

# Electoral pilot scheme evaluation

Bedford Borough Council

August 2007



### **Translations and other formats**

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version please contact the Electoral Commission:

Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: [publications@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:publications@electoralcommission.org.uk)

We are an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and public confidence in the democratic process. We regulate party and election finance and set standards for well-run elections.

# Contents

	Summary	3
1	Introduction	5
2	Context	7
3	Pilot scheme description	8
4	Evaluation	11
	Efficiency	11
	Use of technology	12
	Voting	14
	Impact on counting	17
	Turnout	18
	Security and confidence	19
	Cost and value for money	21
5	Conclusions and findings	23



## 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, Bedford Borough Council submitted an application to pilot a series of innovations, including:

- advance voting at a town centre location
- on-site electronic counting the day after the elections
- changing the ballot paper for the Mayoral election from a two-column to a one-column method of voting
- signing for ballot papers at the advance voting location and on polling day

## Conclusions and findings

**The pilot scheme encouraged a small number of voters to take advantage of advance voting.** A small number of voters took advantage of the advance voting location at the Civic Theatre (0.8% of all voters at the elections), and the change to the Mayoral ballot paper does not seem to have made it easier for voters to express a second preference, as is shown by the number of ballots rejected for the purpose of counting second preference votes.

**The pilot scheme may have facilitated the counting of votes.** While the count took a long time, it did produce a result for each election and it could be argued that the Mayoral count might have been even slower had it been done manually, given the length of time it took at the previous Mayoral election. It is clear, however, that many more ballots were sent for adjudication than was necessary due to a variety of factors, not just the number of rejected ballots.

**Turnout of voters was no higher or lower than it would otherwise have been.** A significant increase in turnout was not a key objective for the pilot scheme, although signing for ballot papers gave most voters greater confidence in the security of the process and so could possibly be a factor in increasing turnout at future elections.

**On the whole, voters found procedures easy to follow.** The provision of advance voting was well received by the small number of voters who took part. Some voters had accessibility issues around signing, including, but not limited to, the size of the space in which to sign, and the height of the table provided for them to sign on. Electronic counting had very limited impact on the voting experience, mostly involving ballot stationery. The change to the Mayoral ballot paper does not seem to have made it easier for voters to express a first and second preference vote, although as this election was combined with others in some wards, no clear conclusions can be drawn.

**There is currently no evidence to suggest that the pilot scheme led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice.** At present there is no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided by the scheme led to any increase in electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections.

**The pilot scheme substantially increased the total cost of delivering the elections.** Costs of just over £177,000 were incurred for the electronic count and £5,000 for the advance voting. These are costs that would not have been incurred had the pilot not been run, and so it can be seen that the procedures led to a considerable increase in expenditure for the Council.

# 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 Affairs<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

1.3 This report presents the Commission's evaluation of the electoral pilot scheme carried out by Bedford 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 evaluation of technical elements of the pilot by Ovum
- 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 Bedford 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 Bedford in the county of Bedfordshire, 50 miles north of London, covers 48,000 hectares and comprises the county town of Bedford, the urban area of Kempston and 42 rural parishes.

2.2 Bedford's population was just under 148,000 at the time of the 2001 census, representing a population density of 3.1 people per hectare. People from black and minority ethnic communities account for 13% of the population (Census 2001) with 57 ethnic groups being represented, against a national average of 9.1%. Mid-2003 population estimates show that 17.4% of the resident population in Bedford were of retirement age compared with 18.5% in England and Wales. Sixty-six per cent of residents live in the urban area of Bedford and Kempston and 34% live in rural parishes.<sup>2</sup>

2.3 The borough ranks 167 out of 354 council areas on a scale of deprivation (with 1 being the most deprived).<sup>3</sup>

### The Council

2.4 The Council is constituted by a directly elected Mayor and 54 councillors, and elects by thirds. Eighteen out of 26 wards (a total of 19 Council seats) held an election in 2007. At the May 2007 elections the electorate of the borough was 113,903.

2.5 The decision to adopt the management structure of a directly elected Mayor for the borough was taken at a referendum held on 21 February 2002 in which the Mayor and Cabinet option was approved. The first election to the position of directly elected Mayor was held on 17 October 2002. The election scheduled for 3 May 2007 was the second direct election of Mayor for the borough and was combined with elections of 19 borough councillors and a number of parish councils.

2.6 The political composition of the Council prior to the 2007 elections was: Conservative – 17; Liberal Democrats – 15; Labour – 12; Better Bedford – four (including the Mayor); Independent – four; Rural Independent – three. The borough is represented by Patrick Hall, Labour Member of Parliament for Bedford; and in part by Alistair Burt, Conservative Member for North East Bedfordshire and Nadine Dorries, Conservative Member for Mid-Bedfordshire. It is in the East of England electoral region for elections to the European Parliament.

---

<sup>2</sup> Except where otherwise stated, all demographic information was obtained from the census carried out in 2001 by the Office for National Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *The English Indices of Deprivation 2004 (revised)* (2004), [www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1128440](http://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, Bedford Borough Council (hereafter known as 'the Council') submitted an application to pilot a series of innovations and changes to electoral procedures, including:

- advance voting at a town centre location
- on-site electronic counting (e-counting) the day after the elections
- changing the ballot paper for the Mayoral election from a two-column to a one-column method of voting
- signing for ballot papers at the advance voting location and on polling day

3.2 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 advance voting and e-counting. The Secretary of State said he considered that 'there is learning value [in piloting these schemes] as they will positively contribute to improving voter awareness and participation in elections'.<sup>4</sup>

3.3 The final Pilot Order, Bedford Borough Council (Advance Voting, Electronic Counting and Signing for Ballot Papers) Pilot Order 2007, was made on 27 March 2007 and came into force on the same day. Two Amendment Orders were subsequently made to correct drafting errors in the original Pilot Order. The second Amendment Order was made on 1 May 2007 and made clear that the requirement to provide a signature applied both to the advance voting stations and to those voting in polling stations on 3 May.<sup>5</sup>

### Pilot scheme summary

3.4 The main use of technology in this pilot was to count automatically the paper ballots, both from the polling stations and the postal voting process. The system consisted of a local network with a number of high-speed proprietary scanners, laptop computers and servers running count management software. All hardware and software was supplied by Indra.

3.5 The Council also proposed using the Civic Theatre as an advance voting station. This station, designed to replicate the polling station experience, would enable electors to vote on 27 and 28 April. The station was open from 9am to 6pm on both days.

3.6 At the polling station (whether in advance or on polling day), electors were first 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 the elector number (entered by polling station staff). Privacy and security of the signed corresponding number

---

<sup>4</sup> Official Record (House of Lords), 29 January 2007, Column WS1.

<sup>5</sup> The Commission's response to all Pilot Orders can be found on the Commission website at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/AllResponses\\_25780-19142\\_E\\_N\\_S\\_W\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/AllResponses_25780-19142_E_N_S_W_.pdf).

list were maintained using a plastic board with a space for a signature, to cover the signatures of preceding voters.

## Objectives of the pilot scheme

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

- improve the accuracy of the count
- increase the efficiency of the administration procedures and the processes of the count
- improve the information using a visual aid (a big screen) to track voting progress
- increase the convenience of the voting process by offering flexibility in voting times and locations
- reduce voter confusion in the Mayoral election and ensure that the electorate exercise their entitlement to mark a second preference as well as a first – if they so wish

3.8 In commenting formally on the application, the Commission noted that the Council's piloting of e-counting for the Mayoral election could provide a useful comparison with the solution that was trialled in Lewisham in 2006. However, the Commission also expressed concern that the initial application did not provide sufficient evidence of learning for e-counting.<sup>6</sup> These issues were the subject of subsequent negotiations between the Council and the Ministry of Justice prior to the acceptance of the pilot.

3.9 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 would add to the evidence available about the impact of providing additional flexibility for electors to choose when they cast their vote, particularly in a relatively compact commuter town. The use of e-counting would provide further evidence about the benefits of automating the counting process, particularly in relation to the combined local Council and Mayoral elections. The requirement for electors to provide their signature before voting would enable any practical issues remaining to be addressed to be identified before the requirement is rolled out nationally.<sup>7</sup>

3.10 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

3.11 It was expected that advance voting would increase the convenience of the voting process by offering flexibility in voting times and locations. Officers would target a range of specific user groups who would be more likely to benefit from early voting. Attracting passers-by would be a key endeavour.

---

<sup>6</sup> Comments by the Commission on pilot scheme applications under Section 10, RPA 2000, December 2006, [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/17797](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/17797)

<sup>7</sup> Official Record (House of Commons), 29 January 2007, Column 3WS.

3.12 There was concern that some voters in the previous Mayoral election in 2002 did not understand the two-column Mayoral ballot paper. In its application the Council cited a recent example of a Mayoral election in Watford in which a number of voters appeared to cast only a second preference vote. By marking a '1' and '2' in a single column, this should reduce voter confusion and ensure that the electorate exercise their entitlement to mark both a first and second preference.

### Facilitating the counting of votes

3.13 The evidence from an e-counting pilot in May 2006 held in Lewisham indicates that e-counting saved 3.5 hours of time at the count. The verification instrument in the counting machine enabled batches of votes from both the Mayoral and the local Council elections to be counted at the same time, thus reducing the administrative costs of separating the ballot papers.

### Turnout

3.14 It was expected that the advance voting pilot scheme would have a positive impact on overall turnout by allowing those people to vote who would otherwise be unable to attend the polling station on polling day.

3.15 Other aspects of the pilot were not expected to have any significant impact on turnout at the elections.

### Security and confidence

3.16 The pilot scheme did not have a specific aim related to improving the security and confidence of the voting process. Provision had to be made for the secure storage of ballots cast in advance voting stations prior to the count.

### Efficiency

3.17 The Council stated in its project planning documentation that it expected the count to take six hours. In the previous Mayoral election in Bedford in 2002, the manual count had taken between eight and 10 hours, with counting of second preference votes being particularly painstaking to avoid errors. This was a Mayoral election only, with a turnout of 18%. The Council expected that in May 2007, with the Mayoral election taking place at the same time as 19 borough elections, the use of e-counting would save considerable time.

## 4 Evaluation

### Efficiency

#### Project management

4.1 The Council's pilot scheme benefited from good project management. The project was managed by the Service Manager (Registration and Administration), who was assisted by the Head of Corporate Administration and the Democratic Engagement Officer. A project team was established consisting of the Project Manager, the Head of Corporate Administration, the Democratic Engagement Officer and the Project Manager from the Council's supplier (Indra).

4.2 In particular, the Council's performance was enhanced by its:

- good working relationship with its supplier, Indra
- leadership, and confidence in making key technical and administrative decisions, including those based on the guidance and expertise provided by Indra
- project planning documentation, including robust risk analysis

4.3 During the early part of the project the project team met every two weeks, but from 18 April until polling day there were daily meetings between Indra and the Council.

#### Training

4.4 The Project Manager provided training sessions for polling station staff, based on Commission resources. This included:

- changes to the ballot papers and method of voting in the Mayoral election
- overview of the pilot, including signing and advance voting
- risk management and general procedures

4.5 Training in the operation of the e-counting hardware and software was provided by Indra's Training Officer. Indra trained all the scanner staff and had input into the training of adjudication staff, but the Council decided on the rules to be used by adjudicators. Indra also trained the observers' assistants.

4.6 Training provided by the Council to Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks covered diversity and customer care responses. All staff were provided with a copy of the Commission's *Handbook for polling station staff*, which gives guidance on accessibility, rights and responsibilities of carers and companions and supporting people who may need a longer time than normal or may need a chair etc.

4.7 Anecdotal evidence from polling station staff at both the advance voting location and at polling stations on polling day showed a varying level of awareness of how to use the equipment provided for assisting with signing for ballot papers. One Presiding Officer who was doing the job for the first time said he felt the training he had received in dealing with queries regarding signing for ballot papers

was insufficient; however, this is anecdotal evidence only and is not a representative sample of Presiding Officers as a whole, for which there is no data.

## Supplier management

4.8 The main external suppliers involved in the elections were:

- Indra, which was responsible for the production, provision and management of e-counting software
- Print UK Ltd, which was responsible for the printing of ballot papers

4.9 The relationship between the Council and Indra appears to have been positive and effective, with regular project meetings and daily communication, and demonstrated good levels of co-operation. From 14 April, Indra established an office base in Bedford Town Hall and was on site until the elections. The Council was consistent and clear in defining its requirements, and Indra was responsive and did its best to deliver the Council's requirements.

4.10 The Council accepted that Indra was using a bespoke e-counting solution based on its existing e-democracy suite of software. The Council recognised its responsibility to make sure that Indra adapted the solution to reflect the requirements of local Council and Mayoral elections in England.

4.11 Following discussions with Indra regarding production of ballot papers, Print UK was contracted to supply the ballot papers after a competitive tendering process. The Council defined its requirements to Print UK, but Print UK was unable to deliver what was required.

## Use of technology

4.12 The main use of technology in this pilot was to count automatically the paper ballots, both from the polling stations and the postal voting process. The system consisted of a local network with a number of high-speed proprietary scanners, laptop computers and servers running count management software. All hardware and software was supplied by Indra.

4.13 The bespoke e-counting solution provided by Indra was based upon established modules within its e-democracy suite of software. The full count system consisted of the following:

- Ten modules from Indra's e-democracy suite of software.
- A commercial, off-the-shelf algorithm used for the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and Intelligent Character Recognition (ICR) of marks on the ballot paper.
- Six scanners with which the Indra applications interfaced. Four scanners were initially proposed but the Council requested that six be provided. Scanner operators had laptop computers providing a control panel for operating the scanners.
- Three servers, operated by four Indra technical staff.

- Laptop computers supplied by Indra which provided password-controlled access to the system for adjudicators and the Returning Officer. Adjudication stations also had observer screens.
- Two large digital displays projected onto screens within the count centre which displayed information on the progress of the count.

## Proposed process

4.14 On the evening of Thursday 3 May, ballot boxes were taken to the count venue and sorted according to the election. Sorting teams employed different approaches to removing excess stub from the ballot papers: some removed it completely, some partially and some not at all. The amount of stub on the papers was to later have a bearing on the adjudication of ballots.

4.15 The number of issued ballot papers, based on the counterfoil numbers recorded by the Presiding Officer, was entered into the e-count system. The boxes were then resealed and stored overnight at the count venue.

4.16 At the start, the system was zeroed, and reports were printed and signed by the Deputy Returning Officer to verify that no votes were held in the system.

4.17 For each election the number of the ballot box was entered into the system along with the number of ballot papers in each box (taken from the ballot account completed by the Presiding Officer). The ballot box was then allocated to a scanner.

## Scanning

4.18 At the start of the count, one ballot box was taken to the first scanning station, opened and the empty box shown to the observers. This was done to ensure that the process was understood by all the scanner operators, who had been recruited by Indra and were supervised effectively throughout the process.

4.19 The previously sorted piles of papers were loaded into the scanner tray one batch at a time. Scanning continued until each bundle was processed by the scanner, which captured images of the front and back of the ballot paper. After scanning, each batch was wrapped in its printout and stacked in a tray by the scanner. When each ballot box had been completely scanned, ballots and their wrappers were returned to the ballot box.

## Verification

4.20 The aim of verification was to check the number of ballot papers scanned against the number expected according to the ballot account for that box. If there was no significant discrepancy, the ballot box was verified. If it was different, a re-scan was ordered and the system cleared of papers previously scanned. If there was a significant discrepancy, the Returning Officer could have ordered a manual count of that box; this did not occur during this pilot.

4.21 Once verification had taken place, the images of the ballot papers were released to the system. Images deemed valid were counted; images deemed invalid were sent for first level adjudication.

## **Standard adjudication and Returning Officer adjudication**

4.22 At standard adjudication, the adjudicator was presented with an image of the ballot paper. They were either accepted as valid or sent for Returning Officer adjudication. Candidates and agents were able to observe standard and Returning Officer adjudication by means of an observer screen provided at each adjudicator's workstation.

4.23 Returning Officer adjudication dealt with more complex issues such as unclear intention. This was conducted by the Returning Officer, his Deputy or another senior official.

4.24 Although the count was rather slower than anticipated, it did produce a result in every contest, and so the count equipment fulfilled its purpose. A single ballot box was used per polling station in which voters put both the Mayoral and the Council and/or parish ballot papers. The technology was used to detect automatically which contest a ballot paper related to (using barcodes on the back of the paper) and to ensure it was counted correctly.

## **Voting**

### **Public awareness and feedback**

4.25 Feedback on the advance voting aspect of the pilot was positive from those who made use of the facility, with 100% of the 68 advance voters polled saying it should be available at all elections. No advance voter took up the opportunity to vote who had not already planned to do so, despite the Council's efforts to draw people in on the day, including the unusual step of having the Town Crier announce the availability of advance voting.

4.26 The Council's project management information included a communication plan for the run-up to the elections, which included articles in the Council's own newspaper (delivered to every household in the borough) and circulation of a Mayoral candidates' addresses booklet to every elector which included information on various aspects of the pilot. The poll card had information on the reverse side giving details of advance voting, and the Council took out a two-page advertisement in the local paper the week before the elections explaining the poll card in different community languages. However, awareness of this information appears low, shown by the fact that one organisation responding to the Commission's accessibility evaluation said that the polling card was clear but 'not accessible' to electors who speak English as a second language.

4.27 The Commission's research found that 38% of people in the Bedford area were aware that a pilot scheme was in operation at these elections. More people polled knew about the e-counting pilot than the other aspects (advance voting and signing for ballot papers). One candidate said that 'Advance voting wasn't that well publicised.' This opinion was reinforced by the accessibility research, which found that the majority of people contacted had little or no knowledge of the pilot, and that people confused advance voting and postal voting.

4.28 The Commission's research also found that residents of Bedford who were surveyed were somewhat uneasy about e-counting. Almost as many (32%) thought the count would be less accurate as more accurate (37%). Twenty-nine per cent would have less confidence in the voting process, while only 22% would have more.

## Impact on voting

4.29 At the advance voting location a member of staff at the entrance directed voters to one of 21 numbered polling stations within the venue with a further two stations for those voting in the Mayoral election only. The stations were set out in numerical order and polling booths were provided centrally for the use of voters. After marking their ballot paper, voters returned to their numbered table to cast their vote in the ballot box for their ward.

4.30 At the polling station (whether in advance or on polling day), voters were first asked to sign for their ballot paper. Privacy and security of the signed corresponding number list were maintained using a plastic board with a space for a signature, to cover the signatures of preceding voters.

4.31 After voters had signed their name they were issued with one, two or three ballot papers of different colours and designs depending on whether they were voting only in the Mayoral election, in the Mayoral and Council elections, or in Mayoral, Council and parish council elections. They were asked to vote using the system of voting and marks specified for each election. They then placed those one, two or three ballot papers into the same ballot box.

4.32 Commission evaluators were present on the first of the two advance voting days. No one who voted appeared to have any problems using the venue or signing for their ballot paper. Opinions of Presiding Officers as to the value of advance voting varied; those who had not previously worked as a Presiding Officer valued it as a 'rehearsal' for polling day, whereas more experienced staff thought that the low turnout meant it was not worthwhile.

4.33 On polling day, Commission evaluators observed the issuing of ballot papers at a number of polling stations, and spoke to polling staff about the effect of the pilot scheme on the voting process. None of the polling staff the Commission spoke to had major concerns with the new process beyond a worry that it might slow things down during busy periods, or considered it to have had a significant negative impact on voting. No instances were observed or reported of significant queues due to the requirement to provide a signature slowing down the issuing process, although it did take slightly longer to process voters than the traditional voting process would have done.

4.34 However, while the requirement to sign at a polling station did not appear to have a major impact on the ability of voters to exercise their democratic right at the polling station, some administrative and practice issues were identified through Commission observation, voters' comments and feedback from Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks after the elections. For example, at a polling station in a nursery school, the tables were very low and voters had to bend down quite a way to sign

their names. For those who had a visual impairment and needed to look closely at the signing sheet, this provided a difficulty that had not been foreseen.

4.35 The way the plastic board for covering the list of signatures was used varied from polling station to polling station. In at least one it was not used at all, with the Presiding Officer saying that security was not an issue; in others it was used with varying levels of ease and/or effectiveness. Polling station staff reported some voters having difficulty signing within the small space provided for by the board.

4.36 Commission research found that three-quarters of the Bedford electorate were or would have been comfortable signing their name before being issued with ballot papers. The major issues raised by those who were uncomfortable were an invasion of privacy and the pointlessness of it.

4.37 The change to the Mayoral ballot paper does not, overall, seem to have made it easier for voters to express a first and second choice candidate: 43,505 valid first preference votes were recorded – many of these were marked as a single cross rather than a number '1' and so had to be adjudicated by a staff member before they could be counted as valid; 10,514 ballot papers did not contain a second preference vote, which was the voter's choice and not necessarily due to voter confusion; and 2,116 ballot papers were completely rejected – 4.6% of the total, compared with 3% of the total at the 2002 Mayoral election.

4.38 The public opinion research carried out on behalf of the Commission and the survey carried out by the Council both point, in overall terms, to the pilot having a neutral or positive impact on voters. Very few negative comments were received. The Council's survey indicated that most voters felt the Mayoral ballot paper was 'very clear' (82%) and a majority thought the change to the ballot paper was a better system than the previous, two-column system (55%).

## Accessibility

4.39 The advance voting location was the Civic Theatre, a fully accessible venue in a town centre location with good public transport links. Billboard posters advertised the fact that advance voting was available.

4.40 The Commission contracted PA Consulting to undertake some research on its behalf into accessibility issues at the elections. In respect of the Bedford pilot scheme, only advance voting was considered when looking at accessibility issues.

4.41 PA Consulting's research highlighted that for some electors, distance to the advance voting location was a possible barrier, with some suggesting the distance was off-putting as they would not be prepared to travel further than they would to a traditional polling station.

4.42 Once a voter reached the location there were 21 different potential voting stations, which could have been confusing to a number of voters and potentially difficult to access. Seven per cent of respondents to the ICM Research survey said they had some access difficulties when voting.

4.43 The Mayoral candidates' addresses booklet may have been confusing and difficult for people with low literacy or a visual impairment to follow. However, the document was offered in accessible formats and alternative languages.

4.44 Overall, this suggests that further work on effective communication to hard-to-reach groups may be beneficial. The Council did not appear to consider sufficiently particular groups who may need further attention to enable access; there was broad identification of 'stakeholders' within the project initiation document, but no specific groups targeted. Some documentation was accessible and there were suggestions for alternative formats and languages.

## Campaigning

4.45 Candidates and agents expressed various views on the merits of the pilot scheme – the majority of candidates and agents considered that neither advance voting nor e-counting had had an impact on the way in which they conducted their campaigns.

4.46 On the advance voting days, one teller was present at the Civic Theatre. He said that advance voting had had no real impact on campaigning.

## Impact on counting

4.47 As mentioned above, the e-counting system was designed to meet or exceed the speed and accuracy levels achieved by current manual methods, particularly with respect to the Mayoral election.

4.48 During testing, an unexpectedly high number of Mayoral test ballots were sent to adjudication because they were marked with only one vote and the system did not recognise these as a valid vote. Subsequently, on the Council's instructions, Indra re-configured the software to accept under-votes where the voter marked their first preference with the valid mark (a number 1). Under-votes where the voter expressed only one preference using an invalid mark (e.g. a cross or a numeral other than 1) were sent to adjudication.

4.49 The ballot papers were sorted on the evening of Thursday 3 May and the count took place on Friday 4 May. Scanning commenced at 10am and was finished by 6.30pm. All the Borough Council results were declared by 8.30pm and the Mayoral result was declared at 1.30am the following day, giving a total count time of 15.5 hours.

4.50 The system only automatically counted the votes on ballot papers where the voter's intention was clear and unambiguous. If there was any uncertainty about the marks on a ballot paper or there were any marks outside the legal voting areas, the ballot paper was adjudicated by election officials. Thirty-eight per cent of Mayoral ballots, 11% of Borough Council ballots and 22% of parish council ballots were sent for adjudication (a total of 22,313 across all contests). An estimate on the day of the count indicates that of the Mayoral ballots sent for adjudication, 50% were due solely to tears and other issues rather than the mark made by the voter.

4.51 Some ballots were seen to be re-adjudicated several times, because of a bottleneck in the system which caused papers to return to adjudication rather than be counted. If a ballot reappeared for adjudication, the earlier decision was rerecorded and no ballot paper was counted more than once.

4.52 Scanning had to be stopped more than once to alter the workflow process or to adjust the system configuration. Reasons for this include: to accommodate changes in the positioning of the thermochromic mark on the Mayoral ballot papers; and to accommodate the difference between postal and polling station ballot papers used in one ward, which was due to the printer not supplying enough postal ballots and the Council having to print some in-house. Scanner resets occurred in six of 189 ballot boxes due to a discrepancy between the number of ballots scanned and the number on the ballot account. In one of these wards the discrepancy was 100 papers; following three scans of the box to confirm the number of ballot papers it contained, the Returning Officer and his staff concluded that a gross arithmetic error had occurred in respect of the ballot account, and a manual recount of that box was not ordered.

## Turnout

4.53 One of the objectives of the pilot scheme was to assess whether advance voting would increase turnout by offering alternative opportunities to vote to those who would otherwise be unable to vote in person on 3 May, and who were unable or did not want to vote by post.

4.54 Use of the advance voting location was low, with a total of 377 people voting over the two-day advance voting period (0.8% of overall turnout and 0.3% of the electorate). This included 23 postal voters who handed in their ballots at the advance voting location. Opinion research suggests that advance voting was largely intentional and no one voted opportunistically. Therefore the impact on turnout was negligible.

4.55 Anecdotal evidence from voters using the advance voting location suggests that some voters would not otherwise have voted due to prior commitments on 3 May, and some who would not have voted if advance voting not been available. This is anecdotal evidence only, and no opinion research is available to support this. Turnout is affected by many factors and it is difficult to attribute a single factor (such as advance voting) as being responsible for an increase or decrease.

4.56 The Commission's public opinion research suggests that the public are fairly positive about the impact that advance voting might have on turnout at future local government elections. From the Commission's research, only 23% of people said they would have been likely to take up the option to vote in advance had they known about it, but 54% of people in Bedford think that turnout would increase if advance voting stations were more readily available. However, two in five of people surveyed by the Council said they were likely to use an advance voting location in future if it were provided.

4.57 The public seem overwhelmingly to have had no particular problem with, or objection to, signing for their ballot papers before voting. Seventy per cent thought a postal vote-type system of signature checking would be a good idea, with 61% saying it would give them more confidence in the voting process. There is a possibility that a slightly higher level of turnout would be attained in Bedford if more substantive signature checks were undertaken.

## Security and confidence

### Security

4.58 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. The impact of elements of the pilot scheme on security and fraud are detailed below.

4.59 As there was only one advance voting location in operation there was no need to update the electoral register in real time, which considerably reduced the possibility of duplicate voting together with other security risks. No incidences were reported of advance voters attempting to vote again on polling day.

4.60 At the count venue on 4 May, all access to the laptops from which registration, adjudication and verification of ballot papers were performed was protected by a username and password. Passwords were issued to Council and Indra staff during training sessions, but these expired at 12 midnight on 2 May. New passwords were issued on both 3 May and 4 May, and a procedure established for the issue of passwords to additional or replacement staff.

4.61 Indra created a detailed access log showing all interactions with the count system. The log detailed who interacted with the system, the operations carried out and when the interaction occurred.

4.62 Each ballot paper had a unique barcode that formed the unique identifying mark that was verified during the count. This mark had to be recognised by the system for the vote to be counted, making it impossible to count a vote twice. An official mark was printed on the reverse of the ballot paper using photosensitive ink.

### User confidence

4.63 Although there was no process by which to check the signatures provided by voters for validity, many voters stated that the requirement to sign for ballot papers provided a further layer of security, and it could therefore be argued that it reduced the public perception of the likelihood of electoral fraud, which is a positive outcome.

4.64 Two-thirds of people surveyed think that having everyone sign their name is a good idea; of those interviewed at polling stations there was an even more positive view, with 70% thinking a postal vote-type system of signature checking would be a good idea and 61% saying it would give them more confidence in the voting process. The single most common comment given by people surveyed by the Council is that they feel signing will help prevent fraud.

4.65 There were very few recorded incidences of queries about signing for ballot papers, although a few voters felt it compromised the secrecy of the ballot. No one refused to sign and was therefore prevented from voting.

4.66 From Citizens' Panel consultations undertaken by the Council following the elections, more people expressed concern about e-counting than said they had no concerns. This followed high-profile articles in local newspapers. However, around one-third said they had few or no concerns, and around half responded in a neutral way.

## Stakeholder confidence

4.67 Of the small sample of candidates and agents surveyed on behalf of the Commission, on the day of the count most seemed satisfied with the adjudication process and the transparency of the entire count procedure. Their main concern early on during the count was the lack of information about the progress of individual wards as standard adjudication took place on more than one computer at a time.

4.68 However, towards the end of the day some candidates expressed deep dissatisfaction with the process. In particular, confusion arose from the fact that the same ballot papers were seen to be adjudicated more than once, and some observers were not satisfied by assurances from Council and Indra staff that the votes would not be counted more than once.

4.69 At around 8.30pm, a group of candidates and agents told the Returning Officer that they had health and safety concerns regarding the length of time staff had been using the computers. Shortly afterwards, a large group of candidates and agents left the count venue in order to express their dissatisfaction. At 12 midnight the Returning Officer received a formal request to abandon the count, but he judged that this was not necessary at that stage. The count was completed within two hours of this decision.

4.70 Feedback from a number of candidates after the elections confirmed both their lack of confidence in the system and their dissatisfaction with the speed and efficiency of the count. Some candidates and agents felt that the results of the elections were in doubt, due to what they felt were multiple adjudications of the same ballot papers and the fact that the difference between the second and third placed candidates in the Mayoral election was less than 200 votes after the first preference votes had been counted.

## Cost and value for money

4.71 According to the cost data provided by the Council, the total cost of the pilot was as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Total cost of the Bedford pilot scheme, May 2007**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cost (£)</b>
Advance voting	5,000
Signing for ballot papers	450
E-counting	177,365
<b>Total</b>	<b>182,815</b>

4.72 The total cost equates to £1.60 per eligible elector, or £4 per voter at the elections. The total number of ballots cast in the elections was 82,889 (45,641 Mayoral; 35,913 Borough Council; and 1,335 parish council) giving a cost per ballot paper of £2.20.

4.73 The cost of advance voting was £5,000, including staff costs of £4,400, hall hire costs of £160 and advertising costs of £440. There were 354 voters who voted in person, giving a cost of approximately £14.12 per voter, which is significantly higher than the cost per voter for polling day.

4.74 A total of 150 plastic boards were purchased for signing for ballot papers, giving an overall cost of £450. This equates to 0.004p per eligible elector or 0.01p per voter at the elections. There were no other costs incurred by this aspect of the pilot.

4.75 Table 2 summarises the additional costs of the e-count compared with a traditional, manual count.

**Table 2: Additional costs incurred by e-counting**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cost (£)</b>
Additional staff hours*	2,850
Additional staff employed to use Windows Results Display Package	729
Security	696
Ballot papers printed for acceptance tests	900
Hire of office and storage space for suppliers	1,450
Hire of Corn Exchange for acceptance test	894
Hardware hire (crash barriers, projectors, cable management)	1,000
Sound and lighting, IT network maintenance	718
Association of Electoral Administrators consultant	2,336
Supplier costs	150,792
2 additional scanners	15,000
<b>Total additional cost</b>	<b>177,365</b>

Note: \*This does not take into account any theoretical savings in staffing costs incurred by the reduced number of staff needed for an e-count, but is simply the extra hours worked by Council staff due to the unforeseen length of the count.

4.76 The total additional costs of the e-count were £177,365. This equates to £1.56 per eligible elector or £3.89 per voter at the elections. The total number of ballots cast at the elections was 82,889, giving a cost per ballot paper of £2.14.

## 5 Conclusions and findings

### Statutory criteria

5.1 The electoral pilot scheme held at the May 2007 elections in Bedford was relatively well planned and managed. The delivery of the new provisions had no adverse impact on the administration of the elections more generally, other than the length of time taken to declare the results. In terms of the five statutory evaluation criteria, the Commission's conclusions in relation to the electoral pilot scheme in Bedford are as follows.

**5.2 The scheme encouraged a small number of voters to take advantage of advance voting.** A small number of voters took advantage of the advance voting location at the Civic Theatre (0.8% of all voters at the elections). However, the provision of more flexible options for voting was seen as desirable by the Council.

5.3 The change to the Mayoral ballot paper, from a two-column to a one-column method of voting, does not seem to have made it easier for voters to express a second preference. A total of 10,514 Mayoral ballot papers were rejected for the purpose of counting second preference votes out of 45,641 completed ballots, indicating that voters may have been confused as to how to express their first and second choice votes. This was reinforced by feedback from Presiding Officers, who said that some voters failed to grasp what was required of them in voting in the Mayoral election. A total of 2,116 ballot papers were completely rejected (4.6%) compared with 3% at the 2002 Mayoral election. However, as no data exists to compare the number of rejected ballots in the wards with combined elections against the wards with only a Mayoral election, no clear conclusions can be drawn as to what may have caused this confusion.

**5.4 The pilot scheme may have facilitated the counting of votes.** While the count took a long time, it did produce a result for each election and it could be argued that the Mayoral count might have been even slower had it been done manually, given the length of time it took at the previous Mayoral election. This remains unproven, as it is based on extrapolation from the previous Mayoral election with a much lower turnout. It is clear, however, that many more ballots were sent for adjudication than was necessary, due to issues with the perforation of the papers (a problem that the majority of Presiding Officers also raised) in addition to the number of ballots rejected.

**5.5 Turnout of voters was no higher or lower than it would otherwise have been.** A significant increase in turnout was not a key objective of the pilot scheme, although signing for ballot papers gave most voters greater confidence in the security of the process and so could possibly be a factor in increasing turnout at future elections.

**5.6 On the whole, voters found procedures easy to follow.** The provision of advance voting was well received by the small number of voters who took part. Some voters had accessibility issues around signing, including, but not limited to, the size of the space in which to sign, and the height of the table provided for them

to sign on. Electronic counting had very limited impact on the voting experience, mostly involving ballot stationery.

**5.7 There is currently no evidence to suggest that the pilot scheme led to any increase in personation or other offences or malpractice.** At present there is no evidence to suggest that the procedures provided by the scheme led to any increase in electoral offences, or in any other malpractice in connection with elections.

**5.8 The pilot scheme substantially increased the total cost of delivering the elections.** According to data produced by the Council, the total costs of the pilot were £182,815 including £5,000 for advance voting. The most significant element of this was the costs of e-counting, which were £177,365.

## Non-statutory criteria

5.9 Other conclusions based on the non-statutory criteria are as follows:

- The election process as a whole was not equally accessible for those with particular needs. Specifically, the pre-election communications were not accessible to a wide range of electors.
- Overall, 70% of voters in Bedford were satisfied with the voting process, but they were less happy with e-counting. Almost as many (32%) thought the count would be less accurate as more accurate (37%). Twenty-nine per cent would have less confidence in the voting process, while only 22% would have more. Voters were generally satisfied with the provision of advance voting and the requirement to sign for ballot papers.
- Some candidates and agents expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the implementation of e-counting. Partly this was due to the loss of the excitement of a manual count, but some also expressed lack of confidence in the result.
- Provision of advance voting was seen as an improvement by those voters who used it, although there was a general lack of awareness of its availability and only 23% of people said that they would have been likely to take up the option had they known about it. However, if advance voting were more readily available, 54% of people in Bedford think that turnout will increase.
- Clearly, the pilot incurred substantial additional costs, which could be reduced in the longer term if the technology were re-used in future elections. Some additional costs were due to the length of time taken to complete the count, but this could be reduced. The cost of advance voting has to be weighed against the advantage and convenience to those who used the service; there was high satisfaction among those voters who voted in advance so there is a case for encouraging higher take-up of this facility.

## Learning

5.10 This pilot has provided evidence that signing for ballot papers is not an issue for the majority of voters, and in fact can give additional confidence in the security of the process. Steps must be taken to ensure that signing is physically accessible to voters with additional needs.

5.11 Involving local community groups and other organisations may help increase awareness of advance voting and increase take-up. Had these groups had notice of advance voting they could have informed their members and developed accessible media. These groups also suggested advertising advance voting in venues such as shops and libraries.

5.12 Despite the fact that most people surveyed felt that the new Mayoral ballot paper was an improvement on the previous one and easy to understand, there was still a great deal of uncertainty among voters about how to express first and second preferences at the Mayoral election. Again, involving local groups and additional publicity may assist with this.

5.13 The speed of the e-count was much slower than envisaged for a variety of reasons. If testing had been done with perforated rather than cut ballot papers, it may have been possible to highlight some of the issues earlier; Print UK failed to deliver test ballots, so this was not possible. Issues that would not have shown up during testing included the misprinting of some ballots, and the marginal difference in the batch of postal ballots that had to be printed in-house as incorrect originals were supplied.

5.14 The issue of under-voting in the Mayoral election was dealt with following the acceptance test. The pilot has highlighted the importance of robust testing of the equipment with conditions as near as possible to what they will be on the day of the count.

5.15 The management of queues within the adjudication system should be examined. If queue management allocated specific elections to specific adjudication screens this could provide adjudicators with more continuity and thus increase the rate of adjudication. It would also reduce confusion for the observers.

5.16 In estimating the time to complete the count, the assumption had been made that the ballot papers would be scanned at a rate of 120 per minute. In practice, the scan rate was only 27 papers per minute. Using more scanners and providing two staff per scanner (one to prepare papers for scanning, the other to scan) would have increased the scan rate.

5.17 It is essential that there is an effective information display to let candidates and agents know what is going on, and that the impact of the display of any decisions made to manage the count are considered. This needs further thought in any future implementation of e-counting. The Council has concluded that public information screens should include a broad indication of the progress of the count in relation to the allocation of votes to candidates, with the caveat that safeguards are provided to ensure that it is not absolute in nature. This would mirror the growing piles of ballot papers for particular candidates at a manual count.

## Issues

5.18 This pilot has highlighted a number of issues that could be investigated in future schemes. These issues include:

- how to provide better instructions to voters to facilitate their expression of first and second choice candidates in the Mayoral election
- how to improve the efficiency of the e-counting process
- how to publicise the availability of advance voting better so that all those who would wish to use it are aware of it
- whether providing more advance voting locations will increase take-up
- how to provide better information to candidates and agents at an e-count so that they can follow the progress of a particular contest, and so that the excitement of a manual count is not lost completely

5.19 Further recommendations can be found in the technical reports by the Commission's contractors.