The
Electoral
Commission

Modernising elections

A strategic evaluation of the
2002 electoral pilot schemes

Contents

Preface

The innovations piloted at the 2002 local elections by 30 local authorities are critical building blocks for the modernisation of our electoral processes. The pilots in May 2000 had given some important pointers, especially on postal voting. These were built on subsequently in a number of mayoral referendums as well as in this year's elections.

The critical change from 2000 has been the number of electronic pilots. In 2000, out of 38 pilot schemes there was electronic counting in five authorities and electronic voting in three. This time, there was electronic voting in nine authorities and electronic counting in 15. Equally striking was the diversity of approach, with kiosk voting in six authorities, internet voting in five, telephone voting in three and voting by text message in two. The experience we now have of a variety of new voting methods has allowed us to draw some conclusions in this report as well as to identify strategically what the priorities should be for future pilots.

The lion's share of the credit for this lies with those local authorities which were prepared to take the risk of trying new ways of running elections. In order to ensure that the maximum learning could be derived from their efforts, The Electoral Commission assigned an individual assessor to each pilot authority. Their reports, enhanced by independent opinion surveys, technical assessments and accessibility reporting, are published by the local authorities themselves and are available on The Electoral Commission website. What we publish here is a strategic overview of the pilot programme as a whole.

I commend the report to you both for its analysis of experience so far and for the agenda it identifies for future action. Its contents are a tribute to the local authorities concerned, to the support provided by government and to the skill and hard work of Electoral Commission staff.

Sam Younger
Chairman, The Electoral Commission
July 2002

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Executive summary

Background

At the local elections held on 2 May 2002 in England, 30 local authorities tested a range of innovations aimed at encouraging participation in the elections, widening the range of voting methods, improving the efficiency of vote counting and increasing the information available to voters. The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate any pilot electoral scheme approved by the relevant Secretary of State. In approaching this task, the Commission starts with the belief that it is essential we respond to the changing lifestyles and new expectations of the electorate, and exploit the opportunities provided by new technologies. If such innovations are to succeed, however, they must demonstrate that they are capable of providing levels of security at least equivalent to more traditional methods of voting and win public and political confidence.

The Commission has produced an individual evaluation report for each pilot authority. These reports are available to view at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk. Overall, the Commission believes that the May 2002 pilots successfully widened the choice of voting method available to those interested in participating in the election and secured significant increases in turnout in some pilot areas; the process was generally well managed by the local authorities and there were no significant technical problems. Although there were concerns in some areas about possible increased risk of fraud, the Commission has identified no evidence that these fears were realised in practice.

However, there are a number of learning points to be drawn from the experience. The Commission has produced this strategic report looking at the pilot schemes collectively as the basis for making recommendations about the selection of future pilots and best practice in the management of pilot schemes.

Turnout and public opinion

In a majority of pilot authorities, turnout was up by comparison both with recent local elections and with non-pilot area local elections in 2002. In some places, turnout increased significantly – even matching the general election figures from 2001. But there were differences in performance between different pilot areas, and variations between wards even in areas that secured significant increases overall. The technology-based voting pilots appeared to have no significant impact on turnout. However, they did increase choice and flexibility for voters and those who used new methods were positive about them. The primary aim of the e-pilots was to establish the security and reliability of the voting mechanisms and to start to build public confidence; this was achieved.

NOP survey findings suggest that, overall, a majority of respondents in the 13 pilot scheme areas surveyed were aware of the new methods and 23% said that these gave them greater encouragement to vote (although nearly three-quarters, 72%, said it made no difference). 45% thought the new methods made the process of voting better with a similar proportion saying that they made no difference. Existing voters are more positive than infrequent or non-voters. Those in postal voting areas were more positive about the new methods both overall and in terms of specific attributes – which may, in part, reflect greater familiarity with them. However, 17% of non-voters did not vote despite saying that the new methods gave them more encouragement to do so. This, plus the reasons given in the NOP surveys for non-voting, reinforces previous research which has shown that, for most people, the why and what of voting are stronger (de)motivators than the how and when.

Accessibility

The Commission recognises that the desire to make voting more convenient and easier should not, directly or indirectly, disadvantage particular groups. This is a particular concern in relation to elderly and disabled people, people with limited literacy skills and those with English as a second language. The 2002 pilot schemes generated mostly positive feedback from a survey of disabled voters co-ordinated by Scope, the national disability charity. However, there are concerns about maintaining the secrecy of the electoral process for some disabled people in all-postal vote elections, and important lessons to be learnt about the provision of information and the signposting of services designed to increase access. Scope's technical assessment of the pilot schemes concluded that, although some problems with access occurred, there was a good level of disability awareness among local authorities and suppliers. The pilots provided a valuable opportunity to plan the accessibility of future voting mechanisms.

Security

Across the pilot areas, there were significant concerns expressed by a minority of electors and by some candidates and agents regarding security and the risk that all-postal voting or technology-based voting might increase the incidence of fraud or malpractice. However, the Commission has not been made aware of any evidence to suggest that the procedures led to any increase in personation or any other electoral offences, or led to other malpractice in connection with the elections.

The Commission recognises the concerns expressed by some about the potential loss of privacy and confidentiality involved in all-postal voting and remote electronic voting. Those who wish to vote privately from their own households will not have the same safeguards that people have enjoyed in casting their votes in the traditional way. One key question, therefore, is how real those safeguards are in practice. It is also important to examine how far perceptions that protection might be reduced (whether those perceptions are matched by reality or not) impact on the willingness of the electorate to use the new methods.

The benchmark against which innovative pilot schemes should be tested is not a 100% secure system. There are security and other weaknesses inherent in traditional polling station voting. The key issues here relate to voter confidence. The traditional system of voting by pencil and paper at polling stations has a very high degree of voter confidence, despite its inherent flaws. To some extent, these can be addressed by providing appropriate information and reassurance about the security features of the new voting mechanisms. However, it is also important that the new mechanisms demonstrate their robustness and continue to develop new security features. This applies to all-postal schemes as much as to those based on new technology.

The Commission also believes that, in some respects, technology should provide opportunities to increase the security of elections (for example, by improving the verification of identity before voting) and increase accessibility (for example, by providing voting information online in ethnic minority languages).

Beer mat - Basingstoke and Deane (ballot paper watermark and promotion of postal voting)

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Impact on political parties

The development of alternative voting mechanisms will rely critically on the support of the political parties as well as the public. It is essential that Returning Officers actively provide opportunities for candidates and party representatives to understand the new voting mechanisms and their security features. In 2002, the selected pilot areas were required to demonstrate broad cross-party support in putting their bids forward. This support was retained in most areas throughout the process. In general, most candidates and agents welcomed the piloting of new ways of encouraging participation, and speeding up the counting process. However, some did express concerns about the loss of transparency in the election process as a result of moving voting into the 'private' sphere and out of the public arena, and through the use of automated voting and counting mechanisms that limited the scope for scrutiny.

In most pilot areas, the parties did not appear to have adapted their campaigning style to reflect the changing voting methods. As the pilots programme extends, the development of new strategies will be important, especially where there is no defined 'polling day'. Some party representatives were particularly keen to see the provision of marked registers before the close of poll, showing which electors have voted, both for all-postal and multi-channel voting methods. There is a need to clarify the legal position of this approach to establish whether it is consistent with data protection legislation.

All-postal voting

Postal voting has undoubtedly proved to be a success in terms of improving voter turnout. Turnout doubled in South Tyneside and almost doubled in Chorley, Gateshead and the pilot wards in Crawley. The average turnout for all-postal pilots was well above that for conventional ballots in the country as a whole. However, it is important to give close consideration to why some all-postal ballot experiments failed to make significant differences to turnout. The diversity of authority types and approaches has also assisted in evaluating 'what works'.

One factor influencing turnout is that some areas have a history of postal voting. For example, turnout in Stevenage (which conducted a previous pilot and has undertaken active promotion of postal voting on demand) contrasts sharply with Hackney, which has very low take-up of postal voting historically (less than 1%). Different socio-economic circumstances are also likely to have had a bearing. There is also some evidence that turnout was influenced by the type of declaration of identity used, as illustrated most vividly by the fact that Chorley secured 62% with no declaration whereas Hackney witnessed a drop in turnout to 32% with the standard declaration.

Did the declaration of identity prevent abuse? The signatures on the declaration are rarely checked (nor is there any obligation on the Returning Officer to do so). In practice, therefore, the declaration served only as a potential deterrent to fraud rather than a means of identifying attempts at personation; its existence may also have reassured some voters about the safeguards in place. It is difficult to determine the extent to which those who did not vote were deterred by the need to complete the declaration of identity, but significant numbers of voters in the pilot schemes certainly had their votes treated as invalid because of failure to complete the form correctly. Where the declaration was simplified or removed altogether, higher turnout figures tended to be recorded with no apparent increase in the incidence of fraud.

The fact that all-postal voting can significantly increase turnout has been established. Both politicians and

members of the public do have concerns about the implications for fraud, although the use of the standard declaration of identity appears to bring with it more problems than solutions. The Commission recognises that the number of pilot schemes involving changes to the declaration was too small in 2002 to make specific recommendations about how best to replace the standard declaration.

Multi-channel and electronic voting

Nine authorities tested different voting mechanisms using information and communications technology; all offered postal voting and polling stations alongside. Across the board, the hardware and software performed successfully without any significant problems. The operational success of the projects was due largely to the good working relationship and high level of trust between the local authorities and service providers.

Timetable pressures, as a result of a less than efficient central procurement process, were identified as the single greatest risk to the successful delivery of many of the projects. In many places both the local authorities and the suppliers had to undertake initial stages of system design and system building before the project had been approved. Time constraints also meant that normal good practice could not always be followed - there was very little contingency or 'slack' built into the project plans and, in some cases, security and testing documentation was not produced.

Voters' feedback suggested they found electronic voting easy, convenient and quick to use, and the pilots appear to have provided a vital first building block in establishing public confidence. However, the evidence in relation to turnout remains unconvincing at this stage, and further pilots are necessary to build on the lessons from 2002. The Commission also recognises that electronic voting pilots that were exclusively polling station-based did not increase convenience for the voter or for the election officials at the polling stations, although they did facilitate the accuracy and efficiency of the count. The cost effectiveness of such pilot schemes (without any option for remote voting) appears to be questionable.

The Commission believes they should not be a high priority for future pilots, especially in elections run on a 'first past the post' system, where the counting process is not complex.

Technology-based voting has made a good start, but it would be premature to suggest that the Government is well on its way to delivering against its commitment to having an 'e-enabled' election some time after 2006. Further piloting is clearly necessary to tease out a number of issues and to establish further the security of these voting mechanisms.

Other pilots

There were 15 authorities that used electronic counting machines, eight as part of a wider trial of electronic voting technology, seven in tandem with traditional voting methods or all-postal ballots. The speed with which results were produced varied, but all the mechanisms appeared to operate well on the night, the only significant problems arising through human error. The authorities involved reported several benefits, including greater accuracy in counting, and making it easier to match ballot papers with declarations that are returned at different times in different envelopes. Some candidates and agents were, however, concerned about the lack of transparency.

Although a number of the e–voting schemes provided an opportunity to vote early, there were only three pilots that tested new voting hours with traditional polling stations. Unfortunately, all three schemes appeared to have little success in attracting new voters. There was only one authority that tested ways to provide voters with more information about the candidates. Here, too, turnout did not appear to have been significantly influenced by the innovation, although there was limited voter feedback on which to reach a judgement.

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Future pilot programme

The Commission regards it as important that future pilot schemes continue to develop multiple channels of voting to increase choice and flexibility for electors. We welcome the Government's endorsement of this approach. Over time, remote voting may well become the norm for most elections, as it appears to be more convenient for many voters. In the medium term, remote voting may be achieved through postal voting; over the longer term, as internet access and digital TV ownership grows, through technology-based voting schemes.

The future development of the pilot programme needs to be linked to a clearly articulated strategic direction, which covers all elections in the UK. The starting point for this strategy is the recently published consultation paper from the Government's e-Envoy. The Commission believes that applications from local authorities for future pilot schemes should be solicited on the basis of a clear requirement, targeted at the issues and aspects of voting that need to be tested in order to move the strategy forward, rather than local preferences.

The Commission also recommends that funding for all future pilots (over and above the costs of running a traditional election) should be provided by central government. In 2002, the entire pilot process, from procurement through to the election and subsequent evaluation, was carried out in a very short period. Future pilots must be given longer lead times. If the pilot schemes are to be tested fully, they must be able to operate in 'real life' circumstances. The Commission therefore recommends that the presumption in future should be that pilots are conducted across whole authorities or constituencies, unless exceptional circumstances apply. Similarly, a lack of cross-party support for a pilot scheme should not automatically be a bar on proceeding.

Other key recommendations include the following:

- Further pilots of all-postal voting should be undertaken at the local elections in May 2003, but must be whole-council pilots in order to test scalability. Following the 2003 pilots, the Government should be in a position to define best practice and decide whether there should be rollout of all-postal voting more widely. The Commission believes that we would be moving too quickly if we were to adopt all-postal ballots for the elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland next year.

- The necessary secondary legislation should be implemented as soon as possible to allow for parish council elections and local authority by-elections to be conducted on an all-postal basis without the need to apply for pilot status, as is already possible in local mayoral referendums.

- The traditional declaration of identity (requiring two signatures) should not be used in future pilots. Instead, all-postal pilot bids should incorporate proposals for testing alternatives, and methods of testing levels of fraud and attempted fraud should be regarded as an integral part of the scheme.

- The Government should develop a high-level functional specification of what each type of voting or counting scheme should deliver, and determine formal security and control attributes against which each potential technical solution can be assessed.

- A wide range of suppliers should continue to contribute towards the piloting of technology-based voting mechanisms; the suppliers used in future pilots should not be limited to those deployed in May 2002. The Government must also clarify the position in relation to the intellectual property rights over software and hardware developed using public funds.

- The Government should establish whether there is a clear legal basis for the provision of marked registers to candidates in advance of the close of poll showing which electors have voted, bearing in mind data protection principles. If the legal issues can be

satisfactorily addressed, the provision of the marked register should be tested in further all-postal and multi-channel voting pilots to establish whether the right balance can be struck between the benefits to the political parties (and potentially to turnout) and the risk of public hostility to heavily targeted campaigning.

- More pilots aimed at increasing the information available to voters about candidates would be welcome, both stand alone and linked to electronic voting; evaluation must examine qualitative and quantitative issues.

- Electronic counting pilots should use technology which is suitable for use in the medium to long term and which, if scaled up to regional or national use, could produce economies of scale.

- Early voting as a supplement to Thursday voting should not be piloted further. Future pilots should focus on testing the potential benefits of adopting weekend voting (or voting over several days) in place of Thursday voting.

Finally, the Commission believes strongly that the future development of voting methods that are more convenient for the electorate will be heavily dependent upon the establishment of a national electronic register. This would allow, for example, voters to use any polling station in the authority area or, in due course, nationwide. A national electronic register should be a key objective in the short to medium term.

Introduction

Statutory framework

The Electoral Commission is a public body established on 30 November 2000 under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent of government, non-partisan and directly accountable to Parliament. One of the Commission's principal aims is to encourage participation in the democratic process, and increased levels of electoral registration and voting.

As a result of measures introduced by PPERA, the Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate any pilot electoral scheme approved by the relevant Secretary of State (now the Deputy Prime Minister, but until the end of May 2002 responsibility lay with the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions). A significant number of such pilot schemes took place at the local elections held in England on 2 May 2002. In all, 30 local authorities tested a range of innovations directed at encouraging participation in the elections, increasing the diversity of voting methods, improving the efficiency of vote counting and increasing the information available to voters.

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Evaluation of pilot schemes

The Commission has submitted individual evaluation reports on each of these pilot schemes to the Deputy Prime Minister and the local authorities concerned. Each local authority is responsible for publishing the evaluation report for their own pilot scheme, in accordance with the statutory requirements. The individual pilot scheme evaluation reports are also available to view on the Commission's website *http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk*

In accordance with the requirements of the Representation of the People Act 2000 (RPA), each evaluation includes a description of the scheme and an assessment as to:

• The scheme's success or otherwise in facilitating voting or the counting of votes, or in encouraging voting or enabling voters to make informed choices at the elections;

• Whether the turnout of voters was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not applied;

• Whether voters found the procedures provided for their assistance by the scheme easy to use;

• Whether the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections;

• Whether those procedures led to any increase in expenditure, or to any savings, by the authority.

In addition to these statutory requirements, the Commission's evaluation reports consider, where appropriate:

• The extent to which the pilot facilitated or otherwise encouraged participation among particular communities, including young people, black and minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities;

• Overall levels of user awareness and comprehension of the voting method being tested, including an assessment of the effectiveness of any literature or other materials used in the promotion of the pilot;

• The attitudes and opinions of key stakeholders, including voters, with a view to determining overall levels of confidence in the voting method being tested;

• Whether the pilot resulted in measurable improvements, or had any adverse impact, with respect to the provision of more efficient and effective service delivery to voters;

• Whether the pilot resulted in measurable improvements to, or had any adverse impact on, the existing system of electoral administration;

• Whether the pilot represented good 'value for money'.

In order to produce these individual evaluation reports, each pilot authority was assigned an evaluator from The Electoral Commission who was responsible for gathering a range of information and opinion. Prior to the start of polling, the Commission contacted all pilot authorities to gather initial factual and background information, and then made arrangements for a pre-election day visit to establish what planning and preparation local authorities were making for the pilot and to meet key stakeholders, including the technology suppliers. Further visits were made on election day to assess how the pilots went and to observe the count. Following the election, all parties fielding candidates in pilot wards were invited to submit their observations to the Commission, and community groups were also contacted. In a number of cases, the Commission was also able to draw upon the results of exit polls or evaluation reports produced by the authorities themselves.

The Commission is grateful to all the Returning Officers, electoral administrators, councillors, candidates, technology suppliers, community representatives and others – including, above all, the voters - who have contributed to the assessment of the pilot schemes.

Strategic evaluation

In addition to producing these individual reports, the Commission decided that it would be useful to produce a more strategic evaluation report which looked at the pilot schemes collectively as the basis for making recommendations about the selection of future pilots, best practice in the management of pilot schemes and, if appropriate, recommendations as to whether changes should be made to electoral arrangements more widely through roll-out of the innovations tested by the pilots.

This report draws on the analysis contained in the thirty individual evaluation reports, and takes account of lessons from three local by-election pilots undertaken in April 2002 in Eden, Stirling and Kerrier. The Commission also contacted national representatives of all parties fielding candidates in pilot areas. The feedback received has been incorporated where appropriate.

In addition, the Commission has benefited from the findings of three specialist reports:[1]

- Public opinion surveys: NOP conducted attitude surveys in all multi-channel voting areas and four of the 13 all-postal areas. Those interviewed included voters and non-voters. This aggregate data has enabled us to produce measures of public awareness of the pilots and public reaction to their operation. Key findings from NOP's surveys are referred to throughout this report, and more detail is included in individual evaluation reports. The summary report from NOP can also be viewed on the Commission's website.

- Evaluation of disabled access: Scope, the national disability charity, was commissioned to produce an assessment of access to the pilots for disabled people. Each pilot scheme was evaluated individually and where possible visited during the election, and disabled people within each pilot area were asked to complete a detailed survey. A technical consultant also evaluated the technological aspects of the pilots from the perspective of disabled access. Details of these technical evaluations are included in the individual authority reports; Scope's full report is also available on the Commission's website.

- Technical evaluation: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were contracted to review the technical aspects of the pilots programme, including the procurement process, the 'quality assurance' audit process conducted by the then Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) immediately before operations went live and the operation of the technology on election day itself and its physical security. PwC also undertook an evaluation of the suppliers' mechanisms for risk assessment. PwC's findings have been incorporated into the individual reports and this overarching report.

Whereas the individual pilot evaluation reports are focused on reviewing the specifics of the pilot schemes and their operation, this report is deliberately forward-looking. The emphasis is on learning lessons for the development of the pilots programme. We look at matters of both detail and strategy. Throughout our analysis, we refer to the five statutory criteria that Parliament has determined should the basis for assessing all electoral pilot schemes.

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[1] See Annex B for more details about the methodology used in preparing each of these specialist reports

The pilots programme

Pilot schemes to test innovative voting and counting methods took place in 30 local authorities on 2 May 2002, authorised by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions under the provisions of the RPA 2000. In total, more than 21.8 million adults were eligible to vote in the elections held on that date across England. Of these, the Commission estimates that approximately 2.7 million people were eligible to vote in the thirty pilot areas – some 7.4% of the English electorate.

The 2002 pilots included a greater range of schemes than those tested in 2000. They were also more ambitious, and more focused on the use of technology to support both voting and counting. The scope of these technology-based pilots was broad. At one end of the scale was a local authority that implemented automatic counting through the provision of wands to read barcodes on ballot papers; at the other end were the local authorities which offered electors the opportunity to vote on the internet, by telephone, via SMS (text messaging), by post and in a polling station. There were also significant numbers of all-postal voting schemes.

The types of authorities involved ranged from the inner London Borough of Hackney to new town Stevenage and semi-rural North West Leicestershire, and the pilots covered a variety of different elections – local, parish and mayoral elections plus one mayoral referendum.

The pilots took place against a backdrop of seemingly irreversible declining participation in local government elections and the substantial drop in turnout at the June 2001 general election. Inevitably, much of the media and political attention was on whether the pilot schemes could halt the downward trend or reverse it. However, turnout was not the only, or even primary, goal of all the pilot schemes. Some were looking for administrative efficiency gains; others wanted to be involved at the start of the process of developing electronic voting mechanisms robust enough to win public credibility. Whatever the individual goals, all the pilot authorities were committed to delivering free and fair elections.

Context

Following the substantial drop in turnout witnessed at the general election in June 2001, the Commission made clear that we would actively encourage and, as appropriate, participate in a significant programme of pilots at the 2002 local elections in England and beyond. However, we applied an important caveat in stressing that "it is unlikely that changing the method of voting can achieve major increases in voter turnout unless voters also feel that the election is relevant to them and their vote matters."

In relation specifically to electronic voting and counting, the Commission went on to state: "It is essential we exploit the opportunities new technologies provide and respond to new expectations. We recognise that this approach is not without problems. Electronic voting, in particular, brings with it potential difficulties in relation to authentication of the vote, the security of the system, the need to ensure privacy and, in relation to home-based internet voting, the fact that only a minority of the population has access to the internet at home. (Nevertheless) electronic voting could, if introduced effectively, not only encourage voter participation but also improve the efficiency and accuracy of the administration of elections."[2]

Since the publication of the Commission's report on the general election, the Government has made a public commitment to the implementation of mechanisms designed to permit the conduct of an 'e-enabled' general election sometime after 2006. The Commission supports the Government's commitment to increasing choice and flexibility in voting. We believe that electors should be able to choose from a range of ways to vote, including polling stations, to suit their commitments and lifestyles. There is an evident need for greater flexibility about when and how we can vote.

This is not to suggest that there is a crisis of confidence in our electoral process. Quite the reverse. Recent polling by NOP for The Electoral Commission has found that there is broad satisfaction with the two main aspects of electoral procedure, namely, the system for registering to vote, and the actual process of voting. There are four people satisfied for every one dissatisfied with the process of voting (70% to 18%). Among those in the pilot areas who say they voted at the May 2002 local elections the margin is six to one. Among non-voters the margin is a smaller, but nonetheless healthy, five to one. Those who occasionally or 'never' vote at general elections are also, on balance, positive about the system of voting at elections in Britain, although much more likely to offer no opinion.

These findings may, in part, reflect the low salience of the reform of electoral process and procedures as an issue among the public but certainly suggest no great dissatisfaction on the part of the public with the voting process. Qualitative research has found that attitudes to electoral outcomes (the why and the what) are more important de-motivators to voting than the process (the how and when). But at the same time, access and convenience are issues for non-voters who want voting to be 'made easy'.[3]

The Commission believes that it is important that the electoral process keeps pace with voters, and potential voters. Electoral services should be regarded as exactly that – services, responsive to customers' wishes. The introduction of postal voting on request for all elections is one example of how this agenda has already been taken forward. In addition, although the focus of discussion around new ways of voting is often the internet, the 2002 pilot schemes were in some respects far more dependent on 'old' technology – telephones and the postal service are hardly cutting edge.

2 Election 2001: The Official Results, The Electoral Commission, July 2001
3 'None of the Above', Hansard Society Briefing, December 2001

Of course, some pilot authorities did take up the challenge of using of new technology to facilitate voting. There is an increasing weight of evidence that the public wants more convenient services, and regards the internet as a means of achieving that end:

- The proportion of people wanting to deal with government or their local council electronically has significantly increased in the past year - with two-thirds who would now like at least one service available online, and more than a third likely to access six or more services in this way.

- Enthusiasm is highest for voting online (38%), closely followed by applying for or renewing a passport (37%), booking a GP's appointment (37%), getting health information via NHS Direct (37%) and renewing car tax (36%).

- Overall, access to the internet and enthusiasm for e-government have both increased for the second consecutive year.

- Half the British population now has access to the internet at home or work (up from 44% last year) and two-thirds want to access public services online.

- A further 27% of those without online access at home or work predict they will be online in three years' time; this would bring internet access up to 63% by 2005.

- By far the most important barriers to internet usage are lack of a computer (60%) and understanding (25%). The cost (13%) and concerns about security (2%) have both faded as barriers.[4]

Set against these findings, however, are more detailed qualitative studies which underline the importance of proceeding carefully. Public attitudes to electronic voting are also examined by recently published research into when and how electronic voting could be successfully introduced for parliamentary and local government elections. This research was co-sponsored by The Electoral Commission alongside DTLR, the Office of the e-Envoy, the Local Government Association and others.[5]

The researchers conducted a series of focus groups and found that key factors determining attitudes towards electronic voting included attitudes towards technology generally, people's access to different mediums of technology, and their ability to use these. These factors led some older respondents and women from socio-economic groups C2DE to reject the use of electronic methods, other than the telephone. Overall, respondents were willing to use electronic methods to vote. However a number of issues need to be addressed in order for the public to have confidence in the system. Reassurances with regard to the process of electronic voting are therefore crucial to the take up of such methods.

Voters' smart card - Sheffield (electronic voting)

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[4] MORI/KPMG Consulting, 2 May 2002
[5] The research team was led by De Montfort University and included Essex University and BMRB International. It was sponsored by DTLR, the Office of the e-Envoy, The Electoral Commission, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. The report is available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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Selection of pilots and procurement

Responsibility for electoral policy transferred from the Home Office DTLR in June 2001. One of the priority areas of action following the transfer of responsibilities was the launch of the 2002 pilots programme. This programme was designed to build on the pilot schemes which ran during the 2000 local government elections and the Government's commitment to modernising democratic processes. Plans for a programme of electoral pilot schemes in 2001 had been cancelled following the announcement of the general election.

The approach adopted for the 2002 pilots was to split the procurement process into two parallel work streams. The first objective was to arrive at the choice of local authorities to be adopted as pilot areas and the second objective was to choose the technology partners that could supply the necessary expertise and equipment to authorities interested in undertaking technology-based schemes. These two complementary processes are described in more detail below. At the outset, it was anticipated that local authorities would share a total of £3.5 million in developing and hosting 'e-pilots' in 2002; in the end just over £4 million was provided by central government. No funds were available for schemes that did not have an electronic component.

The diagram to the right outlines the overall timeline that was followed:

DTLR procurement and selection process

Jun 2001	●	DTLR is given responsibility for Democracy Modernisation pilots	
July 2001			
Aug 2001			
Sep 2001			
Oct 2001	●	Prospectus for electoral pilots despatched to local authorities	5 October
	●	Request to use restricted accelerated procurement	22 October
	●	Approval to use restricted accelerated procurement	29 October
Nov 2001	●	Advert placed in OJEC	8th November
	●	Deadline for expression of interest	22 November
Dec 2001	●	Approval of Business Case	13 December
	●	Invitations to Tender issued	17 December
	●	Applications from local authorities submitted	31 December
Jan 2002	●	Deadline for tender	14 January
	●	Decision on which suppliers would be invited to tenders	18 January
Feb 2002	●	Request for approval for local authority pilot schemes sent to Minister	1 February
	●	Announcement of approved local authorities	5 February
	●	Selection of successful tenders	11 February
Mar 2002			
Apr 2002			
May 2002	●	Local Authority elections	2 May

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Selection of local authorities

A prospectus was sent to all 174 local authorities in England that were due to hold elections in May 2002, inviting applications to run electoral pilot schemes. The prospectus was despatched in October 2001 with a request that applications be submitted by 31 December 2001. DTLR made clear that they were particularly keen to encourage pilot schemes which sought to exploit new technology for the benefit of voters and the efficient administration of elections. They received 41 bids – 23% of the total number of authorities invited.

Of these 41 bids, 12 sought to pilot electronic voting (with two of these 12 also wanting to undertake SMS/Digital TV pilots), eight were looking to pilot electronic counting and there were 17 applications for all-postal voting. In addition, a number of other applications were received, including one proposing to run a cash prize draw to entice voters.

In total, 30 applications were approved after consultation with The Electoral Commission (as required by statute) and following discussions with the Local Government Association and the Office of the e-Envoy. The bids were assessed against the criteria in the prospectus. Of the original 41, three withdrew their bids, one bid (the cash prize option) was deemed to be outside the scope of the legislation enabling the pilots and seven did not meet the criteria that there should be "broad cross party support" for the proposal. Of the 30 local authorities that were chosen by DTLR, 17 were looking to undertake electronic voting or counting pilots (although subsequently one of them, Doncaster, pulled out) and 10 applied to run all-postal voting pilots. In addition, three other local authorities sought to undertake other pilots involving extended hours, leaflet distribution and early voting. An additional all-postal scheme was approved at a later stage. A full list of pilot areas is at Annex A.

Supplier selection process

For the procurement of suppliers, DTLR was looking to set up a "framework agreement" with technology providers. The local authorities would then be able to choose partners for the pilots from among this group. It was agreed that 15 to 20 suppliers would be invited to tender; from these, the best would then be invited to form part of the framework. The suppliers would have to demonstrate that they could provide electronic voting technology (either a complete multi-channel solution or a single element of it). In turn, this would then allow DTLR to match them to a local authority whose request to run a pilot had been approved. In adopting this approach of matching supplier to local authority, DTLR was keen to ensure a spread of technology providers participating in the pilots (that is, to ensure that different technologies were tested and that they were not heavily dependent on any one provider) and also to ensure there was a quality threshold for suppliers.

A "Restricted Accelerated Procurement Procedure" was used for the procurement process, due to the tight time constraints the team was under. This process commenced with an advertisement in the Official Journal of the European Community (OJEC) on 8 November 2001 seeking expressions of interest. Forty-eight suppliers submitted an expression of interest.

At this stage, a filtering process was undertaken by DTLR. In determining the 20 suppliers that would be invited to submit a tender document, technical information was not sought specifically. Instead, the evaluation covered the suppliers' "experience of electoral process", "experience of working with local and central government" and their "previous delivery record". Following this, an invitation to tender document was issued on 17 December 2001 with the deadline for tender bids set as 11 January 2002 (extended on 4 January 2002 to 14 January 2002). Specific technical details were sought at this stage.

Following submission of the tenders the 20 suppliers were reduced to the final 11 that were chosen for the framework. This was undertaken at a tender assessment meeting on 18 January 2002. To facilitate this process, a scoring chart had been developed to assist with the decision-making. The criteria had been determined on the advice of the in-house procurement team and the final decision was agreed by the e-pilots project board. The original tender document indicated that the economically most advantageous tenders in terms of price, quality and technical merit would be selected for the framework agreement. It also indicated that tenders would be judged according to a number of criteria, including how well the objectives were addressed, ability to undertake the work, technical quality and robustness, potential for national replication, value for money and experience in working with local government.

The Commission attended a number of the DTLR assessment meetings in an observer capacity.

Matching local authorities to suppliers

The initial intention was that DTLR would work with the local authorities which had been chosen to participate in the pilots and allocate a supplier to them according to their needs. However, in most cases (12 out of 16), the pilot councils had already identified a preferred supplier with which they sought to work on the pilot. This was principally due to the fact that they had very short timescales to submit their bids, and had requested assistance from companies in developing their proposals. In addition, certain suppliers had already been approaching local councils speculatively and, in some cases, there was already a relationship between a supplier and a local authority.

However, even if the local authority had chosen a preferred supplier, the supplier still had to be approved for the framework agreement drawn up independently by DTLR. Furthermore, the DTLR retained final approval of the matching process. In the event, DTLR did not turn down any of the local authority choices and when the proposals came in from the authorities it was apparent that the spread of suppliers was quite broad.

DTLR arranged a matching process for the four pilot authorities that had not identified a technology supplier.

The final distribution of suppliers approved to work with local authorities was as follows:

Supplier	No.	Local authorities
ESS	3	South Tyneside Metropolitan Council, Epping Forest District Council, Chorley Borough Council
DRS	3	LB Westminster, Rugby Borough Council, Doncaster (subsequently withdrew)
Powervote	2	Bolton Metropolitan Council, Stratford on Avon District Council
BT-Oracle	2	St Albans City & District, Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council
Strand	2	LB Newham, Chester City Council
BT-elections.com	2	Liverpool City Council, Sheffield City Council
ERS	2	Swindon Borough Council, LB Hackney
In house	1	Broxbourne Borough Council

Procurement issues

A number of issues arose during the procurement process. Many of these issues were generated by the transfer of responsibility for electoral matters from the Home Office to DTLR in June 2001. This resulted in extremely tight deadlines, not only in terms of the overall procurement process, but also in terms of the timeframes for completion of the projects once suppliers had been approved by DTLR.

As already outlined, The Modernising Democracy prospectus was issued to local authorities in October 2001 inviting them to participate in the pilots. In addition, DTLR initiated an OJEC advertisement on the 8 November 2001 aimed at suppliers. DTLR managed these two concurrent strands of work and then developed a framework of suppliers that they could match to the local authorities.

An overall description of the approach, although referred to in the respective documents, was not clear, particularly in relation to the 'rules of engagement' (for example, whether local authorities were allowed to approach suppliers in advance of their applications being approved and vice versa). This would have clarified the situation for authorities as well as suppliers and would have avoided the situation where most authorities had already selected their preferred supplier while some had not. In the event, it transpired that all of the suppliers chosen by the local authorities were on the final DTLR list. However, this was not an inevitable outcome; providing more clarity on the process at the outset would have ensured that any potential conflicts in terms of choice of suppliers would have been minimised.

The Commission also notes that, although a scoring chart (which contained 38 distinct weighted criteria) was devised and then used as a basis for discussions in choosing the successful suppliers from the tender documents which were submitted, this scoring chart was not formally completed by all assessors to obtain a final objectively ranked outcome. Furthermore, on reviewing the selection criteria that were used and the weightings allocated, it is apparent that little emphasis was placed on the products being developed (that is, their scalability, mobility, flexibility, convenience); instead, most of the emphasis was placed on supplier criteria. To some extent, this reflects the fact that this is a young and developing market. DTLR was also in the position of procuring suppliers for pilot schemes that had, at that stage, not been defined, making it difficult to be very specific in the tendering and assessment. It is also noteworthy that independent citations were not sought for any of the suppliers.

Although the 2002 procurement process was aimed at identifying suppliers to participate in the framework (and so more information would normally be available about the product after the event), in future pilot exercises it would be helpful to use more product-based criteria and allocate weightings accordingly. In their evaluation for the Commission, PwC concluded that there was no reason to suggest that the final choice of framework suppliers

was not based on sound judgement. However, when a process has been devised to provide an objective outcome it would clearly be prudent to follow it through to completion.

Learning points: procurement

In future pilot schemes, it would be beneficial to start the overall procurement process earlier and ensure that sufficient time was available to maximise the opportunity for quality deliverables. Because of the tight timescales, there was limited time for the authorities to liaise with the potential suppliers, and they effectively had to accept whatever application the supplier had – there was no time to amend, develop or adapt the technology to fit local circumstances.

If the concurrent strand approach is used for future pilot schemes, it would be useful if the overall process was more clearly defined and documented, both for local authorities and suppliers. This should make clear whether discussions between suppliers and local authorities were to be encouraged (or prohibited) prior to the department finalising the framework of suppliers.

In future, when a procurement process based on pre-determined criteria has been devised (and a scoring chart developed with associated weightings), this should be completed in full to obtain a final set of ratings. Completing the ratings for all bidders would help demonstrate due process.

Consideration should be given to obtaining independent citations for suppliers and incorporating the results of this into the scoring criteria.

Continuity of staff

Currently only two people are involved in managing the technical procurement process within central government. Between them they have built up a considerable amount of detailed knowledge. As the conduct of electoral pilots is likely to be an ongoing initiative, it would be useful to ensure that there was some degree of continuity in terms of the administration of the procurement process. This could be achieved either through knowledge gathering in a formal transferable manner or continuity of staff.

Consideration should be given to documenting the knowledge base that has now built up within the former DTLR and specifically documenting the knowledge that has been gained by the two individuals who have administered this procurement process this year. This is particularly important given the recent division of responsibility for electoral matters between the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor's Department. It would also be prudent to ensure that, where possible, these same individuals are used in future pilot initiatives so that they can build on their knowledge.

Quality assurance

As part of its process for managing the selection of electronic voting pilots, DTLR commissioned two quality assurances to look at the technical, security, and project management arrangements. The first assurance, conducted by a consultant working for the IT Services Division of DTLR, looked at:

• Ensuring that appropriate project management steps were in place to ensure implementation by May 2;

• Technical robustness of the mechanisms;

• Security, quality assurance and testing systems;

• Whether contingencies were in place for system failure or problems; and

• General assessment of whether the final proposal and specification would result in a successful pilot.

This assurance looked at the project specifications and tender documentation provided by the local authorities and suppliers and was the basis of the formal approval of the final projects. The key points identified in the report were:

• All pilots were very likely to be successful based on the available documentation;

• The timeframe for implementation, although extremely tight, was achievable;

• All pilots were implementing technically robust mechanisms with appropriate security and quality assurance measures; and

• Pilot-specific points regarding data ownership, emergency or contingency plans were addressed with the individual pilots.

On the basis of this assurance all pilots were given formal approval to proceed.

A second assurance was conducted in April by an external consulting firm, Actica Consulting Limited (Actica), which carried out an independent review of the adequacy of technical controls within each electronic voting pilot. In carrying out that work, Actica visited the seven third-party suppliers that were employed by local authorities to assist with the conduct of the pilot. The Actica work was carried out between 26 April and 1 May 2002. The resulting reports were submitted to DTLR and subsequently shown to the Commission. Given the time constraints, the overall standard of the quality assurance reports produced was good. However, there were a number of respects in which the process could have been improved:

• Actica visited seven suppliers in four working days. This was insufficient time to conduct any thorough review of the proposed operation of the electronic voting mechanisms and was insufficient time to conduct any detailed testing.

• There was no visit to the one authority, Broxbourne, which was undertaking software and other technical development in-house.

- The work undertaken by Actica was performed by three individuals and the visit reports vary in scope, detail and presentation. It would have been beneficial to DTLR to have the same suite of questions and the same type of visit report issued in all seven instances. This would have facilitated comparisons between pilots.

- The short timescales that Actica were subject to meant that they were unable to talk to all the different parties involved in each pilot. For example, for the Liverpool and Sheffield pilots the Actica consultant talked to BT but was not able to spend any time with the representative from election.com. As it was election.com that was driving the bulk of the security definition surrounding the internet voting solution, a meeting with them would have been helpful.
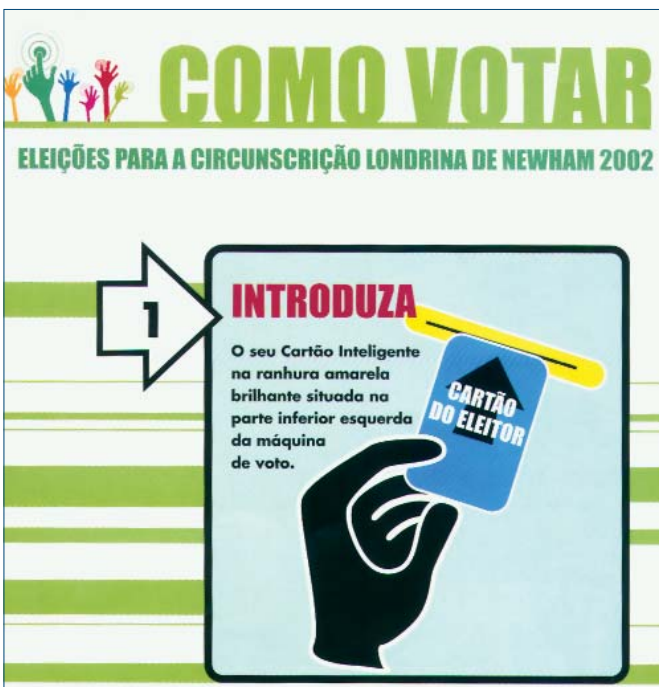
Alternative language information - Newham (electronic voting)

Learning points: quality assurance

Sufficient time must be built into the process to permit an independent assessment of the technology and time for the suppliers to rectify any issues raised as a result of that assessment.

The Government should agree with the Commission, in advance, the minimum control standards that need to be achieved by each pilot, irrespective of whether or not a third-party supplier is involved. These criteria should be used as the basis for the independent assessment of pilots prior to 'going live'.

There should be a more formal approach to the identification and management of risks throughout the pilot schemes. Proper contingency planning procedures should be developed to ensure that any failures in parts of the voting process do not allow the casting of fraudulent votes.

The work programme and reporting format for the independent assessment of electronic voting pilots should be agreed in advance so that the work is carried out in a consistent fashion and reported consistently.

Every part of the electronic voting pilots should be subjected to the same level of review and testing. Time needs to be given to allow the scheduling of such meetings.

The Government should consider implementing a supplier accreditation programme whereby only those suppliers that pass a certain quality threshold for project management and the delivery of voting solutions would be allowed to provide a voting solution to local or central government. The advantage of this accreditation programme is that some of the assessment work could be done outside the normal annual electronic voting pilot timetable.

All-postal voting

DTLR approved 13 all-postal voting pilots for May 2002. These pilots followed immediately in the wake of three smaller pilot schemes, all linked to local by-elections, which had taken place in April 2002. The authorities hoped to build on the encouraging results from the all-postal pilots in 2000 and the popularity of postal voting in the general election in 2001. The outcome was almost universally positive. Turnout doubled in South Tyneside, and almost doubled in Chorley, Gateshead and the pilot wards in Crawley; the average turnout for all-postal pilots (at 47.5%) was 15 percentage points higher than the average turnout for conventional ballots in the country as a whole. It should be noted, however, that local authorities do not all calculate turnout on the same basis; in some areas, spoilt ballot papers are included in turnout, in other areas they are not.

All-postal pilot schemes: May 2002					
	% Turnout 2002	% Turnout at previous comparable election[6]	Declaration of identity	Cost: all-postal[7] £	Cost: traditional £
Stevenage Borough Council	52.95	29	No	58,000	65,000
Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council	52.86	33	Yes – no witness	105,000	93,500
Chorley Borough Council	61.52	32	No	c. 150,000	N/a
Middlesbrough Borough Council	41.63	31	Yes	75,850	73,530
North West Leicestershire District Council (Parish)	33.54	25	Yes – no witness	2,049	1,011
North Tyneside Council	42.45	36	Yes	N/a	N/a
LB Havering	45.04	35	Yes – single envelope	c. 250,000	152,000
LB Hackney	31.9	35	Yes	161,000 (including 12,000 for electronic counting)	180,000
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	54.71	27	Yes – no witness	c.240,000 (including 32,000 on electronic counting)	147,000
LB Greenwich	30.7 28.7	19 19	Yes – no witness, single envelope	46,000	17,300
Preston Borough Council	28.55 49.03	15 31	Yes	Additional cost of 8,500	N/a
Crawley Borough Council	27.79 29.51 40.26 39.73	17 14 23 21	Yes	23,500	13,500
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	57.38	30	No	95,000	115,000

[6] In some cases, direct comparison is not possible owing to boundary changes. In the case of North West Leicestershire, the comparable figure is turnout at elections for the ward containing the parish. For Middlesbrough, this year's mayoral election turnout has been compared with the 1999 full Council election turnout

[7] Figures exclude publicity costs

Promotion

All authorities recognised the importance of effective promotion of the pilot schemes, although the budgets available for publicity varied significantly. In areas where the council had done a significant amount of work to promote postal voting at previous elections in 2000 and 2001, promotional activity was able to build on previous campaigns (although it was notable that Stevenage deliberately designed a relatively low key publicity campaign, in order to provide a benchmark against which to test the impact of more publicity-intensive activity planned for the future).

Standard promotional tools included an information card to all electors, news releases to local media, articles in the council newspaper and posters. Most local media supported the pilot schemes and local radio was an important means of providing information to electors. Helpline numbers for further assistance and websites were also provided in many areas. In Trafford, the council's publicity department organised a media launch on 12 April 2002 featuring Postman Pat, balloons and 'Merlin', the council's bus that travelled around the borough to publicise the postal vote. The launch was timed to 'make' the following week's local press and to coincide with the delivery of the ballot papers. Trafford and Hackney, among others, used a letterbox logo.

Direct communication with electors was also a key tool. In Chorley, for example, a week before the deadline for receipt of returned ballot papers the council sent a reminder letter to all households reiterating to electors that the return envelope was pre-paid and that there would be no polling stations on the day of the election. In Trafford, mailings were timed to arrive on Saturdays, so as to have maximum impact. In Stevenage, Trafford and Chorley, the councils had large thermometers prominently displayed on the front of the town hall and updated each day showing the percentage of ballots returned. In Middlesbrough the council also produced videos in English and a number of ethnic minority languages showing how to complete a ballot paper– an idea developed by the external consultants the council had hired.

Overall, the local authorities' campaigns to publicise the postal vote were impressive and well planned. In addition to the councils' own communications initiatives, in most areas party campaign literature also stressed the existence of the all-postal ballot.
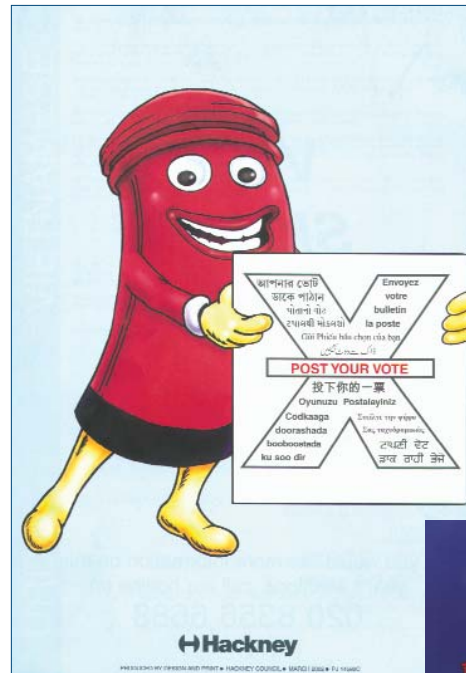
Postbox logos - Hackney and Trafford (all postal-voting)

The use of delivery points, enabling voters to drop off their postal votes in person, varied between authorities. In North Tyneside, for example, there were 19 delivery points available, in Trafford there were 13, in Havering there were 6 and in Stevenage there were none. Concerns were expressed about the number of delivery points in some areas. In Trafford, for example, concerns were expressed that 13 delivery points were not enough, in that there was not one in each of the 21 wards, and that locations were not always convenient.

There were also differences in the locations used, and the nature of the security imposed. In some areas, for example, collection boxes were placed in local shops or hotels under the supervision of the regular staff. Concerns were expressed by some voters in Preston about the security of ballot boxes in these locations, and in particular the risk of being tampered with. The security of the ballot was stressed to staff at the drop-off points. The ballot boxes were also placed in visible and prominent positions, making it unlikely that an attempt to tamper with them would have gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, it is clearly important that the security surrounding delivery points should be sufficient to reassure voters. In Trafford, too, there were concerns from voters that the zip-up soft plastic boxes provided in delivery points were not as secure as traditional ballot boxes.

Generally, the use of delivery points was a positive aspect of the pilot programme, helping to increase turnout. Delivery points also provided an opportunity for staff to offer assistance to electors who were unsure of the postal ballot process. However, there is a balance to be struck between assisting the voter and undermining the purpose of an all-postal ballot. Too many delivery points and an all-postal ballot can start to seem little different to a traditional election. Significant numbers of delivery points would also result in a duplication of voting mechanisms and incur additional costs. Many of the officials responsible for managing the pilots felt that if all-postal ballots became a regular feature of local elections in the future, the number of delivery points could be reduced.

Role of Royal Mail

Communications between the all-postal pilot authorities and Royal Mail were generally effective and good working relationships were established in most areas. In general, Royal Mail considered the pilots to be high profile operations and prioritised them accordingly. They recognised the importance of reaching agreement on the timings and process for delivery. In Stevenage, for example, the Returning Officer's staff met sorting office staff regularly to talk through issues which were likely to arise, and increased the frequency of contact from quarterly to weekly or even daily as required. Royal Mail agreed to deliver ballot papers via a door-drop; an information card was also developed and distributed by Royal Mail in two batches of 30,000 over a 48-hour period.

In Trafford, the Royal Mail account manager was involved in ensuring the mailings that had been designed by the council met requirements, as regards size and weight. Royal Mail was also consulted about the practicalities of scanning the bar codes before envelopes were opened. In Chorley, the council had intended to deliver the ballot papers itself. However, due to errors in the batching of the ballot papers, Royal Mail was used. Some problems did arise due to the short notice involved in this, and the fact that the return envelopes could not be sorted by ward. Despite this, approximately 80% of the ballot papers had been delivered by Monday 22 April and all of the ballot papers were delivered by Wednesday 24 April.

Special arrangements were also agreed in some pilot areas to ensure that ballots posted on polling day were collected from sorting offices in time to be included in the count. In some areas, however, Royal Mail took the view that this was not practical due to the volume of mail. In North Tyneside, this resulted in 1,001 votes not being counted (0.69% of the eligible electorate).

There were some exceptions to the general experience of active and constructive dialogue between the pilot authorities and Royal Mail. For example, in South Tyneside, significant problems were encountered after the original account manager took unplanned leave 10 days before the close of poll and no deputy was allocated. A number of streets in two wards did not receive a delivery of ballot papers; in total, 544 ballot papers had to be hand delivered by council staff on Saturday 27 April. Some candidates reported that a number of post boxes were filled to capacity and could not cope with the volume of mail; there were also reports that young children had removed envelopes from post boxes which were overflowing. The Royal Mail account manager responsible for the South Tyneside pilot acknowledged to the Commission that Royal Mail had underestimated the level of response.

The parish council pilot in North West Leicestershire also suffered from a poor relationship between the council and Royal Mail, despite attempts by the Returning Officer to initiate contacts at a number of levels. There was some initial contact with the manager of the local Royal Mail to discuss the need for a last post before close of poll on 2 May 2002, but no liaison with the account manager or the staff at the sorting offices in Leicester. Discussions between the Commission and Royal Mail after the pilot revealed that a number of changes could have been made to increase the efficiency of the pilot had there been an effective dialogue with the council at an earlier stage.

Preston and Hackney decided not to use Royal Mail for their deliveries. In Preston, this followed standard practice of hand delivering poll cards. In Hackney, hand delivery was also felt to be necessary owing to Royal Mail being "not sufficiently reliable to handle a bulk delivery of ballot papers."[8] A particular issue in Hackney was the high number of multiple-occupancy properties including flats with an outer, 'entry' door. The council took steps to ensure that deliverers had access to such properties by liaising with landlords. In both areas, the hand delivery is considered by the returning officers to have been generally successful. However, in Hackney some party workers and candidates referred to reports of significant

pockets of non-delivery and the council reported that some 2,000 were returned undelivered. These are likely to be people who had moved but not reported their change of address and the numbers should be seen in the context of a highly transient population – the electoral register in Hackney is estimated to experience an annual turnover in the region of 25%. Royal Mail report in the region of 180 voter packs being posted back as 'return to sender' in post boxes, fewer than anticipated.

Candidates and agents

One of the most significant implications of all-postal voting for the candidates and parties was in relation to the timing of their canvassing activities. Postal votes were sent out well in advance of 'election day', which meant that parties had to be ready much earlier than usual to do their canvassing. In Trafford, for example, approximately 25% of the electorate voted within the first four days. As a result, the national party election broadcasts were too late for many electors. The delivery of local party leaflets and the canvassing of electors were also compressed into a shorter length of time between the distribution of postal ballot papers and the election count.

In some all-postal areas, especially those where there had been previous pilot schemes or mayoral referendums using all-postal voting, the parties were geared up to campaigning in a new way. Candidates and party workers focussed their initial campaigning efforts around or just before the date when voters were receiving ballot papers. For most parties, this included for the distribution of leaflets and walkabouts. In other areas, the local parties did not recognise soon enough the need to adapt to the new style of voting, and only realised once they were knocking on doors that many electors had already returned their ballot papers.

Even where the parties did recognise the need to change the timing of their campaign activities, in most areas it was not possible to know who had and who had not voted, making it difficult to target the campaign. Some

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commented that street or door-to-door canvassing during the fortnight prior to the election was wasteful in resources, as many electors had submitted their ballot papers immediately after receiving them. This was a particular problem for small parties with limited resources, such as the Greens and Socialist Alliance.

Some party workers and agents reported it being easier to have a 'real' dialogue with voters knowing that the ballot paper was in their possession, while others said they felt uneasy both with this situation and in acting as witnesses to the declarations of identity. Some candidates also expressed concern to the Commission that all-postal ballots lessened the immediacy of the close of poll, which might potentially have a detrimental effect on turnout.

In areas with delivery points, some parties mounted special efforts on 'polling day' to persuade those who had still not voted to hand in their ballots at the delivery points. In Trafford, for example, 3,364 ballots out of a total of 9,252 were handed in to drop-ins on the final day. In Hackney, it is estimated that in the region of 15% of the turnout were personal deliveries of ballot papers to the town hall on 2 May with some 2,000, 5%, delivered in the last two hours.

Trafford and Chorley experimented with the provision of a daily marked register to the parties during the campaign period. This was welcomed by the candidates and party workers. The availability of the marked register was used to target electors who had not voted, with some parties calling two or three times in person and also sending 'it's not too late to vote' letters. However, in Hackney, the Returning Officer decided – after consulting party agents – that the provision of interim marked up registers would have an undue influence on the election result. Certainly, one outcome in the two pilot areas that did use a marked register during the campaign was that complaints were received from voters annoyed at being regularly contacted by party activists who found the repeated contact unwelcome. The provision of the marked register clearly has the potential to create an intensity to the campaigning that can antagonise voters. On the other hand, the work of the party activists in

contacting potential voters may well have assisted in securing the significant increase in turnout.

One final issue arose in relation to security. In the all-postal ballot areas, envelope-opening sessions started well before 'election day', enabling the election staff to check for the presence of valid declarations of identity and prepare the ballot papers themselves for the count. In all cases, candidates and agents were invited to observe. However, with up to five sessions in advance of the count, this was not always practical. Some candidates and agents were unhappy that they were therefore not able to verify all the invalid ballots.

Turnout

In the majority of pilot authorities, turnout increased significantly – exceeding even the authorities' initial predictions. Turnout was up by comparison both with recent local elections and with non-pilot area local elections in 2002. In some places, turnout even matched the general election figures from 2001. The Commission does not believe that results were simply the product of some sort of 'novelty factor', as that would also have applied to the electronic voting pilots where the impact on turnout was far less significant. As might be expected, there were variations between wards even in areas that secured significant increases overall. In Stevenage, for example, overall turnout was 52.95% with ward turnout ranging from 48.5% to 58.3%. These differences reflect, in part, different levels of campaigning by the parties and also the extent to which individual wards were regarded as 'safe' seats for particular parties.

Postcard front and back - Havering (all-postal voting)

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Given the high increases in most areas, it is clear that the pilots were generally very successful in ensuring that turnout was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not been applied. Of course, the innovative nature of the schemes and the publicity given to them will have assisted in this result. Where the authorities had undertaken previous work in promoting postal voting at the 2001 general election, and in earlier pilot schemes, this also appears to have contributed to the success, boosting awareness and familiarity with the new methods of voting.

It should be noted that local authority practice in calculating turnout varies. Some Returning Officers will include all votes cast, other exclude invalid votes. In all-postal ballots this can make a small but significant difference to the overall turnout figure. In most areas a small, but significant, number of votes were invalidated by the failure to complete the declaration of identify correctly or reluctance to do so. The issue of participation of older voters and people who live alone was also raised by candidates and members of the public. There was concern that the requirement of a declaration of identity witnessed by another person could put people off voting, and the Commission's evaluators heard a number of comments such as "I didn't wish to be in the debt of someone else". In areas where there was no declaration of identity, voters appear to have found the postal voting procedures easy to use. In Chorley, for example, the total number of ballot papers rejected prior to the count was 130. By comparison with other all-postal ballots evaluated by the Commission, including mayoral referendums conducted using all-postal ballots, this represents a very small percentage. The Commission believes that the absence of a declaration of identity in Chorley is likely to have contributed to this.

In all the pilot areas, Returning Officers always attempted to 'reunite' misplaced declarations of identity and ballot papers. Some voters from the same household had placed non-pairs together and some other voters had sent the declaration of identity under separate cover from the ballot paper. While some degree of human error is inevitable as long as the traditional declaration continues to be used, it is clearly important that efforts are made to make the instructions clear to all potential voters.

A number of Returning Officers also decided to operate a degree of flexibility and pragmatism in an effort to increase the percentage of valid votes. In Trafford, the electoral services department returned some unsigned declarations to electors to request a signature if there was time and parties were supportive of this approach. This approach might also be adopted more widely, although it clearly runs the risk of boosting voters' concerns about the lack of confidentiality involved in completing the declaration if council officials are able to trace them after the envelope containing their ballot is opened. In Middlesbrough, the Returning Officer took the view that where a declaration of identity was provided, he would accept votes where the name of the witness was legible from the signature, provided the address of the witness was included on the form.

In all areas except Hackney, comparisons with the last local elections and with neighbouring boroughs indicate that the turnout was higher than it might have been if the election were carried out conventionally. Even in Hackney, where turnout was lower than the previous local elections, these figures should be seen in the context of the particular local circumstances. Hackney is a very diverse community. In 2000, 38.75% of the electorate were defined as of 'minority ethnicity'; there are an estimated 58 different nationalities with some 90 different 'mother languages' spoken. It is estimated that 22% of Hackney's population have poor levels of literacy and 39% have poor levels of numeracy. A further relevant factor in Hackney is the 6.9% of local elections ballot papers rejected as invalid; it is also likely, given high levels of illiteracy and residents whose first language was not English, that some potential voters may have been deterred by the need to complete the declaration of identity.

Other potentially significant factors include the low postal vote take-up in the borough (less than 1% of electors and the lowest at the 1998 Greater London Authority elections) and the historically lower than national average turnouts in Hackney as evidenced by the 2001 general

election. The Commission also found a consensus among council staff, voters, party candidates and workers that the local media's coverage of the local election campaign was fairly low key. Many also reported that the campaign's focus was on the authority itself, its record and problems, and who was to 'blame' for this (on 1 May in 'Tables give Labour no comfort', The Evening Standard referred to Hackney as "a byword for mismanagement" and provided details of the authority's low public approval rating and the high number of complaints received by the Ombudsman about the authority). At the same time the mayoral referendum campaign did not spark public interest. The Returning Officer reported that not one party or individual registered officially as campaigning for either 'yes' or 'no' and there was, apparently, scant local media coverage of this element of the combined ballot. It is worth noting that Hackney's turnout was nevertheless higher than several neighbouring inner London boroughs including Tower Hamlets, Newham, Islington and Southwark.

In addition to Hackney, councils that recorded significantly lower turnouts than other all-postal areas included Middlesbrough, North Tyneside, Havering, Greenwich and North West Leicestershire. In each case, there are local factors that provide important context in evaluating the outcomes:

- In Greenwich, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons with the turnout in the previous elections in 1998 because of boundary changes. However, the two wards in which the pilots were conducted incorporated old wards (Arsenal and Nightingale) which had the lowest turnout in the borough in 1998 at around 19%. It was expected that without the pilots turnout in the two new wards would again be among the lowest of all the wards. By using postal voting, the council was hoping for a doubling of the turnout that could be expected using polling stations. In the event, turnout in the two wards averaged 29.7%, almost identical to average turnout in the borough of 29.9%. A low profile publicity campaign, the previous history of low turnout and the relatively small size of the pilot may all have contributed to the turnout not reaching the levels attained elsewhere.

- In Havering, there were some concerns expressed by electors and candidates over susceptibility to fraud and opposition to the single-envelope system, with articles appearing in local and national newspapers. There is some evidence that the all-postal vote pilot scheme went some way to encouraging voter participation by making the process easier and less time consuming. The London Boroughs of Bexley, Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge showed turnout results of 34%, 23% and 34% respectively, all comparatively lower than that in Havering. However, it may also be the case that the single-envelope issue may have some impact in limiting the potential in increase in turnout in Havering, due to the concerns over secrecy.

- In North West Leicestershire, the election was a small parish council area, in which none of the candidates undertook any distribution of campaign literature and none appeared on the ballot paper as affiliated to any political party. Given the lack of information available to potential voters, and the generally very low turnouts for parish council elections, the outcome can be regarded as positive.

- Both Middlesbrough and North Tyneside also secured turnouts that, while significantly higher than other recent elections, were not as exceptional as other areas. Local factors may have played a part in this. For example, it was suggested by some party workers in North Tyneside that recent debates concerning the council's finances might also have contributed to a sense of disillusionment about local politics among voters. In both cases, the public was dealing with the first elections for a directly elected mayor (in North Tyneside, these took place alongside other local elections). One important factor may be the use of the Supplementary Vote system for voting – a system not previously used for any elections open to residents of Middlesbrough or North Tyneside. Both retained the traditional declaration of identity, which may have dissuaded some voters from participating at all. In North Tyneside, of the 61,000 papers returned, more than 6,000 returns were initially regarded as invalid i.e. those returns which for various reasons had no declaration of identity enclosed; the declaration of identity was not signed or witnessed; only

the declaration had been returned or declarations had been placed in the wrong envelope. By the end of the matching process, over 3,100 votes (just over 5%) still had to be rejected prior to the commencement of the count. In Middlesbrough a slightly smaller percentage of invalid votes was recorded – 3.5%.

Public opinion

A number of candidates who undertook door to door canvassing reported to the Commission that members of the public seemed pleased to be able to vote from home as it gave them longer to consider the ballot paper. However, some electors also felt that there was too much stationery – especially where the declaration of identity operated in the standard fashion, requiring two separate envelopes. Some voters also suggested that the ballot paper design could have been improved through better watermarking and in some pilot areas the envelope made more secure by using opaque paper.

One particular concern from voters focused on their being unable to receive replacement ballot papers on the final day of the election period following the loss or non-receipt of originals (up to 250 were re-issued in some areas before 5pm on 1 May). Several eligible voters were 'disenfranchised' on 2 May as electoral administrators were prevented by statute from re-issuing ballot papers after 5pm despite those concerned being on the electoral register. This inevitably led to several complaints from people frustrated that they had made the effort to vote but had been prevented from doing so.

On behalf of the Commission, NOP conducted quota-based telephone polls in four of the all-postal pilot areas – Chorley, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Stevenage.[9] When aggregated, the data shows that just under three-quarters, 73%, of respondents in all-postal areas said they were aware of the new arrangements for voting. Indeed, of the 13 pilot survey areas, a postal pilot – South Tyneside – recorded the highest level of public awareness with 84% aware.

The 73% awareness figure for postal pilots is higher than the six in 10, 60%, recorded in multi-channel/electronic voting pilots and those in all-postal areas were also more likely to report being 'very' or 'fairly' well informed about the new methods. Higher awareness in all-postal areas may, in part, reflect the communication work done by the individual authorities and the method being already familiar to a significant proportion of the electorate.

Three in 10, 31%, of those in all-postal pilots said that the new methods gave them greater encouragement to vote – a figure higher than the 23% among all pilot survey respondents and the 16% in multi-channel/electronic voting pilots. Analysis of the non-aggregated surveys shows that among the 13 pilot areas, the new methods offered most encouragement in two postal pilots – South Tyneside and Stevenage (both 34%). These survey figures are reflected in the actual turnouts achieved in the May 2002 local elections where all-postal pilots secured higher turnouts than multi-channel/electronic voting areas.

Across the four all-postal pilot areas, four out of 10, 41%, of non-voters who did not know about the new method of voting said – when told what the new methods were – that had they known it would have encouraged them to vote. This figure compares with 36% and 37% in multi-channel/electronic voting and all pilot areas respectively.

Most voters and non-voters in the four all-postal pilot areas thought the new methods easy to use and convenient but were relatively less positive about privacy and, particularly, safety from fraud or abuse. These findings are in line with the aggregate findings based on the 13 pilot area surveys. However, voters in the four postal pilot surveys were more positive about the new methods than those in multi-channel/electronic voting areas.

It is also instructive to consider ratings among the four all-postal pilot areas and it is here that the declaration of identity could be a factor. Chorley and Stevenage – pilots in which the declaration of identity was dispensed with – received the highest survey ratings on ease and convenience among voters, while South Tyneside receives higher ratings than the others on being safe from fraud or abuse.

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9   For full methodological note for these surveys, see Annex B

Similar patterns emerge among non-voters. When asked about the four criteria (ease, convenience, privacy and security), those in all-postal areas were more positive than those in electronic voting pilots. However, non-voters are more likely to rate new methods as 'poor' at being safe from fraud and abuse in all-postal areas than in electronic voting ones. Again it is worth pointing out that for each of the criteria, the 'don't knows' are higher in electronic voting areas – a factor likely to be related to respondents' limited familiarity with these methods.

The NOP surveys show that respondents in all-postal pilot areas were positive about the new methods both in overall terms and in terms of specific attributes. 58% thought the new methods made the process of voting better against 4% who rated them as worse. More importantly perhaps, respondents in all-postal pilot areas were more positive about the new methods than those in electronic voting pilots, although this may, in part, reflect the methods being more familiar as much as being more attractive.

Polling station poster - Trafford (all-posting voting)

Accessibility

An all-postal ballot does increase accessibility to voting for some individuals, especially those who are unable to attend polling stations due to work commitments or mobility problems. However, postal voting is not a completely accessible method of voting. It has several inherent barriers that could prevent a disabled person using a postal vote. Visually impaired people are one such obvious group but it also includes many people with communication, learning and co-ordination impairments who may need assistance to vote. Those who live alone may also find it difficult to find someone to sign the declaration of identity.

The statutory Orders making provision for the all-postal pilot schemes always required the local authorities to make available a special tactile template designed to assist blind or partially sighted voters. According to the most recent figures available from the Office of National Statistics there were 314,179 people in England and Wales registered as blind and partially sighted in 1997. However, the RNIB estimates that up to two out of three people who are eligible to register as blind or partially sighted choose not to do so.

Of course, not all blind or visually impaired people will choose to use a tactile template. But the potential take up of such a device could be significant if appropriately promoted.

Most authorities initiated contact with local organisations, and undertook some form of promotion, for example a taped article was sent to the local talking news or information given on the polling card delivered to electors. However, very few pilot schemes reported significant numbers of requests being made for the tactile template, and the Commission believes that there is scope to develop more effective promotional initiatives in this area, building on best practice.

At least one council ensured that their website was linked to the Talking Link website, a site dedicated to improving access for blind and partially sighted people, disabled

Instructions to postal voters - Greenwich – (all postal-voting)

people, people who have dyslexia, older people and the young. Available on the site was free software, which included a screen reader, screen magnification, speech input and output and a full personalisation facility.

Scope, the national disability charity, highlighted to the Commission that one area of concern with using all-postal voting is the possibility of disabled people being inappropriately influenced to vote in a specific way. Although coercion may have been an issue where postal votes have been one option for voting, where there are all-postal ballots it may become a significantly larger problem. This is because disabled people are more likely to require assistance using this method of voting and for that assistance to be provided 'unofficially'. One advantage of voting at a polling station is that it is very difficult to force a person to vote for a party or identify who a person has voted for. Scope suggest that risk of this type of coercion is higher under an all-postal system where people may be put under pressure to vote in a certain way or have their vote completed by someone else. There is also the potential for political activists or those campaigning on a single issue to target disabled people voting by post. This may happen when disabled people live alone or within a residential setting or if they are members of a cultural, religious or social group with a particular political bias.

In practice, however, the survey of disabled voters in pilot areas conducted by Scope for the Commission concluded that the majority of respondents found it "very easy" or "easy" to vote by postal vote. Few people indicated that they encountered any access problems. People particularly liked the fact that they could vote quickly. But not everyone thought the process was easy or accessible. The complexity of the system was a barrier for some. Voting at a polling station enables people to seek advice or help if they have any problems.[10] Filling in forms can be very daunting especially for people who find it difficult to write or read official documents. Scope suggests that support could be provided to solve this access barrier. They also point out that producing all voting information including the ballot paper, declaration and instructions in plain English, large print and using symbols for extra clarification would not only help people with learning or communication impairments to vote secretly without assistance but would be of benefit to all voters.

A number of areas made special efforts to ensure that the declaration of identity, and its accompanying instructions, were as simple as possible. This is clearly a particular issue in an area such as Hackney where English is not a first language for a significant proportion of the population. Despite these efforts, there were a number of reports (via party representatives and in discussion with local residents on the day) that residents had found the process of completing two forms and using two envelopes less than straightforward.

Security and fraud

All Returning Officers sought to maximise the physical security of ballot papers and counter the possibility of fraud in a number of ways. In Chorley and Gateshead, for example, the bar coding of each individual ballot paper was designed to minimise the possibility of abuse by alerting staff to duplicated ballots during the scanning process. In some areas using electronic-counting, ballot papers were also printed in special ink which meant that ballot papers not printed in the same ink would be rejected by the counting machines.

10   See Annex B

Nevertheless, across the pilot areas, many voters and party candidates expressed general concerns that an all-postal system might be more open to the possibility of fraud. The perceived risks related principally to the possibility of ballot papers being lost or intercepted in the post, the scope for coercion from third parties in completing the ballot paper, and anxieties around the use of bar codes on postal ballots. In areas where the declaration was simplified by removing the requirement for a countersigning signature or (as in Greenwich) a single envelope used for both ballot paper and declaration, this also prompted some concerns.

Candidates also expressed particular fears that in some households all of the ballot papers might be completed and returned by a single individual; others thought that the all-postal ballot was most open to abuse in institutional care homes. Concerns were expressed by some about the possibility of fraud in houses with multiple occupancy, such as those that have been converted to bedsits. This was also a concern where people had moved close to the election and the ballot papers were sent to an incorrect address.

There were a number of instances of 'fraud scares' in the pilot areas. In Trafford, the marked register provided evidence that in some households, all the members of the family voted in 2002, whereas previously only the older members of the family had voted. The suggestion has been made by party workers that one or two members of the family used all the ballots sent to the household, although it could also be argued that the all-postal ballot made it easier for the younger members of families to vote. It is, of course, difficult to find evidence either way. In North Tyneside, some anecdotal stories were reported of electors not receiving their ballot papers. However, out of 144,052 electors only 171 electors applied for and were re-issued with ballot papers and they were spread widely across the council area. In two pilot areas, voters were concerned at the transparency of the return envelopes, and the possibility of Royal Mail staff identifying and intercepting certain votes. In fact, although it may have been possible to see an outline of a ballot paper in its envelope, they were sorted automatically in Royal Mail offices.

In a number of the all-postal voting areas, there were also some people who felt that the requirement for a signed declaration, intended as a means to deter fraud, meant that their vote was not confidential, so did not vote or did not sign the declaration, thereby invalidating their vote. It is clearly important that the purpose of the signature and the procedures for ensuring that the vote remains confidential are explained fully in publicity material.

Similarly, where the authority experimented with a single return envelope, as in Greenwich and Havering, measures were taken to ensure that the declarations were checked and sealed before the ballot paper itself was opened. However, this process was not evident to voters. Staff operating the Havering helpline found that confusion over the system was the main reason to call; most callers were reassured over the declaration of identity once the system of opening and scrutiny was explained. In Greenwich, the single return envelope was designed to enable the ballot paper to be inserted in a pouch and the declaration of identity formed part of the outer envelope. However, they too concluded, on reflection, that it would have been beneficial to have included a description of the opening procedure on the declaration page in order to help reassure voters that the secrecy of the ballot was being maintained.

In South Tyneside, the declaration of identity also contained a bar code from which the marked register was produced. Some candidates and election agents suggested that the bar code could have discouraged some people from either returning the ballot paper, the declaration of identity, or both, because of a perception that the secrecy of the ballot was being compromised.

Despite these fears, across the 13 all-postal pilot schemes, the Commission is not aware of any substantiated allegations of fraud or malpractice, and there is no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections. This applies equally to the authorities which experimented with using just a single signature, removing the requirement for a witness signature, or doing away with the declaration of identity altogether. Across the country, officials found that much of the concern about the security of the system could be addressed simply by providing information. Nevertheless, there are clearly perceptions and concerns, held by many, that postal voting is a less secure method than the conventional system of voting. If public concern about the possibility of fraud were to grow, it could potentially undermine confidence in the system.

The traditional safeguard for postal votes has been the witnessing of the declaration of identity, as confirmation of identity, with a witness countersignature. There is, however, no means of checking that either signature is genuine, as electors are not required to provide signatures on registration. In all the pilot areas, staff did not attempt to verify that the signature on the declaration was in fact that of a different person to the voter or a real person at all – nor are they required to by law. It was not even practical to check for the repetition of signatures to discount multiple voting. This raises real questions about the efficacy of the declaration as a means of preventing fraud.

The views of candidates, officials and voters were mixed on the benefits of using an individual declaration of identity. Some of those with responsibility for running the elections considered it acted as an important safeguard against fraud. Others were less convinced. In practice, they argued, an individual declaration of identity served no useful purpose, offered no protection against fraud, slowed the process down and simply created a large volume of additional administrative work.

Cost

For an all-postal ballot, the main cost factor is postage. Accordingly, the higher the turnout, the higher the cost. This is an important equation to recognise, as it does not apply to 'ordinary' polling station-based elections. For these, higher turnout effectively lowers the unit cost of voting. As will be clear, therefore, the key cost factor in conducting an all-postal ballot is whether the costs of postage outweigh the savings from not having to staff and equip polling stations.

A number of authorities reported significant savings in the number of staff required, and their time. In Stevenage, for example, normally 200 staff would be involved, but this was reduced to 90 for the pilot scheme. In those areas where the cost was higher than a traditional election, this tended to reflect additional publicity costs together with larger printing and postage bills. Another variable was the number of staffed delivery points provided, and their opening hours.

In general terms, the pilots provide good value for money in terms of the cost per voter, as compared with previous years. In some areas the cost was broadly equivalent to previous years. Given the generally increased turnouts, a relatively static overall cost reduced significantly the unit cost per vote. In South Tyneside, although the pilot was more expensive than a traditional election, cost per vote was still lower for the postal election than it would have been if a traditional election had taken place. In the postal election each vote cast cost about £3.80 (£240,000 divided by 63,000 electors) whereas if a traditional election had been held with a lower turnout the cost would have been approximately £4.67 (£147,000 divided by 31,500 electors).

A major contributor to the overall additional costs in some areas was the amount spent on publicity. However, the council believed from the outset that a high profile campaign was essential to the success of the pilot and the significant increase in the number of people voting is a strong endorsement of this policy.
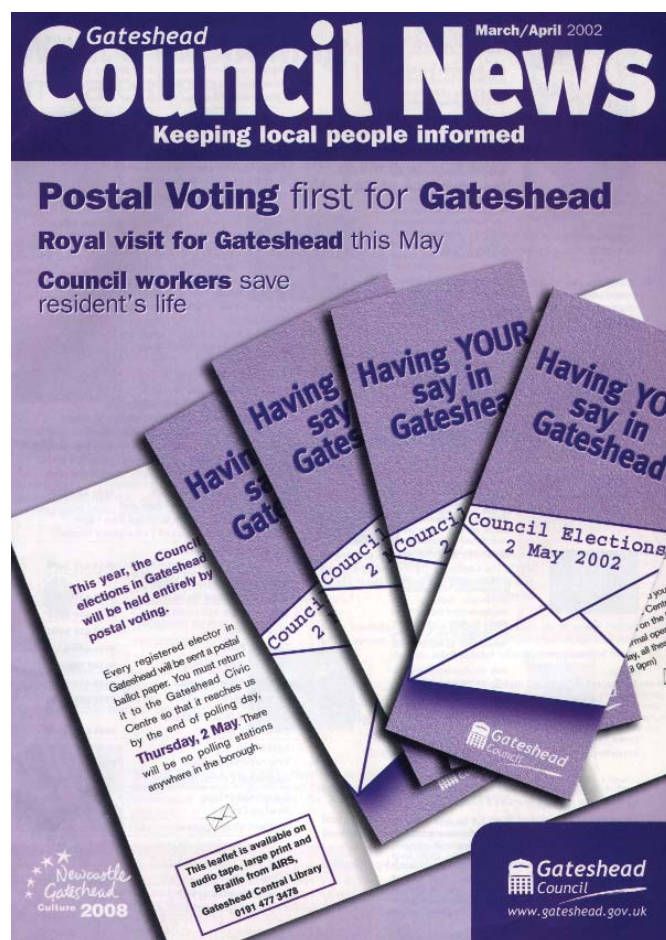
Council News - Gateshead (all-postal voting)

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Learning points: all-postal voting

An open meeting should be held for all candidates and agents to explain the process and the security measures in place. The implications of the pilot for the count process should also be outlined. If any candidates are unrepresented, ensure they receive the same information in writing.

Royal Mail should be asked to agree in advance details of its contingency plans in the event of difficulties being encountered. A designated account manager should be appointed, and a deputy identified.

Effective signposting of services available to visually impaired people and disabled people is important – don't rely on these potential voters ringing the helpline to find out.

To promote access to all-postal pilot schemes:

- Seek advice from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and other national disability organisations;

- Contact groups representing disabled people and talking pages services to publicise the arrangements and, in particular, to promote the availability of the tactile template;

- Ask local disability organisations to include items on the pilot in their own newspapers and information services;

- Prepare a tape on postal voting to issue to Talking Newspapers;

- Ensure presiding officers are available via the helpline to assist people with visual impairments to use the tactile template to cast their votes;

- Include reference in publicity materials to the "type talk" service to help people with hearing impairments;

- Use radio interviews to promote awareness about services designed to increase the accessibility of postal voting for people with disabilities;

- Ensure all delivery points are assessed to establish accessibility for disabled people;

- Include a translation about the availability of the helpline in relevant languages and, where possible, produce publicity material and voting instructions in relevant languages;

- All correspondence with the electorate should be written in clear language and be plain English approved;

- All correspondence with the electorate should be available in alternative formats such as tape, large print and Braille.

All information leaflets should make clear the time of close of poll. Publicity material should make clear that the last date for returning ballots via post is at least two working days before 'polling day'.

The provision of the delivery points provides an additional opportunity to submit a postal vote that was generally welcomed. However, information about delivery points should make clear the opening and closing times and days. Collection boxes must be secure – either through the use of trained staff present at all times at the delivery points or through other security measures. They should not be left in shops, hotels or post offices without additional security measures.

The formatting of the ballot paper needs close attention. In order that ballot papers, declarations of identity and return envelopes fit into outward envelopes, they need to be of a certain uniform size and weight. This means that a ballot paper for a ward with fifteen candidates must be the same size as that for a ward with five candidates. This can create difficulties in meeting the recommended good practice by RNIB of ballot papers being written in Arial 12 point font and places importance on the need to have large print alternatives available, and ensure effective publicity for the supply of tactile templates and assistance.

Care needs to be taken in managing deliveries to multiple occupancy properties - where possible, deliveries should be made to individual front doors, not simply to outer 'entry' doors. This may involve liaison with landlords and the use of hand delivery. A system of notification of attempted delivery could be used where postal ballot papers are not left because a house appears to be empty or boarded up.

Providing information to reassure voters concerned about security issues is critical in an all-postal ballot. The more information that can be provided about why things are done in a particular way and the security features in place, the better. This applies especially where changes are made to the declaration of identity.

To avoid public concern, return envelopes should be as opaque as possible.

To avoid unnecessary concern from voters, the name and address of the voter should not be printed on envelope 'A' used for the return of ballot papers.

In designing the delivery envelope and in timing the delivery it is important to ensure that any confusion with junk mail is minimised.

Printing the barcode on the back of ballot papers (to include ward reference) positioned to show through a window in the return envelope would allow a marked register to be produced automatically.

If the delivery of ballot papers is phased, this should be agreed in advance with the local party leaders and candidates' agents to avoid any suggestions of bias in the way that the phasing of release had been handled.

If using the declaration of identity, explanations should be simple and visuals used wherever possible. A pre-election information leaflet can help to increase recognition and understanding. The purpose of the declaration should be explained in plain English and in other languages, where appropriate.

Spreadsheet software and a laptop computer can be used at the opening of postal votes to speed up matching of declarations of identity and ballot papers.

Collections from the delivery points should be made during the final polling day for pre-count sorting, rather than waiting to collect all ballots from the delivery points after close of poll.

Multi-channel and electronic voting

The range of technologies approved by DTLR for use in voting at the May 2002 elections was deliberately diverse. Remote electronic voting allowed people to vote from any computer, as long as they could connect to a network. It therefore represented the ultimate goal in terms of convenience, but presented the stiffest challenges in terms of design and security. Electronic voting was also available via touch screen kiosks or PCs in polling stations, and sometimes in other public areas, such as libraries and shopping centres. The possibility of voting using SMS (text messaging) or by telephone was also provided for. Not all of these methods were tried out in every authority. Four authorities did not offer multiple electronic voting methods, but used computer-based technology to provide electronic voting in static or mobile polling stations. In all cases, postal voting and voting in polling stations (albeit not always using pencil and paper) was available as an option alongside the new technologies.

Multi-channel and electronic voting pilot schemes: May 2002

	% Turnout 2002	% Turnout at previous comparable election[11]	Technology	Traditional paper and pen voting	Cost: electronic voting[12]
Liverpool City Council	36.5 18.3	25.5 15.9	OL, SMS, TEL	✓	£537K
Sheffield City Council	46.68 21.91 38.70	38.96 17.89 31.93	OL, SMS, K	✓	£610K
St Albans City & District	23.3 38.9	24.1 41.9	OL, TEL, K	✗	Total cost of technology for two pilots: £1.065m
Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council	21.8 36.4	18.6 37.5	OL, K	✓	
Swindon Borough Council	31.2	27.7	OL, TEL	✓	£42K
LB Newham	27.6	28.4	K	✗	£650K (DTLR) £750K (Newham)
Stratford on Avon District Council	42	39	K	✗	£128K
Bolton Metropolitan Council	32.7	26.8	K	✗	£180K
Chester City Council	22.2 40.8 38.5	18.7 39.6 35.8	K	✗	£116K

OL = remote electronic voting using personal computers
K = electronic voting via touch screen kiosks, in polling stations (static or mobile) or other public place
Tel = telephone voting
SMS = text message voting

11 In some cases, direct comparison is not possible
12 Costs exclude the amount used to run postal voting and, in four cases, polling stations alongside the technology-based pilot schemes. The figures given generally represent the costs funded by DTLR. Where the additional costs to the local authority are known, these are given separately

Promotion

As with the postal pilots, all authorities recognised the importance of effective promotion of the pilot schemes. The budgets were generally larger than those used for the promotion of all-postal ballots, reflecting the more complex messages that needed to be communicated. Most used advertising in the local newspaper and promotional advertisements in council newsletters or magazines and devised special branding or logos for material linked to the pilots. Some authorities appointed specialist PR agencies, but most relied on in-house support.

Local authority press offices prepared a number of press releases and publicity events in the weeks leading up to the election. In all areas, the local press in particular ran a considerable number of stories drawing attention to the new voting schemes. Most authorities also had good coverage from regional press, and local radio proved to be particularly interested in highlighting the availability of the new technology. At the conclusion of the elections, however, there was some critical coverage, especially in St Albans (where it had not been possible to cast a vote other than by post on 2 May) and in Stratford on Avon (where some queues had developed in polling stations).

Because a number of pilots took place in only a few wards, it was recognised that a more focused publicity campaign than the media could provide would be required in those wards. Direct communication with electors was essential. In St Albans, a personalised direct mail shot was sent to each elector in the pilot wards to explain the electronic voting opportunities in detail with information regarding security measures; a leaflet was also sent out with each poll card showing the identity number to use when voting, and the location of polling stations. A total of five election communications relating to the electronic voting pilots were sent out to voters in the run-up to the election, including a CD-ROM.

In other pilot areas, a range of direct marketing was also deployed. In Newham, the equipment was demonstrated to the public on five days in April. Swindon also undertook a week-long roadshow at various points

CD Rom - St Albans (electronic voting)

around the borough. The main feature was a portable computer with a simulation of the voting website, with the visitor to the stand taken through the voting procedure. The level of public response varied – relatively low at the town's central library, but higher at Tesco on the Tuesday and in the concourse of Swindon Town Football Club on the Saturday, which was a match day.

All the multi-channel pilots provided a voter helpline. Most local authorities also made use of their existing websites to promote electronic voting; in many cases, detailed information about how to use the new voting methods, including a 'frequently asked questions' section and an online demonstration, was available. Crewe and Nantwich's council website also hosted an internet quiz - with a state of the art digital phone with internet access as the prize – to foster interest in the pilot. In Newham, the council's website promoted the pilots with a very prominent display using the branded image on its home page. Links then led to additional information including lists of candidates, details of demonstration days, advance voting locations and an on-line demonstration of the touch-screen unit.

A number of authorities specifically targeted the youth media and, as in Liverpool and Sheffield, set up specially designed youth websites. Other youth-orientated initiatives were also attempted – for example, in Sheffield beermats were distributed in pubs in the pilot wards and in the student union.

Overall, the local authorities' campaigns to publicise the pilot schemes were professional and comprehensive. Aggregate analysis of NOP's surveys (see Annex B) shows that 60% said they were aware of the new arrangements for voting in the multi-channel areas and 45% also said that they felt either 'very' or 'fairly' well informed about the new methods of voting. However, there is little direct evidence as to the source of most electors' information about the pilot schemes. It was also evident that some electors simply assumed that the traditional voting methods would be available regardless of the alternatives offered.

Voter information - Sheffield (electronic voting)

All authorities ensured that candidates and agents were informed about the pilot schemes. Demonstrations rather than written briefing appeared to be more successful in this regard. A number of authorities arranged seminars, briefing meetings or drop-in sessions for candidates, which were generally well attended. These provided an opportunity to ensure that those directly involved in the election were well informed about the processes and the security features, and had an opportunity to ask questions. In addition to the councils' own communications initiatives, in most areas party campaign literature also stressed the existence of the all-postal ballot.

Role of technology suppliers

It is a significant achievement that in all of the multi-channel and electronic voting pilot areas the hardware and software performed successfully, without any significant problems. Voters found it easy, convenient and quick to use. The operational success of the project was in large part due to the good working relationship and high level of trust between the councils and service providers. The procurement process worked from the perspective of identifying good suppliers who were capable of delivery. High quality suppliers brought expertise and cultivated good management relationships with authorities.

Timetable pressures were identified as the single greatest risk to the successful delivery of many of the projects. In particular, the short period of time between the approval of the schemes and election day was not considered sufficient for the delivery of the project. In many places, both the local authorities and the suppliers had to undertake initial stages of system design and system building before the project had been approved and before the order had been made.

Time constraints had also meant that normal good practice could not always be followed. For example, there was very little contingency or 'slack' built into the project plans and, in some cases, security and testing documentation was not produced (although testing and security issues were taken seriously by all suppliers). Although basic controls seemed to be in place for most of the pilot schemes, there were a number of systems

where controls could be improved to ensure that only appropriate personnel had access to the system, that results from the system were complete and accurate and that all votes were valid and cast by an eligible voter.

Each site used different methods of verification. All had a requirement to enter a personal identification number (PIN) and password code. These were not standardised. Equally, the navigation of the screens did not have to conform to any set standards, and different suppliers adopted different approaches.

One method that could be employed to regulate the usability would be to create a simple set of guidelines on the type of navigation and the expressions used to move people through the site (eg. 'proceed', 'submit'). It would also be possible to specify the number of pages that a person has to go through in order to vote. Although this may seem prescriptive a similar process occurs for paper ballots, which are more or less uniform throughout the country for the same types of elections.

One area that was prescribed in law was that the pilots had to have a replication of the ballot paper on the voting screen. In practice, this did not work very effectively as it was based on a paper design principle and it did not fit with the general design concepts used on the web. The Commission intends to develop good practice guidelines on the design of 'candidate selection' webpages as part of its review of ballot paper design.

It was also notable that in a number of pilot schemes, party logos on the ballot paper that appeared on the screen were unfocused and slightly blurred – this was due in part to the quality of the images supplied through the Commission website. The Commission will improve the quality of these images.

Candidates and agents

As with the all-postal pilots, one of the most significant impacts of multi-channel and electronic-voting for the candidates and parties was in relation to the timing of their canvassing activities. In many of the pilot areas, voting began up to ten days before 'election day', which meant that parties had to be ready much earlier than usual to do their canvassing.

For all parties, there were some problems co-ordinating the campaign across the district due to the staggered election dates, with pilot wards voting at different times to other wards in most authorities.

Although most of the candidates were supportive of the pilot schemes, there was concern expressed about the unavailability of 'real time' information about which residents had cast their vote. There was no means available of providing the sort of running tally that is drawn up by tellers at polling stations. Because voting was largely done in private, it was effectively invisible – so local party members could not operate on polling day as usual to "get voters out".

Few of the parties were geared up to campaigning in a new way, and only realised once they were knocking on doors that many electors had already voted. Even where the parties did recognise the need to change the timing of their campaign activities, the absence of a marked register meant that it was difficult to target the campaign. Although Trafford and Chorley experimented with the provision of a daily marked register to the parties during the campaign period, none of the authorities testing multi-channel voting requested this facility in time to include it in the relevant statutory orders.

Turnout

In assessing turnout, it is important to distinguish between areas such as Newham, Stratford on Avon, Chester and Bolton, where electronic voting took place only in polling stations or mobile kiosks (but not at home or by telephone), and other authorities, such as St Albans, Crewe and Nantwich, Swindon, Sheffield and Liverpool, where voters could choose between 'public' and 'private' voting methods. Use of the different voting channels in the five areas that offered multiple options is set out in the table below.[13]

There is nothing in the figures for the nine electronic voting areas to suggest that the advent of new technology inspired the electorate to vote in significantly greater numbers than would otherwise have been the case. Overall, there is no strong pattern of improved turnout. In some areas, like the two wards in Liverpool, average turnout increased across the two wards by more than eight percentage points. But in Newham, where electronic voting and counting were tried out, turnout fell by 0.8% to 27.6% – although there is some evidence to suggest that the pilot schemes might have had some effect in preventing turnout falling further. There is equally no substantive evidence that 'remote' voting by internet, telephone and text message proved significantly more attractive than polling station-based electronic voting.

Although the multi-channel voting pilots did not appear to persuade significant numbers of people to vote who might not otherwise have done so, they were largely successful in widening the choice of voting method available to those interested in participating in the election. Those who voted appeared to find the procedures relatively easy to use; and even among those who did not vote there was also positive feedback about the convenience of the methods available. All methods attracted a considerable number of voters, but there were significant variations: in the St Albans pilot some 50% of votes cast were by internet or telephone; and in Liverpool, four out of ten voted by internet, telephone or text messaging. Yet in Swindon the comparable figure was 16%.

David Cowling, Editor of BBC Political Research, has analysed the voter surveys conducted by councils with electronic voting experiments that used the internet, telephone and text messaging. These provide profiles of those who used these new voting mechanisms.[14] In Crewe and Nantwich, all internet voters in the two pilot wards were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire as soon as they had finished voting. In St Albans, internet voters in the two pilot wards were offered the same option as in Crewe and Nantwich, and the council also

Multi-channel pilot schemes: turnout								
Local authority	Polling stations/ postal votes	%	Internet	%	Telephone	%	Text messaging	%
Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council (2 wards)	1,839	83.5	364	16.5	-	-		
Liverpool City Council (2 wards)	3,957	59.4	1,093	16.4	1,162	17.4	445	6.7
St Albans City & District Council (2 wards)	1,539	49.5	825	26.5	744	23.9	-	
Sheffield City Council (3 wards)	8,881	67.7	2,904	22.1	-		1,327	10.1
Swindon Borough Council (19 wards)	33,329	84.1	4,293	10.8	2,028	5.1	-	
Total 28 wards	49,545	76.5	9,479	14.6	3,934	6.1	1,772	2.7

surveyed telephone and polling station voters. Swindon provided the richest crop of information: not only did its 19 wards comprise some two-thirds of all the electronic voting pilots but they also surveyed internet, telephone and polling station voters as well as supplying the only information to date of party voting by the individual election methods piloted.

One in four of all 18-24 year olds and almost one in five of those aged 25-44 used the internet to vote, compared with 3% of those aged 60+. The telephone was used by broadly one in 20 of all age groups. Polling station voters provide the reverse image of the age profile of internet voters with only 3% of those aged 60+ casting their vote by internet, compared with 91% who voted in person.
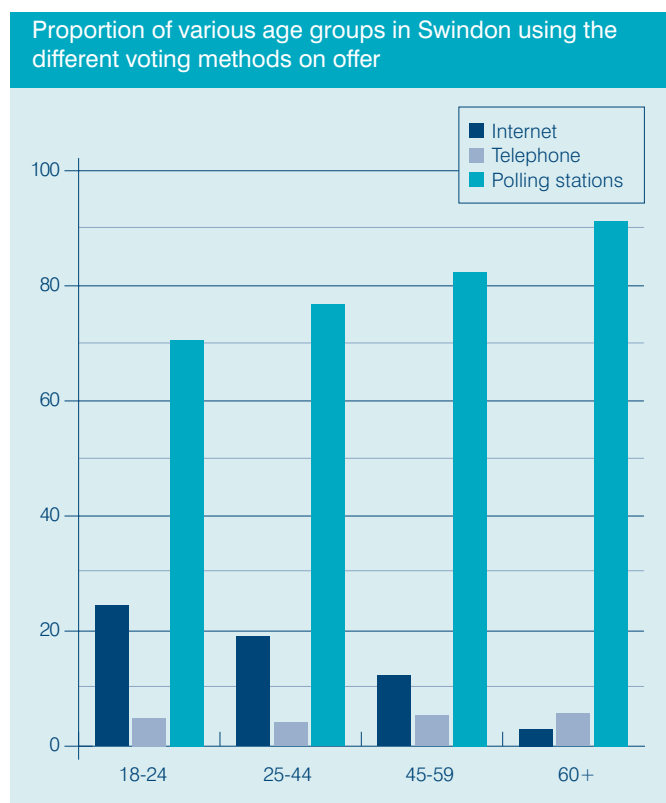
13 *'Profiles of e-voters on 2 May 2002: Does Swindon speak for England'*
    David Cowling, 25 June 2002
14 Ibid

Proportion of various age groups in Swindon using the different voting methods on offer

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E-voters[15]

Internet voting

Swindon's 19 wards provide the most comprehensive data. In May 2000 overall turnout there was 27.7% and this May it was 31.2% - an increase of 3.5%, broadly in line with the national average. In the two wards with the highest internet voting (20.8% of all votes cast) turnout fell in Abbey Meads (down 3.1% from 32.0% in 2000 – although it should be noted that there was an all-postal ballot in 2000) and increased slightly in Shaw and Nine Elms (up 2.4% from 24.8% in 2000). In the three wards with the biggest increased turnout since 2000, two had below average internet voting.

In the two wards in Crewe and Nantwich with experiments, the one with the highest internet voting had a drop in turnout and the one with the lowest saw turnout increase. In the two Liverpool wards, one with 17% internet voting saw an increase of 12% in turnout and the other, where there was almost 12% voting by internet, the turnout increased by only 2%. In St Albans, both experimental wards had high levels of internet voting (24% and 28%) yet both registered a fall in turnout compared with May 2000. Turnout increased in all three Sheffield wards: by 4% in the ward with the lowest electronic voting (17%) and by 6.8% in the ward with the highest (36.1%).

In broad terms, internet voters were more likely to be men than women, to be aged between 35-54, and to be middle class. Landline telephone voters were overwhelmingly from the 45+ age group, working class and/or a homemaker or retired. Polling station voters were marginally more likely to be women than men and overwhelmingly aged 45+. Among the 18-24 age group internet voting achieved its highest penetration. But evidence from the large Swindon pilot suggests that 71% of them still voted at polling stations.

Telephone voting

There were high levels of participation by this method in the two Liverpool wards (17.2% and 18.2%) and in the two in St Albans (17.6% and 27.7%). However, in Swindon the range of phone voting was only between 4.0 and 6.3% across the 19 wards participating in the pilot.

Text messaging

In the five wards where text message voting was operated this method accounted for between 6-11% of all the votes cast. Anecdotal evidence in Liverpool, both from interviews with voters and from call centre staff responding to queries, suggests that those using text-message voting were generally younger voters, those using internet voting were middle-aged and those using telephone voting were more elderly. Electors clearly took advantage of the new multi-channel voting arrangements to choose the voting method with which they were most familiar and comfortable.

[15] Data based on figures from '*Profiles of e-voters on 2 May 2002: Does Swindon speak for England'* David Cowling, 25 June 2002

The Commission also recognises that electronic voting pilots that were exclusively polling station-based did not increase convenience for the voter or for the electoral officials at the polling stations, although they did facilitate the accuracy and efficiency of the count. The cost effectiveness of such pilot schemes (without any option for remote voting) appears to be questionable. The Commission believes they should not be a high priority for future pilots, especially in elections run on a 'first past the post' system, where the counting process is not complex.

Public opinion

In most areas feedback from voters, candidates, agents and polling station staff was positive. Comments made by voters suggested that while many had concerns about using the equipment, these were overcome once they had voted. A significant proportion of voters needed assistance in voting using the touch-screen units; there were, in most cases, adequate numbers of staff to help with this.

NOP conducted quota-based telephone polls for the Commission in nine pilot areas using electronic voting – Bolton, Chester, Crewe and Nantwich, Liverpool, Newham, Sheffield, St Albans, Stratford on Avon and Swindon.[16] Overall analysis showed that respondents in these pilot areas were positive about the new methods being easy to use and convenient but less so than those in all-postal pilots. 16% in electronic voting pilot areas said that the new methods gave them greater encouragement to vote and 37% thought the new methods made the process of voting better with equivalent figures of 31% and 58% in all-postal areas. However, some of the electronic voting pilots also received the highest 'poor' ratings of the 13 NOP surveys in terms of being safe from fraud or abuse and providing privacy for the voter– in some cases these negative ratings reached 25% or more.

16   For full methodological note for these surveys, see Annex B

Voter information - Liverpool (electronic voting)

For analysis purposes, the electronic voting pilots can be divided into:

- 'Core' pilots - where voters could use kiosk or internet voting (Bolton, Newham, Chester, Crewe and Nantwich and Stratford on Avon);

- 'Maxi' pilots - where voters could additionally use other electronic methods such as telephone or SMS voting (Liverpool, Sheffield, St Albans, Swindon).

For the most part, there were many similarities in patterns of public opinion in the two types of multi-channel pilot scheme. In one respect, however, there is a notable difference. Non-voters in maxi pilot areas were more likely to rate the new methods as convenient than those in core pilot areas (87% versus 75%), although among voters there were no significant differences.

Voters in the maxi pilot areas were less likely than those in the core pilot areas to rate the methods as being easy to use. However, the core pilot area respondents were more critical in commenting on the extent to which the pilot scheme provided privacy for the voter. It may, of course, be the case that in responding to these questions respondents had one of the channels in mind rather than all of them.

Those in the maxi pilot areas were significantly more likely to say that the new methods made the process of voting better – 47% against 33% in core pilot areas. Within maxi pilot areas, positive figures on this question were highest among 35-54 year olds and ABC1s (that is, those in managerial and professional occupation

groupings). Those with multiple voting options available to them were also more likely to say that the new methods gave them more encouragement to vote – 20% against 13% in the areas with more limited options. This rises to 28% and 36% respectively among ABC1s and 18-34s in maxi pilot areas.

The Swindon survey of polling station voters asked respondents for reasons why they had voted that way rather than via the internet. Some 48% said they used polling stations because they preferred to do so; and 20% said it was more convenient. Twenty-nine per cent said they did not have access to the internet (including 63% of those aged 60+). Ten per cent said they were concerned that internet voting would not guarantee the secrecy of their ballot. Nine per cent (of whom over half were aged 18-44) said they had either missed or been unaware of the deadline of 30 April for internet voting. Only 2.5% of respondents claimed they had not voted by internet because they were daunted by the technology.

Accessibility

One very positive aspect of the overall evaluation of the electronic voting mechanisms was the awareness by the suppliers of the need to build accessible electronic voting environments. However, some pilot approaches had inherent obstacles for particular groups of disabled people. For example, telephone voting in all the pilot areas was undertaken through a touch-tone system. The voter dials a number and then uses the keypad to verify that they are a voter before making their voting selection. This form of telephone voting will be inaccessible to many people with hearing impairments and may prove difficult for people with co-ordination or communication impairments. The confidentiality of the ballot would prove difficult for some hearing impaired people who use type talk services; no 'textphone' equivalent systems were created. On the other hand, the simplicity of telephone voting makes it particularly accessible to some other groups of disabled people.

Different issues arose in relation to the kiosks, all but one of which used touch-screens. This creates specific issues for people with hand-eye co-ordination, visual and/or

mobility impairments. Where kiosks replace paper ballots and are situated in existing polling stations there is little evidence that they make voting more accessible for disabled voters. One key factor is the weight of touch needed to activate an on-screen button. Involuntary hand movement may switch the button on and off. Other people who are not able to remove their finger from the screen quickly may also encounter the same problem. Touch-screens also have the disadvantage of a person's hand covering the button when they press it. This can cause difficulties for some visually impaired people who can only focus on a small area at a time. Making the buttons as large as possible may help alleviate this problem.

Despite these concerns, in the survey of disabled voters in pilot areas conducted by Scope, the national disability charity, some disabled people did like the kiosk system. Where the kiosk is used in other settings such as a mobile polling station it can dramatically increase the ease with which some disabled people can vote. A good example of this occurred in Newham where the kiosks were taken to people living in residential and care homes. Most kiosks could also be dismounted which would allow people to bring the screens close to them. The Strand kiosk screen was on an angled hinge. This is important for people with some visual impairments who need to be close to the text they are reading. However, none of the kiosks used were completely accessible.

Voting using the internet rather than a kiosk arrangement can happen anywhere there is a computer with a connection to the web. Attempts have been made to standardise the way the internet develops. This is done at a global level though the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). W3C was created to: "lead the World Wide Web to its full potential by developing common protocols that promote its evolution and ensure its interoperability." As part of this work, W3C has developed the Web Access Initiative *http://www.w3.org/WAI/* which works with a wide range of organisations to ensure the web is accessible to disabled people. W3C provides support and checklists but most importantly a set of guidelines. These guidelines, known as Web Content Accessibility

Guidelines (WCAG), indicate whether a website is accessible. The guidelines, if met, are also beneficial to non-disabled people who use the web. This is because access is considered in the wider sense. Each of the electronic voting suppliers was aware of the Web Access Initiative and was able to provide evidence on their level of compliance with the guidelines. Although none of the pilots completely met the higher level WCAG conformance standard "Triple A", each had examined seriously how to include disabled people.

For disabled people, SMS text messaging was in many ways the most simple of the electronic voting pilots. All the user had to do was send a string of numbers to an election phone number using their mobile phone. They would then receive a reply if their vote had been verified. Some disabled people, especially those with hearing impairments, use text messaging to communicate regularly and may have found this system especially useful. Naturally, within this process extreme care has to be taken to ensure that the voter is aware of the way they are voting. This is especially true for people with communication or learning impairments.

Scope concluded that a great deal of thought had gone into how to make the sites accessible. There were no glaring access barriers, though each of the sites had barriers which further development could remove. Some of the problems were understandable given the short amount of time suppliers were given to set up the internet voting mechanisms used in the pilots. Occasionally errors were a result of oversights that would have been picked up through further user-testing. Adequate time for preparation and development is key to ensuring that future electronic voting systems are accessible.

Security and fraud

Across the technology-based pilot areas, many voters and party candidates expressed concerns that using new technology to vote would be a less secure method than the conventional system of voting and so more open to the possibility of fraud. Despite these fears, the Commission is not aware of any substantiated allegations of fraud or malpractice, and there is no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections.

Nevertheless, if public concern about the possibility of fraud were to grow, it could potentially undermine confidence in the use of electronic systems. To help provide the necessary reassurance, it will be essential to establish a set of technical criteria against which future pilots can be tested and judged. For this set of pilots, there was no set of technical standards against which to assess potential suppliers or evaluate the pilots once operational.

The Commission has, in preparing its evaluation reports, had regard to a number of e-specific criteria identified in work done by the California Electronic Voting Taskforce, the UK Independent Commission on Alternative Voting Methods and the technical committee of the international OASIS group, chaired by the Office of the e-Envoy in the UK. OASIS brings together government leaders, policy-makers, community leaders and industry bodies who are committed to the responsible application of technology to the election process.

As well as issues of technical security, there are other issues around privacy and access that may be technologically related. In summary the key issues might be described as:

- Completeness: All votes must be entered, accepted, recorded once and once only and all eligible voters must be provided with the opportunity to register and process their vote.

- Accuracy: Voter registration details must be updated accurately, cast votes stored and counted, with any changes automatically identified and, where required, rectified.

- Validity: Votes must not be fictitious and must relate to an eligible voter. Any changes to votes or voters' registrations must be authorised and input once and not be changed without authorisation.

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- Restricted access: The confidentiality and privacy of the voters and the votes cast must be ensured (preventing anyone linking a voter to their cast vote). The systems must also prevent unauthorised amendment of votes, prevent unauthorised voters from voting and physically protect the vote server and any other infrastructure in use.

The Commission welcomes the intention of the OASIS technical committee to develop Election Markup Language (EML), a specification for the structured interchange of data among hardware, software and service vendors who provide election and voter services. The intention is that EML will provide a standard way for systems to interact, as new global processes evolve and are adopted. Eventually, this should enable technical and security standards to be applied consistently in electronic election mechanisms in the UK.

One further issue that did not arise directly in the 2002 pilots is the commercial sponsorship of the voting screen. The Commission did not identify any undue commercial advertising in any of the voting mechanisms, although there were a few adverse comments regarding the prominence of some supplier logos when the results were being projected onto large screens in Liverpool. The council were happy with this arrangement and had discussed it with the suppliers in advance. For future pilots, and to maintain public confidence in the independence and integrity of the ballot, the commission it would be helpful if standard protocols on use of advertising or branding.

As with all-postal pilot schemes, election officials found that in practice much of the concern about the security of the system could be addressed simply by providing information and by having an opportunity to use the system. However, where this advice is given during the voting process itself, it is critical to maintain the fine line between providing assistance and potentially infringing the privacy of the voter.

The Commission noted that in some instances officials providing advice on the use of voting machines in polling stations – especially where voters had forgotten their identity numbers – were standing alongside voters and helping them to navigate the system. At no time was there any sense that the voters were unhappy with this, and the staff were all aware that they should not be present in the voting areas when the voter actually cast their vote on the ballot paper screen. For many voters, the experience of kiosk voting was unfamiliar and the assistance of the polling station staff very welcome. It was evident that without assistance, some voters would have felt unconfident about casting their votes. Nevertheless, this issue may require further consideration in future pilots. Staff training is critical in this context.

Cost

These pilots involved substantial investments of public money. The total funding from DTLR to the nine electronic voting areas was £3.15 million (additional funds were allocated to the dedicated electronic counting pilots). In addition to the technology expenditure, a significant further cost was the amount spent on publicity. All nine pilot authorities believed from the outset that a high profile campaign was essential to the success of the pilot schemes. Other overheads included project management and training. Exact figures are not available, as each authority approached the costing of their project from a different starting point, and it was sometimes difficult to separate "new" costs from costs that would have been incurred anyway.

In the short-term, the pilots did not provide good value for money with regard to the cost per vote. Because the turnouts achieved were not significantly greater than might have been expected with traditional polling, the unit price was high. But even if turnout had doubled, it was always inevitable that the return on the investment would not be immediate. Heavy start-up costs are to some degree unavoidable with IT infrastructure, especially where managing the security risks is clearly critical.

However, there is a clear distinction to be made between kiosk-based electronic voting and other methods which utilise existing hardware (PCs, phones and so on) owned

by the voter or the council. With kiosk-based voting, there will always be hire costs or, if the machines are purchased outright, maintenance costs. With online voting or telephone voting, on the other hand, the hardware costs are minimal and the infrastructure already in existence. The main cost driver is software development and security controls. Once suitable mechanisms are established, the running costs for these voting methods should be significantly lower than for kiosk-based voting in these pilot areas.

This distinction goes some way towards explaining the significant variations in costs between pilot schemes. In some cases (Swindon, Stratford on Avon, Newham, Bolton and Chester), the funds provided to the pilot schemes by central government were used to hire or purchase hardware and adapt existing software. In others (St Albans, Liverpool, Sheffield, Crewe and Nantwich), the funds were used primarily to support the development and testing of new software, create the technical infrastructure and devise procedural safeguards. Kiosks, if used at all, were not a significant cost factor in these pilot areas.

The Commission is, however, concerned that at least one of the contracts agreed between the government and the technology suppliers for the 2002 pilots made no provision for the software, hardware or intellectual property rights to remain with central government or the local authorities concerned. It is therefore open to the supplier to charge a 'market rate' for any future access to the technology, and to profit in other international markets from development work funded by the UK government.

Voter kiosk - St Albans (electronic voting)

Learning points: multi-channel and electronic voting

An open meeting should be held for all candidates and agents to explain the process and the security measures in place. The implications of the pilot for the count process should also be outlined. If any candidates are unrepresented, ensure they receive the same information in writing.

Staff training is a vital part of delivering successful electronic voting pilot schemes, particularly at the interface between people and technology. Election staff must be briefed in particular on the security procedures required. There is a fine line between providing assistance and potentially infringing the privacy of the voter.

A variety of information sources is needed to raise awareness both of the methods available to vote and how these are used. There is a need to state explicitly how these work and what processes are in place in order to ensure the security, and reliability of the system.

Effective signposting of services available to visually impaired and other disabled people is important – don't rely on these potential voters ringing the helpline to find out about them *(for more information on promotion of access, see the all-postal voting learning points.)*

Helplines and call centres should use a 'reason code' to categorise all of its calls to capture information about what parts of the voting process were not understood by voters.

Where an electronic voting pilot requires both a user ID and a password to enter the site, these two pieces of information should be sent to the voter separately to reduce the risk of personification, but it should be possible for a potential voter who has mislaid one or other piece of information to be given a replacement.

Improved testing should reduce the small operational problems that were experienced within some pilot schemes. Testing of bespoke solutions should comply with good testing practices and should be carried out as close to the date of the election as possible.

Clear procedures for establishing and verifying the operational requirements of voting software need to be established so that the information can be relied upon. These procedures may include running a test check through the machines to ensure that the vote allocation and the voter turnout figures are accurate.

Adequate security must be in place over the electronic counting equipment and software following the completion of testing.

Clear guidance should be given to pilot authorities to establish what generic recovery and resilience procedures are expected of a pilot scheme, for example evacuation and recovery procedures.

A full audit trail of non-standard activity should be produced from the system for The Electoral Commission, for the purpose of evaluation. The returning officer may also decide to do the same before the results of the count are finalised to demonstrate that no one has used system facilities to alter any of the votes. If any amendments have been made, for example due to error, these should be fully explained

Appropriate contingency arrangements should be made in all pilot schemes to guard against the eventuality of an interruption in the power supply to the electronic counting machines. This could include the installation of an appropriate uninterruptible power supply (UPS) device or the availability of a separate location to which the counting could be moved.

To facilitate access, user interaction should be kept to the minimum consistent with enabling a secure and secret ballot. Over time, the aim should be to replace PIN and passwords with alternative safeguards against personation.

Where touch screen technology is being used within a kiosk voting environment, care should be taken in identifying the settings that are used to switch on/off any screen button.

Where aids and adaptations are used to support voters these should be integrated with the page structure of the voting mechanism to ensure maximum independence. For example, if a Braille template is being used the system should be able to be set up by a polling clerk so that a visually impaired person can vote without further assistance.

Where electronic voting is made available in public spaces a demonstration of the ballot process (for example, a video running on a television screen) should be provided close to the electronic voting environment.

Where telephone voting is used, support should be one of the options. This should connect to a human contact rather than a voice recording or further menu options.

Careful consideration should be given to the different levels of user access that should be given to different people. For example, it may be appropriate for the returning officer only to have access to some levels of data.

The configuration settings of the operating system and database should be checked to establish that they are in order prior to voting.

A formal clean up of default IDs should be undertaken by the system administrator prior to the count to verify to the returning officer that no unauthorised default IDs are held in the system.

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Electronic counting

Electronic counting happens automatically with online or telephone-based voting mechanisms. But it is also possible to use electronic counting in tandem with more traditional voting methods, where the voters mark their choice on a ballot paper at the polling station or by post. The ballot paper is designed so that it is capable of being read and counted electronically. A total of 15 authorities used fully electronic counting systems, eight as part of a wider trial of electronic voting technology, seven in tandem with traditional voting methods or all-postal ballots.

All the systems appeared to operate well on the night. Certainly no problems were encountered of the sort experienced at Greater London Authority elections in 2000. The authorities involved reported several benefits including greater accuracy in counting, and (where paper ballots were involved) making it easier to match ballot papers with declarations that are returned at different times in different envelopes. Electronic counting would clearly bring greater administrative and time-saving benefits under different voting systems, for example under proportional electoral systems or where more than one councillor was being elected in each ward.

Some candidates and agents were, however, concerned about the lack of transparency especially because they could not see details on individual ballot papers. In part, this is a reflection of an attachment to 'traditional' methods, but there is also a legitimate concern about being able to scrutinise the operation of new methods.

The speed with which the counting systems operated varied depending largely on the method adopted. In St Albans, where postal ballots had been keyed into the electronic voting machines prior to the count and combined with the votes cast by computer and telephone, the first pilot ward's results were announced within four minutes of close of poll. In Broxbourne and Liverpool, the scheme involved a semi-automated counting method using a wand that is passed over the ballot papers. Liverpool experienced some problems on conclusion of the count for the first pilot ward, when it was established

that there was a discrepancy of nine between the number of votes received and the number of votes counted electronically. It was recognised that, in scanning barcodes with the 'wand', sufficient care may not always have been taken to ensure that the vote was properly registered. A full recount was ordered by the acting returning officer. As a consequence, the declaration was delayed considerably and was not made until 11.40pm, more than an hour after the first result from the traditional count was declared.

As the experience in Liverpool demonstrates, electronic counting does not automatically produce significant time savings and, depending on the technology, there can be potential for human error in the system. As long as semi-automatic counting systems are used, therefore, considerable emphasis must be placed on training of staff. However, the Commission regards these schemes as short-term measures, not suitable for roll-out on a wider scale. Future electronic counting pilots should make use of technology which is capable of being scaled up to use on a regional or national basis.

Learning points: electronic counting

Staff training is essential to minimise human error, and to ensure staff are briefed on security features.

Observers should not be able to stand too close to the machines, and observers should not be able to talk to the results collator. Ideally, a separate public gallery area could be used while giving a 'restricted' number of official observers nominated by the candidates' agents close access to observe the counting processes by ticket. Alternatively, the count venue layout should be modified to allow observation of orientation and other stages, possibly turning the machines around to allow people to observe the operating side of the machines.

Prohibit the consumption of food and drink in the area of the count machines.

Keep ballots from a single ward together and mark both ends of the box.

Where electronic counting is used with paper ballots, counting the boxes from each ward together at a single machine should enable agents to observe and be involved in adjudication of potential spoilt ballots, and prevent the need for agents to be in two places at once. The wards could be allocated to machines in advance - with the proviso that if a delay occurs on one machine and another is free, a whole ward should be transferred to the free machine.

For some electronic counting systems, it is important that all ballot papers are placed in the ballot boxes in the same direction, to avoid taking up count time orientating them. An arrow printed on the reverse of the paper indicating the direction it should be placed into the ballot box could assist. Ballot papers that are rectangular, rather than square, are easier for count staff to orientate.

Electronic counting systems should ideally be designed so that postal ballots can be counted at any machine, to avoid problems experienced in 2002 with postal votes overwriting polling station data when the results are collated.

If results are generated by separate counting machines, the Returning Officer should have a dedicated computer to produce and view the collated results; the possibility of networking the count machines should also be considered.

To address concerns from candidates and election agents about the security of the electronic counting equipment, the 'zeroing' process usually carried out prior to the start of the count and observed by the Returning Officer could be scheduled so that agents and candidates would be present e.g. at the start of the count.

Ensure sufficient space and staff are allocated to the opening of ballot boxes to maximise the efficiency of the scanning process.

Early voting and extended voting hours

Although a number of the electronic voting schemes provided an opportunity to vote early, there were only three pilots that tested new voting hours with traditional polling stations. Unfortunately, all three schemes - in Camden, Wandsworth and Westminster - appeared to have little success in attracting new voters.
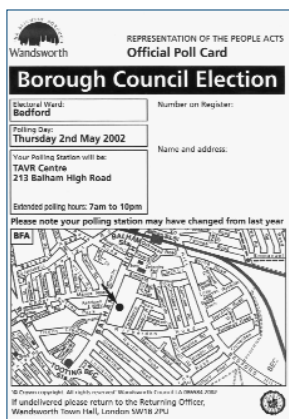
Poll card showing extended polling hours - Wandsworth

In Wandsworth, where polling stations were open for two hours extra, the turnout went down from 39.3% to 29.7%. From the information gathered and analysed by the local authority, 6,130 votes were cast during the extended polling hours, representing 10.5% of the total turnout (higher than the estimated 7.4% in the Westminster pilot scheme, which also operated extended hours). These votes were fairly evenly divided between the early and late additional hours; 47% of the 6,130 were cast in the morning between 7-8am and the remaining 53% in the evening between 9-10pm.

Westminster also operated the same extended hours voting. According to the council's figures, 2,696 voted during the extended hours – 1,286 in the first hour and 1,410 in the last hour (48% and 52% respectively). This represented 2% of the total electorate, 8.3% of those voting at polling stations during the day and 7.4% of total turnout. However, the overall turnout of 27.37% was significantly lower than all relevant comparable figures in the recent past. However, it is possible that the turnout of voters was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not been applied.

In Camden, voting was made available the weekend before election day. However, only 1.1% of the 28.4% who voted did so during the early voting period. Despite a wide-ranging promotional campaign, 57%

of respondents to the council's own exit poll said they had seen no publicity. This conclusion is reinforced by the small overall numbers taking advantage of the facility, but the introduction of postal votes on demand may also be a significant factor, providing an alternative 'early voting' option.

The Commission concludes that while extended hours and 'early voting' did not appear to have any significant effect on overall turnout, they certainly made the process of voting more convenient for some. Many early voters expressed appreciation at being given the opportunity to vote early. Some preferred it to the alternative of a postal vote if their attendance on polling day itself were difficult or impossible. Nevertheless, the Commission does not believe that 'early voting' on the Camden model increases turnout or can be justified in terms of cost and effort, especially given the availability of postal votes on demand. We do think there is a case for considering weekend voting at polling stations (or voting over several days, say Thursday – Sunday) instead of the traditional Thursday polling so as to test voters' preference. Alternatively, this option could be tested initially by surveying electors' views Voting spread over two or three full days, including weekend pay rates for election staff, would certainly increase overall costs.

A separate issue arose in relation to early voting in one of the multi-channel pilot areas. In the two pilot wards in St Albans, all voting ended in advance of 2 May save for the delivery of postal votes which had been issued previously. Unfortunately, some voters did not realise until they turned up at the polling station on 2 May that they were unable to vote in the usual way. This left many feeling disenfranchised. Where pilots involve early voting in only part of a council area, the wider publicity around elections may mean that voters do not always realise that the option of voting on the traditional polling day is unavailable to them. In these circumstances, the Commission believes that great care must be taken in planning the pilot. Ideally, a potential voter should be able to cast an 'unplanned' vote on the voting date operating for the rest of the authority. Where it is impractical to permit this, publicity must highlight clearly at the polling stations will not be open on the standard voting day.

Learning points: early voting and extended voting hours

Information about early voting should be conspicuous on all election literature, including poll cards. Cards specifically advertising the early voting scheme should be designed to avoid confusion with other unsolicited mail.

Advertisements should include the early voting locations, times and dates – but also an explanation of what early voting is for.

It is open to doubt whether the expressions "vote early" or "early voting" are sufficiently clear and unambiguous. To urge voters to "vote early" may to some be interpreted as an exhortation to vote early on polling day rather than leave it late and run the risk of forgetting or not arriving in time. Consideration should be given to finding an alternative and less ambiguous term.

Proactive communication should be used for early voting and extended hours wherever possible - in one previous early voting pilot (Plymouth, 2000), a sandwich-board man walked around the vicinity of the polling station during opening hours in order to stimulate awareness and interest.

Candidates and agents should be fully briefed on the early voting arrangements and encouraged to promote them.

Specific provision for advertising must be made in budgeting for early voting.

Where a pilot involves early voting by electronic means in a limited number of wards, great care must be taken in planning the pilot. Ideally, a potential voter should be able to vote (by some means) on the same date operating for the rest of the authority in addition to the early voting. Where it is impractical to permit this, publicity must highlight clearly that voting will not be possible on the standard polling day.

Other innovations

The pilot schemes, this year and in previous years, have overwhelmingly concentrated on the means of voting. To some extent, this is because of the constraints imposed by the legislation, but it is also true that schemes to increase information to voters have not been encouraged by the government with the same enthusiasm as schemes to change the manner of voting. Ideally, the two could be combined in future – for example, through linking internet voting sites to webpages with information about the candidates and their policies.

In 2002 there was only one authority, Hyndburn, which tested ways to provide voters with more information about the candidates standing in their area. In general elections and European Parliament elections, all candidates are entitled to one free delivery of an election address. However, this provision does not apply to local elections. The pilot scheme was designed to test whether extending the availability of information about candidates to voters would increase participation in the elections. Survey research suggests that three-fifths (61%) of UK voters say they would be more likely to vote in local elections if they had more information about who their candidates are, and what their views are.[17] The council paid for the cost of delivery for one electoral address for each political party and independent candidate in each ward to be sent to every voter on the electoral register. The policy statements were prepared by the candidates or parties but the council did reserve the right to not to deliver any election address that contained material that the Returning Officer believed to be libellous of any individual, contained confidential information or was otherwise unlawful.

Although no exit polls were conducted, the council carried out its own small-scale research in the days following the election to ascertain views on the leaflets. The main results, based on the views of a small sample of 144 people, suggested that a significant majority (78%) felt that getting leaflets made no difference to whether they voted or not. Turnout did not appear to be substantially affected by the pilot - although the final turnout of 35.8% was slightly higher than both the most

recent comparable election (32% in 2000) and the national average in 2002. There is no available qualitative or diagnostic information about what people thought of the literature they received.

Previous research for the Commission does suggest that people do not want more information per se but want more information which is relevant to them. The Commission believes that there is a need for more information-based pilots to examine the sorts of information that could assist voters.

One other initiative tested in some of the pilot areas was to permit electors to vote at polling stations other than the one normally designated. The Commission believes that the ultimate aim must be to provide voting at any polling station anywhere - electors could visit any polling station, be presented with the list of candidates for their home electoral area, and cast their vote. This year, however, the pilots focused simply on providing access to polling stations within the elector's own ward. The evidence does suggest that voters would welcome the ability to vote at any polling station within the relevant constituency. In Liverpool, the provision for electors to vote in person in any polling station within the pilot wards was welcomed by voters and parties alike, and was considered an important feature of the pilot scheme. 5.2% (37) of those voting in polling stations in Everton ward and 2.2% (70) of those voting in polling stations in Church ward did so in stations other than those to which they would normally be assigned. The next step should be to allow voting at any supervised polling station in the constituency or electorate where the voter is registered.

For the longer-term, additional flexibility could be built into all pilot voting mechanisms by having a central electronic electoral roll, so that election officials could authenticate a voter at any polling station. This would require additional communication links to a central voter registration database such as that due to be provided by the current project to create a national electronic electoral register (the LASER project).[18] This additional functionality might further encourage voter participation.

17 MORI Telephone Surveys / Local Government Information Unit, 1 May 2002
18 www.idea-infoage.gov.uk/services/laser/index.shtml

The Commission also notes a point raised with us by Lord Rennard, the Liberal Democrat campaign director: "There have been no pilots experimenting with more generous treatment of party tellers – for example changing the guidelines so that EROs provide them with seats indoors and allow them to ask voters for their numbers on the way in to polling stations." The Commission accepts that this is true. However, we believe that the existing statutory provisions are almost certainly not broad enough to encompass pilots of this nature.

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Analysis

Turnout

The Commission has consistently made clear its belief that changes in the methods of voting are unlikely in themselves to address the underlying causes of low turnout, and in particular the lack of engagement between potential voters and politics which appears to be increasing. As we indicated earlier in examining the context for these pilots, the factors influencing turnout are diverse. The main responsibility for persuading the public of the importance of voting must rest with politicians. However, increasing the choices available to potential voters and increasing the accessibility and convenience of voting are important. As the success of some of the all-postal pilots demonstrates, changing the mechanics of voting can have more than a marginal effect on participation rates.

Prior to the local elections, it was notable that the 30 pilot authorities had differing expectations as to whether their pilot schemes would significantly increase turnout. Some were brave enough to publish target turnout figures. Others, however, were keen to focus on the benefits that would derive through extended voter choice and the links to council e-government programmes. This was perhaps understandable given the falling turnout trends nationally.

In the event, the average turnout across all local authority areas with elections in May 2002 was 32.8%[19] - an increase of just over 3% since the 2000 local elections. This reversed the steady decline in voting at local elections over recent years, and followed one of the most high-profile local election campaigns in recent years. In pilot areas, the overall aggregated turnout was even higher, at 38.7%.

It was all-postal pilots which garnered the prizes for turnout. The average turnout in all-postal areas, at 47.5%, was nearly 15 percentage points above the average for the country, and a number of authorities secured turnout over 50%. The media swiftly hailed the all-postal voting experiments as a success. But it is salutary to note that
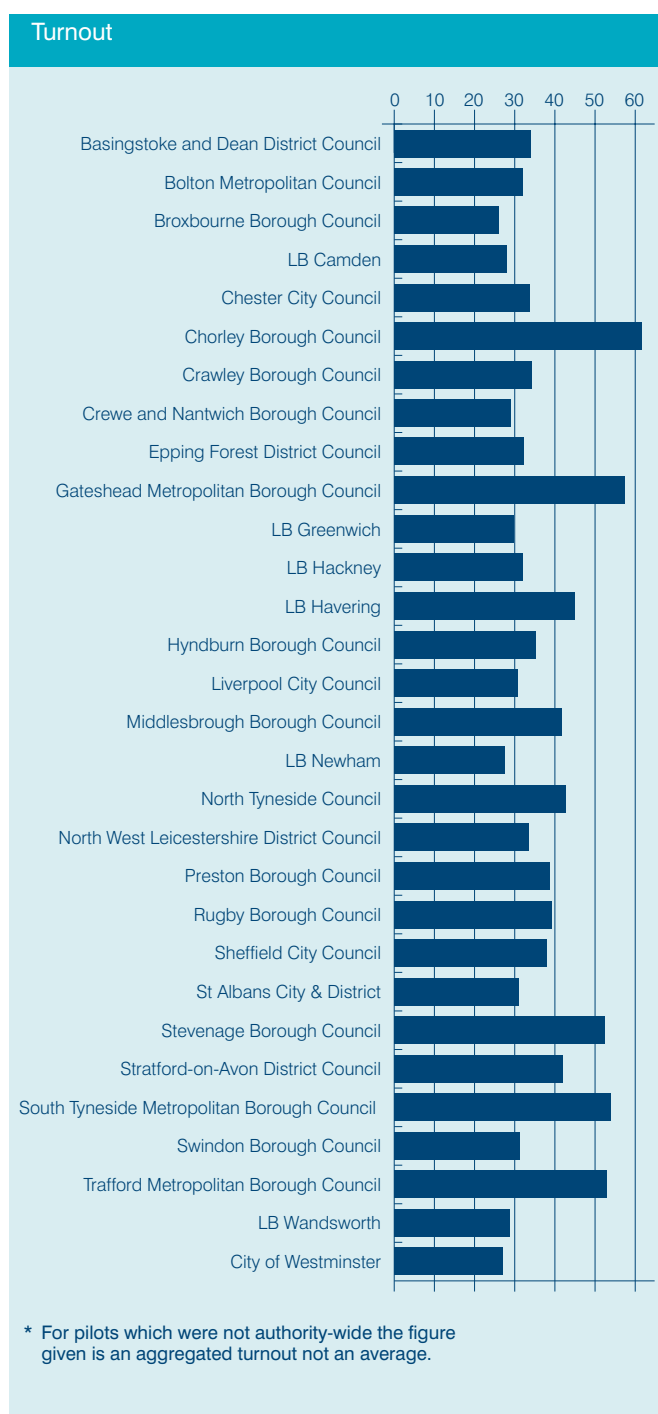
[19] Figures calculated by the Local Government Chronicle Election Centre at University of Plymouth, based on returns from all 174 local authorities in England with elections in May 2002

Turnout

*   For pilots which were not authority-wide the figure given is an aggregated turnout not an average.

even in most all-postal pilot areas, more people decided against voting than participated in the election. In the electronic voting areas, the findings suggest that the advent of new technology did not inspire the electorate to vote in significantly greater numbers than would otherwise have been the case. All methods attracted a considerable number of voters, but there were significant variations; overall, there is no strong pattern of improved turnout. There is equally no substantive evidence that 'remote' voting by internet, telephone and text message proved significantly more attractive than polling station-based electronic voting.

It should be recognised that the primary aim of the technology-based voting pilots in 2002 was to test the reliability and security of the equipment and software, rather than any expectation that they would deliver significant increases in turnout. It was also important that some degree of voter confidence in relation to the new mechanisms was established. Further pilots on the scale of Swindon (and with the quality of their analysis) will be required before a definitive judgement on the potential impact of technology-based voting on turnout can be reached.

NOP Survey Findings: Public attitudes to pilot schemes

"Would you say that the new methods of voting available to you on 2 May made the whole process of voting better, worse or did it make no difference?"

Base: 3,224 interviews in 13 pilot areas
Source: NOP

- Better
- No different
- Worse
- Don't know

The turnouts in smaller scale pilots in relation to early voting, extended voting hours and the distribution of candidates' literature offered no immediate basis for optimism. However, the Commission believes that further pilots could test these issues more effectively.

The Commission notes that the pilot schemes in 2002 generally undertook very effective publicity campaigns. Research in relation to the pilot schemes in 2000 suggests that the media was the major source of information, while their own efforts hardly registered. The available evidence from the 2002 pilots suggests that direct contact with the electors was also an important marketing tool. The best examples were not over-reliant on authority newspapers and used a range of communication methods. The Commission will shortly be publishing more detailed research into effective local promotion of electoral issues. However, one issue raised with a number of Commission evaluators was the need for national TV and radio campaigns to explain and encourage participation, rather than relying on local initiatives. This is clearly difficult when pilot schemes vary significantly around the country.

Perhaps the most effective promotion of the new voting methods will, over time, be word-of-mouth. It is therefore encouraging to note that the NOP survey for the Commission concluded that most voters, and non-voters, thought the new methods easy to use and convenient although they were relatively less positive about privacy and, particularly, safety from fraud. 45% thought the new methods made the process of voting better. Four out of 10 non-voters said it would have encouraged them to vote had they known about the new methods.

As already indicated, any assessment of the impact of pilot schemes on voting behaviour must acknowledge that there is a wide range of factors affecting turnout, including the demographic make-up of the ward or constituency, the level of competition between parties, the level of party activity, the marginality of the seat and the voting system used as well as the means of voting. The Commission also recognises that the nature of the voting process is unlikely ever to be the primary factor in
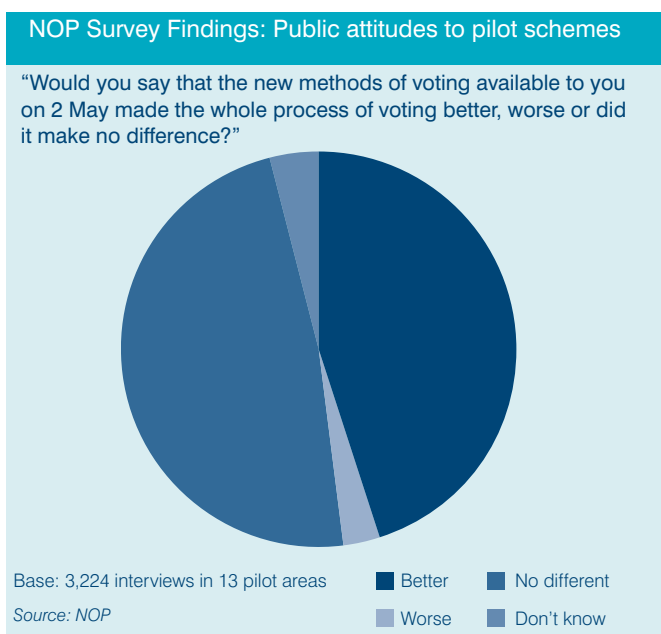
most people's decisions about whether to participate in any election. Certainly previous research for The Electoral Commission among voters and non-voters has shown that perceptions of outcomes – whether people think their vote matters and is likely to make a difference – are greater motivators to vote than the actual process of voting itself. In this context, it is noteworthy that a recent NOP survey suggested that 31% of those surveyed agreed with the statement: "I don't believe voting at local elections makes much of a difference." [20]

[20] NOP telephone survey for The Electoral Commission – 952 British adults aged 18+, 3-5 May 2002

Accessibility

The importance of making new voting mechanisms accessible to all potential voters cannot be overstated. There was evidence from the 2002 pilot schemes that those unable to attend a polling station did benefit from the opportunities provided by the new voting methods. For example, the call centre staff in Liverpool provided assistance to one very elderly voter who expressed delight at being able to cast a vote by telephone, his incapacity having effectively precluded him from voting for many years. So technology can open up access, but it must not be assumed that is inevitable. Access needs must be recognised not only in the way that the technology is created but also in the way that, for example, electronic voting mechanisms are introduced. Access issues relate not only to disabled people, but also to those who have English as a second language, those with limited literacy skills and those who may have limited experience of, or physical access to, technology (because of their age or their socio-economic background).

Suppliers of the electronic voting systems and the local authorities that took part in the pilots had, in general, a good and clear understanding of the access needs of disabled people. Scope identified detailed access planning by many of the local authorities. Several authorities had been creative with the way they managed voting by disabled people. Chester City Council conducted an access audit on all the polling stations that would be used; Crewe and Nantwich opened an accessible public internet voting office in a main shopping area; the London Borough of Newham used mobile polling stations that were accessible and also took the voting kiosks to residential homes where there was a concentration of people with mobility impairments.

However, in some areas, few specific measures were considered necessary to make new methods more accessible; rather it was considered that accessibility was increased simply through making available these new methods, the increased choice of absent voting methods providing greater opportunity for those not able to attend a polling station to cast a vote.

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Overall, Scope concluded that:

- All-postal ballots do increase accessibility for some disabled people, especially those who are unable to attend polling stations due to work commitments or mobility problems. However, postal voting is not a completely accessible method of voting. It has several inherent barriers that could prevent a disabled person using it. Polling information should highlight the availability of the tactile template and the assistance that would be given to support disabled people to vote; these services should also be actively promoted.

- Kiosk voting mechanisms were used in some areas to extend the locations where voting can take place. However, some disabled people, especially those with visual or co-ordination impairments, could find kiosk-voting mechanisms inaccessible. Making the overall voting process as simple as possible may increase accessibility of the kiosk systems.

- Internet voting gave disabled people the opportunity to vote from anywhere there was a computer connected to the web. In general the websites were created to high accessibility standards but some barriers to access remained. Over time and with further testing these barriers should be removed. However national standards will need to be created to ensure that internet voting is fully accessible.

- Telephone and SMS voting will never be completely accessible to all disabled people. Eventually, however, they might provide valuable flexibility needed to ensure an overall accessible election if they were provided as an alternative to other voting methods.

Most people are aware of the physical barriers that disabled people face when accessing their vote. Equally significant are the barriers that many people face in not being able to access polling information. Problems usually arise when information is not provided in an appropriate format. This can mean that a disabled voter has to rely on other people or cannot access the information at all, compromising both independence and the ability to vote in secret. Providing information in alternative formats would dramatically improve the

accessibility of the whole election process. Using type-talk (a service that enables hearing or speech impaired people to communicate using the phone) would also mean that more people could access helpline services independently, without having to rely on friends and family or carers.

Difficulties in accessing information about voting (both official forms and publicity material) affect other people too. In Hackney, for example, it is estimated that there are 90 mother languages and 22% of people have poor levels of literacy. The Basic Skills Agency estimates that across the country, 24% of adults have poor literacy. [21] There were a number of examples of good practice. In St Albans, for example, the electronic-voting and telephone voting options were provided in Bangla, reflecting the fact that 5% of the community in one of the pilot wards were from Bangladesh. In South Tyneside, the authority provided publicity material including a translation about the availability of the helpline in Arabic, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu and Cantonese; arrangements were made to ensure that Language Line could be accessed via the helpline; local group leaders were advised about the postal vote election; and arrangements were also made to translate the voting instructions into five languages. Copies of these were provided to relevant community groups.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives. In South Tyneside, for example, no direct requests were made for information in alternative languages – and two candidates expressed the view that more could have been done to target publicity at wards with larger black and minority ethnic populations. In St Albans, data is not yet available regarding take up of the Bangla versions of the website and phone voting services. The Commission contacted a number of black and minority ethnic community groups in the pilot areas after the election, but feedback was very limited.

The Commission believes that it will continue to be important to design and implement initiatives to facilitate access and encourage participation by disabled people,

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[21] Basic Skills Agency, 'Poor Basic Skills are key to disenfranchisement', 18 June 2002

black and minority ethnic communities, or other groups. Monitoring of the impact of these initiatives, both quantitatively and through seeking feedback at local level, should assist in developing good practice.

Public opinion

The Commission was keen from an early stage to gauge voter and non-voter feedback on the new pilot methods and, as already described, commissioned NOP to carry out surveys with residents in 13 of the 30 areas where new voting methods were piloted in May 2002.[22]

Two thirds, 65%, of people in the thirteen pilot areas were aware that there were new arrangements for voting in their wards. This figure was higher in all-postal pilots, 73%, and highest in South Tyneside at 84%. Just as the 55+ age group were more likely to say they voted than younger respondents, they were also more likely to have recalled seeing publicity about the new methods (68% compared with 40% of 18-24s and 58% overall) and to be aware of them (80% compared to 39% of 18-24 year olds and 65% overall). The most likely mediums by which respondents recall seeing publicity about the pilot were a leaflet through the door (32%), an advert in a local newspaper (17%) and a TV advertisement or programme (16%).

While two-thirds were aware of the new methods, barely half, 52%, said that they felt either 'very' or 'fairly well informed' about the new methods of voting. 46% recalled feeling 'not very' or 'not well informed at all'. Older age groups, May 2002 voters and those who regularly vote at local elections were most likely to have been aware of the pilot and to have felt well informed about the new methods. By contrast, 45% of those who did not vote in May 2002 were not aware of the pilot and 58% did not feel informed about the new methods. This further highlights the challenges facing local authorities in communicating new electoral arrangements to groups already less engaged in politics.

Nearly a quarter, 23%, of those who reported knowing about the pilot said it gave them more encouragement to

22 See Annex B for methodological details

Q Whether or not you voted and from what you know, would you say that the new methods of voting available to you on 2 May made the whole process of voting better, worse or did it make no difference?

	% better	% worse	% no difference
Total	45	3	48
Men	47	4	46
Women	44	2	51
Aged 18-24	45	1	51
Aged 25-34	44	2	51
Aged 35-54	51	4	42
Aged 55+	41	4	52
Voters – May 2002	55	2	42
Non-voters – May 2002	39	4	52
All-postal pilot scheme	58	4	37
Electronic voting pilot scheme	37	3	56
Single channel electronic voting pilot	33	3	58
Multi-channel electronic voting pilot	47	2	49

Source: NOP/Electoral Commission surveys of 3,224 adults 18+ in 13 pilot areas 3-9 May 2002. The question was asked after respondents were reminded of the new voting arrangements

vote although nearly three quarters, 73%, said it made no difference. The methods gave equal encouragement to all types of voters – including frequent, occasional and non-voters – although it is worth noting that 17% of non-voters said the new methods gave them more encouragement (although not enough to actually vote!) This reinforces previous research for the Commission, which has found that perceptions of electoral outcomes – whether people think their vote matters and is likely to make a difference – are greater motivators to vote than the actual process of voting itself.

The NOP survey found that the main prompted reasons for not voting focus on the idea that voting makes no difference (32%) and not knowing what the issues are (28%). A similar proportion identify not having time to get to a polling station (also 32%) although mentions of this reason are higher among those groups unaware of the pilot methods designed to make voting more convenient.

Also in line with previous research, when not prompted, non-voters give a range of reasons for not voting including practical matters such as not being able to get time off work to vote (10%), and being too busy to vote (7%). Additionally, 14% of non-voters in the pilot areas say they were not registered – a figure which rises to 23% of 18-24 year old non-voters.

When told precisely what the voting method was, 37% of those who did not vote and who had been unaware of the new methods, said knowledge of this would have made them more likely to vote. Overall, more than four in ten, 45%, thought the new methods made the whole process of voting better with a similar proportion, 48%, saying it made no difference and 3% rating them as worse. Middle-aged groups were most positive with younger and older age groups more likely to say that the new methods made no difference. Similarly, 2002 and usual/regular voters were most positive suggesting that these groups are likely to be most receptive to reform of voting arrangements.

Respondents were given a brief description of the methods involved in the pilot in their area and then asked to rate them in terms of being easy to use, convenient, safe from fraud or abuse and providing the voter with privacy. Voters rated the new pilot methods highly for ease of use (net +85), convenience (+86) and in providing privacy for the voter (+71). Non-voters also rated the new methods highly with equivalent figures of +70, +73 and +61 respectively. Both voters and non-voters were less sure that the new methods were safe from fraud or abuse, confirming previous survey research for the Commission, which found fraud and security to be key concerns among those opposed to new methods of voting. While a majority of voters and non-voters in the NOP surveys thought that the new methods were either 'very' or 'fairly' good in this respect (62% and 55%), significant proportions rated them as poor (17% and 14%) or answered 'don't know' (15% and 20%).

It is also interesting to note that, comparing the 13 individual surveys, respondents in Chorley – where the all-postal ballot was run without an declaration of identity – were most likely to say that the process was better than traditional polling. The 69% rating was 24 points higher than the average.

In summary, the surveys conducted by NOP offer some clear pointers with regard to public views of the new methods of voting piloted in the 13 areas:

• Those in postal voting areas were more positive about the new methods than those in electronic voting pilots – which may, in part, reflect greater familiarity with them.

• People are positive about the new methods in overall terms: 45% thought the new methods made the whole process of voting better, although existing voters are more positive than infrequent or non-voters.

• Voters and non-voters are positive about the specific attributes of the new methods, particularly ease of use and convenience.

• Where they are relatively less positive is in terms of the methods providing security from fraud and abuse.

• Nearly a quarter, 23%, of those who reported knowing about the pilot said it gave them more encouragement to vote although nearly three quarters, 73%, said it made no difference.

• However, 17% of non-voters did not vote despite saying that the new methods gave them more encouragement to do so. This, plus the reasons given in the NOP surveys for non-vote, reinforces previous research which has shown that, for most people, the why and what of voting are stronger (de)motivators than the how and when.

Impact on political parties

The development of alternative voting mechanisms will rely critically on the support of the political parties, as well as the public. Lord Rennard, the Liberal Democrat's campaign director, commented in his submission to the Commission that "the role of candidates and political parties seems to be largely absent from the pilot schemes. They have a key role to play in both increasing turnout through their own activities and also in providing a set of external checks on the voting system that provides public confidence in the fairness and accuracy of results." Chris Rose, national election agent for the Green Party of England and Wales also commented that "the advance consultation with political parties has been wholly inadequate. Indeed it would appear that arrangements more generally were being made in too much of a last-minute rush." The Commission agrees that it is essential for Returning Officers to be proactive in initial consultation and, subsequently, in providing opportunities for candidates and party representatives to understand the new voting mechanisms and their security features.

In 2002, the selected pilot areas were required to demonstrate broad cross-party support in putting their bids forward. This support was retained in most areas throughout the process. In general, most candidates and agents welcomed the piloting of new ways of encouraging participation in elections, and speeding up the counting process. However, some did express concerns about the loss of transparency in the election process as a result of moving voting into the "private" sphere and out of the public arena, and through the use of automated voting and counting mechanisms that limit the scope for scrutiny. Concerns in relation to security and fraud are considered later in this chapter.

It might have been expected that the pilots would affect the work of political parties to get their supporters to vote. In fact, it was not evident that the ways in which the parties or candidates campaigned in the pilot areas were significantly different to elsewhere. In some all-postal areas, especially those where there had been previous pilot schemes or mayoral referendums using all-postal voting, the parties were geared up to campaigning in a

new way. Candidates and party workers focussed their initial campaigning efforts around or just before the date when voters were receiving ballot papers. But most candidates or their agents admitted that they had given little thought to the impact of the new voting methods. Many continued to concentrate campaigning in the last few days despite the fact that in many areas voters could or should already have voted.

In some areas, candidates were reluctant to be proactive in promoting use of the new voting methods because they felt a lack of information about the system of voting. In addition, some campaign activity was being co-ordinated by parties across several wards and so, given limited resources, inevitably assumed traditional voting arrangements. In multi-channel voting areas, the more familiar postal voting tended to be promoted more effectively than the other methods.

For both all-postal pilots and electronic voting pilots, the parties were unhappy at the loss of 'live' information about turnout, normally secured through the use of tellers outside polling stations and used to focus canvassing activity on election day. In Trafford and Chorley, where the authorities were empowered by their statutory orders to make a marked version of the register available to the parties during the election campaign, the parties found this an extremely useful campaigning tool. However, there were some concerns voiced by residents who found themselves targeted repeatedly by canvassers if the updated registers continued to show them as not having voted.

The Commission is also concerned about the potential conflict between data protection legislation and the provision of information to political parties about whether or not residents have voted. This issue does not arise in relation to tellers, as voters have the opportunity to refuse to disclose their name in person. The Government should establish a clear legal basis for the provision of marked registers of voting to candidates in advance of the close of poll, bearing in mind data protection principles. If the legal issues can be satisfactorily addressed, the provision of the marked register should then be tested in further

pilots, looking closely at the use made of the register and public reaction. One possible option would be to make sure that the marked register is not made available until the morning of the final polling day, allowing the parties to conduct traditional campaigning activities on polling day. However, this approach is likely to be only effective if there are mechanisms that permit votes to be cast on the final day of the poll without inconvenience.

Parties also expressed concern about the lack of security in dealing with ballot papers where electronic counting was used. The Commission recognises that it is important to examine the ways in which pilot schemes helped or hindered the ability of candidates, agents, counting agents and polling agents to scrutinise and validate the accuracy of results and to check for fraud.

Value for money

One of the main difficulties in establishing whether the pilot schemes provided value for money is identifying the costs in the first place. The figures given earlier in this report are based on the figures supplied by the local authorities; however, there are no protocols establishing how to calculate the costs of pilot schemes, especially when run in parallel with traditional elections. The deliberate diversity of pilot schemes in 2002, designed to test a range of possible voting schemes, also makes comparison of the different features more difficult. Nevertheless, some key issues can be identified.

For an all-postal ballot, there is a direct correlation between turnout and cost. The higher the turnout, the higher the cost. The key cost factor in conducting an all-postal ballot is whether the costs of postage outweigh the savings from not having to staff and equip polling stations. Nevertheless, some authorities reported significant savings in the number of staff required, and their time. In general terms, the pilots appeared to provide good value for money in terms of the cost per voter as compared with previous years. In those areas where the cost was higher than a traditional election, this tended to reflect additional publicity costs together with larger printing and postage bills. Another variable was the number of staffed delivery points provided, and their

opening hours. Further all-postal pilots should adopt a standard costing methodology so that comparisons can be drawn between schemes more readily.

The total investment from central government for the multi-channel voting and electronic counting pilots in 2002 was in the region of £4.1 million. The Commission believes that there will be a continuing need for appropriate levels of investment to provide sufficient guarantees to the public that IT-based voting mechanisms are safe to use. We therefore welcome the fact that the Government has allocated funding of £30 million through the Comprehensive Spending Review 2002 to support further piloting over the next three years,

Assessing value for money in relation to the 2002 pilots cannot be approached solely on the basis of cost per voter. In some pilot areas, the figures would equate to nearly £100 per eligible elector, as compared to a more traditional unit cost of around £1. The intention is clearly that investment in the ongoing pilot programme should mean that future elections run using the same platform and software would have far reduced costs. Furthermore, if the scheme were to be rolled out across a greater number of wards or local government areas, the unit cost (per eligible elector or per voter) would be reduced because little further development of the systems would be required.

As indicated in the previous chapter, there is a clear distinction to be made between kiosk-based electronic voting and other methods which utilise existing hardware (PCs, phones and so on) owned by the voter or the council. With kiosk-based voting, there will always be hire costs or, if the machines are purchased outright, maintenance costs. With online voting or telephone voting, on the other hand, the hardware costs are minimal and the infrastructure already in existence. The main cost drivers are software development and security controls. Once suitable mechanisms are established, the running costs for these voting methods should be significantly lower than for kiosk-based voting.

In May 2002 the level of funding allocated to local authorities to pay suppliers varied significantly with each pilot; there were also two different sets of contract terms and conditions used by DTLR. As outlined in the previous chapter, neither the local authorities nor central government have any intellectual property rights over the solution developed by BT-Oracle for St Albans and Crewe and Nantwich, at a total contract fee of over £1 million. The Government has therefore potentially paid a high price for a one-off solution. In other cases, the fees paid to the suppliers were for delivery of solutions that had already been developed and used elsewhere, and for hire of hardware.

The Commission understands that it is Crown policy to vest new intellectual property rights in the party best able to exploit it and in relation to this contract the Crown and any person authorised by them have been granted a royalty-free license to new intellectual property rights. Nevertheless, where development costs are underwritten by the Government, it is open to the suppliers to charge a 'market rate' for any future access to the technology and to profit from the development work funded by UK taxpayers by selling the product to international markets. This benefit might appropriately be recognised in the fee paid for the initial work.

Security and voter confidence

Across the pilot areas, there were significant concerns expressed by a minority of electors and by some candidates and agents regarding security and the risk that all-postal voting or technology-based voting might increase the incidence of fraud or malpractice. From the information available, the Commission does not believe that these concerns are well founded. We are unaware of any evidence to suggest that the procedures led to any increase in personation or any other electoral offences or led to other malpractice in connection with the elections. The Commission has talked to the relevant police forces in each pilot area. Our enquiries indicate that, to date, Stratford on Avon is the only pilot area where a fraud allegation was being investigated by the police, and the nature of the fraud does not relate to the pilot scheme itself. However, the Commission recognises that allegations of electoral malpractice may still arise, since complainants have six months in which to make them.

Of course, it would be wrong to assert that the new voting methods did not provide opportunities for fraud. Those who wish to vote privately from their own households do not have the same safeguards that people have enjoyed in casting their votes in the traditional way. The key question, therefore, is how real those safeguards are in practice and whether alternative, better, safeguards can be provided. It is important to bear in mind that the benchmark against which innovative pilot schemes should be tested is not a 100% secure system. There are security and other weaknesses inherent in traditional polling station voting – not least the fact that in most parts of the UK all it takes to cast a vote is to state a name and address to a polling station official in the knowledge that the individual concerned has not already voted (or does not intend to do so) and in the hope that the polling clerks do not know the individual in question.

The central issue here is not security *per se*, but voter confidence. The traditional system of voting by pencil and paper at polling stations has a very high degree of voter confidence, despite its inherent flaws. Voters do not

yet have the same confidence in the telephone, internet or postal service as a means of casting a vote. Nevertheless, as staff at the telephone call centres discovered, many of the concerns raised were based on misunderstandings or false information and could be allayed through greater reassurance about the security of the new voting mechanisms. It is also important that the new mechanisms can demonstrate their robustness and continue to develop their security features – this applies to all-postal schemes as much as to those based on new technology. The Commission also believes that, in some respects, technology should provide opportunities to increase the security of elections (for example, by improving the verification of identity before voting) and increase accessibility (for example, by providing voting information online in ethnic minority languages).

The Commission acknowledges the concerns expressed in all-postal pilot areas about the scope for coercion during the completion of ballot papers. Some also pointed out that where canvassers collect ballot papers and promise to deliver them, there is no means for voters to check that their ballot paper is actually received at the town hall. In a number of areas, there was also widespread unease about security surrounding the distribution of poll cards containing identification numbers and passwords. In Liverpool, the leader of the council was reported in the local press after the elections as saying: "I do think the electronic system is open to fraud, particularly in areas of multi-occupancy houses… I believe there are party activists who have flouted the law in Liverpool. If I had wanted to fiddle votes in Church ward, I could have done."

The Electoral Commission's separate review of absent voting law and procedures, begun earlier this year and due to report in early 2003, is examining these issues in more detail, with a view to identifying specific proposals for enhancements to the present safeguard. Some of the measures which might be tested in pilot schemes in 2003 will be suggested in a consultation paper scheduled for publication this autumn. In addition, the Commission proposes that applications for all-postal pilots should in

future include proposals for assessing the level of fraud, so that the mechanisms can be tested rigorously, rather than relying on anecdotal evidence. For example, where a simplified declaration of identity is used, an exercise might be conducted to return a percentage of all declarations to the voter and ask them to confirm that it is their signature; where no declaration is used, a percentage of them who are marked as having returned their ballots might be contacted for confirmation that they did cast the vote themselves.

The grounds for concern are readily apparent. However, it remains the case that those intent on committing fraud may find opportunity to do so in either traditional, postal or multi-channel voting schemes, and that any such action constitutes a criminal offence.

Scalability

An important issue for the future is whether the technical solutions adopted for pilot purposes are capable of being scaled up to wider use including, eventually, a general election. On the basis of the information available, the Commission believes that some of the pilot schemes raise significant cost benefit issues, and it is not evident that all of the approaches adopted in May 2002 would be capable of roll-out on a wider scale.

Internet and telephone channels are inherently scalable. The issues that might arise are in relation to practicalities, such as the number of standby kiosks that would be available on polling day. PwC's assessment of the seven commercial suppliers of electronic voting and electronic counting solutions used in May 2002 concluded that all had mechanisms which were potentially capable of being scaled up to handle larger numbers of votes, although they would require extensive testing to confirm this and incremental investments in infrastructure.

With electronic counting, the scalability aspect is likely to be a factor of cost with the number of machines that would have to be purchased to operate on that scale, and the likely reduced cost of staff that it might deliver. Potential volumes can be calculated in advance and the appropriate numbers of staff and scanners can be added

to the process. However, the cost benefits may vary according to the technology. For example, the electronic counting schemes in Broxbourne and Liverpool are as scalable as the current number of manual counters throughout the country, but may not deliver sufficient benefits over the manual process compared to other methods of vote counting. Other electronic counting approaches, however, could produce more significant cost benefits.

Interestingly, the most significant scaling up problems might be experienced in relation to postal voting. The risk of a postal strike represents a significant threat, albeit one that has been managed well by pilots to date. The more immediate problem is the capacity of the market to handle an extension of all-postal voting and risk management. The main players - including Document Technology, ERS and ES&S - are not mailing houses. They rely on some 120 mailing houses for distribution, all of which needs to take place in a two week period. Service providers estimate that the maximum number of all-postal pilots that could be held in May 2003 is 40 to 50 average (80,000 electorate) size authorities.

Scaling up also raises new issues of security. While security within the electronic voting pilots was adequate for the scale of pilot being operated, it might not necessarily operate as effectively for a full-scale local or general election when the publicity would be greater and the risks higher. As the electronic voting marketplace continues to evolve the Government will also face decisions in the future about procuring electronic voting and multi-channel solutions from a number of different countries. Two of the electronic voting pilots used internet sites hosted by US companies and physically residing in the US. While the Commission has not identified any security issues with these sites, a policy decision will need to be made in due course by the Government regarding the supply of multi-channel voting services from non-UK organisations.

Evaluation

The Commission intends to review the evaluation approach it has adopted this year with a view to making improvements for future years. In undertaking its evaluation of the pilot schemes in 2002, the Commission has benefited enormously from the openness of electoral administrators and their willingness to share information and data. In future, however, we believe that it would be helpful to all parties if the evaluation process could be outlined at the outset and the information needs identified. Pilot authorities should also, as a matter of routine, undertake research to gauge the views of voters and non-voters. This might involve surveys, exit polls and qualitative approaches. The Commission will also want to identify, with pilot authorities, suitable mechanisms for testing levels of fraud.

The Commission also agrees with the comment made to us by Lord Rennard, campaign director of the Liberal Democrats: "The claims of companies wishing to provide equipment or services for new ways of voting must both be closely examined and also open to public scrutiny rather than being shrouded by claims of commercial confidentiality. This may winnow down the number of companies willing to take part in pilots in the future, but public scrutiny of the democratic process is a fundamental principle of a genuinely free and fair election system."

Recommendations

The Government has indicated that it wishes to see a gradual roll-out of further pilots in elections over the next few years, developing the capacity to hold an 'e-enabled' general election some time after 2006. The Commission supports the Government's commitment to increasing choice and flexibility in voting. We believe that electors should be able to choose from a range of ways to vote, including polling stations, to suit their commitments and lifestyles. We therefore welcome the Government's commitment to pursuing this multi-channel approach, as set out in their recent consultation paper, "In the Service of Democracy", published on 15 July 2002.

Pilot strategy

Given the aim of moving towards implementation of an ''e-enabled'' voting system that can handle a UK general election, the Commission believes that the Government must articulate clearly its vision of what the UK's multi-channel voting infrastructure might look like. The vision should be flexible enough to accommodate changes in technology but set an actual end date for when a full multi-channel general election could be operated in the UK. This strategy and vision should be developed in consultation with local authorities, political parties and electors; it should be clearly articulated to all interested parties, including technology providers, to inform debate.

The first step towards a full articulation of this vision has already been taken in the recent consultation paper, referred to above.[23] The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is also working with the Commission and other key partners (the e-Envoy, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) to commission the development of a project plan that shows a deadline for reaching that maturity of technology. The plan will define what it aims to achieve in each pilot over the next few years and set out the roadmap for reaching the ultimate destination.

- There is a need to create an integrated UK-wide pilot strategy, looking at elections to the devolved assemblies and Parliament, elections to the European Parliament, elections to the Greater London Assembly and Mayor, as well as local authority elections and other mayoral elections. The funding of the strategy and the pace of development will ultimately be determined by the Government. However, the Commission intends to play a lead role in bringing together key players, given our UK-wide remit.

- Applications from local authorities should be solicited for future pilot schemes on the basis of a clear requirement, targeted at the issues and aspects of voting that need to be tested rather than dependent on local preferences.

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[23] 'In the service of democracy – a consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy' OGC/Office of the E-Envoy July 2002

- Reflecting this more strategic approach to piloting, funding for all future pilots (over and above the costs of running a traditional election) should be provided by central government. Funding levels should ensure that local authorities can buy fully accessible electronic voting systems.

- If the pilot schemes are to be tested fully, they must be able to operate in 'real life' circumstances. The presumption in future should be that pilots are conducted across whole authorities or constituencies, unless exceptional circumstances apply. Similarly, a lack of cross-party support for a pilot scheme should not automatically be a bar on proceeding.

- It will be important to ensure that pilots are staged in areas which reflect the diversity of the UK and different types of authority.

The procurement process adopted by the Government in 2002 involved asking local authorities to participate in the pilot, asking suppliers to tender and matching successful applicants from both sides. This approach reflects the statutory basis for pilot schemes, which requires the initiative to come from the local authority. However, this approach does carry with it a risk that the overall goal of the pilots programme (an 'e-enabled' general election sometime after 2006) will not be achieved. If local authorities that participate are selecting themselves, this may not deliver the necessary diversity, or the number of authorities needed to establish large-scale trials. If this risk appears likely to be realised, the Government may need to consider changing existing legislation to allow it to require local authorities to participate in electronic voting pilots.

Pilot selection and procurement

In 2002, the entire pilot process, from procurement through to the election and subsequent evaluation, was carried out in a very short period. This put significant stress on the procurement process, the development of the solutions and the assessment of those solutions. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) needs to issue a detailed prospectus for 2003 as soon as possible, to allow sufficient time for the development of comprehensive proposals. The Commission welcomes recent ministerial statements indicating that the prospectus is scheduled for publication in September 2002.

- Where pilot schemes are proposed, there should be consultation and communication with local political parties inside and outside the council, and ideally with voters, in advance.

- Pilot applications should not be approved unless they contribute to the development of the overarching strategy referred to above.

- The Government should develop a high-level functional specification of what each type of voting or counting scheme should deliver. This specification should include information about how and when a voter can vote, the security that should be in place, the controls around the process, volumes to be processed, performance criteria and so on.

- The Government should agree on formal security and control attributes against which each potential technical solution can be assessed. There are different mechanisms for securing a multi-channel voting infrastructure and it would be wrong to be prescriptive. However, defining security and control attributes would allow comparison between the different options and an objective assessment of the adequacy of security.

- As was the case in 2002, technical compliance with the technical e-GIF (government interoperability framework) requirements and evidence of interoperability of system must be established at the bidding stage. Evidence of accessibility for disabled voters should also be provided at the bidding stage, and prospective suppliers of electronic voting

technology should be asked to provide a disability access audit on any mechanism they wish to use.

- The Government should develop standard terms and conditions of contract to be used as the basis for negotiation with the technology providers delivering multi-channel voting pilots or electronic counting pilots. This contract should address issues such as intellectual property rights and licensing of any development paid for by the Government.

- Procurement should be managed through separate channels for the different types of elections being piloted. The 'blind date' arrangements used in 2002 to match local authorities to suppliers should not be repeated. One solution would be for the Government to create an authorised supplier list in advance of local authorities being invited to bid. Bids would then be made on a partnership basis, and include detailed costings.

- It is in the public interest to continue to allow a wide range of suppliers to contribute towards the piloting of technology-based voting mechanisms. The suppliers used in May 2002 should not have a monopoly on the solutions.

- Evaluation requirements must be built into the bidding process – bids should indicate how material for evaluation purposes will be generated (for example by exit polls, residents surveys) and guarantee access to project information and documentation for evaluation purposes.

- It is important to build in sufficient time for quality assurance in advance of 'going live' – not a matter of days or hours, as in some cases this year. The quality assurance process should include access audits on all aspects of the technology used.

- The National Audit Office should monitor and review the procurement process adopted for future pilot programmes, to ensure efficiency and effectiveness and provide independent expert scrutiny.

There is a balance to be struck here between avoiding a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and allowing flexible localism while also ensuring that there is some consistency of approach and the development of best practice. The Commission recognises that getting this balance right will not always be straightforward.

All-postal voting

Although the postal experiments were relatively small scale – 13 local authorities in England opted for all-postal ballots in the local elections in May – there is also evidence from more than 15 all-postal mayoral referendums since 2001[24] and three local authority by-elections in early part of 2002. The significant increases in turnout in all-postal areas, combined with the absence of any evidence of fraud or malpractice, have gone a long way towards establishing the potential benefits of all-postal voting for the future.

The key issues for future pilots are scalability, extending postal voting across whole authorities, dealing with marginal seats and authorities where there is no political consensus – in effect, testing all-postal voting in 'live' situations. It will also be important to test whether the turnout effect is maintained over time.

The Government will in due course need to consider whether and when to make the necessary secondary legislation to enable all local authorities to run their elections as all-postal ballots without applying for pilot status. The Commission believes there is a case for proceeding immediately to allow this for parish elections and local authority by-elections. Following the 2003 pilots, the Government should be in a position to define best practice and decide whether there should be rollout of all-postal voting more widely.

The Commission believes that we would be moving too quickly if we were to adopt all-postal ballots for the Scottish and Welsh elections next year and it would certainly not be appropriate at this stage in Northern Ireland, given wider developments in electoral law in relation to voter identification and registration.

- Further pilots of postal voting should be undertaken in May 2003, but must be whole-council pilots in order to test scalability.

24 For more information on these referendums, see Electoral Commission, 'Reinvigorating Local Democracy. Mayoral Referendums in 2001', January 2002

- The necessary secondary legislation should be implemented as soon as possible to allow for parish council elections and local authority by-elections to be conducted on an all-postal basis without the need to apply for "pilot" status, as is already possible in local mayoral referendums.

- The traditional declaration of identity should not be used in future pilots. There was no evidence from the 2002 pilots that simplifying the declaration or removing it altogether increased the incidence of fraud. Such pilots also recorded, in general, more significant increases in turnout than other all-postal pilots. Future pilot bids from local authorities which wish to use all-postal balloting should incorporate proposals for testing alternatives to the declaration of identity.

- The Commission's separate review of absent voting law and practice will be issuing a consultation paper in the autumn identifying alternative security features for postal voting which the Commission believes should be piloted.

- All applications for all-postal pilots should have proposals built into them for assessing the level of fraud, so that the mechanisms can be tested rigorously, rather than relying on anecdotal evidence. For example, where a simplified declaration of identity is used, an exercise might be conducted to return a percentage of all declarations to the voter and ask them to confirm that it was their signature; where no declaration is used, a percentage of those who are marked as having returned their ballots might be contacted for confirmation that they did cast the vote themselves.

- The Government should establish whether there is a clear legal basis for the provision of marked registers to candidates in advance of the close of poll showing which candidates have voted, bearing in mind data protection principles. If the legal issues can be satisfactorily addressed, the provision of the marked register should be tested in further pilots to establish whether the right balance can be struck between the benefits to the political parties (and potentially to turnout) and the risk of public hostility to heavily targeted campaigning.

- Consideration should be given to allowing councils to run all-postal schemes that allow the replacement of lost ballot papers on polling day.

- The use of delivery points was a positive aspect of the pilot programme, helping to increase turnout. However, the collection boxes must be secure – either through the use of trained staff present at all times at the delivery points or through other security measures. Location and numbers are also important. The number of delivery points used in all-postal pilots should be reduced in future pilots, to test the impact on turnout.

Other detailed learning points from 2002 are highlighted in the main body of the report.

Multi-channel and electronic voting

The Commission regards it as important to retain the option of voting in polling stations alongside 'remote' electronic voting methods for the foreseeable future, and welcomes the Government's endorsement of this approach in its recent consultation paper. However, the Commission recognises that remote voting is more convenient than traditional polling stations for many (perhaps especially those who in recent elections have tended not to vote). Over time, remote voting is likely to become the norm for most elections. In the medium term, this may be through postal voting, but over the longer term - as internet access and digital TV ownership grow - technology based schemes are likely to increase.

Evidence from the pilot schemes suggests that technology-based voting has made a good start. Performance of the systems was good, with few problems arising.

But it would be premature to suggest that the Government is well on its way to delivering against its commitment to having an 'e-enabled' election sometime after 2006. Further piloting is clearly necessary to tease out a number of issues and to further establish the security measures necessary to protect these systems from attack and ensure public confidence. Another objective of future pilots must be to increase the size of vote processed. The Commission therefore welcomes the Government's intention to fund a further programme of multi-channel pilots over the coming years.

• Technology should provide opportunities to increase the security of elections (for example, by improving the verification of identity before voting) and increase accessibility (for example, by providing voting information online in ethnic minority languages). Future pilots should explore these opportunities.

• One outcome of the 2002 evaluation of pilots should be to establish a set of technical criteria by which future pilots can be tested and judged. The Commission therefore welcomes the intention of the OASIS technical committee to develop Election Markup Language (EML), which should provide a standard way for systems to interact and enable technical and security standards

to be applied consistently in electronic election systems in the UK.

• Standard minimum periods for electronic voting mechanisms to be available to electors should be established.

• As with all-postal pilots, the Government should establish whether there is a clear legal basis for the provision of marked registers to candidates in advance of the close of poll showing which electors have voted, bearing in mind data protection principles. If the legal issues can be satisfactorily addressed, the provision of the marked register should also be tested in further multi-channel pilots, looking closely at the use made of the register and public reaction.

• The design of 'candidate selection' pages on electronic voting sites should not automatically replicate paper ballots. Good practice in this area will be developed by the Commission, in consultation with others, as part of its current review of ballot paper design.

• All websites, both information and electronic voting portals, should be created to a minimum of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Conformance Level "A". The most current WCAG should be used.

• The eventual objective should be to define a consistent and functional navigation system to be used throughout all electronic voting websites. A glossary of terms should be included explaining basic expressions such as "submit" or "proceed".

• To maintain public confidence in the independence and integrity of the ballot, standard protocols should be developed on the use of advertising or branding in relation to pilot schemes.

Other detailed learning points from 2002 are highlighted in the main body of the report.

Other pilots

- More pilots aimed at increasing the information available to voters about candidates would be welcome, both stand alone and linked to electronic voting. Evaluation of such pilots must examine both qualitative and quantitative issues.

- Electronic counting pilots should use technology which is suitable for use in the medium to long term and which, if scaled up to regional or national use, could produce economies of scale.

- Data protection standards need to be clearly enforced in electronic counting of ballot papers.

- Early voting in polling stations as a supplement to Thursday voting should not be piloted further now that postal voting on demand is available. Future pilots should focus on testing the potential benefits of adopting weekend voting (or voting over several days, say Thursday – Sunday) in place of Thursday voting.

- Pilots should also test the feasibility of allowing voters to vote at any polling station in the authority area.

Other detailed learning points from 2002 are highlighted in the main body of the report.

General

- All pilot schemes must be accompanied by a locally based information campaign, available on the internet and in other formats. This should explain what mechanisms are being used and how to vote by each individual method. Pilot applications should make explicit the provision for publicity.

- Publicity material and official forms need to be user-friendly, written in plain English and translated into other languages and alternative formats (Braille, tape, etc.) wherever appropriate.

- Better signposting of services available for disabled voters such as assistance to vote, tactile template, and information in alternative formats is needed. There should also be a freephone number for access enquiries.

- Pilot schemes should undertake survey research to gauge the views of voters and non-voters. Survey questionnaires should be short and focused.

- Pilots should adopt a standard costing methodology so that comparisons can be drawn between schemes more readily.

- The Commission intends to review the evaluation approach it has adopted this year, with a view to making improvements for future years. A particular priority, if the necessary funds are secured, will be to undertake research in 2003 to obtain quantifiable evidence in relation to security issues.

Finally, the Commission believes strongly that the future development of voting methods that are more convenient for the electorate will be heavily dependent upon the establishment of a national electronic electoral register. This would allow, for example, voters to use any polling station in the authority area or, in due course, nationwide. A national electronic register should be a key objective in the short to medium term.

Annex A

Summary of Pilot Schemes

Pilots covered all wards in the authority unless otherwise specified. Where the scheme applied only to a limited number of wards, turnout figures are given for each ward. Local authorities do not all calculate turnout on the same basis; in some areas, spoilt ballot papers are included in turnout, in other areas they are not.

	Local elections turnout %	R	M	All-postal	Multi-channel	E-count	Change to voting hours or days	Notes
Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council	34.3			2				Watermark on ballot paper
Bolton Metropolitan Council	32.7				✓	✓		K, P
Broxbourne Borough Council	26.88					✓		4 wards
LB Camden	28.4						✓	
Chester City Council	22.2 40.8 38.5				✓	✓		3 wards K, P
Chorley Borough Council	61.52			✓ 3		✓		Marked register during election campaign
Crawley Borough Council	27.79 29.51 40.26 39.73			✓ 1				4 wards
Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council	21.8 36.4				✓		✓	2 wards OL, K, P
Epping Forest District Council	32.7			2		✓		Official mark on ballot paper used machine readable ink. Watermark on ballot paper
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	57.3			✓ 3				Watermark on ballot paper
LB Greenwich	30.7 28.7			✓ 2				2 wards
LB Hackney	31.9	✓		✓ 1				
LB Havering	45.04			✓ 2				
Hyndburn Borough Council	35.8							Free delivery of election address leaflets to all electors
Liverpool City Council	36.5 18.3				✓	✓	✓	2 wards OL, SMS, TEL, P, PS (voters could use any ward polling station)

CODE

M   = Election for directly elected Mayor
R   = Referendum on whether to create a directly elected Mayor alongside local council elections

OL   = remote electronic voting using personal computers
K   = electronic voting via touch screen kiosks, either in polling stations or other public places
Tel   = telephone voting
SMS = text message voting
P   = postal voting
PS   = traditional pen and paper polling stations

1   = Standard declaration of identity process
2   = Simplified declaration of identity process
3   = No declaration of identity

	Turnout %	R	M	All-postal	Multi-channel	E-count	Change to voting hours or days	Notes
Middlesbrough Borough Council	41.63		✓	✓ 1				
LB Newham	27.6		✓		✓	✓	✓	K, P
North Tyneside Council	42.45		✓	✓ 1				
North West Leicestershire District Council	33.54			✓ 2				Parish elections
Preston Borough Council	49.03 28.55			✓ 1				2 wards
Rugby Borough Council	39.18					✓		
St Albans City & District	23.3 38.9				✓	✓	✓	2 wards OL, K, TEL, P
Sheffield City Council	46.68 21.91 38.70				✓	✓	✓	3 wards OL, SMS, K, P, PS (voters could use any ward polling station)
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	54.71			✓ 2		✓		
Stevenage Borough Council	52.95			✓ 3				Watermark on ballot paper
Stratford on Avon District Council	42				✓	✓		K, P
Swindon Borough Council	31.2				✓	✓	✓	OL, TEL, P, PS
Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council	52.86			✓ 2				Marked register during election campaign
LB Wandsworth	29.7						✓	
City of Westminster	27.37					✓	✓	

Annex B

Summary of specialist research

PricewaterhouseCoopers

There were 15 electronic voting and/or counting pilots held as part of the local government elections and PwC carried out review work at eight of these. This was possible because each third party supplier had at least two pilot sites and the technologies employed at both pilots was largely the same. A review of the process at one site therefore provided information on the processes that were taking place at the other. PwC undertook a number of different strands of work. They attended the elections which were 'live' on 2 May and the counts to understand how the voting process operated, and later visited the relevant electoral officers and suppliers to drill down into the operation of the systems. This was followed up with a visit, where relevant, from their technical security specialists. PwC also met with officials at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (formerly DTLR) to understand the procurement process adopted, and reviewed the work of the DTLR-commissioned Quality Assurance report prepared by Actica Consulting. It should be emphasised that the scope of PwC's work did not include any detailed testing of the controls and processes within the DTLR or within any of the pilots. PwC's findings have been incorporated into the 16 individual reports and this strategic report.

Scope

Scope's report was authored by Ruth Scott, Anna Woodward and Gwilym Morris. Scott and Woodward work in the campaigns department at Scope, and Scott was co-author of Polls Apart 3, which examined the accessibility of the 2001 general election. Morris is a new media consultant who advises organisations on creating inclusive communication strategies. He was also co-author of Polls Apart 3 and has been campaigning on accessible democracy for a number of years.

The Scope report evaluated the pilot schemes from a disabled access perspective. electronic voting mechanisms in use were visited by a new media consultant during the election or at a public demonstration. Where there were remote electronic voting mechanisms they were accessed via the web or using the telephone demonstrations. In addition, the suppliers of each electronic voting mechanism were contacted, as were local authorities to identify how each electronic voting system would fit into the wider elections environment. In addition, information was gathered from disabled voters in five out of the nine pilot areas. The postal vote pilots were assessed solely by means of detailed surveys that disabled voters completed. Surveys were received from eight out of 13 pilot areas. An analysis of voting information produced by four local authorities was also undertaken. Key findings from Scope's report are included in this report. The full text can be viewed on the Commission's website.

NOP

NOP research was retained by the Commission to carry out quota-based telephone surveys with residents in 13 of the 30 areas where new voting methods were piloted on 2 May 2002. Fieldwork took place between 3-9 May in nine electronic voting pilot authorities and four authorities where a postal methodology was being piloted, with different approaches to the use of the declaration of identity.

A total of 3,224 interviews were conducted. The surveys were aggregated to provide analysis of opinion across the 13 pilot areas. The final data have been weighted by age, sex and working status to match each of the areas' population profiles, by the actual turnout on 2 May and by the number of the electorate as a proportion of all 13 areas. NOP's summary report can be viewed on the Commission's website.

All results are subject to sampling tolerances, which means that not all are statistically significant. The number of interviews and their associated sampling tolerances are set out opposite.

NOP Sampling tolerance and sample sizes

Postal

Aggregated results for the four all-postal pilots are based on 1,038 interviews, ±3.

Chorley Borough Council	216	±7
North Tyneside Council	326	±5
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council	299	±6
Stevenage Borough Council	197	±7

Electronic Voting

Aggregated results for the nine electronic voting pilots are based on 2,186 interviews, ±2.

Bolton Metropolitan Council	377	±5
Chester City Council	224	±7
Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council	134	±8
Liverpool City Council	210	±7
LB Newham	291	±6
Sheffield City Council	176	±7
St Albans City & District	206	±7
Stratford-on-Avon District Council	267	±6
Swindon Borough Council	301	±6

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The
Electoral
Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.