POSTAL VOTING UPDATE

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FINANCE

CABINET   **9TH SEPTEMBER, 2004**

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To note the recommendations of the recent Select Committee Report on postal voting issues

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendation

THAT the recommendations in the Postal Voting Report of The Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee and their implications for local electoral registration be noted.

Reasons

After the European Elections held in June 2004 the Government is committed to make a firm decision on whether to extend all-postal voting.

Considerations

1. The Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and its associated bodies. It resolved to conduct an inquiry into postal voting, exploring in particular the following issues:

    - electoral fraud
    - public perceptions
    - impact on turnout
    - administration and cost
    - access and disability issues
    - voter choice.

2. The Committee recently presented its report on these issues. It found that the Government's programme of electoral modernisation had developed against a background of declining voter turnout. In the June 2001 General Election, turnout was the lowest recorded since the advent of universal adult suffrage; only 59.4% of the 44,403,238 registered voters chose to vote, compared with 71.4% in the 1997

Further information on the subject of this report is available from Mr Stephen Oram, Public Services Manager on 01432 260110

General Election. Voting by post was first introduced after World War One in order to allow service personnel stationed overseas to vote at the December 1918 General Election. Until 2000 the facility was only available to limited groups, for example, those who would be absent from the area, or who had a physical disability.   In 1999 a Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures undertook a review of how electoral procedures might be changed to increase voter turnout. The Working Party recommended the introduction of electoral pilot schemes as a means of testing innovative voting procedures.

3. All-postal voting pilots have been the most popular pilot; eighty all-postal pilots have taken place in England and Wales (including Herefordshire), and four in Scotland. Under an all-postal voting pilot, the entire electorate, whether or not they have applied to vote by post, is issued with a postal vote; there are no 'traditional' polling stations, although there may be staffed points for the completion and receipt of votes. As a result, polling is not confined to one day. The largest pilot to date took place in 2004 when elections for local councils and the European Parliament were combined on 10 June. Voters in the East Midlands, North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions, making up 30% of the electorate, were only able to vote by post. This large scale pilot should answer crucial questions about the scaleability, costs and security of all-postal elections. Following these elections much comment has been made of the possibility of fraud taking place. Instances are currently being investigated and reports are awaited. Following these elections the Government must make a firm decision as to whether to extend all-postal voting.

4. The Committee found that evidence shows that all-postal voting has had a positive effect, increasing turnout by an average of 15% in all but three of the pilot areas. Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland more than doubled their voter turnout. It has been suggested that higher turnouts are the result of increased incidences of electoral fraud, or "personation". The Electoral Commission, has evaluated each of the all-postal pilots, and although no hard evidence of greater fraud has been found, the Committee believes that steps should be taken to ensure the risk of fraud is not increased with the extension of all-postal voting. The Committee recommends:

- Introduction of individual voter registration: Each voter's signature and a numeric individual identifier should be required to join the electoral register. A witnessed declaration of identity could be replaced with a voter-signed declaration requiring completion of the numeric individual identifier. This identifier should be verified electronically as standard practice;
- Increased resources to allow Electoral Officers to verify a sample of signatures on returned ballot papers;
- Establishment of a national database to record allegations of electoral offences;
- Dissemination of information and guidance to police forces on electoral offences; and provision of search and arrest powers to the police to aid investigations of allegations of electoral offences; and
- More rigorous prosecution of allegations of electoral offences, and harsher penalties for those convicted.

5. The Committee considers that the Government must also develop better systems to help those who may be unable to vote by post as a result of disability or literacy problems. It recommends assisted delivery points, and home assistance should be available throughout the polling period to offer impartial advice and assistance. Tactile voting devices should be redesigned to include candidates' names and political parties in Braille; and ballot material should be regulated to prevent overly complex designs.

6. All-postal elections rely on the reliability and security of the postal service. The Committee considers that the Government must ensure that the Royal Mail's audit trail is rigorous and transparent. The Committee recommends that the independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission (Postcomm), sets targets which require that the Royal Mail deliver 100% of ballot papers securely and accurately. Postcomm and the Electoral Commission should verify completion of this target through use of "seeded" ballot papers.

7. The Committee further recommends that the Government must not only rely on changes in the electoral system to increase voter turnout but that they must also ensure engagement of electors in politics.

Risk Management

The Committee's recommendation to move to individual voter registration will have an increased impact on the workload and costs of the Council's Electoral Registration Section.

Consultees

None identified

Background Papers

None identified