

Electoral pilot scheme evaluation

Merseyside authorities: Knowsley,
Liverpool, St Helens and Sefton

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Translations and other formats

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Executive summary

In response to a prospectus issued to local authorities in England inviting applications for electoral pilot schemes at the May 2006 local elections, the metropolitan authorities of Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens and Sefton submitted an application to pilot a series of innovations including:

- the printing of a barcode on postal ballot materials to facilitate the creation of a marked register of postal votes
- the inclusion of a printed official mark on ballot papers as an alternative to the perforated mark provided by a stamping instrument

Conclusions and findings

Facilitating voting or the counting of votes: The inclusion of a printed official mark on ballot papers as an alternative to the perforated mark provided by a stamping instrument simplified the procedure for polling staff, which enabled a more efficient and effective service to voters and significantly reduced the risk of human error and invalidation of votes. Fewer ballot papers were rejected at the count because they lacked the official mark than in previous years, and in the small number of cases where ballot papers were rejected, voters appear to have returned only part of the ballot paper.

Whether the turnout of voters was higher than it would otherwise have been: Overall turnout at the May 2006 local elections in the four Merseyside authorities varied between 24.1% in Knowsley and 33.8% in St Helens. The Commission has received no evidence to suggest that either of the innovations piloted had a significant impact on the turnout at the May 2006 elections.

Whether voters found procedures easy to use: The changes that were piloted did not affect any procedures that concerned voters directly, and there is no evidence to suggest that voters found the new procedures for issuing ballot papers in polling stations difficult to use or understand.

Whether the scheme led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice: The Commission has received no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided for by the pilot scheme led to an increase in personation or other malpractice. There were no complaints to the four Merseyside authorities or the police regarding potential fraud or security breaches in connection with the pilot procedures.

Whether the procedures led to any increase in expenditure or savings by the authority: The authorities have indicated that the additional costs of the pilot scheme elements of the elections were not significant.

1 Introduction

1.1 Under the Representation of the People Act 2000, any local authority in England or Wales can submit proposals to the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs to carry out an electoral pilot scheme. Electoral pilot schemes can involve changes to when, where and how voting at local elections is to take place, or to how the votes cast at the elections are to be counted, or candidates sending election communications free of charge for postage. The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate and report on any pilot scheme approved by the Secretary of State.

1.2 A total of 176 local authorities in England held elections in May 2006. In October 2005, the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Commission issued a joint prospectus to local authorities inviting applications for electoral pilot schemes at the May 2006 elections. Thirty-four applications were received in response to the prospectus, and in February 2006 the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs announced that he had approved 16 pilot schemes in a total of 22 local authority areas, although one authority later withdrew. A full list of all the authorities holding pilot schemes in May 2006 is available on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

1.3 This report presents the Commission's evaluation of the electoral pilot scheme in the Merseyside authorities of Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens and Sefton at the elections on 4 May 2006. Part A includes our evaluation findings, and Part B comprises the Statutory Order that allowed the local authorities to conduct the pilot scheme. The 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

1.4 In addition to these statutory requirements, the Commission's evaluation also considers, where appropriate:

- the extent to which the pilot scheme facilitated or otherwise encouraged participation among particular communities, including young people, 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 scheme
- 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 scheme 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 scheme resulted in measurable improvements to, or had any adverse impact on, the existing system of electoral administration
- whether the scheme represented good value for money

1.5 Where appropriate, the Commission may also make recommendations as to whether changes should be made to electoral arrangements more widely through roll-out of the pilot scheme procedures.

1.6 The Commission is required to submit its evaluation report to the Secretary of State and any of the local authorities involved in the pilot scheme, and those local authorities are required to publish the evaluation report within three months of the election. The Commission has also published this report on its website.

1.7 In preparing this report, the Commission has drawn on its own observation and assessment of the pilot scheme, as well as on the views expressed to it by a number of other stakeholders. We would particularly like to thank the Returning Officers and the Electoral Services departments of Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens and Sefton for their assistance in undertaking this evaluation and for supplying us with the information and data to support it.

2 Context

The area

2.1 The Merseyside sub-region is situated on the west coast of England in the North West region. It is centred on the historic port city of Liverpool, but also includes the large towns of Birkenhead, Bootle, Huyton-with-Roby, St Helens, Southport and Wallasey. It comprises the metropolitan councils of Liverpool, Sefton (to the north of Liverpool), Knowsley and St Helens (both to the east) and Wirral (to the west).

2.2 The Merseyside region benefits from good road, rail and air links to Liverpool. The region further benefits from a diverse economy focused on the port, tourism and service industries.

The councils

2.3 The four authorities involved in the pilot each hold elections by thirds. One-third of the membership of the authority is elected in each of three years, followed by a year with no local elections. The authorities all have three-member wards: Liverpool City Council has a total of 90 members in 30 wards; Knowsley Council has 63 members in 21 wards; Sefton Council has 66 members in 22 wards; and St Helens Council has 48 members in 16 wards. In May 2006, electors across the four authorities voted to elect one new member in each ward.

2.4 The total electorate of the four authorities is just over 1,000,000. Turnout at the most recent local elections in the four authorities in June 2004, which involved an all-postal voting pilot scheme across the North West region, was significantly higher than in previous years. Turnout at the 2003 local elections was also significantly higher in St Helens (where all-postal voting pilot scheme arrangements applied) than in the other three authorities.

2.5 Following the previous local elections in June 2004, Liverpool City Council was controlled by a Liberal Democrat administration and Knowsley Council by Labour; Sefton and St Helens were both left with councils with no overall control. The 12 Members of Parliament for constituencies included within the area of the pilot scheme are all Labour Party representatives with the exception of one Liberal Democrat who represents Southport constituency in Sefton.

2.6 Most authorities have been involved in pilots prior to 2004, but all were involved in the all-postal pilot held in June 2004 and found that joint and co-operative working was beneficial to the extent that the arrangements continued into the UK Parliamentary general election in 2005, when a common provider was used for postal voting.

3 Pilot scheme description

The pilot scheme application

3.1 In response to the October 2005 electoral pilot scheme prospectus, five Merseyside unitary authorities (Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral) submitted a joint application to pilot a series of innovations and changes to electoral procedures at the May 2006 local elections. However, the application did not receive full political support from Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, which subsequently withdrew from the pilot scheme. The application proposed the following innovations:

- the printing of a barcode on postal ballot materials to facilitate the creation of a marked register of postal votes
- the inclusion of a printed official mark on ballot papers as an alternative to the perforated official mark provided by a stamping instrument

3.2 In a Written Ministerial Statement issued on 13 February 2006, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs announced that the Government had given approval for the four Merseyside authorities to pilot the innovations listed above.¹ The final pilot scheme Order *Merseyside (Election Security Measures) Pilot Order 2006* was made on 23 March, and came into force on the same day.

Pilot scheme details

Barcodes printed on postal ballot materials

3.3 A barcode representing each elector's unique number on the authorities' electoral management systems was printed onto the postal ballot declaration of identity, and scanned prior to the opening of the postal vote envelopes. Scanning the barcode on each declaration of identity enabled the creation of marked registers of returned postal votes, which was made available to political parties after the election at a cost.

Printed security features

3.4 As an alternative to the perforation of ballot papers by a stamping instrument to provide the official mark, watermarked paper was used and the official mark was formed by security marks which were printed on all ballot papers. Pre-printing of security marks removed the requirement to apply the official mark and check that each ballot paper had been perforated.

Objectives of the pilot scheme

3.5 In their pilot scheme application, the Merseyside authorities noted that the proposed pilot scheme aimed to:

¹ Official Record (House of Lords) 13 February 2006: Vol 678, Column WS51, www.dca.gov.uk/pubs/statements/2006/st060213.htm

- trial provisions included within the Electoral Administration Bill, which would be rolled out for general use in local elections in May 2007
- improve the administration of the electoral process
- assess possible economies of scale by using common services across the four authorities

3.6 The background paper attached to the Secretary of State's written statement announcing approval of the May 2006 pilot scheme programme noted the Government's view that 'there is learning that could be gained about the use of these changes across a wide scale.' In commenting formally on the application, the Commission also noted that 'there would be significant learning value to be gained by piloting the proposed changes in detail before their full implementation in future years. In particular, we note that piloting these changes will enable a practical assessment of the scalability of the proposals and their cost, staff and time resource implications.'²

3.7 The following section outlines the key objectives of the pilot scheme, as they relate to the statutory evaluation criteria specified in Chapter 1, 'Introduction'.

Facilitating voting or the counting of votes

3.8 Removing the need for the use of stamping instruments to apply the official mark aimed to simplify and speed up the process of issuing ballot papers to voters in polling stations. The innovation was also intended to ensure that fewer ballot papers were rejected at the count because the official mark had not been applied.

Turnout

3.9 The innovations tested by the pilot scheme were essentially procedural and were therefore not expected to have a significant impact on turnout.

Ease of use by voters

3.10 Neither of the innovations introduced as part of this pilot scheme were expected to have a direct impact on the experience of electors during the voting process, other than to improve the efficiency of the process of issuing ballot papers in polling stations.

Security and confidence

3.11 In addition to providing useful campaign information to candidates and political parties, the creation of marked registers of returned postal votes was intended to enable more effective oversight and management of the postal vote opening and verification process by the authorities, including checks to establish whether

² *Comments by the Electoral Commission on pilot scheme applications under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000*, December 2005, www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/pilotsmay2006.cfm

individual ballot packs had been returned when dealing with requests to issue new ballot packs to replace lost or spoilt ballots.

Efficiency

3.12 Pre-printing the official mark on ballot papers was intended to support greater automation and improvements in the efficiency of the process for issuing postal ballot papers. The requirement to apply a perforated mark to each ballot paper can be resource-intensive and does not allow for efficiency savings from the automated issue of postal ballot packs to be fully realised. The cost and administrative efficiency savings identified by the authorities would however need to be set against the costs of outsourcing the printing of ballot papers and the production and issue of postal ballot packs to a contractor. The initial and ongoing costs of purchasing and maintaining stamping instruments would also be removed.

3.13 The inclusion of barcodes on postal ballot declarations of identity would enable the automatic creation of marked registers of returned postal votes by scanning the declarations upon opening. Resource-intensive manual marking of the postal voters lists would not be required.

4 Evaluation

Management of the pilot scheme

Project management

4.1 The Merseyside authorities have a successful track record of working in partnership and have established a partnership agreement for joint working. Regular fortnightly meetings of the managers of the Merseyside authorities involved took place in the months running up to the elections. Issues were raised and discussed at the fortnightly meetings in order to ensure successful and timely procurement of services from suppliers and to reduce the risk of any complication in the production of materials.

4.2 The project management methodology normally used for elections was adopted for the 2006 elections, including the electoral pilot scheme. For the procedures being piloted, Electoral Services Managers in each of the four authorities co-ordinated relevant milestones and liaison among suppliers.

4.3 Relevant key stakeholders including suppliers, Royal Mail and Merseyside Police were invited to attend meetings where appropriate.

Training

4.4 Each of the Merseyside authorities participating in the pilot scheme undertook training and briefing sessions to raise awareness of the changes being piloted, both with the Returning Officers' staff, and separately with agents, candidates and political parties. Some authorities (e.g. Liverpool) undertook a dedicated training session for all staff, while others (e.g. Sefton) provided a short briefing for staff in advance of polling day, to complement written materials.

4.5 In general, no issues specifically relating to the pilot scheme procedures were raised by staff or other stakeholders during the briefing and training sessions. The process was well received by polling station staff, although a small minority of Poll Clerks claimed to be unaware of the changes being piloted. The authorities suggest that this is likely to be attributable to last-minute changes to polling station staff, rather than any specific problems with training procedures.

Suppliers

4.6 The key partners to supply printed materials were:

- AeroPrint – for the printing of the ballot papers
- ERS – for the production of other postal ballot materials and overall assembly of postal ballot packs

4.7 The partnership between the Merseyside authorities and ERS is well established and these were the third elections at which they had collaborated. These were the first elections at which any of the Merseyside authorities had used

AeroPrint. The Merseyside team deemed the size of the company and its facilities adequate to deal with both the volume of materials to be printed and the added security measures required for the 2006 local elections, as well as representing value for money.

4.8 Although the Merseyside team was in general satisfied that the changes being piloted had been delivered smoothly, the authorities noted a number of issues relating to expected timescales not being met. The Merseyside team felt that these issues could be resolved and would be happy to work with AeroPrint in the future, while retaining the option of sourcing other security printers. The authorities' positive relationship with ERS continued, with only minor issues of concern reported.

4.9 A third supplier, Strand, provided electoral registration software which automatically marked the postal voters lists to show that ballot packs had been returned.

Modified postal voting processes

4.10 Returned postal ballot packs were scanned at each authority during postal vote opening sessions, using hand-held scanners. Each authority, with the exception of St Helens (where three new scanners were bought) reused technology bought for the 2004 all-postal pilot. Barcodes were strategically placed on the declaration of identity to enable scanning through the window of the return envelope without having to open the envelope. This enabled the data needed for the creation of the marked registers of returned postal ballots to be collected without opening the ballot packs and possibly compromising the secrecy of the election.

4.11 The process passed off in the main without any operational problems. Each authority reported issuing a small number of replacement postal ballot packs (ranging between 10 and 24). Where replacement postal ballot packs were necessary the system eliminated the opportunity for people to vote twice, as it could identify whether the original postal ballot pack had been returned. There were no examples found of voters requesting a replacement ballot pack where a completed pack had already been returned.

4.12 Although the process of scanning all returned postal ballot packs added extra time to the postal vote opening process, the authorities felt that the benefit of being able to produce a marked register outweighed this minor time inconvenience.

4.13 The scanning of returned postal ballot packs enabled the relatively easy production of marked registers of returned postal votes. These could not otherwise have been compiled within the limited staff resources available at each authority.

Impact on voting

4.14 The changes to procedure at polling stations did not have a significant impact on the process of voting. Nevertheless, the changes were particularly welcomed by polling station staff, who reported that the time saved by not using stamping instruments had a positive effect on the service provided to voters, particularly those

arriving at polling stations during busy periods. The pre-printed security marks enabled polling station staff to deliver a swifter and more effective service to the voter.

Impact on counting

4.15 Owing to the nature of the changes being piloted the impact on counting was limited. The number of ballot papers rejected for want of an official mark was limited to three in St Helens, and these cases resulted from the elector returning only part of their ballot paper.

Public awareness and feedback

Impact and effectiveness of publicity arrangements

4.16 Although the Merseyside authorities engaged in communicating general information on the elections to the public, the pilot innovations were not specifically promoted because they were not explicitly voter-facing.

4.17 On the postal ballot instructions, the Merseyside team decided to include an explanation of the barcode. However, it decided not to include an explanation of the new security features. It was felt that such an explanation would have increased the number of enquiries and thus placed unnecessary pressure on limited staff resources.

Voter awareness and comprehension

4.18 There was little evidence of significant voter awareness of the relatively unobtrusive changes implemented by the pilot scheme. The Merseyside team reported that very few voters noticed any difference to their voting experience. Once the changes to the official mark were explained, voters who queried the absence of a stamping instrument were satisfied that an official mark was nonetheless present.

4.19 The Commission wrote to interested local stakeholders shortly after the election to request their assessment of the pilot scheme, enclosing a questionnaire. We also made the questionnaire available on our website together with a facility to provide further comment. We received 15 responses and are grateful to those concerned for providing us with their views, which we have incorporated into our evaluation of the pilot scheme.

Impact on campaigning

4.20 The marked register of returned postal votes will be able to be employed by candidates and political parties for future campaigning purposes, although it could not be used for this election because the information was only made available after the close of poll. At the time of writing this report, a total of 26 requests for the marked register of returned postal votes had been made across the four authorities. In general, candidates and political parties were fully supportive of this innovation.

4.21 The revised official marks on the ballot papers had no direct impact on political party campaigning efforts. Consequently, while views of candidates and political parties were generally supportive once the measures had been explained, the response was usually one of indifference to the revised administrative procedures.

Administrative efficiency

4.22 The changes being piloted were considered to have supported greater administrative efficiency within each of the four Merseyside authorities. As each barcode was scanned, the electoral registration software provided by Strand automatically marked a copy of the postal voters list to show that a ballot pack had been returned.

4.23 Dispensing with the need to perforate ballot papers in polling stations not only reduced the time required to process each elector but also removed the risk of stamping instruments breaking down on polling day. Removing the annual requirement to recalibrate stamping instruments was estimated to have saved a day of a staff member's time, although this was probably offset by the extra time required to scan postal ballot returns. Both polling station and Electoral Services staff supported dispensing with what they considered to be an antiquated method of producing the official mark.

4.24 The introduction of barcodes to the declaration of identity was also considered to have been an improved efficiency measure. Although the scanning of returned declarations of identity was an additional procedure, the authorities have suggested that it would not have been possible to create the marked register of returned postal votes without this change, given the significant staff resource that would be required. The use of barcodes also helped to automate the process of matching declarations of identity and postal ballot envelopes. Moreover, given that the number of registered postal voters in Merseyside continues to increase, the authorities consider that the improvements provided by new electronic technology would be invaluable for future elections.

Accessibility

4.25 The innovations piloted in the four Merseyside authorities did not pose any accessibility issues or risks owing to the non-voter-facing nature of the changes being piloted. However, it will be important to ensure that clear and effective explanations of role and purpose of barcodes are provided on all materials if they are used in future elections.

Security and user confidence

4.26 The Merseyside authorities consider that they have not historically experienced significant levels of allegations of electoral fraud or malpractice. Feedback from stakeholders suggests that the innovations piloted had little impact on overall confidence in the security of the elections.

4.27 In St Helens, the marked register of returned postal votes was used to carry out a survey among a random sample of 2,759 postal voters to check if they had both received and returned their postal vote. Letters were sent out on 5 June. At the time of writing, approximately 1,800 responses had been received but had yet to be analysed.

4.28 The Commission has not been made aware of any allegations of fraud or malpractice arising from the pilot scheme at this election. At present, therefore, there is no substantiated evidence to suggest that the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections. However, we note that the period in which a prosecution can be launched is one year, and so such evidence may still come to light.

Impact on turnout

4.29 Overall turnout at the May 2006 local elections in the four Merseyside authorities varied from 24.1% in Knowsley to 33.8% in St Helens. Average turnout at the May 2006 local elections in England was approximately 37%. Table 1 below shows the average turnout for each authority at each of the last five local elections.

Table 1: Percentage turnout at local elections in Merseyside 2000–2006

	2000	2002	2003	2004	2006
Knowsley	18.0	23.6	19.9	33.7	24.1
Liverpool	19.1	27.6	21.7	33.3	25.5
St Helens	22.2	26.4	47.8	38.9	33.8
Sefton	27.3	31.1	26.8	43.7	30.8

4.30 All four authorities held all-postal elections at the combined European Parliamentary and local elections in June 2004, and St Helens also undertook an all-postal voting pilot scheme at the May 2003 local elections. Turnout among registered postal voters for each of the four authorities at the May 2006 elections was:

- Knowsley: 53.0%
- Liverpool: 57.0%
- St Helens: 70.8%
- Sefton: 66.0%

4.31 There is no evidence to suggest that either of the innovations piloted had any significant direct impact on the turnout at the May 2006 elections.

Cost and value for money

4.32 Overall, the Merseyside team was satisfied that both the pilot scheme and the elections more generally had been conducted successfully while achieving value for money through a joint procurement exercise.

Technology

4.33 Owing to all the Merseyside authorities having held all-postal elections in June 2004, they already possessed hardware technology to enable scanning of postal ballot packs. The scanners bought in 2004 represented an initial investment that was now producing longer-term savings. In St Helens, three new scanners were bought for the 2006 elections for a total price of £350.

4.34 The costs from Strand for use of the postal vote scanning software were around £600 per authority.

Postal ballot pack

4.35 The costs of ERS producing and assembling the postal ballot packs varied from 58 to 70 pence per ballot pack issued, which compares with 75 pence per ballot pack at the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election. There was no extra cost implication from the addition of a barcode to the declaration of identity.

4.36 The costs from AeroPrint for the production of the ballot papers using watermarked paper equated to £2.80 per book of 100.

Production of the marked register of returned postal ballots

4.37 The Merseyside team have expressed the view that, without the availability of barcode scanning technology, the scale of administrative resources that would be required to create a marked list of returned postal ballots would have been prohibitive. Although some additional costs were incurred (see 'Technology', paragraph 4.33 above), overall the creation of the marked lists of returned postal ballots was achieved in an efficient and relatively cost-effective manner.

5 Conclusions and findings

5.1 In terms of the five statutory evaluation criteria as outlined in Chapter 1, 'Introduction', the Commission's conclusions in relation to the May 2006 electoral pilot scheme in the Merseyside metropolitan authorities of Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens and Sefton are as follows:

- **Facilitating voting or the counting of votes:** The inclusion of a printed official mark on ballot papers as an alternative to the perforated mark provided by a stamping instrument simplified the procedure for polling staff, which enabled a more efficient and effective service to voters and significantly reduced the risk of human error and invalidation of votes. Fewer ballot papers were rejected at the count because they lacked the official mark than in previous years, and in the small number of cases where ballot papers were rejected, voters appear to have returned only part of the ballot paper.
- **Whether the turnout of voters was higher than it would otherwise have been:** Overall turnout at the May 2006 local elections in the four Merseyside authorities varied between 24.1% in Knowsley and 33.8% in St Helens, compared with an overall average turnout of approximately 37% for the local elections in England. Disregarding the years in which all-postal pilot schemes have been held in the Merseyside authorities, this represents a small increase compared with previous local elections. The Commission has received no evidence to suggest that either of the innovations piloted had a significant impact on the turnout at the May 2006 elections.
- **Whether voters found procedures easy to use:** The changes that were piloted did not affect any procedures that concerned voters directly, and there is no evidence to suggest that voters found the new procedures for issuing ballot papers in polling stations difficult to use or understand.
- **Whether the scheme led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice:** The Commission has received no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided for by the pilot scheme led to an increase in personation or other malpractice. There were no complaints to the four Merseyside authorities or the police regarding potential fraud or security breaches in connection with the pilot procedures.
- **Whether the procedures led to any increase in expenditure or savings by the authority:** The authorities have indicated that the additional costs of the pilot scheme elements of the elections were not significant.

Learning

5.2 The Commission's evaluation of this pilot scheme has identified the following key learning points:

- There was limited elector awareness either of the reason for barcodes on postal packs or of the security marks on ballot papers, although there is no evidence that voters were disconcerted by the new procedures.
- The five Merseyside authorities (including Wirral) have worked together as a non-statutory partnership since the planning period for the 2004 European Parliamentary elections, and they report that working as a consortium has provided benefits in terms of value for money through joint procurement exercises and improved and consistent service delivery.