

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

POSTAL VOTING PILOT SCHEME – MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS 2000

EVALUATION

Summary

- The pilot scheme took the form of a wholly postal election in two wards, Bensham and Whickham North. Each elector received a ballot paper through the post. There were no polling stations; electors could either return their ballot papers by reply-paid post, or deliver them to the Civic Centre or Whickham Library.
- **Turnout in both pilot wards more than doubled as compared with last year's figures.** In Whickham North it rose from 30% to 62%, and in Bensham from 19% to 46%. In the other 20 wards of the Borough, where the election was conducted conventionally, turnout increased by less than 1%.
- Since there are no other known factors which would account for it, the conclusion must be that this increase in turnout was mainly attributable to the different method of voting, allied to the increased publicity and extra attention from the political parties that the pilot scheme generated.
- The increased turnout figures in themselves suggest that voters found the system easier to use. This is borne out by a subsequent survey of a sample of voters, who overwhelmingly endorsed the concept of postal voting. One factor that is likely to have contributed to ease of voting is the decision, approved by the Home Office, to dispense with declarations of identity and separate ballot paper envelopes.
- There is no evidence to suggest that the procedures adopted in the pilot scheme led to personation or electoral malpractice. But some questions were raised about maintaining the security of the voting arrangements if the pilot scheme were to be extended.
- Additional administrative and publicity costs made the pilot scheme more expensive than a conventional election, but not greatly so.

Evaluation of Postal Voting Pilot Scheme

Structure of Report

1. This report evaluates the postal voting pilot scheme held in two wards of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council at the May 2000 municipal elections. It is submitted to the Home Secretary in accordance with section 10 of the Representation of the People Act (RoPA) 2000, which requires a report on the scheme to be prepared within three months of the elections. The report must contain, among other things, an assessment of whether the scheme
 - facilitated voting
 - was easy for voters to use
 - increased turnout
 - led to any increase in personation or electoral malpractice
 - resulted in increased costs or savings.
2. The report contains the following sections
 - description of the scheme
 - effect on turnout
 - electors' views on the scheme
 - views of candidates, agents and councillors on the scheme
 - security and integrity of the voting arrangements
 - financial implications.
3. The report covers all the issues referred to in section 10 of RoPA.

Description of the Scheme

4. The pilot scheme took the form of an election conducted wholly by postal voting in two wards of the Borough, namely Whickham North and Bensham. There were no polling stations in either of these wards.
5. Briefly, the scheme operated as follows. A ballot paper, with a reply-paid envelope and instructions for voting, was sent to every registered elector in the pilot wards. The ballot papers were despatched using Royal Mail on Thursday 20 April, two weeks before the date of the election (4 May), and as far as can be ascertained were delivered the following day. Electors were required to return their ballot paper to the Returning Officer by 9.00pm on 4 May. They could do this in one of two ways:
 - by returning the ballot paper by post in the reply-paid envelope, or
 - by delivering the ballot paper, in the envelope, to the Civic Centre (which is in fact located in the Bensham ward) or to Whickham Library.
6. Both the Civic Centre and Whickham Library remained open until 9.00pm on 4 May, and all ballot papers returned to those locations by 9.00pm were included in the count, which was conducted in the normal way.
7. A copy of the Home Secretary's Order approving the pilot scheme is attached as required by RoPA (Appendix A). The scheme differed from a conventional poll in two significant respects. Firstly and most obviously, the Order made the necessary legal provision for a wholly postal election; in the words of paragraph 3:

'Notwithstanding anything in any enactment, no polling station shall be used ... and any person who, apart from this Order, may vote in person either as an elector or as proxy may only vote by post'.

The Order goes on to amend or disapply existing election rules as necessary to give effect to this.
8. The second main difference relates to declarations of identity. Under the Local Elections (Principal Areas) Rules 1986, a postal vote must be accompanied by a declaration of identity signed by the voter and witnessed by a person known to the voter. The declaration must be included in the return envelope together with the ballot paper, which is to be sealed in a separate envelope. At the Council's request, the Home Office agreed that both the declaration of identity and the separate ballot paper envelope could be dispensed with. This is reflected in the Order.

Effect on Turnout

9. **Turnout in the two pilot wards more than doubled as compared with turnout in 1999.** The figures can be summarised as follows:

	2000 %	1999 %	1998 %
Whickham North	62.2	30.1	33.5
Bensham	46.3	19.5	17.1
Gateshead MBC (whole Borough)	29.6	26.4	24.5
Gateshead MBC (excluding Whickham North/ Bensham)	27.1	26.4	24.2

10. In Whickham North, 5004 people voted out of an electorate of 8048; in Bensham the figures were 2313 out of 4992. Taken together, almost 4000 more people in the two wards participated in local democracy than in 1999.
11. Section 7(8) of RoPA requires the Council to make an assessment of whether the turnout of voters was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not applied. On the face of it, the answer must be yes. However, it is necessary to consider whether any other factors might have affected the level of turnout.
12. In submitting its application for a pilot scheme, the Council took care over the selection of the pilot wards. In the first place it was considered important to select two contrasting wards. Bensham is an inner area ward adjacent to, and covering part of, Gateshead Town Centre. It had experienced consistently low turnout, the average turnout in the four municipal elections from 1995 to 1999 being 20.7%. Whickham North is a suburban area to the west of Gateshead town with some rural parts. Its average turnout at municipal elections in 1995-99 was 37.0%, but underlying this figure was a marked trend of decline, from 42.8% in 1995 to 30.1% in 1999.
13. The fact that similarly high rates of increase were experienced in two contrasting wards, while turnout in the rest of Gateshead remained virtually static, suggests that the outcome was attributable to the method of voting.
14. Secondly, there is a body of evidence that the marginal nature of a ward can increase turnout. The Council therefore selected two wards that cannot by any means be described as marginal. Bensham has been won by a Labour candidate at every local election since the present ward boundaries were drawn in 1982. In 1999, the Labour candidate obtained 80.6% of the vote with a majority of 669. Whickham North has been won by a Liberal Democrat candidate at every local election since 1992. In 1999, the Liberal Democrat secured 55.6% of the vote, with a majority of 424. Marginality was therefore not an issue.

15. No local factors or issues were evident in either ward which could have affected turnout to any significant degree and none of the candidates or agents drew attention to any such factors. However, the very fact that the scheme was a pilot may also have had an influence, in that it received publicity both from the Council and the media, and the political parties may have devoted extra attention to those wards. Indeed, one agent suggested that in both wards the 'defending' party ran a more intensive campaign than normal. This could in itself have increased turnout, though not to the extent actually experienced.
16. In the light of turnout levels in the rest of Gateshead, and in the absence of any special factors, it is reasonable to conclude that the increase in turnout in the pilot wards was mainly attributable to the method of voting, allied to the increased publicity and extra attention from the political parties that the pilot scheme generated.
17. Two other factors about turnout should be mentioned. According to published figures, it appears that the increase in the two Gateshead pilot wards (in terms of percentage points) was greater than in any other ward elsewhere in the country where voters could only vote by post.
18. There can be no certainty as to why Gateshead experienced a higher increase in turnout than anywhere else but the fact that no declarations of identity were used (see paragraph 8) may be relevant as it is likely to have made voting easier. It may also be relevant that the Council undertook a good deal of publicity in the pilot wards (see next section), but there is no evidence as to whether this was greater or less than in other councils which operated similar pilot schemes.
19. Secondly, did the increase in turnout have any effect on the parties' respective share of the vote? The figures for changes in vote share are as follows

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
	%	%	%
Bensham – 1999	8.1	80.6	11.3
- 2000	12.8	74.0	13.2
Whickham North – 1999	6.0	38.5	55.6
- 2000	6.0	37.7	56.3
Whole Borough - 1999	5.4	56.8	36.3
- 2000	9.6	50.8	38.9

Thus in Whickham North there was virtually no change in the parties' share of the vote, while in Bensham the change reflected that in the Borough as a whole. The conclusion is that doubling the turnout had remarkably little effect on vote share.

Effect on Voters and their Views

20. When we learned in mid-February that our application to run a pilot scheme had received Home Office approval, one of our immediate concerns was to make sure everyone in the pilot wards knew about it.
21. During the period 10-17 March we delivered an information pack by hand to every household in the two wards. The envelope containing the information was designed to attract attention in the hope that it would not be thrown away! The cover read

IMPORTANT THIS IS NOT A CIRCULAR POSTAL VOTING – HOW IT AFFECTS YOU

The envelope included

- a letter from the Returning Officer
 - a leaflet explaining the reasons for carrying out the pilot scheme and the way it would operate
 - information on how to apply for a postal proxy vote
 - contact numbers for general enquiries and for audiotape, large print and Braille versions
 - a separate insert, in five minority languages, explaining how to get a translation of the leaflet.
22. We followed this up with an A5 flyer to every household in the period 31 March – 7 April (roughly the period when poll cards would have been delivered in a conventional election). This leaflet was a reminder of the fact that the elections would be held wholly by post and of the arrangements for voting. Again the leaflet included a contact number and information in minority languages of how to get a translation.
 23. At the end of March, an advertisement was placed in the Newcastle Journal advising anyone who had moved in or out of the two pilot wards since 10 October 1999 (the qualifying date for the electoral register) to contact the election office at the Civic Centre. The main purpose of this was to try to identify registered electors who had moved out of Bensham or Whickham North so that we could send their ballot paper to their new address.
 24. We received some useful free publicity in the press and on TV and radio. This included
 - interviews on local BBC television and radio
 - several mentions on local independent television
 - mentions in general television news items
 - coverage in main daily and evening newspapers and free newspapers.
 25. As well as maximising publicity, we tried throughout to adopt an approach which would make it as simple as possible for electors to cast their vote. One aspect of this was to provide an option for voters to deliver their ballot paper by hand as an alternative to returning it by post. The following table shows the proportion of electors using each method:

	Whickham North	Bensham
Electorate	8048	4992
Total votes cast	5004	2312
Of which:		
Delivered by post	4424 (88.4%)	2095 (90.6%)
Hand delivered – Civic Centre	24 (0.5%)	215 (9.3%)
- Whickham Library	556 (11.1%)	2 (0.1%)

26. Overall, around 11% of electors preferred to deliver their ballot paper by hand. This may seem a small proportion but the fact that almost 800 electors preferred this method shows that it was right to give them the choice. Personal delivery also proved very useful for 'last minute' voters: 72 ballot paper envelopes were delivered to Whickham Library between 2.30pm and 9.00pm on election day.
27. The decision to dispense with declarations of identity is also likely to have made the system more user-friendly. The 'double-envelope' system which goes with declarations of identity is complicated and may deter some people from voting. It leads to some votes being rejected, for example because the elector fails to sign the declaration of identity or to get it witnessed. And it positively disadvantages many people, such as those living on their own, who may find it difficult to get someone to witness their signature.
28. All these measures made for a very smooth process which generated very few complaints or even queries. In fact there were only eight approaches by electors to the Election Office, which can be categorised as follows:
- | | |
|---|---|
| Complaint about method of voting | 1 |
| Request for further information/explanation | 2 |
| Enquiries about proxy voting | 3 |
| Enquiries about change of address | 2 |
29. After the election, a postal questionnaire was sent to all members of the Council's Citizens Panel (Viewpoint) who live in the two pilot wards, asking for their views on the process. The following paragraphs highlight the key points from the responses to the questionnaire. While the data are not statistically significant, they provide a good indication of people's views.
30. In total 148 questionnaires were sent out, 61 to Bensham and 87 to Whickham North. 30 questionnaires were returned from Bensham and 67 from Whickham North, producing response rates of 49% and 77% respectively (66% overall).
31. 96% of respondents were aware that there had been an all-postal vote in their ward and 97% said that they had voted. Of the three people who did not vote, two said it was because they did not like the candidates and one said that it was not convenient.

32. 22 respondents (23%) said they would not have voted if it had not been a postal vote.
33. The questionnaire asked whether voting by post caused any problems. In each ward, one respondent referred to problems: in one case the problem was caused by not being given enough time and in the other the problem was that the voter's usual polling station was actually nearer and more convenient than the post box.
34. Overall, 95% of respondents considered that the Council should use postal voting in the future. 31 people chose to make additional comments as follows:
- easier and more convenient (9)
 - very successful in increasing turnout (1)
 - an excellent idea (7)
 - should work out cheaper in the long run (2)
 - should use second class postage to save money (1)
 - should send a reminder (1)
 - not confidential enough (3)
 - too expensive (2)
35. To sum up this section, it is clear that electors did find the postal voting arrangements easy to use. The evidence for this lies in
- the turnout figures themselves
 - the very low number of complaints or queries
 - the fact that there were very few spoiled ballot papers (nine in Bensham and nine in Whickham North)
 - the results from the survey, which showed both wide awareness of the scheme and a high level of support for it.

Views of Candidates, Agents and Councillors

36. Each of the three main political parties had a candidate in each of the pilot wards, making six in all. These candidates were represented by five agents.
37. After the election, we wrote to all the candidates and agents asking for their views or the merits of an all-postal election, and on the way we ran it in practice. In particular, we asked whether the all-postal election had caused any difficulties for them as candidates or agents, or for their constituents; whether in their view it was attractive to particular groups or people who might not otherwise have voted; and whether any improvements could be made if the experiment were to be repeated.
38. A meeting of the Council's Electoral Matters Advisory Group, which consists of representatives of both political parties represented on the Council, was also held to review the pilot.
39. Generally, the candidates (even the defeated ones!) and their agents expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the pilot in terms of the increased turnout. The Electoral Matters Advisory Group also commented favourably on the success of the scheme and endorsed a proposal that the Home Secretary should be asked to approve a trial total postal vote throughout the Borough in 2002.

Accessibility

40. Councillors and candidates reported positive feedback from voters. They placed great emphasis on the increase in accessibility to the democratic process brought about by an all-postal election. One candidate pointed out that this form of election benefits:
 - elderly residents who may have asked friends or family to post their votes or may have voted when collecting their state pension;
 - parents with small children, who could vote without having to take their children with them;
 - people who work long hours;
 - carers who may have difficulties in leaving their dependent relatives at homes.
41. On a similar theme, the Electoral Matters Advisory Group commented that, in removing the need for temporary polling stations which often have poor access, all-postal voting helps to ensure equal accessibility for all voters. It also avoids the disruption to the school timetable that can be caused by requiring their use as polling stations.

Administration of the Election

42. One issue which candidates were unhappy about was the fact that it was not possible to provide marked registers in a useful form. In a normal election, the poll clerk at each polling station places a mark in the register of electors against the name of every person to whom a ballot paper has been issued. After the election, the marked registers are open to public inspection and copies must be supplied on payment of a fee. The political parties find it

useful to have this information as it enables them to identify areas of high or low turnout and thus to plan their campaigning strategy for future elections. It may also have implications for demonstrating the integrity of the voting arrangements (see next section).

43. The effect of a wholly postal election is that a ballot paper is issued to every elector, and therefore every name in the register is marked. This of course gives the political parties no information as to who has voted. It is not possible to use the completed ballot papers as the means of marking a register since they may not be inspected after the election except by order of an election court.
44. An issue which attracted comment from one candidate was the opening of postal votes on the afternoon of election day. Given that a large number of votes were expected, and that opening them is time-consuming, it was decided to open the returned postal vote envelopes at 1.00pm on 4 May. (This procedure is entirely in accordance with electoral law and did not, of course, preclude postal vote envelopes received after that time from being included in the count). Candidates and their agents were notified of these arrangements, as required by law, and a number of them exercised their right to attend.
45. One candidate commented that the presence of the candidates and agents meant that the result of the election was effectively known before the end of election day, since those who were present could gain a good impression of the proportion of votes for each candidate. He felt that if this type of election were to be repeated, the envelopes should not be opened until 9.00pm, even if this delayed the count (as it inevitably would).
46. One agent pointed out that the all-postal ballot meant, in effect, that the case for voting for a particular party or candidate had to be conveyed by the date when ballot papers were received. This effectively shortened the election by two weeks. As the pilot was only conducted in two out of 22 wards this did not cause a major difficulty, but if the experiment was repeated more widely it could (it was suggested) cause difficulties for the finite campaigning resources of the political parties. The agent suggested that if the Home Office is minded to proceed with all postal ballots there would be a case for increasing the time between close of nominations and close of poll.
47. In this connection, one candidate suggested that the prefix letters of voting areas should be displayed on the prepaid envelopes, so that areas of high and low turnout within a ward could be identified and targeted for further canvassing. It was also suggested that, once voting has begun, a daily count should be made of votes received, and this information made available to candidates.

Security and Integrity of the Voting Arrangements

48. Every effort was made to maintain the security and integrity of the poll at all times and great care was taken to ensure that returned ballot papers were held in secure conditions.
49. Section 10 (8) (c) of RoPA requires the Council to make an assessment of whether the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences or in any other malpractice in connection with elections.
50. The pilot scheme was conducted in the spotlight of publicity with considerable attention from the media and the political parties. It therefore seems likely that, if there had been any electoral offences or malpractice, these would have been brought to light; at the very least, suspicions would have been voiced. In fact, no suggestion of any such malpractice has been made. Candidates and agents have accepted that the election was conducted with customary propriety.
51. However, one agent expressed some concerns over the possible extension of all-postal voting. He pointed out that while all voting procedures are open to abuse, the conventional process has three major checks:
 - everyone has the guarantee of secrecy when casting their vote;
 - having to vote in person increases the chance of personation being detected (the right to appoint polling agents, although little used now, is a defence against these practices);
 - the right to inspect a marked register allows 'voting for the absent or the dead' to be detected.
52. By contrast, the agent suggested that the experimental postal procedure of the type adopted in May 2000 was open to abuse (although it was not suggested that such abuse had taken place). There could be no guarantee that the ballot was secret in all households. There was no certainty as to what had happened to ballot papers that arrived in houses where occupancy had changed. And there were opportunities for systematic abuse; for example, just as some people acquire 'giro drops' to defraud the benefit system, an unscrupulous candidate or his/her supporter could register fictitious voters and fraudulently use their voting papers.
53. The agent commented that some of these potential problems arise from the untraceability of the voting, and from participation in voting ceasing to be a matter of public record. He suggested that one way of dealing with this issue would be to have ballot paper envelopes with a detachable tag with the voter's electoral roll number pre-printed on it. On receipt of the envelope, the tag would be removed and used to record who had voted.
54. It must be stressed that there is no evidence whatever that this pilot scheme did in fact lead to any increase in personation or electoral malpractice. However, it is probably fair to say that there are issues about ensuring that the process is demonstrably secure that will need further thought if all-postal voting is to be extended.

Financial Implications

55. The all-postal election was more expensive than a conventional election, but not greatly so.

56. The costs fall into two categories: administration costs and publicity. On the administrative side, costs were incurred in

- printing of stationery
- staff costs (despatching and receiving postal votes)
- postage (with the Council paying the cost both ways).

However, this was offset to some extent by not incurring costs on

- printing and delivering poll cards
- hire of polling station accommodation
- employment of polling station staff
- collection and delivery of polling booths and ballot boxes.

Overall, the total additional expenditure on administration costs over the two wards was in the order of £4,500.

57. As mentioned before, the Council put considerable effort into publicising the pilot scheme. Costs were incurred in

- printing and delivery of two leaflets
- minority language translation service
- press advertising.

The total costs of publicity were in the order of £6,500.

58. There could be some scope for economies of scale were this experiment to be repeated across the whole Borough.

Conclusions

59. The conclusions of this evaluation report are summarised on the front page.

60. The Council urges the Home Secretary to build on the success of the pilot scheme by approving a trial total postal vote throughout the Borough at the local elections in May 2002.

**THE BOROUGH OF GATESHEAD (ALL-POSTAL VOTING SCHEME) ORDER
2000**

(Text of order)