

Signing for ballot papers at polling stations

May 2007 electoral pilot schemes

At the May 2007 local government elections in England, four local authorities held pilot schemes trialling processes for electors to sign for their ballot papers when voting at polling stations. This paper summarises the main findings of the Electoral Commission's evaluation of these 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.

Signing for ballot papers at polling stations

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 includes provisions requiring electors to sign for their ballot papers at polling stations. These provisions were expected to be brought into effect for all elections from May 2007 onwards. However, the relevant section did not provide a clear sanction to withhold a ballot paper should an elector refuse to sign, which resulted in the provisions not being commenced. The Government stated that it planned to clarify the legislation at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime, the Government saw the May 2007 elections as presenting a further opportunity to test the provisions and to evaluate the effectiveness of, and public

response to, having to sign for their ballot papers. The Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs therefore invited the local authorities that were piloting advance voting also to pilot signing for ballot papers at the May 2007 elections. Four of them did so.

Pilot schemes at the May 2007 elections

The four pilot schemes were:

- Bedford Borough Council, which piloted signing for ballot papers at both the advance voting station and on polling day
- Broxbourne Borough Council, which piloted signing at all three of its advance voting stations, which were open between 25 April and 28 April and between 30 April and 2 May
- Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, which piloted signing at its sole advance voting station at a town centre location (civic centre) between 23 April and 28 April and between 30 April and 2 May
- Sunderland City Council, which piloted signing at all three of its advance voting stations and at all polling stations on 3 May

In all cases, electors 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 columns for the relevant pre-printed ballot paper number and elector number (entered by polling station staff). Once the elector had provided their signature on the list, the

Presiding Officer issued them with a ballot paper. Where an elector would not provide a signature, the Presiding Officer was required to refuse to provide them with a ballot paper or waive the requirement in the case of physical incapacity.

None of the local authorities undertook any post-election checks on the signatures in order to verify voters' identities, as this was not provided for within the Pilot Orders.

Findings

Management

The pilot schemes required training to be provided to Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks. In all cases, the training was locally designed and delivered. However, the key elements of the training were similar – focusing on understanding situations in which a signature was not required, dealing with people who refused to sign, and explaining the requirement and changes to voters. In Gateshead and Sunderland, the training complemented the training that the majority of staff had received the previous year. The training appears to have been largely effective in communicating the key issues.

Overall, the management of the four pilot schemes where signature collection was undertaken was effective, followed good practice and enabled useful practical lessons to be learned.

Impact on voting and counting

The vast majority of people who voted were happy to provide a signature – public opinion

research suggests that nine in 10 voters were comfortable to do so. The most commonly heard concerns, doubts or objections voiced by those few electors who did have concerns about the signature requirement centred on:

- concerns about who would have access to their signatures, and what would happen to the list after the elections
- the value of requiring signatures without checking them against another signature or form of identification
- privacy issues regarding having to sign in the presence of others
- feeling that signing for ballot papers was an invasion of privacy and resulted in the ballot being 'less secret'

Requiring electors to sign for their ballot papers did add slightly to the time taken to vote, but with the relatively small numbers voting (especially at advance voting stations) this did not constitute a serious issue. Some administrative difficulties were also faced, particularly in relation to people with visual impairment or those with mobility issues.

Given this, it is not possible to offer any firm conclusions about the impact of requiring electors to sign for ballot papers on the time taken to vote and administration at a large-scale election.

This pilot had no impact on the counting of votes.

Public awareness

The local authorities took slightly different approaches to publicity. Some focused on promoting

awareness and understanding of the need to provide a signature, while others emphasised the intended positive impact on the security of the elections. Public opinion research found that around one-third of the public in the four areas were aware that a pilot scheme was taking place in their local area. Voters were also statistically more likely to be aware of the requirement to sign compared with non-voters.

[Turnout and participation](#)

There is no evidence that the changes introduced as part of these pilot schemes had a significant effect on overall levels of turnout. There were very few recorded incidences of queries about signing for ballot papers and no reports of any elector refusing to provide a signature.

It has not been possible to assess whether any legitimate electors were discouraged from voting because of the requirement to provide a signature. It is also possible, although not quantifiable, that some of those who voted were persuaded to do so because of perceived improvements in the security of the election process.

[Security and confidence](#)

Almost 60% of respondents to the Commission's public opinion research said that signing for ballot papers gave them more confidence in the electoral process, while only 1% stated that it made them less confident. Candidates and other stakeholders also felt confident in the requirement to provide signatures.

The Commission has not been made aware of any allegations of fraud or malpractice arising from the pilot schemes, although the period in which a prosecution can be launched is one year. At present, therefore, there is no substantiated evidence to suggest that the changes led to any increase or decrease in electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections.

[Cost and value for money](#)

Costs related specifically to these pilot scheme innovations were relatively insignificant, with the majority of the required changes being incorporated within traditional election expenditure (such as training for polling station staff). The major additional cost related to signing for ballot papers was in Bedford, which purchased 150 plastic templates at a cost of £450 in order to cover the signatures of preceding voters.

[Learning and issues](#)

The Commission's evaluation of the signing for ballot paper pilot schemes at the May 2007 elections shows very little new learning compared with May 2006. Our findings from the 2006 and 2007 experiences of signing for ballot papers are as follows:

- The pilots do not appear to have been met with negative reactions. Nearly 60% of respondents to our public opinion research felt more confident about the electoral process as a result of having to sign for their ballot papers. This is a clear increase when compared with 35% in 2006.

- The pilots did not result in queues or delays. However, we believe that problems of this kind might occur at elections with higher turnout, and that it is therefore important that any Returning Officer managing elections at which signatures for ballot papers are required should have adequate plans to deal with such problems if they develop.
- It will be important to communicate effectively to electors both the detail of the new procedures and the reasons for the requirement. In particular, appropriate advice and support must be provided for electors who may find it difficult (or be unable) to sign.

In 2006 the Commission identified a number of good practice learning points which it believes still stand and which should be highlighted through effective guidance and training prior to full implementation. These include:

- ensuring that appropriate space is provided for electors to sign on corresponding number lists
- requiring that electors sign with a pen, to ensure that a signature cannot be altered
- ensuring that electors' signatures are covered up once they have been provided, to address any elector concerns about secrecy and identity theft

The Commission believes that there is unlikely to be any particular value or additional learning from further piloting of

the signing for ballot paper provisions. The evidence on the basis of last year's and this year's pilots shows that the provisions were not met with serious public or other stakeholder objections and furthermore did not cause difficulties for administrators. Public opinion research also suggests that requiring electors to sign does have a positive impact on levels of public confidence.

The actual security benefits of the current signing for ballot paper provisions are, however, limited and, in the absence of existing records against which signatures provided at polling stations could be compared, the Commission continues to question their overall deterrent value in the face of someone determined to commit an electoral offence.

The Commission maintains that in order to deal effectively with the risk of electoral offences being committed, the security of voting at polling stations must be underpinned by a system of individual registration. Presiding Officers could then be empowered to ask electors to confirm their date of birth, or provide a signature, which could then if necessary be checked against the details held on the polling station register of electors.

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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