

Local Government and Public Service Committee

LGPS 06-05(p4)

Date: Wednesday 8 June 2005

Venue: Committee Room, National Assembly Building

Title: Scrutiny of Electoral Arrangements in Wales - Evidence from Scope Cymru and The Pollen Shop

Introduction

This paper is being submitted by Scope Cymru and The Pollen Shop in advance of our attendance at the Local Government and Public Services Committee on the 8th June 2005.

Scope and The Pollen Shop work closely on access to democracy issues for disabled people, young people, people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities and people who have low literacy because English is their second language.

Polls Apart Cymru 2005

Scope, Scope Cymru, Capability Scotland, Disability Action Northern Ireland and The Pollen Shop have again undertaken a research project into the accessibility of the 2005 General Election. Our research is based on members of the public surveying polling stations when they vote.

The following are some of our interim results that we believe the Local Government and Public Services Committee may be interested in. It should be noted that these are interim results based on 284 surveys returned from Wales and 1618 for the UK as a whole.

Polls Apart Cymru 2005 results

	Yes	
	Wales	UK
Is there level access into the polling station?	58.7%	59.7%
If there is a ramp to improve access is it appropriately designed?	64.8%	63.4%

Is there level access inside the polling station and can a disabled person move around easily and safely?	84.6%	87.4%
Is there a low-level polling booth?	63.7%	66.2%
Is there a large print version of the ballot paper on display?	73.7%	69.5%

Similar Polls Apart research has been undertaken in Wales for the last major elections. By comparing data from previous elections we are able to identify that there has been a significant improvement in access of many polling stations in Wales.

Accessible polling stations at the last 3 elections

2003 National Assembly	2004 Local and European	2005 General Election
23%	30%	37% ¹

We believe this increase primarily reflects effort by Welsh Electoral Administrators to try to make polling stations as accessible as possible.

Improving access at polling stations has been an all Wales project that has got support from across the political spectrum. Lots of organisations in Wales have also come together to support this work; these include Disability Wales and the Wales Disability Reference Group.

The National Assembly for Wales, Equality of Opportunity Committee; The National Assembly Government's Local Government Modernisation Division; Sue Essex AM Minister for Finance, Local Government and Public Services; Electoral Commission and the Disability Rights Commission in Wales should also be commended for prioritising this work.

There is however a tremendous amount of work to do. Only 37% of Welsh polling stations are accessible. We will need to ensure that the variation between constituencies is reduced. More fundamentally we believe that the Polls Apart Cymru surveys indicate that, despite the Disability Discrimination Act October 2004 deadline, many public buildings are still not accessible.

Voter registration

Although many of the formal procedures, processes and funding for elections are not devolved, the National Assembly for Wales and Welsh Assembly has a crucial role in delivering inclusive elections in Wales. Voter registration is one area where devolved government in Wales can really make difference.

Although we welcome the general move towards individual registration, as it will support multi-channel voting which enhances the overall accessibility of elections, we also recognise it will create a number of challenges.

Overall registration of a number of groups will be reduced if individual registration is introduced without care. These include young people, especially those living in houses of multiple occupation, people with low literacy, people who do not speak English as a first language, older people and people with learning difficulties. These groups will have to be directly targeted with specific voter registration campaigns. The National Assembly could take a lead in starting this process now.

The process of individual registration needs to be inclusive. This does not just mean producing the forms in accessible formats but also looking carefully at what security information is required. For example, the requirement to supply a national insurance number would create a barrier for many people.

Turnout

Falling and differential turnout is dependant on a number of issues.

These include

- the accessibility and usability of the election process,
- how voters view the relative importance of an election,
- and if people think an election is going to be close.

The first of these is partly dependant on how well politicians reach out to different groups. It is natural for political party machinery to target those who it believes are most likely to vote. These are often those people it is easiest to reach.

Turnout at elections for the National Assembly is constrained because it is difficult to explain to voters, especially those such as young people who are less likely to vote anyway, why the National Assembly for Wales is important.

To increase turnout it is therefore important that strategies are adopted to explain to specific groups of voters what relevance the Assembly has to them. The communication methods and the message will have to be accessible to each group. This will mean the strategies will have to be very different.

¹Interim data