
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Operational practices

All practices and procedures will be kept under review to ensure that the best service is delivered to electors, registered political parties, candidates and media at the next State election. Below are some of the areas which have been identified for improvement.

Polling places in rural and regional electorates

Informing electors in rural and regional electorates of the location of polling places, particularly where a location has changed, remains a challenge. The provision of this information would be more effective if it were able to be conveyed directly to rural electors.

Electors from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal electors

Improve the recruitment and placement of multilingual and Aboriginal election officials to ensure staff are employed at polling places where most required.

Postal voting

The NSWEC has explored many options for assisting electors in remote locations to access the voting system. Within the current legislative provisions, there are no options other than such electors choosing to register as a general postal voter. Returning officers despatched postal voting material to registered general postal voters on Monday, 12 March 2007. Unfortunately, electors in remote areas who applied for a postal vote after Monday, 12 March 2007 may not have received their postal vote in time due to the limited mail delivery service in these areas.

The NSWEC's view is that legislative change would be necessary to provide other options for these electors such as mandating that electors in certain areas be enrolled as registered general postal voter, or offering eVoting options.

Communication services

The State election communication campaign will be reviewed, with a particular focus on the development of a comprehensive strategy to increase enrolment and voter participation, in areas where these are particularly low.

Returning officers' offices

Returning officers often have difficulty leasing suitable temporary office accommodation that meets the accessibility standards required as owners are not keen to enter into a short-term lease on commercial property.

In future where returning officers' offices are not fully wheelchair accessible the NSWEC will consider, where possible, establishing an additional pre-poll voting location within the district to better assist electors who require such access.

Provision of electoral roll

The New South Wales electoral roll is provided to parties on CD-ROM. NSWEC will consider developing a search facility to enable finding an elector anywhere on the roll without having to examine the roll district by district.

Usability of the NSWEC website

The usability of the NSWEC website will be reviewed to ensure that information can be easily accessed. The possibility of providing a brief training session or training module for interested media to assist them access information will be considered.

Media releases

The scheduling of media releases will be reviewed to ensure the timely distribution of information, and attention will be paid to close seats in regional areas to cater for regional media interests. Links to the relevant section on the NSWEC website will also be provided to assist the media to find additional information.

Information kit

The NSWEC will endeavour to further develop maps and graphics used in the information kit to ensure they are suitable for reproduction in newspapers.

Electronic voting

Computer-assisted voting, through voting kiosks or online formats, has become possible in recent years due to advances in the required technology. Some electoral authorities in Australia have begun to trial this technology.

Electronic voting (eVoting) requires an elector to visit a purpose-built electronic voting kiosk to cast their vote. This was trialled by the Victorian Electoral Commission for electors with a vision impairment at the November 2006 Victorian State election. Internet voting (iVoting) would allow electors with internet access to vote online.

The NSWEC has closely followed the trial of electronic voting in Victoria, and will also monitor the trial of electronic voting for vision impaired electors as well as defence personnel stationed overseas at the upcoming Federal election. Given these developments it is appropriate for New South Wales to consider its position on this issue but no such trial would proceed in the absence of legislative support.

Legislative changes

Based on the experience of the March 2007 State election it is recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals.

Introduce more flexible voting options

Electors in rural and remote locations

A major challenge for conducting elections in New South Wales is the geographical spread of the State. It requires a balance to be struck between making pre-poll offices and polling places available to all electors in a district, and the resulting cost and resource implications. This is an issue particularly in rural and remote areas where finding appropriate locations and election officials can be challenging. It is also an issue for electors who may have to drive long distances to attend pre-poll and polling places which, given the high cost of fuel, can be an expensive exercise.

People who live more than 20 kilometres from the nearest polling place can apply to be registered general postal voters and automatically receive the ballot papers when they are available, or if they meet the relevant criteria they can apply for a postal vote. Supplying electors with a copy of the ballot papers cannot occur until after nominations have closed and the draw for candidates' positions on the ballot paper has been conducted and ballot papers have been printed. Although this is usually finalised about two weeks before election day, the main difficulty with postal voting in many rural and remote areas is the limited mail service (in some areas there is only one mail delivery a week), which may mean ballot papers are not received, completed and returned by the statutory deadline. One response could be to mandate those in remote areas as registered general postal voters to at least facilitate the early dispatch of ballot papers.

Another possible solution would be for the Act to be amended to permit the NSWEC to provide mobile pre-polling, where appropriate. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act* contains such a provision, and according to the Australian Electoral Commission's report on the 2004 election it had mobile polling teams visit in the 12 days leading up to and including election day. It used road, air and sea transport to visit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their outstations, pastoral properties, small towns, tourist resorts and mine sites. Such an initiative would not only be beneficial from an elector's point of view but it may prove a more efficient and cost effective option for the NSWEC compared with locating suitable polling places and election officials.

Another option which could be considered is iVoting for electors in rural and remote parts of the State. Those eligible and wishing to vote in this manner would be required to register with the NSWEC prior to the election.

Electors with a physical disability

Electors with a disability could be allowed to qualify for a postal or pre-poll vote. Under the *Local Government Act* 1993 people with a disability can apply for a postal vote, and it has been recommended that they also be given the option of casting a pre-poll vote. In this way a person would be able to choose the most accessible means for them to be heard: sending in a postal vote, voting in person before the election or attending on election day. These choices should be available at State elections as well.

Electors with a disability could also be provided with the option to register as an iVoter.

Electors overseas or interstate

The majority of those overseas or interstate do not vote by post but attend a consular office (if overseas) or an electoral organisation (if interstate) and cast a pre-poll vote. In keeping with the current practice it is recommended that these provisions be recast to mirror the pre-poll provisions that apply if an elector is voting as a pre-poll voter in New South Wales where they make an oral declaration to establish their entitlement to the pre-poll vote.

Electors in declared institutions

Although the Act has been amended to remove the requirement for a person to complete a written application in order to cast a pre-poll vote, they are still required to sign the declaration on the envelope in which the ballot papers are placed. Considering that many of the electors resident in declared institutions are enrolled in the district in which the declared institution is located, they could be given an ordinary vote in the same way as they would at a polling place. This would greatly assist elderly electors some of whom find it difficult to sign a declaration.

More flexibility in how resources are allocated by the NSWEC

The Act states that election officials are appointed for a specific district as well as for a specific term. This means that there have to be 93 returning officers, each of whom needs an office requiring fit-out and supplies as well as staff. It would be of great assistance if the Electoral Commissioner were able to co-locate two or more returning officers in a central location which would simplify the process for the NSWEC in finding suitable accommodation and cut down the costs of rental, fit-out, staff and other related expenses.

Election posters

Clarify the definition of 'poster'

Although the definition of poster is quite wide, it is arguable whether many new forms of advertising, such as electronic billboards or digital road signs, are captured. It is recommended that the use of digital road signs of the type that are used by the RTA or the police to convey messages to drivers be prohibited. The use of such a device, which occurred at the March 2007 State election, is considered inappropriate.

Posters at polling places

On election day posters not exceeding 8,000 sq cm are permitted within 5 metres of the entrance to the polling place and on the outer wall, fence or other boundary of the grounds. In the space from the 5 metre mark to the outer wall, fence or other boundary, any size poster is permitted. Canvassing for votes or distribution of electoral material may not occur within 6 metres from the entrance to the polling place so that electors would be able to make their way easily into the polling places.

To make the situation clearer for election officials and party workers it is recommended that section 151B(1) be amended to provide that no posters are allowed to be displayed within 6 metres of the entrance to the polling place (which the Act defines as being the building in which voting takes place), and that from the 6 metre mark, up to and including the outer wall, fence or other boundary, no poster can exceed 8,000 sq cm.

Superannuation

The current arrangements are onerous and costly. Over 17,000 employees earned less than \$300 each for their work with the NSWEC on election day. In New South Wales all employers are required to pay 9% superannuation to an account of the employee's choice. In the NSWEC context the contribution amounted to less than \$30 per employee, and employees nominated over 500 different super funds. This was an extremely labour intensive process to manage.

Moreover, many employees did not correctly nominate a fund which resulted in their monies being transmitted to First State Super (FSS). FSS in turn had a significant administrative burden in setting up new accounts for the one-off contribution of \$30 and, given the low account balance, they were unable to charge a fee. In addition those people who did not want their contribution to remain in FSS then sought a roll-over, which further increased the burden to FSS.

The NSWEC would like to seek an exemption from paying a super contribution for these employees or alternatively be able to pay the contribution directly to the employee.