

Council accused of mixing up Muslim names in election blunder

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By Laura Hughes, Parliamentary Correspondent



THE city council has been accused of an election blunder by spelling the names of scores of Muslim voters incorrectly on the voting register.

At the last General Election, the authority came in for a barrage of criticism after ballot papers were mixed up during the election count, causing the process to drag on for hours longer than necessary.

This time, Labour activists claim they have come across voters with Islamic names which have been entered incorrectly on the electoral register.

They say the problem particularly involves the variety of spellings of the name Mohammed, as well as Muslim women whose first names and surnames have been mixed up and have sometimes been registered as men.

The council insists anyone affected will still be able to vote but concerns have been raised that it could also affect financial deals such as credit card applications, as reference agencies use the electoral register to check identities to protect against fraud.

The name Mohammed can be spelt a number of ways, including Mohammed, Mohamed, Muhammad, Muhammat and Mohammad.

Fuad Mahamed, *pictured*, who runs Ashley Community Housing, says he is aware of the problem.

He said: "The most common way people think you spell the name is Muhammad but believe it or not, that is the least common way it is actually spelt. People write it different ways and what's happening is that the Council may be assuming it's all being spelt in the same way. The Somali community already feel isolated and the last thing we want is for them not to vote and have a political influence."

Mary Southcott, who is a Labour council candidate in Ashley ward, says there has been an increase in problems with registrations, including more people going unregistered, particularly students and young people on the move in privately rented accommodation, since a change from household to individual electoral registration (IER) in 2011.

She said: "We do not know the extent of the problem but we need to be aware of it and deal with it if even more people in the inner city are not to be disenfranchised."

"Many people have fallen off the register. I believe there are three main reasons, the voter may not be literate in English, names may have inconsistent spelling and the first and second names are being reversed in order.

"In Ashley and Lawrence hill we are finding a lot of missing ethnic minority names."

Bristol North West Labour activist Callum Collins said: "One lady's name had been recorded as Mariam instead of Maryam, so we told her to go and get it changed."

Darren Jones, the Labour parliamentary candidate for Bristol North West, said: "We continue to find people who want to vote but find they're not on the register. To make it worse, we're now finding voters' names have been recorded incorrectly. I have real fears that people will be turning up to vote on May 7 and told they're unable to."

The city council insists people will still be able to vote even if their names are incorrectly spelt on the register.

A council spokesperson said: "Given the rules around data protection, we cannot comment on individual cases.

"We process each application individually based on the information received.

"Our system does not have predictive text or auto-correct functions. Accuracy is a key priority and there are a number of checks in place to avoid errors being made. These checks will not alter the information that the applicant provides.

"If anybody finds that the name on their polling card is incorrect, they will still be able to vote – any such errors will be noted by polling station personnel for correction."

The Electoral Commission has confirmed that people may be denied credit if a credit referencing agency is unable to verify their details on the electoral register.

Anyone told that they have been denied credit for this reason should contact the electoral registration officer at their local council for confirmation that they are registered.

The council will be able to supply them with a letter confirming their details on the electoral register to pass on to the reference agency - but may charge a fee for supplying it.

The commission said authorities can cross-reference their records with the Department for Work and Pensions to check spellings, a process known as "matching across", which can be carried out where there is a problem with individual voter registration.

Read more: <http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Council-accused-mixing-Muslim-names-election/story-26362452-detail/story.html#ixzz3Y38V55Ye>

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