

## **AMBER VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT, 2000** **EVALUATION OF ELECTORAL SCHEME**

#### **EXTENSION OF ENTITLEMENT TO POSTAL VOTES ON DEMAND IN TWO** **WARDS**

1. Amber Valley Borough Council – Electoral Profile
  - 1.1 Amber Valley Borough Council is the largest District Council in Derbyshire. The population is 116,200 and the electorate, as first published is 92,702.
  - 1.2 The Council is the only District Council in Derbyshire which elects by thirds and has done so since its creation in 1974. The “all out” elections on 4 May, 2000 were held under the new constitutional arrangements introduced by the Borough of Amber Valley (Electoral Changes) Order 1999. 23 Wards returned 45 Councillors, compared to the previous 43.
  - 1.3 The Council has maintained detailed turnout figures for all elections and since 1987 turnout has fallen from a high of 59% to an all time low of 27% in 1998. The pilot conducted on 4 May, 2000 was an important part of the Council's strategy of finding new ways of increasing democratic participation and thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the council and making it more accountable.
2. How the pilot was chosen
  - 2.1 The Council observed the utmost impartiality in the process used to choose a pilot. The matter was referred to the Scrutiny Committee, a bi partisan body which at the time the matter was considered comprised 4 Conservative Members and 6 Labour Members. The proposal to make application to pilot postal voting on demand in two wards was unanimously supported by the Committee.
  - 2.2 The Council believes that the existing regulations controlling access to postal votes are unnecessarily restrictive and far too bureaucratic. By limiting access to postal votes to certain categories, many people who would vote, are probably prevented from doing so. In an effort to increase voter turnout, the Council decided to experiment with postal voting on demand in two wards. Two wards were selected. One urban ward (Heanor West) which in 1998 had the lowest turnout in the Borough of 21% and a rural ward (Duffield) in which turnout had dropped from a high of 60% in 1990 to 42% in 1999. All the local members supported the operation of a pilot in these wards.

### 3. Publicity

- 3.1 A number of mechanisms were used to promote and market the pilot. All households in the pilot wards received a specially designed poll card which had a tear off freepost section on which the elector could apply for a postal vote. A freephone helpline was printed on the poll cards. The poll cards were delivered in March, giving plenty of time for applications to be submitted by the 13 April, 2000 deadline.
- 3.2 Articles about the pilots appeared in local newspapers. The Council's quarterly magazine (which is distributed to every household in the Borough) also publicised the experiment. An independent publication produced by the Duffield Community Association and circulated free of charge to all houses in Duffield also featured an article promoting access to postal voting on demand. Local radio was very interested in the pilots and interviewed the Returning Officer on several occasions as the election progressed through its timetable. There were no cost implications arising from the extra publicity.

### 4. Stationery

- 4.1 Faced with falling turnout, in an effort to make postal voting more user friendly, and to reduce the opportunity for error by the elector/witness, which usually, results in a high rejection rate for postal votes, a new style postal vote return envelope was introduced universally throughout the Borough. Besides making the issue of postal votes easier to administer, the rejection rate was much lower than for other elections.

### 5. Cost

- 5.1 The additional cost of the scheme is estimated at £500. A cost of 6.2p per elector in the two wards or £1.84 per postal vote returned.

### 6. The Outcome

- 6.1 The pilot scheme was a success in that in the Duffield ward there were 205 applications for postal votes, compared to 113 at the last election, an increase of 84%. In the Heanor West Ward 193 applications were received compared to 74 at the last election, an increase of 162%.

- 6.2 In Heanor West voter turnout increased from 21% in 1998 to 28% at these elections, but unfortunately, Duffield went from 42% in 1999 to 39%. It is difficult to be precise about the success of the pilots, but the following findings emerge:-

- Compared to the 1998 elections percentage increases in the number of postal votes at the Borough elections were as follows:-

Duffield 84%  
Heanor West 162%

- Although only a relatively small (but significantly increased) percentage of the electorate applied for a postal vote, the convenience of voting by this method appears to have been well received. Choice is therefore important.
- The new stationery for postal votes was a significant improvement and was more user friendly.
- Although turnout in Heanor West increased compared to 1998, it should not be concluded that the postal pilot was the major contributory factor. Other factors such as the use of a new supermarket, with plenty of on site parking, as a polling station cannot be ignored.
- In Duffield, 540 electors were inadvertently excluded from the pilot in so far as they did not receive their poll card as timetabled. These electors received a poll card the evening before polling day. Turnout in that part of the ward was 59%.

The following table sets out key data relating to the pilot schemes for each ward.

	Duffield	Heanor West
Electorate	3752	4318
Number of Councillors	2	2
Number of Polling Stations	3	5
Turnout 1990	60%	56%
Turnout 1998	38%	21%
Turnout 1999	42%	N/A
Turnout 2000	39%	28%
Number of postal votes issued	205	193
Expressed as % electorate	5.46% *	4.47%
Number of postal votes returned	143	128
Expressed as % of votes issued	69.8%	66.3%
Number of postal votes rejected	None	7
Expressed as % of votes returned	0%	5.5%
Number of postal votes counted	143	121

\*This figure increases to 6.38% after excluding 540 electors who did not receive their poll card as timetabled.

## 7. Contact

- 7.1 For further information contact John Grady, Assistant Chief Executive (Tel: 01773 841630) or Email [john.grady@ambervalley.gov.uk](mailto:john.grady@ambervalley.gov.uk)