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Briefing: Local government and local democracy First published: 16 June 2023
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of a House of Lords debate on 15 June, this briefing sets out the views of the Electoral Commission on the role of local authorities in delivering elections and overseeing the democratic process. It highlights some of the issues they face, and our recommendations to improve the system, with the goal of broadening participation in local democracy.

Resilience of electoral administrators Local authority election teams are responsible for delivering elections, including electoral registration, nominations, absent voting, polling stations and counts. Local electoral services currently face significant challenges including funding, staffing and venue shortages. The Commission and others – including the Association of s – have highlighted that the resilience of these teams is a concern for delivering well-run elections. Our research and the feedback we gather from electoral administrators after each set of elections tells us about the pressures on the electoral system that are currently being experienced at the local level. In response we develop and deliver a programme of activity to support resilient electoral services.

Elections Act The changes introduced by the Elections Act have the potential to increase the challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled and trained polling station staff. This is due to the additional responsibilities for poll clerks and presiding officers, such as checking the identification of voters. Our pre-poll survey with electoral administrators this year showed these concerns particularly in relation to the new voter ID requirement, issuing and processing the Voter Authority Certificate and its temporary and anonymous equivalents. Other comments made related to legislative delays; the impact on resources; risk around delivery; and inability to have proper mitigations in place given timescales. We continue to recommend that the UK Government ensures that legislative changes are clear six months before they are required to be implemented, in order to enable administrators to plan effectively. This is especially important given the range and scale of changes to be introduced by the Elections Act. We will publish an interim analysis of the voter ID requirement later in June. Our full report on the May 2023 local elections in England and Northern Ireland will be published in September.

Electoral registration Accuracy and completeness of electoral registers The Commission measures the quality of the electoral registers in the UK through accuracy and completeness studies. These help us to understand voter registration levels, including by demographic. We will publish updated accuracy and completeness data in autumn 2023. Our research has shown us that there are three key factors driving under-registration: age, residency, and ethnicity. Registration rates are lowest among young people and students, private renters and recent movers, and some black and minority ethnic communities. Our most recent research, conducted on the December 2018 registers, shows that completeness of the local government registers was at 83% in Great Britain and 73% in Northern Ireland. It suggests that the quality of the registers could be improved, but significant improvement is unlikely without reform.

Impact of electoral registration on local authorities An accessible online registration process means it is easy for people who want to make sure they can take part to submit an application, and to do so close to the deadline – which we know remains common voter behaviour. However, online registration also means that electoral administrators come under pressure to process large numbers of applications ahead of high-profile elections such as UK general elections. This comes at a key point in the timetable when elections teams are also issuing postal votes and preparing for polling day. The number of

applications made before the registration deadline for the general election in 2019 (3.85 million people) was significantly higher than at the 2017 election (2.9 million people). In 2019, 660,000 people applied on deadline day, compared to 612,000 people in 2017. Electoral administrators have reported that large volumes of registration and absent vote applications can make it harder to focus on running elections at a critical time. Further pressure can also arise where registration and postal vote application deadlines fall on the same day or close together. Administrators will be under pressure to process both types of application in line with the legal timescales. We have recommended that the UK Government undertake further work to explore how the system could be improved to address the significant administrative impact of processing duplicate applications ahead of electoral events.

Participation

The Commission collects data on turnout at local elections. Over the last 40 years levels of local election turnout have been in decline. Unlike UK general elections where their periodic nature makes changes in turnout more apparent, the regular nature of local elections can mask more gentle trends. The average turnout at local elections in the 1980s was 42%, this has declined steadily to 38% in the 1990s, 35% in the 2000s and 34% in the 2010s.

Recommendations for reform

Electoral registration reform

In 2019, we published feasibility studies setting out how electoral registration could be modernised in practice. They focused on three main areas:

- Better use of public data
- Direct or automatic enrolment processes
- Integrating electoral registration into other public service transaction

We found that all these could be implemented without radically altering the structure of the electoral registration system in the UK. We are currently revisiting these studies, focusing on how different data sources and infrastructures could be utilised to support further reform; in particular, to help address the specific challenge of under-registration among certain groups of citizens, including attainders, home movers and private renters. Introducing more automated or automatic opportunities to register would help increase levels of registration and opportunities for democratic participation. This could build on frequently used public service transactions such as applications for passports, changes to driving licence details, or when new National Insurance numbers are issued to people turning 16. Giving electoral registration officers access to data from a wide range of public service organisations, so that they can identify people who are not correctly registered, would also help reduce the challenge of processing large numbers of applications ahead of major electoral events.

Electoral law reform

The resilience of electoral administration in the UK is also challenged by delivering elections within an outdated and increasingly complex electoral law framework. We will continue to work with the electoral community, the UK Government and local authorities to develop and deliver proposals to support resilient electoral services. We continue to call on the Government to implement the widely supported recommendations of the law commissions to simplify and modernise electoral law. This would help governments and legislatures to deliver their policy priorities more easily, and help administrators to provide the level of service that voters deserve.

. A key part of our role is to provide advice to government and parliament on legislation relating to elections. If you would like any further information, please contact Ryan McCullough in our public affairs team:
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