

# Electoral pilot scheme evaluation

Sunderland City Council

August 2007



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# Contents

	Summary	3
1	Introduction	4
2	Context	6
3	Pilot scheme description	7
4	Evaluation	12
	Efficiency	12
	Voting	13
	Turnout	16
	Security and confidence	17
	Cost and value for money	18
5	Conclusions and findings	19



## 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, Sunderland City Council submitted an application to pilot a series of innovations, including:

- advance voting in three library locations in the week prior to the elections
- signing for the ballot paper at advance voting stations and on polling day

## Conclusions and findings

**The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors.** The advance voting stations allowed those who did not apply for a postal vote and who would be unable to vote on polling day the opportunity to cast their vote. This clearly facilitates voting for those people who would otherwise be automatically disenfranchised. A greater number of voters in Washington and Houghton-le-Spring than in 2006 used advance voting stations – in 2006 they would have had to travel to Sunderland, whereas this year there were also stations in these towns.

**The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout.** Some 1.6% of voters took advantage of the advance voting stations in Sunderland. Given that opinion research found that 86% of advance voters surveyed stated that they were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that advance voting has had a significant positive impact on overall turnout.

**The pilot scheme was easy to use.** Those voters who did choose to vote at the advance voting stations found the procedures easy to follow. There was no indication that signing for the ballot paper caused any problems and there were no reported difficulties in voters 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 signing for the ballot paper 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 of the elections associated with advance voting is in relation to staffing. Staffing the advance voting stations equates to an extra cost of £8.41 per voter. This is more than double the cost per voter last year in Sunderland (£3.17).

# 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 Sunderland City 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

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<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 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 Sunderland City 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 Sunderland is the largest city in the north east of England. The City Council area covers 13,737 hectares and comprises the urban areas of Sunderland, Houghton-le-Spring and Washington, as well as a smaller rural area.

2.2 Sunderland's population was 280,807 at the time of the last census in 2001, representing a population density of 20.4 people per hectare. People from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities account for 1.86% of the population (Census 2001), against a national average of 9.1%.<sup>2</sup>

2.3 The city is ranked 22 out of 354 council areas on a scale of deprivation (with 1 being the most deprived).<sup>3</sup>

### The Council

2.4 Sunderland City Council is represented by 75 councillors in 25 three-member wards and elects by thirds. All 25 three-member wards therefore held an election in May 2007. At the May 2007 elections the electorate of the city was 210,499.

2.5 The political composition of Sunderland City Council prior to the 2007 elections was: Labour – 57; Conservative – 13; Independent – four; and Liberal Democrat – one. The city is represented by four Labour Members of Parliament: Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington East); Bill Etherington (Sunderland North); Chris Mullin (Sunderland South); and Sharon Hodgson (Gateshead East and Washington West). Sunderland is in the North East of England electoral region for elections to the European Parliament. There is one parish in the City Council area – Hetton, which was uncontested in 2007.

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<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?=1128440](http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?=1128440)

## 3 Pilot scheme description

### The pilot scheme application

3.1 In response to the October 2006 electoral pilot scheme prospectus, Sunderland City Council (hereafter known as ‘the Council’) submitted an application to pilot a series of innovations and changes to electoral procedures, including advance voting stations in three libraries in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton-le-Spring.

3.2 Following discussions with the Ministry of Justice, 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 stations and at all polling stations on 3 May. A similar measure requiring signature collection at polling stations was included in the Electoral Administration Act 2006 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.<sup>4</sup> The Sunderland City 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.<sup>5</sup> An Amendment Order was made on 1 May 2007 which made clear that the requirement to provide a signature applied both to the advance voting stations and to those voting at polling stations on 3 May.

### Pilot scheme summary

#### Advance voting

3.4 In 2006, the Council had piloted advance voting at a single location (Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre) as part of a joint pilot with three other Tyne and Wear local authorities. For 2007, the Council proposed extending the 2006 pilot by increasing the number of locations with advance voting stations to three. Two additional stations were provided for the other key settlements in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton-le-Spring. In 2006, very few electors from these areas used the advance voting station at Sunderland City Library. These areas were therefore chosen to provide electors living in those areas with a similar opportunity to those living in Sunderland city itself.

3.5 The advance voting stations were located just inside the entrances to Sunderland City Library, Washington Town Centre Library and Houghton Library and Customer Service Centre. Each of these advance voting stations was open on the following dates and times, which are the same as those for last year’s pilot scheme, with the exception that no stations were open on Saturday this year:

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

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<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/All\\_Responses\\_25780-19142\\_E\\_N\\_S\\_W\\_.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/All_Responses_25780-19142_E_N_S_W_.pdf).

3.6 Electors could vote at an advance voting station based on the ward in which they were registered, as set out in Table 1. The advance voting stations also served as a delivery point for postal votes from any ward in the city.

**Table 1: Allocation of wards to advance voting stations**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Wards</b>
Houghton Library and Customer Service Centre	Copt Hill, Hetton, Houghton, Shiney Row
Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre	Barnes, Castle, Doxford, Fulwell, Hendon, Millfield, Pallion, Redhill, Ryhope, St Anne's, St Chad's, St Michael's, St Peter's, Sandhill, Silksworth, Southwick
Washington Town Centre Library	Washington Central, Washington East, Washington North, Washington South, Washington West

### 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 stations and those voting on 3 May 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 or polling station staff). Once the voter had provided their signature on the list, the Presiding Officer 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, where they were satisfied that because of a disability or inability to read, a voter would be unable to make a distinctive signature.

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 or polling station staff requesting a signature from voters before issuing a ballot paper, there were no changes to conventional polling station procedures and staff had nothing else specific to consider on the day.

### Objectives of the pilot scheme

3.10 In its pilot scheme application, the Council stated that the proposed innovations aimed to continue the success of the advance voting pilot undertaken at the 2006 elections by:

- enabling any elector to vote in person who, for whatever reason, is not able to or prefers not to attend their polling station on polling day
- enabling electors to attend an advance voting station in the area in which they live – Sunderland, Houghton-le-Spring or Washington

3.11 In commenting formally on the application, the Commission welcomed the opportunity to explore the impact of piloting advance voting in Sunderland for a second year. In particular, it noted the provision of additional advance voting stations in Houghton-le-Spring and Washington, compared with 2006, when only one station was provided at Sunderland City Library.<sup>6</sup>

3.12 The Commission also subsequently commented on the proposal to pilot a signature collection requirement at the advance voting stations. 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 Sunderland'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.<sup>7</sup>

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 at a polling station (i.e. those who did not wish to vote by post or proxy) but were not able to do so on 3 May with the opportunity to cast their vote in person. 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.

3.16 It was also expected that advance voting would make the elections more accessible to electors by significantly lengthening the period during which votes could be cast in person. During last year's pilot scheme only Sunderland City Library was used as an advance voting station. An analysis of voting patterns showed that far fewer voters living in Washington and Houghton-le-Spring voted at the advance voting station than those living in Sunderland itself. By extending the pilot so that there were advance voting stations in these areas the Council considered that an equivalent level of convenience would be provided for electors in all parts of the Council area.

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<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.

3.17 The libraries used as advance voting stations were situated in areas that electors were likely to visit regularly as part of their normal routine. For example, the library in Washington adjoins the town shopping centre. The Houghton library is not in a location with such a high footfall but is still a central, well-known and visible location for residents of Houghton-le-Spring. It was expected that using reasonably frequently visited locations as advance voting stations would allow both those electors who knew about the pilot scheme and those who did not to combine different tasks on one journey. The advance voting stations also provided secure drop-off points for those electors with a postal vote who preferred not to return it by post.

3.18 The impact of the signature requirement on voters was assessed through analysis of a record of queries raised which was kept by advance voting station or polling station staff along with the details of any electors refusing to sign. It was also considered by means of observation of the advance voting stations and polling stations and through 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 stations 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 or 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. It was also suggested by the Council that the opening of additional advance voting stations in Houghton-le-Spring and Washington would enhance any positive impact the pilot might have on turnout.

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. Given the experience of the 2006 pilot scheme, during which no security issues came to light, it considered it was unlikely that there would be any new security issues this year with an essentially similar pilot.

3.23 It is also noted that trialling signature collection at advance voting stations and at polling stations will provide 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 advance voting stations and any additional costs resulting from the signature collection requirement. As Council-owned properties were used for the advance voting stations, there were no additional costs associated with their 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 stations were in effect only traditional polling stations that were open earlier than usual. No difficulties in implementing the signature collection requirement were anticipated at either advance voting stations or polling stations.

## 4 Evaluation

### Efficiency

#### Project management

4.1 The management of the pilot was considered straightforward as the issues were essentially the same as those that would normally be encountered on polling day, except for the signature requirement. The Council managed the pilot as part of the overall elections project. In addition a project initiation document was produced for the pilot aspect of the elections and a risk log was created. This approach appears to have been fit for purpose, and there did not appear to be any significant problems in respect of the management or processes used to plan and implement the pilot scheme.

4.2 The lead officers managing the pilot aspect of the elections were the Elections Officer and the Deputy Elections Officer under the direct guidance and control of the Returning Officer. All members of the Electoral Services team were available to provide support to staff at the advance voting stations and regular visits were made on a daily basis by senior members of the Elections Office. Throughout polling day, election staff also visited polling stations where voters were being asked for their signature. The pilot scheme was delivered without difficulty and without diverting resources from managing other aspects of the elections.

4.3 Each of the three advance voting stations was in a Council library and this made managing the opening and closing of the advance voting stations easy to co-ordinate. Staff from each of the relevant libraries acted as Poll Clerks and were therefore familiar with the location and facilities of the advance voting stations. The Sunderland advance voting station had one Presiding Officer and six Poll Clerks; the Washington and Houghton advance voting stations each had one Presiding Officer and three Poll Clerks.

4.4 No suppliers were involved in the project as the ballot papers for the advance voting stations and the corresponding number lists were produced in-house by the Council.

#### Training

4.5 All those who were involved in any aspect of the election process were given training, including Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks at the advance voting stations. Training was delivered by senior members of the Electoral Services team, with no more than 25 people being trained in one group. The training complemented the training that the majority of staff had undertaken for similar pilots in previous years. The staff who were trained did not report any issues or gaps in the training either before or after the elections.

## Voting

### Public awareness and feedback

4.6 The Council informed electors about advance voting by including information in a pre-election letter and also in their poll card and postal voting pack. This informed the elector of the location of the library in which they were entitled to vote in advance and the opening times. For those people who had applied to vote by post it informed them that they could hand in their completed postal vote at any of the advance voting stations. Poll cards also informed electors that they would be asked to sign for their ballot paper as a security measure, and that without signing they would not be allowed to vote.

4.7 The inside back page of the Council magazine, *Sunrise*, distributed to every household in the city, included information on the pilot and informed electors that they would be requested to sign for their ballot papers. The pilot scheme was also advertised on the Council's website and in the local press, designed to coincide with postal and proxy vote application deadlines. A number of articles were published in the local press to raise the profile of advance voting in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton-le-Spring. It was also noted that this was an extension of the previous year's pilot.

4.8 According to ICM Research, 39% of the Sunderland public were aware that their local authority was piloting new ways of voting at the 2007 elections. According to the Commission's research, the primary source of awareness of the pilot was information from the Council (55%), with local media interest (37%) also having an impact. There was a similar amount of awareness both for the requirement to provide a signature and for advance voting.

4.9 Awareness rose when members of the public were prompted with a description of the two innovations (advance voting and the signature collection requirement) being trialled in Sunderland. Overall 56% of residents surveyed claimed to recall at least one of the two innovations, rising to 77% among those who had voted. Only around one-third (35%) of non-voters knew that a pilot scheme was being tested locally. Four in 10 (41%) were aware that signature checking was taking place (57% among voters, 23% among non-voters). In the case of advance voting, awareness rose to 46% overall (65% among voters, 26% among non-voters).

4.10 Those aged 55–64 and 75 and over had the highest levels of awareness of signature checks (60% were aware), closely followed by those aged 65–74 (53% were aware) and those aged 45–54 (49% were aware). This is in stark contrast to the relatively low levels of awareness among younger voters, with only 6% of 18–24-year-olds and 32% of 25–34-year-olds claiming to be aware of signature checks.

4.11 Advance voting followed a similar pattern to signature checking, with the older groups showing significantly higher levels of prompted awareness than the younger age groups. Those aged 45 and over were significantly more likely to be aware of

advance voting than those aged 18–44. The highest level of awareness was among those aged 75 and over (74% were aware) whereas the lowest level was among 18–24-year-olds (19% were aware).

4.12 Since one of the key aims of advance voting was to provide greater convenience to those who may not be able to vote on polling day it is interesting to note that awareness was below average for full-time workers (only 39% were aware).

### Impact on voting

4.13 A total of 1,162 voters voted at one of the three advance voting stations. This accounts for 1.6% of the total votes cast in Sunderland and 0.6% of the total electorate. The number of voters voting in advance was lower than in 2006, when more than 2% of those who voted did so in advance (0.7% of the total electorate). A possible contributory factor for this decrease is the increased number of registered postal voters. At the 2006 elections 21% of the electorate were registered to vote by post, while in 2007 this had increased to 28%.

4.14 There was much greater usage of advance voting at Sunderland City Library, with fewer than 150 voters taking advantage at each of the Washington and Houghton-le-Spring locations. However, more people from Washington and Houghton-le-Spring voted in advance than in 2006, when electors from these areas who wished to vote in advance had to visit Sunderland City Library.

4.15 Table 2 shows that although usage of advance voting is less than in last year’s pilot, the number of advance voters in the Washington and Houghton wards has increased. The proportion of advance voters from these areas has increased from 7% in 2006 to 22% in 2007. The breakdown of advance voting on a daily basis in 2007 is shown in Table 3.

**Table 2: Comparison of advance voting by voters registered in Sunderland, Washington and Houghton in 2006 and 2007**

	Number of advance votes cast in 2006	Number of advance votes cast in 2007
Sunderland (16 wards)	1,341	886
Washington (5 wards)	36	147
Houghton (4 wards)	58	129
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,435</b>	<b>1,162</b>

**Table 3: Breakdown of advance voting on a daily basis (April–May 2007)**

	Mon 23	Tue 24	Wed 25	Thu 26	Fri 27	Mon 30	Tue 1	Wed 2
Advance voters	182	150	165	177	138	144	126	80

4.16 Commission evaluators observed the issuing of ballot papers at the advance voting stations, and spoke to advance voting station staff about the effect of the signature collection requirement on the voting process. None of the advance voting

station staff the Commission spoke to had concerns with the process or considered it to have had a significant negative impact on voting. No instances were observed or reported of queues forming 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.

4.17 While the signature requirement did not appear to have a major impact on the ability of electors to vote in person, there were some queries raised by voters regarding the need to sign. One voter who considered it would make her vote less secret did not initially wish to sign for her ballot paper. However, once she had spoken to an officer in the Electoral Services team, and was advised that this was purely a security measure, she decided to continue to vote. On this occasion, this had no impact on any other voters and did not distract from the voting process at the advance voting station. However, in future, some administrative and practical issues may become apparent. 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 and if voters were to raise similar queries regarding the requirement to sign. The Electoral Services team in making their application gave consideration to potential 'bottlenecks' and used the correct number of staff, which prevented such an occurrence.

4.18 At each of the advance voting stations, a laptop was set up to hold the electoral register in order to speed up the process of identifying voters. This worked efficiently, especially when voters were not able to provide their poll card. When voters came in they gave their name and/or the first line of their address and staff were immediately able to identify which ward they lived in. It allowed those who arrived at the same time to receive their ballot papers slightly more quickly than had this system not been in place.

4.19 According to public opinion research, advance voting in person was largely premeditated, with 29% of those using one of the advance voting stations claiming it was the sole reason for their visit on the day and a further 41% claiming it was one of a number of reasons for their visit to the location on the day.

4.20 Sunderland, however, has the highest proportion of 'impulse' voters of any local authority participating in the advance voting pilot scheme, with 30% (compared with the average of 11% across all pilot schemes) claiming they did not intend to vote at the advance voting station on the day, and did so on the spur of the moment. This may relate to the fact that in Sunderland a large proportion of people using Sunderland City Library were approached about the opportunity to vote without the need to provide their poll card.

4.21 Having learned from the experiences of both the 2006 and 2007 pilots, the Council stated that it welcomed the addition of the advance voting stations in Washington and Houghton-le-Spring.

## Accessibility

4.22 Each of the three libraries provided a relatively accessible location for the advance voting stations. Outside each station a large 'polling station' sign was displayed, which was clearly visible at some distance. This did not specifically indicate that this was a polling station that was open in advance of polling day. Each advance voting station was fully equipped with tables for the staff, a ballot box, voting compartments, posters with instructions for voters, and large-print versions of the ballot paper.

4.23 The pilot scheme did not seek to target particular groups. However, there were no recorded instances of any accessibility issues for voters who visited the advance voting stations.

## Campaigning

4.24 Candidates and agents were given a briefing on the local government elections which included information on the pilot scheme such as dates, times and locations for advance voting and the allocation of wards to specific advance voting stations.

4.25 Anecdotal information gained at the count suggests that some candidates and agents were aware of the pilot scheme. When asked whether it had any impact on campaigning, no candidates or agents considered that the pilot scheme would necessitate working in a different way.

4.26 One respondent to the Commission's evaluation questionnaire considered that advance voting would have a positive impact on the elections and fully supported this aspect of the pilot. However, they expressed concern regarding the validity and secrecy of the signature requirement.

## Turnout

4.27 The overall level of turnout in Sunderland at these elections was 34.4%, which was an increase of nearly two percentage points on the last comparable local government elections in May 2006 (32.7%).

4.28 As previously discussed, a total of 1,162 people voted at one of the three advance voting stations in Sunderland. This accounts for only 1.6% of the total votes cast in Sunderland. According to the Commission's research, 86% of advance voters surveyed said they were 'very likely' or 'quite likely' to vote at the local government elections had they not been able to vote in advance. Given the low number of people who used advance voting and the likelihood that the majority would have voted anyway based on the opinion research noted above, it therefore appears to have had a minimal positive impact on turnout.

4.29 Public opinion research conducted by ICM Research indicates that the overriding feeling among Sunderland residents is that advance voting has the capacity to increase voter turnout, with 62% saying they would expect to see an increase in voter numbers. However, one-third think it will make no difference.

This figure is consistent among non-voters (59% think it will increase turnout) and younger voters aged 18–24 (62% think it will increase turnout).

4.30 Opinion research indicates that the potential for increased voter turnout is the key reason why candidates and agents believe advance voting should continue to be offered, although the Council also considers that increasing voter choice is important:

Anything that gives choice might increase voting but I still think postal votes will be the most popular.

**Candidate, Sunderland**

Turnout was up a couple of per cent this year in Sunderland although it's still very low – 34% from 32%.

**Agent, Sunderland**

## Security and confidence

### Security

4.31 There were no specific concerns over the security of advance voting or signing for ballot papers. There were no recorded instances of alleged personation or attempted voting at advance voting stations and again on polling day. Polling station or advance voting station staff were informed not to provide a ballot paper for those electors who refused to sign for their ballot paper. One voter did initially raise concerns with the signature requirement. In their training polling station and advance voting station staff were instructed to direct such voters to the Electoral Services team, and in the only case identified, explanation of the requirement was sufficient for her to choose to vote.

4.32 Each day of advance voting was treated separately, with one ballot box being used at each advance voting station per day. Boxes were colour coded for each of the three areas and numbered for each day of the pilot. At the end of each day, ballot boxes, ballot papers and stationery were returned to the civic centre to be securely stored. At the end of each day, ballot paper accounts were completed for all wards.

4.33 In order to prevent any possible personation during the advance voting period, the electoral registers for the relevant wards were provided to staff at each advance voting station. Advance voters were marked on the electoral register as they voted and the same register was then used on 3 May.

4.34 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.

## User confidence

4.35 The Commission's research in Sunderland reflects a generally positive user confidence in advance voting and the requirement to provide a signature. Around nine in 10 voters (94%) who used the advance voting station at Sunderland City Library said they felt comfortable about signing their name in order to receive a ballot paper. Fifty-nine 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. Around one-third (34%) said it would make no difference to their confidence in the process, with three people (1%) saying it would make them less confident.

4.36 Those voters who voted at one of the advance voting stations in Sunderland appear enthusiastic at the prospect of advance voting being rolled out at all future elections.

## Stakeholder confidence

4.37 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 voters and the general public, and in anecdotal information received during the count from candidates and agents. Candidates and agents as well as voters generally considered that the requirement to provide a signature made them feel the process was more secure and felt very comfortable doing so.

4.38 Around one-third (31%) of the public surveyed think that the signature collection requirement has the potential to reduce fraud at future elections, although 53% think it would make no difference.

## Cost and value for money

4.39 The only additional cost to the elections associated with advance voting is in relation to staffing. The total cost of staffing the three advance voting stations was £9,778.36, as shown in Table 4. With 1,162 voters voting in advance, this equates to a cost of £8.41 per voter. The 2006 elections had a total cost of £3.17 per voter. The significant extra cost is directly attributable to the cost of the additional advance voting stations. The Houghton and Washington stations did not attract as many advance voters as the Sunderland location and therefore had a greater cost per voter.

**Table 4: Cost of staffing advance voting**

<b>Cost type</b>	<b>Staff cost (£)</b>
Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre	4,104.96
Houghton Library and Customer Service Centre	2,509.68
Washington Town Centre Library	2,613.72
Supervisor cost	550.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,778.36</b>

## 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 Sunderland are as follows.

**5.2 The pilot scheme facilitated and encouraged voting for a small number of electors.** The advance voting stations allowed those who did not apply for a postal vote and who would be unable to vote on polling day the opportunity to cast their vote. This clearly facilitates voting for those people who would otherwise be automatically disenfranchised. A greater number of voters in Washington and Houghton-le-Spring than in 2006 used advance voting stations – in 2006 they would have had to travel to Sunderland, whereas this year there were also stations in these towns.

5.3 The pilot scheme had no impact on the capacity of electors to make an informed choice and did not affect the counting of votes.

**5.4 The pilot scheme appears to have had a negligible impact on turnout.** Some 1.6% of voters took advantage of the advance voting stations in Sunderland. Given that opinion research found that 86% of advance voters surveyed stated that they were likely to have voted anyway, it is not possible to conclude that advance voting has had a significant impact on overall turnout.

**5.5 The pilot scheme was easy to use.** Those voters who did choose to vote at the advance voting stations found the procedures easy to follow. There was no indication that signing for the ballot paper was difficult and there were no reported difficulties in voters providing their signatures.

**5.6 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 signing for the ballot paper had any negative impact on the integrity of the elections.

**5.7 The pilot scheme led to a slight increase in expenditure for the Council.** The only additional cost of the elections associated with advance voting is in relation to staffing. Staffing the advance voting stations equates to a cost of £8.41 per voter. This is more than double the cost per voter last year in Sunderland (£3.17).

### Learning

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

- In Sunderland, the location and footfall of the advance voting station at Sunderland City Library has been fundamental in the success of the pilot scheme.

- 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 satisfactory 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

5.9 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 an advance voting pilot scheme or an increase in the number of advance voting stations does not in itself necessarily increase levels of usage.
- 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.