organisation and does not attract attention like many of our front line services such as education, social services, housing, highways, planning, etc. That is not to say it is unimportant – it is, but if it is to be substantially reformed it must compete for attention (and hence resources) in an essentially political arena alongside the other "headline/sexy issues".

This significant consideration is amplified well in a paragraph from the Electoral Commission Report on Local Election in Wales 2004 (remember that registration staff and election staff are synonymous).

*Paragraph 7.16*

*It is important to recall that the administrators who manage the day-to-day election planning are generally not senior management staff. Returning Officers are Chief Executives or other senior officers with many other responsibilities and priorities. In Wales, as in England, few Returning Officers would describe themselves as 'hands-on' (although there are those who are) and, understandably given their broader responsibilities, tend to be involved in key decisions only. Electoral administrators, on the other hand, are obliged to spend their time administering complex processes aimed at meeting legal requirements and deadlines, rather than considering broader strategy and wider issues beyond delivering an election.*

Thus electoral registration is conducted more as a routine annual process, rather than a strategic service in local authorities. To change this attitude will require a massive cultural shift – not just new legislation.

All concerned with the electoral process wish to both maximise registration and make such a procedure as available and accessible as possible. The current system is not perfect but it is well understood by those that administer it and, broadly speaking, produces reasonably accurate results (there are some notable exceptions, particularly in urbanised areas). Thus, at the outset, if changes are to be made then they must be addressed with clear objectives in mind (that are measurable) with easily discernable benefits to the consumer. There must also be proper consultation on these proposals with adequate resourcing and training for those charged with operating any new system. It must be fairly said that the record of central government in producing new legislation for election work falls woefully short when measured against these standards.

Moreover, rather like the act of "turning out to vote" registration for the general public has little attraction. It is done out of routine and duty and is seen by many in the 18-24 age range as being connected to their credit worthiness, opening a bank account, obtaining a loan rather than an active step to participate in the democratic process of this country; politics are not attractive (this is all evidenced by research from companies like MORI and quoted in Electoral Commission reports, for instance). Thus, if there were a move to have individual registration by, say, all within a household signing the form there would, inevitably, be a significant decline in names on the register. Again, there would be increased delays in the return of the form and a need for special provision for those with physical and language disabilities, etc. Compared with the attractions of the Lottery, reality television and voting out participants in 'Big Brother' this is not an issue that is likely to grab the public's attention; legislative tinkering with details is not the answer. The real issues centre on awareness and education, involving a change in attitude in our society, which is rarely achieved quickly after any new enactment.

Turning now to the detailed points listed in the invitation to submit evidence and amplifying the themes outlined above:-

**(a) Advantages of individual registration compared with the existing system of household registration**

There are some apparent superficial advantages in having individual registration rather than the current system. Thus, the Returning Officer could, in theory, check postal vote application forms and declarations of identity documents against original signatures; however, it must be appreciated that this would be a huge burden of work in an already ridiculously tight timescale. Frankly, it is an unrealistic aim.

Individual registration would be more expensive to operate, cause delays (as explained above) and would probably reduce the size of the register.

**(b) Strategies for encouraging registration, in particular among young voters, and tackling resistance to registration; and examination of the advantages and disadvantages of compulsory registration**

There is always a case to be made for more citizenship education in schools and colleges. Other more radical strategies have been discussed – eg a refund of, say, £10 or £20 on Council Tax for either registering and/or voting in elections. This is controversial though does have some instant appeal.

The same arguments concerning compulsory registration also apply to compulsory voting. It only really works if there is a determination to enforce it and, really, some desire amongst the vast majority of people in this country to agree to such compulsion. There will always be some resistance and it is the aspiration of some people to appear as martyrs, particularly if enforcement takes place through the courts.

**(c) Issues of geographic and ethnic variations in levels of voter registration**

These issues arise in certain areas of the country and the answer is adding extra resources by having specialised staff undertaking registration (canvassing) and greater levels of publicity and education.

**(d) Advantages or disadvantages of electronic rather than paper-based registration systems**

There is a strong case to be made out for electronic registration. Some authorities use a telephoned based system at the moment to update the register. Why cannot some people apply on line to be registered? As ever, there is resistance because of worries about fraud and secrecy. The banking industry proves that it is possible to take a view on this (risk assessment) and conduct such work reasonably satisfactorily.

**(e) Difficulties for the disabled and others unable to complete forms**

Again, the answer is for special provision to be made for those with disabilities (of whatever form) to have assistance in undertaking the registration procedure. Levels of this are available from most authorities.

**(f) Availability and confidentiality of the register**

SOLACE believes that the basic presumption and starting point should be that the register should only be used for proper election and public service reasons. It is widely sold to credit agencies for a very small sum of money and, like many other areas of public life, this is effectively subsidising a very profitable industry. A possible increased source of revenue for Electoral Registration Officers to undertake greater work could be charging those companies a higher sum of money.

In the past when ideas have been put forward to limit the access of these companies to the register there has been considerable pressure brought upon government from them to stop such moves.

The issue of anonymous registration for certain groups of people (those under threat of violence from a former partner, for example) is one that is dealt with in various ways at many authorities. It really should be clearly legislated upon and have a single solution throughout the country.

**(g) Basis for individual registration, eg address-based or on personal criteria such as NI number or birth date**

National Insurance numbers would appear to be a most attractive solution. It is understood that most people have an NI number, though it is not blanket coverage.

Our society is very mobile and this is always a problem with an address-based system.

**(h) The desirability of a national electoral register**

A national electoral register would be desirable and such schemes as the Co-ordinated Online Register of Elections (CORE) are moving towards this goal. However, the system will only work if all the other problems that this Inquiry is addressing are tackled and existing local registers can be made as accurate as possible.

There should be some system of allowing people to vote at a polling station other than the traditional local one near their home. Thus, if they commute to London they should be able to vote there or, better still, via their laptop/blackberry on the train as they go to work.

**(i) Means on ensuring the security of the register: PIN numbers, electoral voting cards, signatures**

The current system has very high levels of integrity and trust which, however, have been challenged recently with various scare stories about postal voting. It would be disastrous to lose that overall public confidence in the system and very strong scrutiny measures must be built in to any revised system, together with the resolution to prosecute those who are determined to carry out fraudulent acts.

### **Some Concluding Thoughts . . .**

- (i)** The current regulations governing electoral registration are horribly complex and convoluted – even for experienced lawyer Electoral Registration Officers! If changes are to be made then any new regulations should be simpler and more accessible.
  
- (ii)** There must be some 'joined-up' thinking here. Central Government, via the Gershon review, is putting pressure on local authorities to become more efficient, seeking savings of 2.5% per annum on our budgets. If extended registration duties are to be placed upon us then there must be proper and adequate resources to accompany the new burdens.

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