



**EVALUATION REPORT BY WIGAN METROPOLITAN
BOROUGH COUNCIL ON AN INNOVATIVE
ELECTORAL PROCEDURE AND SUBMITTED TO
THE HOME OFFICE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE
PROVISIONS OF SECTION 10 OF THE
REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT 2000**

Elections Office,
Town Hall,
Library Street,
Wigan
WN1 1YN

INTRODUCTION

1. In 1998, the Local Elections in Wigan showed an average turnout of 17.37%, the lowest in the Greater Manchester Authorities. The Council commissioned market research between the Local and European Elections in 1999 to identify the underlying reasons for this and any measures that could be taken to improve it. Electors on the whole were satisfied with the arrangements for Elections in Wigan but one of the findings indicated that more people would vote if they could do so by post. When the Home Office announced the potential for Local Authorities to conduct Pilot Schemes, one of the options was all postal ballots and the Council felt that there was some merit in running a pilot of that nature to test the market research findings.
2. On 15th December 1999, the Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council (which is elected by thirds) confirmed and adopted the following recommendation of the Policy and Resources (Standing) Sub-Committee:-

134.5 REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE BILL - PILOT SCHEMES:

The Chief Executive submitted a report (circulated) stating that the Representation of the People Bill was currently before Parliament. He reminded the Sub-Committee that the purpose of the Bill was to effect the recommendations of the Howarth Working Party on Electoral Procedures. Included in the Bill was a proposal to allow the Home Secretary to make Orders enabling local authorities in England and Wales to run pilot schemes of innovative electoral procedures at particular local government elections. Authorities wishing to submit proposals for approval under the legislation had to do so by January 2000, with selected proposals being announced in February and the necessary Orders being made to enable the proposals to run at the local government elections in May 2000. Authorities selected would be required to produce a report on their scheme which had to cover a number of points, details of which were set out within the report.

Recommended: (1) That this Council approves the application of a bid to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs for approval under the provisions of the Representation of the People Bill to a pilot scheme to undertake a total postal vote election in one Ward in each of the three Counting Areas in the borough for local elections.

(2) That in the event of the bid being successful, the Chief Executive, as Returning Officer:-

- (a) be authorised to make all the necessary arrangements; and
- (b) be requested to prepare a report on the outcome of the pilot scheme using consultants as appropriate in accordance with the provisions of the Bill and to submit the report to the Council for consideration before forwarding to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs.

(3) That this Sub-Committee be given delegated power to determine any further action which may be required in relation to any pilot scheme.

3. Subsequently, the Secretary of State approved the application and the Borough of Wigan (All Postal Voting Scheme) Order 2000 was made. A copy of the Order is

attached as Appendix A. This report has been prepared in accordance with Section 10 of the Act to inform the Home Office of the outcome of the pilot scheme and the Council's views thereon.

4. The Council's area includes the whole Parliamentary Constituencies of Leigh, Makerfield and Wigan and part of Worsley and there is a separate Count venue for each Constituency. Local Elections are organised on a Constituency basis and use the Constituency Count facilities (with Worsley being added to Leigh for these purposes). The proposal was for one of the Wards in each Count area to be conducted wholly by postal ballot. It was felt that this would give a better means of comparing and contrasting the results in the Wards selected than would be the case if one Ward only had been selected. In addition, the use of three Wards would give a more accurate picture of the level of turnout under the trial compared to the other Wards in the Borough (whose elections were to be conducted in the usual way in 2000) and to the 1999 results in general.
5. The Council was of the opinion that the pilot would be of most effect if the Wards were selected by reference to their voter characteristics so that the results of the market research to be undertaken with electors could be cross referenced back to similar research carried out in 1999 on low turnout. The Index of Local Deprivation divided into three bands was felt to be the most appropriate indicator for these purposes. The Index divided into bands is set out below:-

INDEX OF LOCAL DEPRIVATION 1998 FOR WIGAN BOROUGH WARDS
Source 1991 Census

Wigan Con. Rank	Ward	ILD 1998 Score	England Rank	England % Band
Band 1:				
1	Wigan Norley	11.67	367	10
2	Makerfield Ince	9.70	719	10
3	Wigan Newtown	9.61	739	10
4	Makerfield Abram	8.38	979	20
5	Wigan Whelley	8.14	1024	20
6	Leigh Atherton	7.99	1060	20
7	Leigh Leigh Central	7.11	1244	20
8	Leigh Hindley	6.73	1331	20
Band 2:				
9	Wigan Beech Hill	5.99	1485	20
10	Makerfield Worsley Mesnes	5.78	1548	20
11	Worsley Hindsford	4.11	1946	30
12	Leigh Leigh East	2.70	2571	30
13	Worsley Bedford-Astley	1.43	3656	40
14	Leigh Hope Carr	0.61	4733	50
15	Leigh Lightshaw	0.56	4801	50
16	Leigh Hindley Green	0.54	4852	50

Band 3:					
17	Makerfield	Winstanley	0.44	5019	50
18	Makerfield	Ashton-Golborne	0.23	5360	60
19	Worsley	Tyldesley East	0.11	5595	60
20	Makerfield	Bryn	0.07	5711	60
21	Wigan	Swinley	0.04	5812	60
22	Wigan	Aspull-Standish	0.00	6076	70+
23	Wigan	Langtree	0.00	6076	70+
24	Makerfield	Orrell	0.00	6076	70+

When the bands were plotted against the Count venues, the selections had to be made as follows if there were to be an element of selection remaining:-

Band 1	Wigan
Band 2	Leigh and Worsley
Band 3	Makerfield

e.g. the Leigh/Worsley Ward had to be from band 2 because there were no choices in that band for Wigan and Makerfield. For the same reason the Leigh/Worsley Ward could not be from Band 3. Thereafter, Wigan from Band 1 and Makerfield from band 3 offered the greatest choice of Wards to draw from. Also, this was a better match of the characteristics of those areas (a Wigan Ward was the lowest in band 1 and a Makerfield Ward was the highest in band 3).

The Wards were selected by lot on that basis with the chosen Wards being Whelley, Bedford Astley and Winstanley respectively.

THE SCHEME

6. The Scheme involved the issue of postal ballot papers to all eligible electors to their qualifying address. If electors had current postal vote applications involving addresses other than their qualifying address (e.g. students at their term time address), the postal ballot papers were redirected to the address on their postal vote application. Where electors had appointed proxies, their ballot papers were redirected to their proxies for attention.

Returned postal ballot papers were opened each day in the Elections Office as far as the Envelopes A, which were then opened en bloc on Polling Day at the Count.

7. Polling Stations were not opened on Polling Day and, as a consequence, poll cards were not issued to electors. The Notice of Poll wording was amended to remind electors that there were no Polling Stations and that the Election would be an all postal ballot.
8. The Home Office, when inviting bids, expected Local Authorities to take steps to ensure that the new procedure would not lead to any increase in personation or other electoral fraud. The Council was keen to use the Declaration of Identity to cover this point but was aware that the postal ballot procedure would be new to the majority of electors. Accordingly, a small project was conducted in-house to

ascertain the best way of presenting the postal ballot paper literature and a copy of the findings is enclosed as Appendix B. This showed that Clear English instructions were the most effective. The statutory instructions were rewritten, approved by the Plain English Campaign and embodied in the leaflet sent out to electors with their postal ballot papers (copy attached as Appendix C). In addition to the instructions, the purpose of the leaflet was to explain what the pilot scheme was about; to invite comments on the pilot; and to provide a checklist to follow before returning the ballot papers. The standard A4 Declarations of Identity were used which still carried on the reverse the explanatory notes laid down by the Regulations. The numbers of ballot papers rejected from those cast were as follows:-

Ward	Rejected	Accepted	Percentage rejected
Bedford Astley	80	2261	3.42%
Whelley	116	2083	5.28%
Winstanley	88	3153	2.72%
Average			3.81%

They were rejected because the Declaration either was not returned or did not contain both signatures.

PUBLICITY

9. In addition to the leaflet that was delivered to every elector, the Council mounted a publicity campaign and the Press Releases issued during this are attached as Appendix D. They were taken up by the local press and were a valuable tool in spreading the word about the Pilot Scheme. In the final Press Release, the opportunity was taken to address the concerns being expressed by electors about the secrecy of the postal ballot.

THE RESULTS

10. Appendix E shows the results of the Election. Turnout across the Borough (excluding the Pilot Wards) increased less than 1% on average on the 1999 results whilst the Pilot Wards showed a substantially higher increase of 50% on average. The market research undertaken in 1999 indicated, contrary to popular preconceptions, that non-voters were likely to be young, employed, house and car owning electors who could not fit in a visit to the Polling Station in their busy lifestyles. The greater increase in turnout in the Winstanley Ward (the band 3 Ward in the Index of Local Deprivation) meant that this part of the electorate was more attracted to an all postal ballot and more inclined to take part in this Election. The Pilot Scheme, as well as increasing turnout therefore, had the added advantage of targeting successfully the part of the electorate known to be non-voters.

COSTS (ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL)

11. Appendix F compares the cost of the Pilot Scheme with a traditional Election. The savings on the Pilot Scheme amounted to not renting Polling Station premises nor employing Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks or Keyholders but were more than outweighed by the increased costs of issuing and opening the postal

ballot papers. In general terms, the costs of the Pilot Scheme were 75% higher than a traditional Election. It is important to note that, whilst the costs of a traditional Election are fixed irrespective of turnout, those of an all postal ballot increase if turnout increases because of the cost of return postage.

12. In addition, the Pilot Scheme required substantial staff time to implement. Normally, a team of 15 can spend two hours issuing the postal ballot papers across the whole Borough. For the Pilot Scheme, the team was doubled in size to 30, their working hours were doubled to four, and they took five days to issue the ballot papers. At the other end of the process, the postal ballot papers are opened on Election night at the Count, taking approximately half an hour. Under the Pilot Scheme, the outer envelopes were opened, the Declaration checked and the Envelope A opened for two hours per day for eleven days, leaving the ballot papers to be verified on Election Day at the Count. If this method of voting were to be rolled out across the Borough, it is by no means certain that staff from within the Authority could be made available to carry out this level of work over a long period (compared to being released for one day to staff Polling Stations).
13. If the Pilot Scheme is to be rolled out nationally, the Home Office must reconsider the present Election Timetable. Whilst some preparatory work can be done before the Election on the envelopes and Declarations of Identity, the ballot papers cannot be printed until nominations close. The ballot papers for the Pilot Wards were delivered to the Elections Office by Friday, 7th April 2000, four days after nominations closed. On that basis, it would take 32 working days to provide the ballot papers for all Wards in the Borough with the last arriving on Monday, 22nd May 2000, twelve days after Election Day! Serious consideration must be given, therefore, to bringing the close of nominations much further forward to allow for the time necessary to undertake the printing of ballot papers.
14. If all postal voting is not rolled out nationally, the Home Office should consider seeking powers to authorise Returning Officers to undertake postal ballots where considered preferable either on cost or geographical grounds. In Wigan, there is a Polling District based on the village of Crooke with 97 electors. The basic cost of operating the Polling Station is £226.50 whilst the basic cost of an all postal ballot (even assuming 100% turnout) is £33.47. Therefore, there is an economic case for running the election in this Polling District on an all postal ballot basis. Another Polling District is based on the Parish of Haigh with 496 electors. The basic cost of operating the Polling Station is £236.50 whilst the basic cost of an all postal ballot (even assuming 100% turnout) is £171.12. Again, there is an economic case for an all postal ballot but there is also a geographical case because the Polling District is predominantly rural in nature and, wherever the Polling Station is located, electors have difficulty getting to it. Assuming an average cost per Polling Station of £231.50, there are 16 Polling Districts out of a total of 189 (8.5%) in the Borough that would be more cost effective to run on an all postal ballot basis. This figure would be even higher in more rural areas of the country.

VIEWS EXPRESSED

15. In 1999, the Council commissioned Market Research UK Limited to ascertain the reasons for low turnout and to identify any measures which could be taken to improve it. To build on that research, the Company was commissioned to undertake market research with electors involved in the Pilot Scheme. The Company interviewed approximately 300 electors in each Ward and re-weighted the findings to represent the total numbers of electors in each Ward. The Company's report is attached as Appendix G and the main findings are set out in paragraph 20 below.

16. In addition, the Council consulted the Political Parties involved in the selected Wards on their perceptions of the election and whether it created any problems for them. Their responses were as follows:-

R, the Agent of a Labour candidate expressed general satisfaction with the Pilot Scheme and the result. However, he was concerned about the possibility of electors missing their ballot papers because they assumed they were junk mail. In addition, he reported complaints from electors about the need for the Declaration of Identity, particularly from people living alone who found difficulty in finding a witness to act for them.

N, the Agent of a Labour candidate expressed a wish to see some indication of which Polling Districts had or had not returned ballot papers so that he could focus his canvassing. Also, he reported confusion amongst the electorate about the postal ballot paper process and the non-availability of Polling Stations on Election Day.

C, the Chairman of a Conservative Association objected to the adoption of all postal ballots on the grounds that electors could be pressurised by Party activists into completing their ballot on the doorstep; voting for a candidate should be a positive thing like going to a Polling Station; and ballot papers could be lost in the mail or not recognised as such amongst all of the other mail that people receive.

W, the Chairman of a Conservative Association expressed general satisfaction with the arrangements for the postal ballot; referred to misgivings by some electors about the secrecy of the ballot; was disappointed that the turnout was not even higher than that achieved; and felt that the pilot deprived the Parties of their opportunity to maximise their vote on Election Day. On balance, he was against an all postal ballot on the grounds that ballot papers that were not delivered correctly disenfranchised the electors concerned and the level of increase in turnout did not justify the extra costs involved.

17. The Council received individual written comments as follows:-

Mr. and Mrs. K. expressed enthusiasm for the new method of voting. However, they pointed out that, since they did not receive an election leaflet from each candidate, they did not feel able to vote. This comment was received from several electors by telephone and Appendix H indicates the level of campaigning by candidates with reference to their election expenses.

Mr. S. expressed concern at the ability of Royal Mail to ensure that all electors received their postal ballot papers. The papers were actually delivered by hand by Council employees and complaints about non-delivery were minute and easy to resolve as a consequence.

Mr. D. was more than happy to go to his local Polling Station and failed to see why his right to vote in that way was removed for the benefit of electors who had never bothered to go to the Polling Stations in the past.

Mrs. W., Mr. F. and Mr. S. expressed grave concern about the maintenance of the secrecy of the ballot because all of the documentation had matching numbers. This reservation was repeated by up to 50 telephone calls to the Elections Office. Electors were told about the opening procedure that guaranteed secrecy but still felt unable to take part in the voting process. It is interesting to note that traditional postal vote applicants never raise this as an issue.

FINDINGS

18. If all postal voting is to be adopted nationally, serious consideration must be given to amending the Election Timetable by bringing forward the close of nominations so that the ballot papers can be printed on time.

If all postal voting is not rolled out nationally, the Home Office should consider seeking powers to authorise Returning Officers to undertake postal ballots in individual Wards or Polling Districts where that is considered preferable.

19. There are serious concerns about the ability of Local Authorities to meet the additional costs of all postal ballots and to provide the necessary staffing resources to run them. If postal ballots are rolled out nationally, the Home Office must provide additional funding at Parliamentary and European Elections and sponsor an increase in the Rate Support Grant to assist Local Authorities with the increased costs of Local Elections.

20. The survey findings were as follows:-

"Our previous research on behalf of the Council, conducted immediately after the Local Elections in 1999, concluded that the introduction of voting by post was the measure likely to make the biggest single impact on the problem of low electoral turnout in Wigan. The research also concluded that postal voting would appeal in particular to the sector within the electorate who are least likely to go to a polling station to vote – those who are younger, more mobile and more affluent.

The outcome of the pilot scheme and the results of the subsequent survey of residents have upheld both these conclusions. Across the three pilot wards, turnout levels increased by 50%. The largest increase (71%) occurred in Winstanley, by far the most affluent of the three wards. Moreover, with 72% of those who did vote by post saying they want to continue to use this method, there are strong indications that these sizeable rises in turnout are sustainable in the future.

The survey findings also indicate that even larger rises might be possible if the Council and the political parties take some additional measures. These are summarised below:-

- *Although the Council did mount a programme of advance publicity through the local newspapers, fewer than half (49%) of the respondents to the survey could recall reading about the pilot scheme. This finding points to the need for a more intensive publicity campaign prior to any future all-postal ballots.*
- *Close to 1 in 5 (17%) survey respondents could not remember receiving the voting documents from the Elections Office. Again, this finding points to the need for the packaging of the postal ballot papers to be made even more distinctive.*
- *While very few respondents had any difficulties either in understanding the voting instructions or in completing and returning the voting documents, it is clear that some were not convinced about the secrecy of the ballot procedure. The need for more reassurance on this latter point is thus indicated, both in the advance publicity and in the voting documents themselves.*
- *Nearly one-third (31%) of those respondents who did not vote said they had simply forgotten about it. Issuing the voting documents closer to the date of the elections, and emphasising that the documents should be completed and returned as quickly as possible, might go some way to reducing this extent of forgetfulness.*
- *Finally, more than 1 in 5 non-voters also said that lack of information about the candidates was a significant factor in their decision not to vote by post. This difficulty might be reduced if a set of leaflets from the candidates was delivered to electors as part of the postal ballot package. To maintain the Council's impartiality, however, such a measure would have to be adopted on an "all or nothing" basis."*