Police and Crime Commissioners – Candidate addresses

Background

On 15 November 2012, for the first time ever, the public across England and Wales will elect police and crime commissioners (PCCs) who will be accountable for how crime is tackled in their police force areas. PCCs will cut crime by ensuring an effective and efficient police service within their area. To provide stronger and more transparent accountability of the police, PCCs will be elected by the public to hold chief constables and the force to account; effectively making the police answerable to the communities they serve.

This is the first election of this kind and, in order that they can exercise their vote effectively, the public will need information about the full range of candidates that are standing.

Proposal

In order to aid candidates in reaching the public, the Home Office will provide a single national website on which candidates can publish an 'election address'. This will allow every candidate, for free, to set out to the public what they would do if they were PCC. Every candidate will have an identical page to ensure they are treated equally, and as such will provide a level playing field for everyone seeking election. Voters will be able to search by postcode, candidate name or issue allowing easy access to the information they need. Information on how to vote will also be provided by the Electoral Commission on the website.

Whilst the website will be run and paid for by the Government, it will operate independently, and the Government will have no say about the content of addresses and no power to refuse to publish any address. Independent Returning Officers will upload information provided by candidates and be responsible for ensure no commercial, offensive or illegal content is published.

In addition the Home Office will offer a free phoneline whereby a member of the public can order a paper copy of those addresses delivered to their door for free, whether they are without web access or simply prefer a paper copy. We will take all steps we can to ensure the public equally know the web address and how to order a paper copy. Both will be widely publicised by the Electoral Commission and will appear on the poll card.

This approach will enable the public to access candidate information through a range of means within the short timescales that elections require, and is cost effective in the current climate.

With internet penetration at 80% we believe that this multi-channel solution will make candidate information far more accessible to the general public than a single channel alone, and especially those groups normally less likely to engage in elections.

Summary of the evidence considered in demonstrating due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Consultation

The Home Office sought comments on the proposals from key organisations within the electoral community, including the Electoral Commission, Returning Officers and the Association for Electoral Administrators. Those organisations asked us to consider the fact a website and phoneline requires the voter to seek out the information. They also asked us to consider demographic differences in internet access.

Internet Usage

Most people have access to the internet and use it regularly. In 2011 77% of households had internet access, rising at a rate of 4% a year[1].For many the internet is the first port of call for information, especially official information. 39% of households use the internet when they wish to access local and/or national Government information, up 3% on last year[2]. Therefore we can assume that there will be a significant number of voters that will look to the internet first to find out information on PCCs rather than waiting to receive information by mail.

Whilst we will make provision for households without internet access, we have carefully considered whether a multi-channel approach will mean some households feel they are not given equality of access. In fact, most households who do not have internet access choose not to; 50% of households without internet access feel they do not need it, 8% do not have access because they have access elsewhere and 5% do not have access due to security concerns. It can be assumed therefore that nearly two-thirds of those without internet access would rather receive the information on paper and will be content to phone the free helpline to request a free paper copy delivered to their door.

An important consideration is whether a mailing is fairer than a website, as it ensures that everyone will receive the mailing and be able to chose whether or not they red it. This relays on the fallacious assumption that people note the unsolicited mail they receive. Nearly a third of direct mail is discarded unopened and less than half is ever read[3]. Further, many people do not like receiving information for which they have not asked; 5.2m people were registered to not receive unsolicited mail as of October 2011[4]. With postal information there is a risk that the leaflets get lost in a pile of other unsolicited mail and not noticed, much less read. An on-demand service ensures that everyone who wants the information can receive it, and will be expecting it to arrive. Postal voting is increasingly common - in the 2011 referendum, 25% of

[1] ONS, Internet Access - Households and Individuals, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-226727

[2] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/statistics/2012jan/Ofcom_Technology_Tracker_Wa3.pdf

[3] Royal Mail – The Letterbox Factfile, http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=site%3Aroyalmail.com%20statistics%20mailshot&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CEQQFjAB&url=ftp%3A%2F%2Fftp.royalmail.com%2FDownloads%2Fpublic%2Fctf%2Frm%2FLetterbox_Factfile_2002.pdf&ei=k2F0T573LqK20QXQ4tHfDw&usg=AFQjCNFx6SD1lTn7OHlhGLBm0F_rHEQvNA

[4] Selectabase – media - http://www.selectabase.co.uk/news/

voters opted to vote by post, with a further 0.17% applying for a proxy vote[5]. Many people opting to vote by post or by proxy do so because they are not at home for example they are on holiday or on military service. Returning officers therefore have to make a decision whether to send candidate information to the registered address or the address given for a postal/proxy vote. Under our proposed model the public can access the website from any location, and can ask for a paper copy to be sent to the address most convenient to them.

Socio-Economic Factors

Whilst a smaller number of lower socioeconomic groups (56% of DE groups) have internet access, only a small proportion of these are unable to access due to cost.[6] 22% of households without internet access (only about 3% of households in total) are unable to access the internet due to cost[7]. A print on demand service will fill these gaps and allow all people to request candidate information for free, and have it delivered for free. Candidates will be included on the website with no cost to them (distinct from any existing election) meaning no candidate will be denied this platform due to lack of funds.

Disability

There is evidence that providing information online may improve access to information for disabled people. For example, internet users with disabilities access the internet more often internet users as a whole, due to the range of information available, the speed with which it is available and the convenience of being able to access information from home[8]. There is also evidence to suggest that some disabled people prefer to use the internet as it allows independent access to information, without having to rely on help from others[9].

Although only 3% of households without internet access state this is due to a disability[10], for some with visual or motor impairments using the internet and computers require specific adaptations that can limit access.[11] To enable as many people as possible to access our website, we will ensure compliance with Level A of the Web Accessibility Initiative's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. The level that "must be satisfied or some groups of people will be unable to access information from the site" in WAI's phraseology.

A print on demand service allows more flexibility in terms of allowing the public to request the format (e.g. large print or Braille) that suits them, allowing those with disabilities more flexibility. This is simply not possible with a mass-scale mailing.

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[5] Electoral Commission, Report on May 2011 Referendum - http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/141328/Final-PVS-report.pdf

[6] Ofcom, The Communications Market, 2011

[7] ONS, Internet Access - Households and Individuals, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-226727

[8] The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Does the Internet open up opportunities for disabled people? http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/does-internet-open-opportunities-disabled-people

[9] The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Does the Internet open up opportunities for disabled people? http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/does-internet-open-opportunities-disabled-people

[10] ONS, Internet Access - Households and Individuals, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-226727

[11] The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Does the Internet open up opportunities for disabled people? http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/does-internet-open-opportunities-disabled-people

Race and Ethnicity

People from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities tend to be younger than the UK population in general[12], and there is evidence to suggest those from BME communities are more likely to have both access to, and understanding of, the internet than the population as a whole[13]. It is important that information is available in both English and Welsh, and we have consulted with the Welsh Language Board on these provisions. The website and paper booklet will be available in both English and Welsh, candidates will be able to submit their addresses in either language, and may provide a translation into the other language if they wish.

Age

Younger people use the internet more than older people. In total 88% of under 55s have web access, 73% of 55-65, and 55% of 65-74s. This demographic is shifting, however, and of the average of 2 million new internet users every year 53% are over 50[14].

Voting turnout for over 65s was 10% higher than the average adult turnout rate in the 2010 general election.[15] Older people are, therefore, much more likely to be engaged in the electoral process and we believe are therefore more likely to be comfortable with requesting a paper copy of candidate information if they do not have internet access.

Younger people are less likely to vote[16], but are more likely to access information through the internet. Promoting access to information on candidates through websites, particularly if supported by marketing, may increase their access to electoral information. 57% of 15-24 year olds access the internet via their mobile phones , and this has changed rapidly in the last two years[17]. We will ensure that the website is optimised to be accessible to those who wish to view via mobile device in order to boost this impact.

Sex

There is little difference in internet access between sexes, with a 1% difference in internet access between females and males in 2011.

We do not consider this policy to have any differential impact in respect of gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; religion or belief (includes lack of belief); or sexual orientation.

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[12] OFCOM, Media literacy of UK adults from ethnic minority groups, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media--iteracy/archive/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ml_emg08/

[13] OFCOM, Media literacy of UK adults from ethnic minority groups, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media--iteracy/archive/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ml_emg08/

[14] Ofcom, The Communications Market 2011, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr11/UK_Doc_Section_4.pdf

[15] Ipsos-Mori, How Britain Voted in 2010: http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613

[16] Ipsos MORI, How Britain Voted in 2011, http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613

[17] Ofcom, The Communications Market 2011, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr11/UK_Doc_Section_4.pdf