

# Lack of engagement in local elections needs to be addressed

*More effort needed to engage and enable voters in local authority elections*

Lack of engagement at party political, local and Scottish Government level is leading to local authority elections becoming the 'third tier' of democracy according to a report published today by the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Regeneration Committee.

The report examines the 2012 local authority elections – which attracted a voter turnout of just 39.8 per cent – with a view to making recommendations about how to engage the public and make it easier for them to vote in the next elections due to take place in 2017.

Key to increasing voting is modernising the way people vote with the increased use of postal and proxy votes and widening the voting options. The Committee notes that whilst technology is moving rapidly, voting methods have not changed. It also notes that the use of technology would be key to engaging with younger voters.

Deputy Committee Convener John Wilson MSP said:-

“Our Committee is only too aware of the importance of local democracy on the day to day lives of people across the country. That is why it is so important we looked at local authority elections and what more needs to be done to ensure that everyone can have their say. Given its importance, we are disappointed that none of the political parties took the opportunity to respond to our requests for evidence.”

“Voter engagement is not the responsibility of just one organisation. The Scottish Government, the Electoral Commission, local authorities and political parties all have a role to play in giving people the power to affect and change local issues. If we don’t all work together, there is a real danger that local authority elections will continue to be seen as the third tier of democracy.

“With four years to go until the next local authority elections, now is the time to learn the lessons of the past and modernise the voting system to engage with as many people as possible and to make the voting system as accessible as possible.”

The Committee’s report also reached the following conclusions:

#### Voting methods

- Consideration should be given to take all opportunities to pilot new voting methods such as on-line and phone voting.

The Scottish Government should seek to extend the use of proxy or postal votes given the high return of postal votes experienced.

#### Election awareness initiatives

- That local authorities (working with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and Election Registration Officers) do more to engage with young people in secondary and further education on a regular basis to highlight the importance of local democracy and raise awareness of the voting process.

#### Voter registration and how this can be increased

- Consideration should be given to a year round continual canvass to ensure that all eligible voters are registered. Alternative ways of registering to vote should also be considered.