

Advance voting

May 2007 electoral pilot schemes

At the May 2007 local government elections in England, five local authorities held pilot schemes providing advance voting facilities on various days before polling day, 3 May 2007. This paper summarises the main findings of the Electoral Commission's evaluations of those pilot schemes.

Background

Under the Representation of the People Act 2000, local authorities 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 electoral pilot schemes. Local authorities in Scotland can apply to the Scottish Executive to carry out pilot schemes. 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 is required by law to evaluate every electoral pilot scheme in England and Wales, and may also be asked to evaluate pilot schemes in Scotland. We must consider whether the pilot scheme:

- helped to make voting or counting the votes easier
- helped to improve turnout

- helped to facilitate voting
- led to a reduction or increase in electoral fraud
- led to a reduction or increase in the cost of the elections

The Commission is required to publish evaluation reports on individual pilot schemes within three months of the elections taking place.

Advance voting

Since 2000, a limited number of electoral pilot schemes have provided opportunities for electors to vote in person at special advance voting facilities before polling day. In this context, advance voting is defined as paper-based voting at polling stations in advance of polling day – it does not include advance voting by electronic means (either at polling stations or remotely), which is covered in the Commission's separate summary paper, 'Electronic voting'. Our evaluation of previous pilot schemes has found that use of advance voting facilities has been limited and mainly confined to those already predisposed to vote.

Table 1: Summary of pilot schemes involving advance voting

Local authority	No. of locations and type	No. of days	Details
Bedford Borough Council	1 (Council)	2 (weekdays and weekend)	Electors could vote at 1 station – the Civic Theatre
Broxbourne Borough Council	3 (Council)	7 (weekdays and weekend)	Electors allocated by ward to 1 of 3 stations
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	1 (Council)	9 (weekdays and weekend)	All electors could vote at 1 station
Sheffield City Council	1 (Council)	4 (weekdays and weekend)	All electors could vote at 1 station – the Town Hall
Sunderland City Council	3 (Council)	8 (weekdays)	Electors allocated by ward to 1 of 3 stations

Announcing approval for a number of pilot schemes in February 2007, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs noted that the pilots would ‘help inform decisions about the value of allowing advance voting as a general provision’.

Pilot schemes at the May 2007 elections

A total of five local authorities undertook electoral pilot schemes providing advance voting facilities during the two weeks before polling day on 3 May 2007, including three (Broxbourne, Gateshead and Sunderland) that had been involved in similar advance voting schemes the year before (see Table 1 for details).

Findings

Management

The process for managing advance voting facilities was similar to that involved in setting up and running traditional polling stations. The key additional tasks were obtaining suitable venues and recruiting and training staff.

In four of the areas (Bedford, Broxbourne, Gateshead and Sunderland), advance voting was conducted in conjunction with a requirement for electors to sign for their ballot papers at advance voting locations, in anticipation of the eventual commencement of the statutory requirement contained in the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

Impact on voting and counting

Advance voting had no direct impact on the counting of votes. In relation to the voting process, its principal effect was to provide a wider range of times and locations at which voting in person could take place.

Advance voting facilities aimed to facilitate voting among those who usually did not participate, targeting specifically ‘opportunistic’ voters. However, feedback suggests that there was relatively little success in achieving this aim, with the majority (74%) of those surveyed who used the service stating that they would have voted on 3 May anyway.

Table 2: Comparison of usage of advance voting facilities aimed at the electorate as a whole

Local authority	Usage of advance voting as percentage of turnout	Most popular advance voting day
Bedford	0.8	Friday
Broxbourne	7.0	Wednesday
Gateshead	0.5	Wednesday
Sheffield	0.7	Thursday
Sunderland	1.6	Monday

As Table 2 indicates, use of advance voting facilities aimed at the electorate as a whole was low, ranging from a high of 7% of voters in Broxbourne to a low of 0.7% in Sheffield. However, feedback from local stakeholders and public opinion research conducted for the Commission in the pilot scheme areas suggests that electors generally welcomed the increased convenience of advance voting. Thirty-three per cent of respondents who either did not vote or were not aware of the advance voting facilities stated that they would have been either very or quite likely to have used the facility if they had known about it.

Public awareness

Public opinion research found that awareness of advance voting was markedly improved when compared with awareness of advance voting pilot schemes at the 2006 local government elections. Forty-nine per cent of respondents in areas with advance voting pilot schemes were aware that advance voting was available at the May 2007 elections.¹ This compares favourably with just 6% at the

2006 elections. The reasons for this are not clear, but since three areas were repeating these pilots, familiarity could have played a part.

Separately, surveys of advance voters conducted by the local authorities show that of the 39% who stated that they knew about the availability of advance voting, most people (almost half) found out about the facility through their poll card. Council publicity and other forms of media such as television informed around 30% of respondents. Those who received specific information about advance voting had few complaints about it; 98% said that the information was easy to understand.

Turnout and participation

In most of the local authorities that provided advance voting facilities aimed at the electorate as a whole, boosting turnout was an explicit goal because they expected the scheme to attract those who may not normally vote. But feedback from elections staff and other local stakeholders, together with evidence from local surveys,

suggests that the majority (74%) of users of advance voting would have voted in any case. Indeed, across these areas, turnout at the May 2007 elections was more or less consistent with the last comparable elections. In addition, repeat piloting of advance voting did not necessarily lead to higher levels of usage, which were low. It is unlikely therefore that advance voting had anything more than a very limited effect on turnout.

Security and confidence

No instances or allegations of personation or other electoral offences have been reported in relation to the changes introduced as part of these pilot schemes.

Risks such as duplicate voting, the secure storage of completed ballots and the security of the networked electronic electoral register were identified and well managed.

Cost and value for money

The costs of advance voting varied between local authorities, depending on the numbers of staff employed and the length of

time advance voting was in operation. It was possible to avoid additional costs for venue hire in some pilot schemes because the advance voting stations were situated on council-owned or other public property. The cost of promoting the pilot scheme depended on the extent to which specific advance voting publicity was undertaken in addition to traditional means (e.g. poll cards, press releases, etc.).

The low level of usage in the majority of cases means it is difficult to argue that advance voting provides value for money for the majority of the electorate. The cost per voter was at its lowest in Broxbourne at approximately £2.00 and at its highest in Sheffield at £60.00. The variation in costs occurred as a result of different levels of expenditure and usage of advance voting across the pilot schemes. Those local authorities repeating advance voting at this year's elections incurred costs in keeping with the previous year's advance voting, and it might be assumed that repeated years of advance voting could yield some marginal cost improvements.

Recommendations

The Commission's evaluations have demonstrated that advance voting has the potential to enhance the accessibility and convenience of the electoral process, at least as far as voters' perceptions are concerned. However, actual take-up of advance voting remains low and there was little new learning to take from the piloting of advance voting this year. In the light of this, we see

little value in continuing to pilot advance voting and believe that available resources should be targeted elsewhere in order to bring about further improvements in other areas of the electoral process.

The Commission considers that there is now a sufficient knowledge and evidence base that would enable the Government to reach a decision as part of its wider electoral modernisation strategy on whether advance voting should be mandatory, optional or discontinued. The mandatory option would oblige Returning Officers to make advance voting available to electors, either at specific types of election or at elections at all levels. Pursuing either of these variants would have resource implications for local authorities, which would depend on the number and type of locations and the period of time during which advance voting facilities were made available.

An alternative approach would involve giving Returning Officers the option of providing advance voting facilities in their area. Returning Officers could then decide, on the basis of available resources and any information on likely take-up, whether or not to provide such facilities. The disadvantage of this approach is that it would lead to a patchwork of different arrangements across the country, with electors in different areas having unequal access to advance voting.

The Commission believes that the Government should carefully consider these issues in making a decision on advance voting and consult widely on the

implications of each of these options. We note in this context that the Government has recently stated its intention to conduct a consultation on the merits of moving polling day to the weekend. Once again, we believe that the merits of various options in relation to the timing of voting should now be considered in the wider context of a strategy for modernising elections, given that the key lessons have now been learned from piloting.

Notwithstanding the lack of new learning from this year's pilots, in order to maximise any benefits of advance voting, the learning points identified by the Commission in relation to last year's advance voting pilots are still relevant. These are as follows.

Times and locations

The choice of times and locations for advance voting facilities are key factors in determining convenience, turnout and value for money. Any advance voting arrangements should be designed to maximise value in all these areas. In particular, repeated advance voting opportunities in the same areas are likely to increase familiarity and take-up.

Although the most popular advance voting locations included both retail and council venues, all were based in busy central areas. Less accessible council offices were less well used. Pilot schemes with more than one advance voting station open at the same time generally achieved higher levels of use, but several single-site approaches also performed well. There seemed to be no

significant correlation between the level of use of advance voting and opening times.

Any advance voting arrangements should include a disability access assessment of proposed advance voting locations.

Management and communications

Any advance voting arrangements should include comprehensive and properly resourced communications plans for ensuring wide public awareness of the availability of advance voting. Advance voting stations should have clear and appropriate signage in order to attract passers-by to vote.

A more accurate assessment of the number of staff required for advance voting stations should be possible in future, based on an estimation of expected demand informed by the Commission's individual evaluation reports and taking into account local circumstances.

If the locations used for advance voting stations are not used exclusively for electoral purposes, they should be set out in such a way as to ensure the secrecy of the vote.

A marked register of advance voters should not be supplied to political parties, candidates and agents until after the close of poll, although candidates and election agents should be given opportunities to observe the advance voting process, as is the case on polling day.

Further information

All evaluation reports for individual electoral pilot schemes are available from our website.

In preparing the evaluation of the 2007 electoral pilot schemes, the Commission has drawn on findings from work undertaken by a number of contractors, including technical and accessibility experts. Their reports are available from our website.

Further information on electoral pilot schemes is available from the Ministry of Justice website, www.justice.gov.uk.

Feedback

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¹ Bedford – 42%, Broxbourne – 47%, Gateshead – 42%, Sheffield – 66%, Sunderland – 46%.

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