

Electoral pilot scheme evaluation
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council
August 2007



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Summary

In response to a prospectus issued to local authorities in England inviting applications for electoral pilot schemes at the May 2007 local government elections, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council piloted the following innovations:

- advance voting at one town centre location from 23 April to 2 May
- a requirement for voters to provide a signature before their ballot papers would be issued at the advance voting station

Conclusions and findings

The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors. Advance voting gave electors more opportunity to cast their votes, improving convenience by enabling them to vote in person before polling day. However, while the feedback from advance voters was positive, they were a small minority among the electorate as a whole, with only 286 voters (0.5% of turnout, 0.2% of the total electorate) using this facility. The requirement to provide a signature appears to have been widely accepted by advance voters.

The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout. As noted above, advance voters comprised 0.5% of overall turnout. Given that opinion research suggests that the majority of advance voters (74%) were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that the pilot has had a significant impact.

The new procedures provided in the pilot scheme were easy to follow. The research undertaken shows that those who did vote at the advance voting station found the procedures easy to follow. There was no indication that signing for the ballot paper was a problem for users and there were no reports of voters experiencing difficulties in providing their signatures.

The pilot scheme does not appear to have led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice. There is no evidence to suggest that advance voting or the requirement to provide a signature had any negative impact on the integrity of the elections.

The pilot scheme led to a slight increase in expenditure for the Council. The only additional cost to the elections associated with advance voting was in relation to staffing. The cost of staffing the advance voting station with a Presiding Officer and one Poll Clerk was £1,190. With 286 voters, this equates to a cost of £4.16 per voter.

1 Introduction

1.1 Under the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 2000, any local authority in England and Wales can submit proposals to the Secretary of State for Justice (prior to 9 May 2007, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs) to carry out an electoral pilot scheme. Electoral pilot schemes can involve changes to when, where and how voting at local government elections is to take place, how the votes cast at the elections are to be counted, or candidates sending election communications free of postage charges. The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate and report on any pilot scheme approved by the Secretary of State.

1.2 A total of 312 local authorities in England held elections in May 2007. In October 2006, the Department for Constitutional Affairs¹ and the Commission issued a joint prospectus to local authorities inviting applications for electoral pilot schemes at the May 2007 elections. Fourteen applications were received in response to the prospectus, and in January 2007 the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs announced that he had approved 12 pilot schemes in a total of 13 local authority areas. A full list of all the authorities that held pilot schemes in May 2007 is available on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

1.3 This report presents the Commission's evaluation of the electoral pilot scheme carried out by Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council at the elections on 3 May 2007. The evaluation includes a description of the pilot scheme and an assessment as to:

- the scheme's success or otherwise in facilitating voting or the counting of votes, or in encouraging voting or enabling voters to make informed choices at the elections
- whether the turnout of voters was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not applied
- whether voters found the procedures provided for their assistance by the scheme easy to use
- whether the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections
- whether those procedures led to any increase in expenditure, or to any savings, by the authority

1.4 In addition to these statutory requirements, the Commission's evaluation also considers, where appropriate:

- the extent to which the pilot scheme facilitated or otherwise encouraged participation among particular communities, including young people, people from minority ethnic communities and disabled people
- overall levels of user awareness and comprehension of the voting method being tested, including an assessment of the effectiveness of any literature or other materials used in the promotion of the pilot scheme

¹ Hereafter referred to as the Ministry of Justice following the machinery of government changes on 9 May 2007.

- the attitudes and opinions of key stakeholders, including voters, with a view to determining overall levels of confidence in the voting method being tested
- whether the pilot scheme resulted in measurable improvements, or had any adverse impact, with respect to the provision of more efficient and effective service delivery to voters
- whether the pilot scheme resulted in measurable improvements to, or had any adverse impact on, the existing system of electoral administration
- whether the pilot scheme represented good 'value for money'

1.5 Where appropriate, the Commission may also make recommendations as to whether changes should be made to electoral arrangements more generally through roll-out of the pilot scheme procedures.

1.6 The Commission is required to submit its evaluation report to the Secretary of State and any of the local authorities involved in the pilot scheme, and those local authorities are required to publish the evaluation report within three months of the elections. The Commission has also published this report on its website, together with a copy of the Statutory Order that allowed the pilot scheme to take place.

1.7 In preparing this report, the Commission has drawn on its own observations and assessment of the pilot scheme, as well as on the views expressed to it by a number of other stakeholders. The report also incorporates findings from work undertaken by the following contractors:

- public opinion research carried out by ICM Research
- an accessibility evaluation of the pilot by PA Consulting, Equal Ability CIC and Churchill, Minty & Friend Ltd

1.8 Copies of the reports produced by the Commission's contractors are available from its website, and in other formats on request.

1.9 The Commission would particularly like to thank the Returning Officer and the Electoral Services department of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council for their assistance in undertaking this evaluation and for supplying it with the information and data to support the evaluation.

2 Context

The area

2.1 The borough of Gateshead extends nearly 13 miles along the south bank of the River Tyne and has the largest area of the five Tyne and Wear districts, covering 14,360 hectares.

2.2 Gateshead's population was 191,151 at the time of the last census in 2001, representing a population density of 13.3 people per hectare. It is predominantly urban in character and comprises the town of Gateshead with a number of more outlying rural areas, including the only parish in the borough, Lamesley.

2.3 The borough is ranked 26 out of 354 council areas on the 2004 indices of deprivation (with 1 being the most deprived).²

The Council

2.4 Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council is represented by 66 councillors in 22 three-member wards and elects by thirds. All 22 wards therefore held an election in May 2007. At the May 2007 elections the electorate of the borough was 144,166. Elections to Lamesley parish were uncontested.

2.5 The political composition of the Council prior to the 2007 elections was: Liberal Democrat – 23; Liberal – one; and Labour – 42. The borough is represented by four Labour Members of Parliament: Dave Anderson (Blaydon); Sharon Hodgson (Gateshead East and Washington West); David Clelland (Tyne Bridge); and Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow). Gateshead is in the North East of England electoral region for elections to the European Parliament.

² Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *The English Indices of Deprivation 2004 (revised)* (2004), www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1128440

3 Pilot scheme description

The pilot scheme application

3.1 In response to the October 2006 electoral pilot scheme prospectus, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (hereafter known as 'the Council') submitted an application to pilot advance voting at one advance voting station located at the civic centre in the week prior to the elections.

3.2 Following discussions with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Council also agreed to pilot a requirement for voters to provide a signature before their ballot papers would be issued by staff at the advance voting station. A similar measure requiring signature collection at polling stations was included in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (EAA) but has yet to be commenced.

3.3 In a Written Ministerial Statement on 29 January 2007, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs announced that the Government had given approval for the Council to pilot the above innovations.³ The Gateshead Council (Advance Voting and Signing for Ballot Papers) Pilot Order 2007 was made on 26 March 2007 and came into force on the same day.⁴

Pilot scheme summary

Advance voting

3.4 In 2006, the Council had piloted advance voting at a single location (the civic centre) as part of a joint pilot with three other Tyne and Wear local authorities. For 2007, it retained a single advance voting station at the civic centre, designed to replicate a conventional polling station. The advance voting station was open on the same corresponding dates and times as in 2006, which had been chosen to coincide with office hours when people would be most likely to visit:

- Monday 23 April to Friday 27 April, 9am to 5pm
- Saturday 28 April, 9am to 12 noon
- Monday 30 April and Tuesday 1 May, 9am to 5pm
- Wednesday 2 May, 9am to 12 noon

3.5 All electors from the borough who were eligible to vote on 3 May could vote at this location, provided they had not already applied for a postal vote. The advance voting station also provided a secure drop-off point for those electors with a postal vote who preferred not to return it by post.

3.6 The Council used an area just inside the entrance to the civic centre as the advance voting station. Since it was located at the civic centre, the Council considered it would be unlikely that electors from other local authorities would attempt to vote there. The Council also noted that its central location, well used by

³ Official Record (House of Lords), 29 January 2007, Column WS1.

⁴ The Commission's response to all Pilot Orders can be found on the Commission website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/All_Responses_25780-19142_E_N_S_W_.pdf.

the people of Gateshead, is also easily accessible to disabled people. The Council did consider other possible locations in central Gateshead but none of them was as well used or secure. Using the civic centre meant that it would be easy to secure the ballot box and other materials and that election staff would be on hand to resolve any difficulties that might arise.

Requiring voters to sign for receipt of their ballot paper

3.7 As well as enabling advance voting, the pilot required all voters at the advance voting station to provide their signature before they were issued with a ballot paper. Voters were asked to provide their signature in a designated space on a separate list (the corresponding number list) maintained by the Presiding Officer, next to the columns for the relevant ballot paper number (pre-printed) and elector number (entered by advance voting station staff). Once the voter had provided their signature, advance voting station staff issued them with a ballot paper. Where they would not provide a signature, the Presiding Officer was required to refuse to provide them with a ballot paper.

3.8 The Presiding Officer could dispense with the requirement for a voter to provide a signature, and instead mark the space with the letters 'PI' for physical incapacity, if they were satisfied that it was not reasonably possible for a voter to sign in a consistent or distinctive way because of any incapacity or inability to read.

3.9 A Presiding Officer and Poll Clerk were available to offer guidance, mark the electoral registers and corresponding number list, issue ballot papers to voters and observe the placing of the ballot papers in the ballot box. Other than advance voting station staff having to require a signature from voters before issuing a ballot paper, there were no changes to conventional polling station procedures.

Objectives of the pilot scheme

3.10 In its pilot scheme application, the Council stated that the proposed innovations aimed to:

- give electors a wide choice of voting methods
- ascertain whether, following a similar advance voting pilot in 2006, the turnout for advance voting would be higher second time around

3.11 In commenting formally to the Secretary of State on the application, the Commission noted that the proposal did not seek to test any improvements to the design of the advance voting pilot undertaken by the Council and three other Tyne and Wear local authorities in 2006. Although the Commission acknowledged that an unchanged pilot might provide a useful 'control' comparison with the 2006 pilot scheme, it considered that the absence of the comprehensive awareness campaign undertaken by the four local authorities in 2006 meant that the pilot scheme would be unlikely to be truly comparable. The Commission concluded that it did not support the application as submitted by the Council.⁵ This issue was the subject of subsequent negotiations between the Council and the MoJ prior to the acceptance of the pilot.

⁵ Comments by the Commission on pilot scheme applications under Section 10, RPA 2000, December 2006, www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/17797

3.12 The Commission also subsequently commented on the proposal to pilot a signature collection requirement at the advance voting station. It questioned the effectiveness of this measure in the absence of individual voter registration and the collection of personal identification details against which to check the signatures. However, it indicated that it was ready to evaluate these trials and assess the views and reactions of voters.

3.13 The background paper attached to the Secretary of State's Written Ministerial Statement announcing approval of the May 2007 pilot schemes noted the Government's view that:

the piloting of advance voting will add to the evidence available about the longer term impact of providing additional flexibility for electors to choose when they cast their vote, building on Gateshead's May 2006 advance voting pilot scheme. The requirement for electors to provide their signature before voting will enable us to identify any practical issues remaining to be addressed before the requirement is rolled out nationally.⁶

3.14 The following section outlines the key objectives of the pilot scheme, as they relate to the statutory evaluation criteria specified in Chapter 1, 'Introduction'.

Facilitating voting and ease of use

3.15 The option of voting at an advance voting station provided those electors who wished to vote in person but were not able to do so on 3 May the opportunity to cast their vote. It also provided those who had missed the postal and proxy vote application deadlines and who would be unable to vote on polling day with the opportunity to vote. The Council expressed the view that the advance voting station was intended to act as a complementary, additional voting channel, not as a rival to existing methods of voting.

3.16 It was also expected that advance voting would make the elections more convenient and accessible to electors by significantly lengthening the period during which votes could be cast in person. By using the civic centre as an advance voting station, electors would be able to cast their vote when they were visiting the civic centre on other business. For some electors, the civic centre is a location that they visit as part of their normal routine, to access Council services and information. Using a reasonably frequently visited location as an advance voting station would allow both those electors who knew about the pilot scheme and those who did not to combine different tasks in one journey.

3.17 As previously noted, the advance voting station also provided a secure drop-off point for those electors with a postal vote who preferred not to return it by post.

⁶ Official Record (House of Commons), 29 January 2007, Column 3WS.

3.18 An assessment of the requirement to sign and its impact on voters' experiences was carried out through analysis of a record kept by advance voting station staff of queries raised, along with details of any electors refusing to sign. It was supplemented by observation at the advance voting station and analysis of opinion research and exit surveys.

Facilitating the counting of votes

3.19 There was no advance counting of the votes received at the advance voting station and therefore it was not expected that advance voting or signing for ballot papers would affect the counting of votes on polling day.

Turnout

3.20 It was expected that the advance voting pilot scheme would have a slight positive impact on overall turnout as it offered both those electors otherwise unlikely to vote and those electors who had missed the postal and proxy vote application deadlines (but who would be away on polling day) the opportunity to vote in person at a more convenient time and location. In its application, the Council stated that it anticipated a greater level of usage in 2007 than in 2006, when 0.2% of the electorate voted using the advance voting station, given the fact that this would be the second year running that the pilot had been carried out and there could be an associated increase in public awareness. However, it did not expect this increased level of usage to be more than approximately 1% of the electorate.

3.21 It was not expected that the signature requirement would have any impact on turnout. During the 2006 pilot scheme, when advance voters were asked for their signature, there were no reports of voters refusing or querying the requirement. The Council subsequently expected that this would not have any impact at the 2007 elections.

Security and confidence

3.22 The Council did not expect security to be a particular issue in relation to advance voting, since the advance voting station was in effect only a traditional polling station that was open earlier than usual. Given the experience of the 2006 pilot scheme, during which no security issues came to light, the Council considered it was unlikely that there would be any new security issues this year with an essentially similar pilot.

3.23 Trialling signature collection at the advance voting station provided a further opportunity to evaluate the views and reactions of voters to this measure before it is rolled out more widely.

Efficiency

3.24 The main impact of the pilot scheme on the overall efficiency of the elections was expected to be the staffing costs associated with the advance voting station and any additional costs resulting from the signature collection requirement. As Council-owned property was used for the advance voting station, there were no

additional costs associated with its use. Clearly, the greater the number of voters who took advantage of the advance voting facilities, the greater the efficiency of the service in cost-per-vote terms.

3.25 Notwithstanding these issues, no overall impact on the efficiency of the electoral process was expected as a result of this pilot scheme, since the advance voting station was in effect only a traditional polling station that was open earlier than usual. No difficulties in implementing the signature collection requirement were anticipated given the low levels of usage likely for advance voting.

4 Evaluation

Efficiency

Project management

4.1 The pilot scheme was managed in the same way as the 2006 pilot scheme. Two experienced officers managed the pilot, which did not require extensive project management as there was only one advance voting station, within the civic centre, and the issues were essentially the same as those that would normally be encountered on polling day, except for the signature requirement. The pilot was therefore managed as part of the overall elections project. The pilot scheme was delivered without difficulty and without diverting resources from managing other aspects of the elections.

Training

4.2 Staff at the advance voting station attended a briefing on the pilot scheme with the Deputy Returning Officer and the Electoral Services Manager. The Presiding Officer at the advance voting station had held the same position during the 2006 pilot scheme. The Council stated that the feedback staff gave on the training was that it was very useful and gave them a good insight into the pilot, and confidence in explaining the revised voting process to electors.

4.3 The Council stated that it would not see any need for fundamental changes in the training should the pilot be repeated. However, the Presiding Officer, as a retired officer who had worked in a supervisory capacity at numerous elections, is likely to have greater experience and understanding of electoral administration than many other Presiding Officers. Were the signature provision requirement in the EAA rolled out for use at all elections, the training would need to take into account the likelihood that all polling station staff may not have such a depth of understanding. The same issue would apply to a lesser extent if future pilot schemes were to include advance voting stations in other areas of the borough and consequently more staff were required.

Voting

Public awareness and feedback

4.4 According to the Commission's research, one in three (33%) of the Gateshead public were aware that their local authority was piloting new ways of voting at the 2007 elections. This is below the average across all pilot scheme areas (which was 48%). Slightly more (42%) were aware of advance voting when prompted. The Council informed electors about advance voting by including the dates, opening times and location of the advance voting station on poll cards and in a pre-election letter. It also issued press releases, and two stories were run about the pilot scheme. The Council inserted an article in the *Council News*, which is delivered to every household in the borough, informing electors that they could vote in advance

and giving the location and opening times of the advance voting station. None of the material the Council distributed before the elections included the fact that voters would be required to sign for their ballot paper.

4.5 According to the Commission's research, the primary source of awareness of the pilot was material from the Council (47%), with local media interest (19%) also having an impact. Of the 286 voters who used the advance voting station in Gateshead, 32% made a specific visit with the sole intention of voting, as opposed to accessing other services or information at the civic centre at the same time.

I remembered advance voting being advertised in the *Chronicle* and was going through the civic centre anyway so it was just smashing for me.

Advance voter

4.6 These activities were part of the Council's general publicity campaign to raise awareness of the elections on 3 May. It included advance voting as part of its overall publicity strategy under the tag line 'three ways to vote' (i.e. on 3 May at a polling station, by post or at the advance voting station). The Council used methods such as posters, television monitors in public buildings and display units on the side of refuse vehicles to publicise the elections, but details of advance voting were not provided.

Impact on voting

4.7 Only 286 people voted at the advance voting station in Gateshead. This accounts for less than 1% of the turnout and 0.2% of the total electorate in Gateshead. The ward in which the civic centre is located, Bridges, returned the greatest number of ballots from people who voted at the advance voting station – 69 voters, or 24% of advance voters.

4.8 In addition to those casting their vote at the advance voting station, a total of 410 voters dropped off their postal ballot votes there. Again, Bridges ward accounted for the largest number of people voting in this way, with 75 voters from the ward dropping off their postal ballot at the advance voting station.

4.9 Table 1 provides a breakdown of days on which individuals voted at the advance voting station. It shows that there is a fairly even distribution of the days on which people voted, with the exception of Saturday 28 April. Lower than average levels of usage on this day may reflect the fact that the core opening hours for the civic centre were on weekdays. Further breakdown of the figures shows that most people voted in the morning. No more than nine people voted between 3pm and 5pm on any one day and the average number of people voting during these hours was just five. On the final day of advance voting there was a peak in the number of voters with 20 people voting between 9am and 12 noon.

Table 1: Breakdown of advance voting on a daily basis

	Mon 23	Tues 24	Wed 25	Thurs 26	Fri 27	Sat 28	Mon 30	Tues 1	Wed 2
Advance voters	38	41	44	35	38	7	27	36	20

4.10 It is not possible to say conclusively that the low take-up of advance voting was directly related to a lack of awareness, but there was no specific campaigning highlighting advance voting and it is possible that this may have contributed to low levels of use. The Council noted that, in the light of the poor turnout at the advance voting station, its publicity strategy was not as effective as it had hoped and that running the pilot for a second year in a row did not have the anticipated improved impact on turnout. In post-election discussions, several members of the Council expressed support for the principle of increasing the number of advance voting stations and for possibly employing a mobile advance voting station.

4.11 Commission evaluators observed the issuing of ballot papers at the advance voting station, and spoke to advance voting station staff about the effect of the pilot scheme on the voting process. None of the advance voting station staff the Commission evaluators spoke to had concerns about the process or considered it to have had any negative impact on voting or on the administration of the elections. There were no questions from voters using the advance voting station about the new processes involved in the pilot scheme and no voters refused to sign or queried the need to provide a signature. No instances were observed or reported of queues forming due to the requirement to provide a signature or of this slowing down the issuing process, although it did take slightly longer to process voters than the traditional voting process would have done.

4.12 The Council had considered the possibility of using a device that hides the previous voter's signature from view, but chose not to do so because it was not commercially available. While the signatures collected consequently remained in view on the corresponding number list, this was not raised as an issue by any voters, who remained content to provide their signature.

4.13 While the requirement to provide a signature did not appear to have a major impact on the ability of individuals to vote, some administrative and practical issues may have become apparent had more electors taken advantage of advance voting. For example, it is possible that a larger turnout, such as at a UK Parliamentary general election, could have created 'bottlenecks' of voters, particularly during peak periods.

Accessibility

4.14 The area allocated as an advance voting station, just inside the entrance to the civic centre, provided an accessible location for the advance voting station. It was also used as a polling station on 3 May for the surrounding polling district. The civic centre was identified by a large 'polling station' sign outside, which was clearly visible at some distance. This was identical to the type of sign used on polling day.

Each advance voting station was equipped with posters with instructions for voters, and large-print versions of the ballot paper.

4.15 The pilot scheme did not seek to target particular groups. Unsurprisingly, therefore, organisations representing young people, people from minority ethnic communities and disabled people, when contacted by the Commission's accessibility contractors, had no knowledge of the pilot scheme. However, there were no recorded instances of any accessibility issues for voters who visited the advance voting station.

4.16 There was no need at the advance voting station for the Presiding Officer to waive the signature requirement for any voters for accessibility reasons. However, the Council had put in place an agreed procedure in the event that a voter, because of a disability or inability to read, was unable to make a distinctive signature. In such cases the Presiding Officer would write the letters 'PI' (physical incapacity) in the space for the signature, as stipulated in the Statutory Order.

Campaigning

4.17 Candidates and agents were not given specific briefings on the pilot scheme itself and this was evident in the anecdotal information gained at the count. Some candidates and agents were aware of the pilot scheme when prompted, but generally did not know specifically what the pilot entailed. When asked whether the pilot scheme had any impact on campaigning, no candidates or agents considered that the pilot scheme would necessitate working in a different way.

Turnout

4.18 The overall level of turnout in Gateshead at these elections was 36.6%, which is very similar to the last comparable local government elections in May 2006 (36.7%).

4.19 Only 286 people voted at the advance voting station in Gateshead. This accounts for 0.5% of turnout (0.2% of the total electorate) and is slightly less than in 2006, when 309 people (again, 0.5% of turnout and 0.2% of the total electorate) voted at an advance voting station.

4.20 Of those who voted at the advance voting station, 74% said it was likely that they would have voted on polling day had they not been able to vote in advance – a figure that is higher than in other advance voting areas, except Broxbourne. Just under one-quarter (23%) said that if they had not been able to vote at the advance voting station it was unlikely they would have voted at all. Given the low number of people who used advance voting and the likelihood that the majority would have voted anyway, it therefore appears to have had a minimal positive impact on turnout.

4.21 Although it is not possible to say conclusively that the low take-up of advance voting was directly related to a lack of awareness, there was no specific campaigning highlighting advance voting, which may have contributed to the low turnout. ICM Research indicated that this may have been the case – almost half (47%) of local non-voters when surveyed say they would have been likely to vote had they been aware of the possibility of advance voting.⁷ It is also interesting to note that 54% of the general public in Gateshead also think that turnout would increase if advance voting stations were more readily available at future elections.

Security and confidence

Security

4.22 There were no specific concerns over the security of advance voting or signing for ballot papers. There were no recorded instances of alleged personation and there were no instances of anybody attempting to vote on 3 May who had voted during the advance voting period. Fifty-six per cent of voters said they felt that requiring everyone to sign their name before being allowed to vote at a polling station would give them more confidence in the voting process. Thirty-seven per cent said it would make no difference to their confidence in the process and nobody said it would make them less confident.

4.23 In the event of an elector refusing to sign, the Council stated that the Presiding Officer would inform them that, by law, they are not allowed to be issued with a ballot paper. If the elector questioned this, the Presiding Officer would ask one of the election staff at the civic centre to come to the advance voting station and explain the legal position to the elector.

4.24 The Commission has not been made aware of any allegations of fraud or malpractice arising from the pilot scheme at these elections. At present, therefore, there is no substantiated evidence to suggest that the procedures provided by the pilot scheme led to any increase in electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections. The Commission notes that the period in which a prosecution can be launched is one year, and so such evidence may still come to light.

4.25 There were no concerns regarding the storage of ballot papers; at the end of each day's proceedings, the ballot box, electoral registers and other materials were locked away in the civic centre basement until shortly before the advance voting station re-opened the following day.

4.26 In order to address any possible personation during the advance voting period, the names of people voting at the advance voting station were marked in red pen on the electoral register (as opposed to the pencil mark that is made at polling stations). This meant that if any allegation of personation had been made, it would have been possible to identify whether it occurred at the advance voting station or at an ordinary polling station.

⁷ Only 18% say they would be 'very likely' to vote and the remainder – 30% – say 'quite likely'.

User confidence

4.27 Although only 286 people voted at the advance voting station, their experiences where recorded were almost all positive. Of those who responded to the questionnaire about their experience of voting, 97% of advance voters said the information that they were given about advance voting was 'very easy' or 'fairly easy' to understand. Ninety-eight per cent of advance voters said they felt 'very comfortable' or 'fairly comfortable' about providing their signature. The small number of advance voters who said they were 'uncomfortable' stated that their reason for this was that their vote was 'less secret'.

4.28 ICM Research found that the vast majority of all voters (94%) felt 'very comfortable' or 'fairly comfortable' about providing their signature. While this would appear to indicate a high level of confidence in the process, given the low numbers of people voting at the advance voting station and an even lower number of people responding to the questionnaire, it is difficult to attribute much weight to these responses.

4.29 The two advance voters surveyed who said they felt 'uncomfortable' did not see the point of providing their signature and felt it made their vote 'less secret'.⁸ In-depth interviews with advance voters also queried the purpose of providing a signature.

All I had to do was sign. I didn't really think about it, but I wasn't quite sure what they could do with it.

Female advance voter

Stakeholder confidence

4.30 Overall, security risks such as the storage of completed ballots for advance voting and the possibility of duplicate voting were well managed and this was reflected in the research undertaken with advance voters and by anecdotal information received during the count from candidates and agents. It was generally considered by voters and other stakeholders that the requirement to provide a signature made them feel the process was more secure and felt very comfortable doing so.

Cost and value for money

4.31 The only additional cost to the elections associated with advance voting was in relation to staffing. There were no additional costs incurred by the need to provide a signature. The cost of staffing the advance voting station with a Presiding Officer and one Poll Clerk was £1,190. With 286 voters, this equates to a cost of £4.16 per voter. This is approximately the same as the advance voting cost last year (£1,112.50).

⁸ These figures are based on a sample of 64 respondents, so their reliability is less than other figures provided in this report.

5 Conclusions and findings

Statutory criteria

5.1 In terms of the five statutory evaluation criteria, the Commission's conclusions in relation to the electoral pilot scheme in Gateshead are as follows.

5.2 The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors. Advance voting gave electors more opportunity to cast their votes, improving convenience by enabling them to vote in person before polling day. However, while the feedback from advance voters was positive, they were a small minority among the electorate as a whole, with only 286 voters (0.5% of turnout, 0.2% of the total electorate) using this facility.

5.3 The requirement to provide a signature appears to have been widely accepted by advance voters.

5.4 The pilot scheme had no impact on the ability of electors to make an informed choice at elections and did not affect the counting of votes.

5.5 The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout. As noted in paragraph 5.2, advance voters comprised 0.5% of overall turnout. Given that opinion research suggests that the majority of advance voters (74%) were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that the pilot has had a significant impact.

5.6 The new procedures provided in the pilot scheme were easy to follow. The research undertaken shows that those who did vote at the advance voting station found the procedures easy to follow. There was no indication that signing for the ballot paper was a problem for users and there were no reports of voters experiencing difficulties in providing their signatures.

5.7 The pilot scheme does not appear to have led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice. There is no evidence to suggest that advance voting or the requirement to provide a signature had any negative impact on the integrity of the elections.

5.8 The pilot scheme led to a slight increase in expenditure for the Council. The only additional cost to the elections associated with advance voting was in relation to staffing. The cost of staffing the advance voting station with a Presiding Officer and one Poll Clerk was £1,190. With 286 voters, this equates to a cost of £4.16 per voter.

Learning

5.9 The Commission's evaluation of this pilot scheme has identified the following additional key learning points:

- The civic centre is a practical location for a single advance voting station as it is one of the few locations in the borough that serves the entire area.
- As a council office it is also an ideal location for storing ballot boxes and election materials. It is also highly accessible for most electors, including those with any mobility difficulties.
- The advance voting station also saw some use as a delivery point for postal votes, with a larger number of postal votes deposited than votes cast in person.
- The Commission's evaluation suggests that voters, candidates and agents seemed generally satisfied with advance voting.
- Overall value for money could increase if levels of usage increased or if the resources required were reduced by focusing the availability of advance voting within a shorter period of time.
- There is a high level of user and stakeholder confidence in the requirement to provide a signature, notwithstanding the small sample size on which this conclusion is necessarily based.

Issues

5.10 The following issues will need to be considered further in relation to any future pilot schemes or wider implementation of the processes trialled by the Council:

- It is evident that a repeat of the pilot scheme does not in itself necessarily increase usage of advance voting.
- The use of only one advance voting station may have contributed to the lack of take-up, with around one-quarter of users coming from the ward in which the advance voting station was based.
- Consideration should be given to how the literature and materials used to communicate and encourage advance voting could be more effective, both for the electorate in general and for particular communities, such as young people, people from minority ethnic communities and disabled people.
- More information could be provided in future pilots to candidates and agents on the detail of the pilot scheme.