

# EVALUATION OF PILOT SCHEME FOR INNOVATIVE ELECTORAL PROCEDURES

## BOROUGH OF BROXBOURNE SEMI-AUTOMATED COUNTING SCHEME

### Introduction

Under the provisions of the Borough of Broxbourne (Semi-Automated Counting Scheme) Order 2000, the Council conducted a pilot scheme using bar codes to improve the speed and effectiveness of counting the votes at the Borough Election held on 4 May 2000.

### Pilot Scheme Process

Elections were held in twelve of the Borough's wards and one councillor was elected in each.

In the four wards with the largest electorate – Wormley/Turnford, Cheshunt Central, Cheshunt North and Hoddesdon North – bar codes were printed on the ballot papers against the name of each candidate to assist the counting process. In the remaining eight wards the count was carried out in the conventional manner. The advantage of performing two separate counting processes simultaneously enabled a direct comparison to be made between the speed and effectiveness of the two methods. The commencement and completion times of the count in each of the wards was recorded to aid comparison.

### Consultation and Promotion

A demonstration of the processes to be employed at the count was given to candidates and election agents for the pilot wards prior to the election. All groups have been asked for their comments on the pilot scheme.

Press releases were issued prior to the election and there was considerable interest in the pilot scheme from local and national media.

### Summary of Pilot

The pilot scheme was considered to be successful. The experiment demonstrated the suitability of bar code technology for completing the counting process. The count was conducted in a transparent manner, allowing candidates, election agents and counting agents the usual opportunities to scrutinise. The returning officer received no comments at the count from any person involved in the election. No subsequent comments have been received from candidates and election agents of the wards concerned who have been specifically invited to respond.

The software developed by the Council for ensuring accuracy in the count was reliable. The visual presentation to observers of the process via a display monitor reinforced the integrity of the count.

The experiment showed the potential to reduce the duration of the count by increasing the number of bar code readers applied to the process. Ergonomic issues such as the use of staff for sorting the votes prior to the reading process could be reviewed to maximise the potential to complete the count as expeditiously as possible.

### Key Statistics/Quantification

- The total number of votes cast in the election was - 13,889
- The number of bar coded ballot papers counted was - 4,875  
This represents 35% of the total number of votes cast
- The count was completed in 1 hour 35 minutes and the counting of the votes in the four wards where bar coding was trialled was completed within the expected time envelope.

### Financial Evaluation

No significant costs arose from the pilot scheme:

Supply of bar code readers and pc's	The council's existing equipment was utilised at the count
Software	Officer time was committed to the development of the software needed to support the pilot. This investment in time will enable the potential of bar coded ballot papers to be developed further at future elections.
Swiping of bar coded ballot papers	Staffing levels for the count were the same as previous years. The pilot scheme identified the potential to review staff numbers at future elections if the number of bar code readers applied to the process were increased.
Printing of bar codes on ballot paper runs	The requirement to provide bar codes on ballot papers increased the print costs for the four wards concerned. The additional cost was £1,300.

## Specific Lessons Learned

- The use of bar codes on ballot papers did not adversely effect the behaviour of the electorate.
- The bar code printed on each ballot paper was conveniently positioned to the left of the candidate's name and there was no evidence that any papers were spoiled because of the addition of the bar code.
- The full potential of bar coded ballot papers will be realised by increasing the number of bar code readers applied to the process. The software programme needs to be developed to provide for at least two readers per ward, which would reduce the count duration, speed the declaration of the result and exploit the full capabilities of this technique.
- In the four wards where bar coding was used, the count was completed within the time envelope of the conventionally counted wards. At least two bar code readers per ward for a future count will lift the new counting technique ahead of conventional counting and reduce manpower costs.
- The undertaking of the pilot received local and national media interest in this innovation. There is potential to reduce elector apathy.
- The accuracy and integrity of the count process was improved. No requests were made by election agents for any recounts in the pilot wards.

## Future Proposals

In view of the potential of the pilot, the Council has obtained the agreement of Hertfordshire County Council to conduct a similar exercise at next year's County Council elections subject to Home Office approval. It is felt that the investment in time to develop this initiative would be maximised over a longer payback period than one single election. A formal application will therefore be submitted to the Home Office in accordance with the requirements set out in RPA Circular No. 433.