

SWINDON BOROUGH COUNCIL

EVALUATION OF PILOT SCHEME - ALL POSTAL VOTING - FOUR WARDS

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Home Office RPA Circular 430/1999 invited local authorities to submit applications to participate in Pilot Schemes in connection with local elections in May 2000. Accordingly the Council submitted an application to run all Postal Vote Pilot Schemes in four Wards at the Borough Council Elections. The four Wards were Abbey Meads, Moredon, Parks and Penhill.
- 1.2 As a result of an Electoral Changes Order, all but two of the boundaries of the Wards of the Borough have changed. However the Parks Ward boundary remained unchanged and the boundaries of the Moredon and Penhill Wards have not been significantly amended. Abbey Meads Ward is a new area created from parts of a rural Ward and an urban Ward and where new residential development is being undertaken on a large scale - in the next 10 years some 10,000 properties are planned.
- 1.3 Moredon, Parks and Penhill are urban Wards with a record of low, and falling, electoral turn-out. In 1999 the figures were 19.6%, 17.7% and 19.5% respectively. No similar figures exist for Abbey Meads. Moredon, Park and Penhill are Wards where historically the Labour candidates have a large majority. Abbey Meads, being a new area was likely to be more marginal.
- 1.4 The Pilot Scheme proposal was to issue to all 21,520 electors (15.5% of the total electors of the Borough) in the four Wards, a postal ballot paper. Of the above figure 21,021 electors were eligible to vote.

2. ISSUE AND OPENING ARRANGEMENTS

- 2.1 Between 24 March and 31 March a personalised letter was hand delivered to every elector in the four Wards explaining the Pilot Scheme and asking them if they wished to appoint a proxy or wanted the postal vote sent to a different address. (A copy of the letter is attached as Appendix A). Although over 800 responses were received, just over 100 were applicable (i.e. most electors either appointed themselves as the proxy or wanted the documents sent to their normal address).
- 2.2 A considerable amount of staff time was taken up printing and labelling envelopes, appointing staff for the issue and liaising with the Royal Mail and Media. Time was limited bearing in mind no printing etc. could start until Friday 14 April (the closing date for change of address/proxy application was 5.00 pm on Thursday 13 April) and postal votes were issued on Thursday 20 April. The local press were co-operative in their coverage of the scheme and local television stations also featured the new arrangements.
- 2.3 A total of 29 persons at any one time were involved with the issue which took about 2½ days (although 4 days had been allocated). The issue was completed efficiently and the post was prepared for despatch to the satisfaction of the Royal Mail who delivered the postal ballot papers to electors on 21 April.
- 2.4 The Election staff received numerous telephone calls and nine letters complaining about the new system. The complaints were based on lack of secrecy, mistrust of the Royal Mail, lack of choice and alleged non delivery of documents. Some callers were

extremely angry and upset and dealing sympathetically with such persons was time consuming.

- 2.5 No problems were encountered with the receipt of the returned Postal Votes in the Office.
- 2.6 The opening of the ballot papers was undertaken on 4 separate days, plus Polling Day. The number of persons employed varied over the 4 days but averaged 16 persons. On most occasions the opening took 2 - 3 hours and again operated quite smoothly. However the level of staff resources needed to manage the opening procedure was a significant distraction to the overall administration of the election. It should be noted that the postal vote supervisors were members of the Election Section but virtually all other staff were recruited from outside the Council.
- 2.7 A total of 3.64% of votes were rejected for a number of reasons. The majority of errors affected the Declaration of Identity. The number of votes rejected whilst not large was probably 50% higher than under normal postal vote circumstances. Obviously papers were being completed by a large number of persons not familiar with the procedure.
- 2.8 No candidate or agent attended any of the issues or openings.

3. **OUTCOME OF PILOT SCHEME**

- 3.1 The results of the Pilot Scheme are as indicated below:-

Ward	Electorate (total)	Ballot Papers returned	1999 turnout %	2000 turnout %	% increase
Abbey Meads	2,649	885	-	33.4	-
Moredon	7,397	2,327	19.6	31.5	50.7
Parks	6,955	1,898	17.7	27.3	54.2
Penhill	4,528	1,398	19.5	30.9	58.5
TOTAL	21,529	6,508	-	30.22	-

There was a significant increase in turnout in these traditionally low turn-out Wards. The average turn-out in the other 18 Wards of the Borough was 27.4% and in 1999 it was 26.0% across the Borough.

- 3.2 In addition to the encouraging turn-out the counting of the votes was completed more quickly because there was no need to go through the ballot box verification stage as all postal votes were identified at each opening.

4. **QUESTIONNAIRE**

- 4.1 Following the election 10% of the electors affected (2,112) were sent a letter and questionnaire requesting their comments and observations on the pilot scheme in particular and the electoral arrangements in general (a copy of the documents are attached as Appendix B). There was no compulsion to sign the document and the electors were selected at random.

4.2 Of the 2,112 questionnaires despatched 613 (29%) were completed and returned by the date requested. The under-mentioned paragraphs analyse the responses question by question. The statistics do not necessarily correspond exactly with the number of questionnaires returned as some people did not answer all questions and some gave more than one answer to the multiple choice questions.

4.3 Question 1 - About Yourself

Of the respondents, 59% were female and 41% were male.

The age groups who responded were as follows:

18 - 25	4%
26 - 40	22%
41 - 65	38%
Over 65	36%

It is interesting to note that 74% of the respondents were over 41 years of age.

The breakdown between voters and non-voters are as follows:

Voters	468	(76%)
Non-Voters	145	(24%)

Of those who say they voted, 80% were over 41 years of age yet of those who did not vote only 53% were over 41 years.

4.4 Question 2 - Length of Residence in Swindon

The response to this question was as follows:

<u>Years</u>	<u>Voted</u>		<u>Did not Vote</u>	
0 - 10	55	(12%)	30	(21%)
11 - 20	43	(10%)	25	(18%)
21 - 30	53	(12%)	22	(15%)
31 - 40	109	(24%)	31	(22%)
41 - 50	83	(19%)	13	(9%)
51 - 60	42	(9%)	10	(7%)
61 - 70	33	(7%)	10	(7%)
70+	32	(7%)	2	(1%)

As will be noted from the above figures a significant number of electors who voted had lived in Swindon for 30 years or more (66%). Whereas only 46% of electors who did not vote had lived in the town for the same length of time. This confirms the view that the longer an elector resides in an area the more likely they are to feel an identity with the area and the statistics support the outcome of Questions 1 and 3 that younger people are less inclined to vote.

4.5 Question 3 - Voting Practice

As referred to above (paragraph 4.3) 468 respondents stated that they voted this year; of these some 113 said they did not vote in the Borough elections last year. However 59 persons said they did not vote this year but did last year. (The reasons for this change in attitude is analysed in 4.6 below).

The age groups of the 113 "new" electors are as follows:-

18 - 25	-	3	3%
26 - 40	-	28	25%
41 - 65		50	44%
Over 65		32	28%

Whilst it is encouraging to see that the pilot scheme could have attracted 113 persons who did not vote last year, it still failed to attract the younger voter. It will be noted from the figures that 72% of "new" electors are aged 41 years or over.

The age groups of the 59 persons who did not vote this year are as follows:-

18 - 25	3	5%
26 - 40	13	22%
41 - 65	23	39%
Over 65	20	34%

From these figures it is not possible to draw any conclusion other than to state that the age groups where votes were "lost" for whatever reason were mirrored by those "gained" (e.g. 73% of "lost" electors are aged 41 years or older).

4.6 Question 4 - Reasons for not voting

The 145 electors who said they did not vote gave a variety of reasons for not casting their vote (several gave more than one reason). Such reasons are indicated below (a - d) were printed reasons on the questionnaire.

a)	Prefer to vote in person	42
b)	Paperwork too complicated	22
c)	Not interested in local government	26
d)	Inadequate election material from Candidates	57
e)	Completed, but forgot to post	9
f)	Away	9
g)	Domestic situation/ill	7
h)	Poor Candidates	6
i)	Difficulty in obtaining witness	5
j)	Forgot	4
k)	Worried about security of vote	4
l)	Mislaid paperwork	3

The largest reason, lack of information from Candidates, could perhaps be partly answered by the perceived shortened campaign period with votes being despatched to electors 14 days before polling. This is touched upon later in the responses from political parties/Candidates (see paragraph 5). The number of persons wishing to maintain the traditional means of voting is relatively high at 42 or 29% of the persons who did not vote. This translates into 7% of all questionnaires returned. Whilst the percentage increase due to all postal votes was very encouraging there are some 12% (73 electors) who preferred to vote in person or thought the system too complicated or felt there was a lack of security.

4.7 Question 5 - If voting, did you find postal voting more or less convenient than voting in person

Overwhelmingly persons who voted in the Borough elections found the pilot scheme postal voting system more convenient than by traditional means. The figures were:-

More convenient	432	92%
Same	4	1%
Less convenient	30	7%

4.8 Question 6 - Was the paperwork easy or difficult to understand?

Electors who voted were almost unanimous in the fact that they found the documentation very easy or quite easy to understand. The figures were as follows:-

Very easy	314	68%
Quite easy	141	30%
Quite difficult	11	2%
Very difficult	-	-

The vast majority of electors who did not vote obviously read the paperwork sent and answered the question. Their response was as follows:-

Very easy	56	45%
Quite easy	54	44%
Quite difficult	13	10%
Very Difficult	1	1%

These figures are extremely encouraging although later observations will refer to possible concerns with the Declaration of Identity.

4.9 Question 7 - In general were you satisfied with the Postal Scheme arrangements?

The figures in response to this question exactly mirrored the figures expressed in Question 6 above for those electors who voted and unanimously endorsed the arrangements for the pilot scheme.

The figures were as follows:-

Satisfied	454	98%
Dissatisfied	11	2%

Interestingly whilst a considerable number of electors did not vote, a high proportion of this group were satisfied with the arrangements for voting. This would indicate that this reluctance to vote was due to factors other than the administration, organisation and principle of postal votes and this is referred to in the next section and elsewhere.

Satisfied	106	82%
Dissatisfied	24	18%

4.10 Question 8 - If you were dissatisfied with the arrangements in 7 above how could they been improved?

A limited number of electors expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangements and their comments for improvement are as follows:-

More information from Candidates	3
System open to abuse/influence	2
Make procedure easier	2
Post documents earlier	1
Post documents later	1

Such comments should be linked to Question 10 below.

4.11 Question 9 - By what means do you think the Council could increase vote turn-out in local elections

This question is not strictly within the remit of the pilot scheme evaluation but it raised a number of issues which supported answers given elsewhere in the Questionnaire.

The main answers as to how the Council could increase turn-out were:-

More information from Councillors	58
More canvassing by prospective candidates	42
Make voting compulsory	32
Provide better Candidates/Services	29
Provide incentives to vote	19

There were a number of other suggestions.

Nevertheless the above figures highlight a general dissatisfaction with Councillors, the Council and canvassing.

4.12 Question 10 - General comments on the Pilot Scheme

This was an open ended questionnaire which prompted a variety of replies. Most of the responses were positive and can be summarised as follows:-

Positive comments

Good idea	164
Expand postal votes to all Wards	47

Negative comments

Finding a witness was inconvenient etc	33
Do not repeat the scheme	31
Concern re security/open to abuse	26
Reduce paperwork/elector instructions	16
Would prefer a choice of voting	11

<u>General Comments</u>	
Needs more publicity	6
More post boxes	4
Post ballot paper later	4
Post ballot papers earlier	3
Combine political information with ballot papers	3
Electors forgot to post	2
More collection points	2
Advice on completing papers	1

The above comments reflect the answers given to Question 7 above in that the vast majority of electors are satisfied with the pilot scheme and positively expressed that it was a good idea or should be expanded to all areas.

5. COMMENTS FROM POLITICAL PARTIES/CANDIDATES

As part of the evaluation exercise all Candidates in the four Ward concerned were contacted for their observations on the pilot scheme from a Candidates prospective.

In addition Group Leaders of the political parties represented on the Council were similarly approached.

Five individual responses were received as well as representation from the Conservative Group and the Liberal Democrat Group. The representation from the Groups is attached as Appendices C and D.

The individual responses were all supportive of the pilot scheme and contained the following comments:-

Some electors were "suspicious" of the scheme
Candidates cannot undertake effective "knocking up" on day of poll - lack of tellers (and therefore no indication of whether supporters voted or not)
Lack of post boxes - concern regarding lost mail
Allegations of politicians helping/witnessing ballot papers - undue influence

6. COST

6.1 The net increase in cost of the pilot schemes over the normal method of voting in the four Wards was £13,728.

6.2 The breakdown of the additional costs attributable to the Pilot Scheme can be summarised as follows:-

Publicity letter postage	£ 3,508.00
Postal vote postage	£ 5,299.00
Staffing and supervision	£ 7,571.00
Printing - publicity letter	£ 444.00
Printing - stationery	£ 1,260.00
Printing - envelopes	£ 3,360.00
	£21,442.00

6.3 The printing costs for stationery include the Declaration of Identity, notes and the various envelopes.

- 6.4 With the benefit of experience the staffing costs for the issue and opening could be reduced by perhaps 25%. However the costs do not include the considerable staff time required to administer the pilot scheme nor the additional computer resources needed.
- 6.5 There are obvious savings by not having to staff and administer the polling stations etc that would be used under normal circumstances. It is estimated that the cost of the election in all four Wards would, under the existing voting system, be as follows:-

Poll card postage	£2,992.00
Polling station staffing	£2,774.00
Travelling	£ 125.00
Hire of polling stations	£1,013.00
Printing - poll cards	£ 210.00
Contingency - transport, equipment etc.	£ 200.00
Postal vote stationery	£ 400.00
	£7,714.00

All other election arrangement costs would remain the same.

- 6.6 Therefore the net increase of using all postal votes over normal means of conducting an election is £13,728. If the project was extended across the Borough then the increased cost would be £88,568.
- 6.7 The additional number of electors who voted in May 2000 in the four Wards was approximately 2,250 (with Ward boundary changes it is not possible to be precise) and therefore the cost per additional elector is in the region of £6.10.

7. **CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 The outcome of the pilot scheme for all postal votes was to increase the elector turnout in the four Wards by over 50%. Therefore there can be no argument that the scheme was a success measured in the increased number of voters.
- 7.2 Electors were obviously very satisfied with the system and found it more convenient than the conventional means of voting and furthermore the paperwork associated with the scheme was found easy to understand. It is encouraging to note that over 200 persons (33%) who responded to the questionnaire positively expressed the view that the system was a good idea and/or should be expanded to all areas.
- 7.3 On the negative side the cost of £13,728 referred to above in paragraphs 6.6 and 6.7 has to be taken very much into account. However if the pilot scheme is used again or extended then some consideration should be given to amending the use of the Declaration of Identity as this area appeared to attract most criticism of the scheme insofar as finding a witness was perceived to be a difficulty together with the security/undue influence issue.