Making an impact
The local promotion of electoral issues
The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.


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Preface

This report presents the findings of a recently completed study which focused on the range of activities undertaken by UK local councils to promote electoral issues. The study, funded by The Electoral Commission, was prepared and written by Professor Ivor Gaber and Adrian Wardle of CLEAR, a communications and training consultancy. Overall responsibility rests with the authors and it should be noted that the suggestions and recommendations contained within this report are theirs and not those of The Electoral Commission. The Commission welcomes their contribution to consideration of the issues raised.

Since the 2001 general election, which saw turnout drop to an historic low of 59.4%, the urgency of finding effective ways of promoting electoral issues has been brought sharply into focus. While The Electoral Commission has responsibility at the national level for encouraging voters’ understanding of and participation in the democratic process, it is welcome that a good deal of promotional activity linked to these issues is undertaken by local councils. Yet as the following report shows, although all electoral administrators accept that it is part of their job to facilitate registration, there is no similar consensual view that the same applies to turnout. The Commission, for its part, takes the view that local authorities can helpfully adopt an ‘all-encompassing’ approach. This would ideally include an emphasis on how the electoral process works and the significance of voting, as well as the more established focus on the importance of registration. Having said that, the Commission recognises that budgets available for this sort of work will vary significantly from one authority to the next.

The report identifies, compares and contrasts a variety of local communication methods. It draws upon the results of a questionnaire sent to UK local authorities, as well as in-depth interviews with electoral and communications officers, focus group discussions, a consultation meeting with key stakeholders and a range of other information sources. The report’s primary aim is to highlight and promote best practice at the local level in relation to publicising electoral issues. Its contents will therefore be of interest to local government officers, political parties and others who are seeking to facilitate greater levels of participation in and increased understanding of the democratic process.

Pamela Gordon
Electoral Commissioner
Chair of the Local Promotion of Electoral Issues
Research Steering Group
October 2002
Executive summary

This report examines the effectiveness of different communication methods employed in local publicity campaigns to encourage participation in UK electoral and democratic systems. It seeks to identify, compare and contrast the wide range of communication methods used by local authorities with the aim of promoting awareness of electoral issues, and includes an assessment of the relative success of these communication methods.

The report aims primarily to highlight and promote best practice at the local level. Its findings should also assist The Electoral Commission in the development of informed and effective national campaign strategies on a wide range of electoral issues.

Research methodology
A variety of research methods were employed in the course of compiling this report. A postal questionnaire, also mailed electronically, was sent to all electoral administrators in England, Scotland, Wales and the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland. The questionnaire was designed as an audit of the communication methods used in the different stages of the electoral process – the annual update of the electoral register, rolling registration, promotion of postal voting and notice of election. It also sought to establish what resources were being allocated to these activities and what the assessment was of their effectiveness. The survey achieved a response rate of 65%.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales in order to probe further these issues and to gain examples of good practice. In addition, promotional materials produced at the local level were examined and their effectiveness evaluated against set criteria. The research team also carried out focus group work with eligible voters with a view to exploring which methods of communication had made an impact and other methods that, if employed, might have a positive impact on those voters. A review of existing relevant material was conducted and the project has benefited from quantitative research funded by The Electoral Commission. Finally, a wide range of groups and individuals with an interest in the promotion of electoral issues were consulted and their contributions used to inform the research project.

Key points

What’s happening locally

- There is a lot of evidence of creative energy and effort going into locally produced materials.
- Personal canvassers, nationally produced posters and leaflets, council magazines and local media are the most common methods of communicating with electors during the annual update of the register.
- The number of initiatives taken in terms of communicating with the public about voting issues appears to be significantly less than those that have been mounted to encourage registration.
- Many electoral administrators question the idea that encouraging people to vote is, even in part, their responsibility.
- Most publicity is produced without any knowledge about how effective it is.
- Although there is a family of similar promotional messages, with councils producing much of their own material, there is no single message.
- A great deal of effort is now going into getting people to register for postal votes.
- There is an increasing concern for the personal safety of canvassers.

Attitudes to voting

- Electors’ interest in and knowledge of formal political structures is low but this is not something about which they are necessarily content.
- Electors want to be better informed about the policies and candidates they are being asked to vote for.
- Electors do not appear to blame the electoral system itself for their lack of political interest or participation but
they do blame the parties and politicians for failing to interest or excite them.

What works

• Overall, electoral administrators believe that direct mail is the most effective way of reaching potential voters and posters the least effective.

• Different localities retain distinct characteristics, which means that the same promotional activities work well in some areas and not so well in others.

• Where there is an opportunity to make direct contact with the public in their homes (usually via leaflets through the door) this can have a significant effect on levels of voter awareness.

• Local publicity efforts in public spaces appear to have minimal impact on levels of awareness.

• Councils believe that their communication initiatives have much more effect in terms of getting people to apply for postal votes than in persuading people to vote.

• While the quality of materials produced is inconsistent, the research uncovered more examples of good quality than bad. Good promotional materials should:
  - use language that is appropriate for the audience;
  - be produced in a format that is accessible to its audience;
  - convey a clear message;
  - be attractive or eye-catching;
  - be clear who it is aimed at;
  - encourage action on the part of the audience.

• Views are mixed on whether national or local publicity is best.

• Official-looking mail in personally addressed envelopes has the best chance of being remembered by voters.

• The local media were generally identified as an effective means of reaching electors.

Opportunities for improvement

• It is possible to improve voter participation levels but this can only be done by implementing a coherent and comprehensive communications strategy, which itself takes time and money.

• Electoral services departments should have a dedicated publicity budget, and administrators should establish effective working relationships with press office staff.

• Electoral administrators should work with other council departments to gain access to information that could assist in compiling accurate registers, taking into account data protection requirements.

• Electoral administrators should make direct personal contact with local newspaper editors to enlist their support for registration or election purposes.

• Electoral registration officers (EROs) should provide communication materials in alternative formats suitable for disabled people, including people with learning disabilities. EROs should also ensure that disabled people are made aware of their existence.

• The introduction of citizenship education presents local authorities with a major opportunity to assist schools. Electoral services staff should offer to assist in the running of mock elections, by providing speakers, information and election materials.

• EROs and their staff should actively seek opportunities to maintain and develop good relationships with political parties and candidates.

• EROs should encourage their own authority to promote voter registration as part of the induction process for new staff.

• Electoral administrators should work with local universities and large companies to identify ways of promoting registration among students and new staff.
The Electoral Commission contracted CLEAR, a communications and training consultancy, to undertake an assessment of local publicity campaigns to encourage participation in UK electoral and democratic systems.

The research team comprised:

- Professor Ivor Gaber, Emeritus Professor of Journalism, Goldsmiths College, University of London;
- Adrian Wardle, Associate Director, CLEAR.

Research steering committee
The project was supervised by a steering committee convened by The Electoral Commission. The steering committee members were:

- Pamela Gordon, Electoral Commissioner;
- Nicole Smith, Director of Policy, The Electoral Commission;
- Andrew Nye, Media & Campaigns Manager, The Electoral Commission;
- Mark Williams, Assistant Policy Manager, The Electoral Commission;
- Richard Scott, Communications Manager at Nottinghamshire County Council and 2002/03 Chair of LGcommunications.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank all the electoral administrators, council communications staff and others who responded to the questionnaire and, in particular, those who agreed to be interviewed. The research team is also grateful to staff at The Electoral Commission for their help and support and to everyone else who contributed their time and expertise to the project.

Research objectives and methods
The research reported here assesses the impact of the different communication methods employed by local authorities to publicise electoral issues. It covers the period 1997-2002 and the range of communication activities linked to local, devolved, parliamentary and European elections, as well as electoral registration and referendums. More specifically, the project focuses on communication activities related to the following issues:

- the mechanics of different voting systems;
- absent voting;
- the annual update of the register;
- rolling registration;
- pilot schemes;
- mayoral and other referendums;
- the location of polling stations.

The objectives of the research were threefold:

- to identify the communication activities that have been or are planned to be used by local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;
- to identify which of these activities:
  - raises awareness
  - persuades people that voting matters;
- to describe and communicate best practice.

The study compares and contrasts communication methods implemented in different local authority areas. A range of research methods were employed during the research phase of the project. These are detailed below:

- In order to identify the full range of communication methods a questionnaire was sent to all local authorities in the UK, to assessors in Scotland and to the Chief Electoral Officer in Northern Ireland. The aim was to ascertain:
  - what communications methods had been employed;
why these particular methods had been chosen;
what evaluation, if any, had been carried out on the
effectiveness of communication methods;
what appear to be the most and least successful
methods of communication, and
the costs involved in implementing specific
communication methods.

• A review of existing research material held by the
local authorities or published in previous studies
was undertaken, e.g. the analyses of the electoral
experiments conducted by local authorities in May
2000, The Electoral Commission’s analysis of the
May 2002 pilot schemes. This desk research helped
to identify gaps in research and specify areas for
follow-up work.

• Attendance at the 2002 annual conference of the
Association of Electoral Administrators in Harrogate,
at which the research team talked to a number
of electoral administrators informally and hosted an
open consultation meeting for all delegates, attended
by approximately 40 people.

• Visits to 22 local authorities in England, Scotland and
Wales in order to conduct in-depth interviews with
EROs. These interviews were in many cases conducted
jointly with communications officers and across a
range of authority types, including unitary, district
and metropolitan borough, as well as two Scottish
and two Welsh authorities. Six authorities in England
that conducted electoral pilots in May 2000 were also
included in the sample. These interviews were very
informative and added to the quantitative information
provided by the questionnaires.

• Comparing and contrasting a range of communication
materials produced and used by local authorities.
In doing this, the research team was interested in
the extent to which such materials addressed specific
social groups, were written in plain English, and were
clearly presented, attractive and eye-catching. The
research team also addressed the experiences of local
authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and
sought to identify any differences with local authorities
in England.

• A number of focus group discussions were conducted
in order to gauge and probe the effectiveness of
materials and methods used by local authorities
to promote electoral registration and participation.
These focus groups were conducted close to the
date of the May 2002 local government elections.
This provided an opportunity to explore general issues,
as well as perceptions of publicity during the campaign
and the links between these activities and the decision
whether to vote or not.

• Inclusion of questions relating to communication
methods in an NOP survey conducted on behalf of
The Electoral Commission and carried out at the time
of the May 2002 local elections.

• A consultation meeting attended by local government
and professional association representatives,
journalists, researchers and other professionals.
This meeting provided an opportunity to test
preliminary findings with an audience of experts.
The research team also held conversations with
local newspaper editors, citizenship educators,
representatives of political parties and voluntary
sector organisations.
Factors affecting turnout

Over the past few decades the issue of voting behaviour has attracted a great deal of attention from political scientists and other commentators. A wide range of factors have been identified as playing a role in determining how people vote, including family influences, occupation, geography, media consumption and individual psychology (Miller and Niemi, 2002). In addition, commentators have identified a number of factors considered to influence a person’s propensity to turn out and vote (Franklin, 2002). While the focus of this research report is on the most effective means of tackling the problems of low turnout and under-registration – at least those means that are within the powers of local authorities to deliver – it is useful to restate some of the key findings of recent work on the subject of turnout, in order to place the effects of local authority communication in proper context.

In general terms, the political science literature identifies a number of factors that influence turnout:

• **Characteristics of the electorate:** Many researchers have noted relationships between turnout levels and demographic factors such as social class, age and education (see Franklin, 2002). In crude terms, their analysis suggests that higher social class individuals are more likely to vote. Turnout is also generally shown to be higher among older people and people who have lived longer in the same location. Turnout among young people was at an all-time low at the 2001 general election; it has been estimated that as few as 39% of young people aged between 18-24 cast their vote (MORI, 2001). McAllister (2001) found that areas with large black and minority ethnic (BME) populations and significant proportions of people dependant on welfare benefits had lower than average turnout rates in the 2001 general election (with the exception of areas where the main competition was between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats where he found no significant effect, highlighting the fact that BME voters and those on welfare overwhelmingly support Labour). The Electoral Commission’s recent report on voter engagement among BME communities also found turnout to be related to socio-economic factors, such as age, social class and gender (Purdam et al. 2002).

• **The ‘rationality’ of the individual:** This body of research suggests that electors are more motivated to vote when the result is expected to be close and they believe that their vote might swing it one way or the other. Turnout in marginal constituencies in the 2001 general election was some 10% higher than in those perceived as safe seats (Whiteley et al. 2001). ‘Rational’ approaches also suggest that voters weigh up the costs and benefits of voting, so that if a victory by one party or another is perceived to have a serious effect on, for example, tax levels and hence take home pay, then this may induce more people to vote.

• **Extent of party competition:** To some extent this is another feature of close contests. The level of activity by parties in trying to mobilise the vote is a factor that induces higher turnout. Parties now concentrate their
efforts to a larger degree than ever before in those constituencies in which the result is likely to be the closest (a judgment primarily based on the result of the previous election). But there are other elements of party competition – such as the level of party attachment and the presence of alternative candidates – that also seem to have a positive effect on turnout. Rallings and Thrasher found that an increase from two to three parties contesting a ward election increases turnout by nearly 2% (Rallings and Thrasher, 2000). Their research also found that the higher the share of the vote gained by Liberal Democrats the higher the turnout. And the British Election Study in 2001 showed that the stronger an individual identified with a particular party, the more likely they were to vote (Clarke et al. 2001).

- The existence of local topical issues: At the 2001 general election some of the highest turnouts were recorded in areas where local issues were relevant to the campaign, e.g. Wyre Forest (The Electoral Commission, 2001). In addition, Brighton successfully combined a referendum on the redevelopment of the local football team’s ground with the council elections in 1999, increasing turnout by almost 8%.

- The level of local media interest: An active local media giving publicity to the election and the key issues involved can play an important part in promoting awareness of that election. Community newspapers can also help in this regard.

These factors help to explain differential levels of turnout across local authorities. However, a general pattern of falling turnout can be discerned across all types of elections in the UK since 1979, with a marked slump since 1992. The turnout in the 2001 general election – 59.4% – was the lowest since 1918 and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise. The Leeds by-election in 1999 saw a turnout of 19.6%, the lowest peacetime level in an individual seat, while turnout at the European Parliament elections during the same year was just 24% (The Electoral Commission, 2001). Local elections turnout in 1998 was 28.8%, although levels have shown small signs of recovery more recently – in 2000 it was 29.6% while in 2002 turnout was 32.8% (The Electoral Commission, 2001; Local

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So is the answer to declining electoral participation simply better local communications? Up to a point and that point is that communications do play a role, but in the face of current levels of political demotivation, that role can only, at best, be subsidiary.
So what can communications realistically be expected to achieve? In general terms local initiatives designed to promote electoral issues have three main objectives. First, to promote the registration process, either prior to or during the annual canvass or in the form of awareness campaigns linked to rolling registration. Second, to raise awareness that an election is to be held, that people have the right to take part, and how they can take part. Third, to persuade people that voting is important and explain that their vote matters.

These objectives are reflected in the different activities undertaken by local authorities. For example, activities that focus on the registration process will aim to raise awareness that people have the right to take part in elections and explain the first part of how to take part. Weighting objectives according to local circumstances will help an authority achieve a good balance of activities. So, for example, an authority using new ways of voting – by electronic kiosk, say – will need to concentrate a lot of activity on how to use the kiosk, where to find it and so on. Table 1 shows some examples of different communication activities aimed at each of these objectives.

Setting clear objectives is obviously important as a first step towards evaluating the success of communication. Measuring the effect of communication will be easier for some activities than others. For example, a survey of people voting at a polling station could ask individuals how they heard that the election was being held – i.e. through reading a council newspaper, seeing a poster, getting a leaflet through the door, etc. Asking people what makes them believe voting is important is more problematic. This is likely to be due to a complex combination of factors and influences absorbed over a long period of time. In this context, any particular promotional campaign, particularly outside an actual election period, could be said to have a sensitising effect, making someone more likely to act when an election does come around.

Communication activities might therefore be characterised as those that fall broadly into the category of ‘voter education’ and those that could be termed ‘mobilising campaigns’.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Examples of communication activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Promote the registration process</td>
<td>• inclusion of registration form with new resident’s pack</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• promotion of rolling registration on council website</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• roadshows and events promoting registration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• articles in council newspaper/magazine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raise awareness that an election is to be held</td>
<td>• distribution of polling cards</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• posters advertising election date</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• statutory notice of election</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• feature in local media about administration of elections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• press advertisements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raise awareness that people have a right to take part in an election and how they can take part</td>
<td>• leaflet distributed with registration form, e.g. ‘don’t lose your right to vote’</td>
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<td>• features in press and broadcast media about new ways of voting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• direct mail</td>
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<td>• information at ‘polling points’</td>
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<td>Persuade people that voting is important</td>
<td>• a programme of talks in schools and colleges</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• outreach work with community groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuade people that their vote matters</td>
<td>• ‘don’t forget to vote’ mailshot</td>
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<td>• young people’s referendums</td>
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This chapter identifies the core themes that emerged from the research programme and provides an overview of the key results. A more detailed analysis of the issues explored below is provided in the chapters entitled *The promotion of electoral pilot schemes, The views of electoral administrators, An evaluation of publicity materials and quantitative and qualitative research*.

### Voter motivation

One clear theme that emerges from the research is that the effect on voters of the very best efforts that a local authority can muster pales into insignificance compared with the impact, or lack of it, made by politicians, both local and national. This means that a local authority might adapt every conceivable form of 'best practice' in how it communicates and informs its electors but if the politicians are failing to motivate then these efforts are, at best, rendered marginal. However, that is not to say that nothing can be done to improve registration or turnout in the face of voter apathy or that it is not worth doing anything. Any improvement, no matter how marginal, is to be welcomed.

It is also possible for the officers of a local authority to play some role in assisting politicians to improve their own communication skills as part of a general project aimed at improving voter turnout. Indeed the research team would argue that while local authorities have relatively narrow statutory duties in relation to electoral registration and the facilitation of postal and proxy voting (elections are the responsibility of the returning officers), they also have a much broader responsibility for seeking to enhance the wider process of democratic engagement as it manifests itself at local, national and European elections as well as other votes and referendums. For local authorities this makes good sense, since any enhancement of their own perceived democratic credibility will enhance their own abilities to deliver effective services to their electors.

### The research context

That is the broad canvass of the research, but what of the more particular? The focus was electoral administrators – the research team tried to contact all local authority electoral services departments, either in the form of in-depth interviews, at the AEA annual gathering in Harrogate, but above all through an extensive postal questionnaire. In the end the team reached 65% of them, which, while far from perfect, provides the basis for the generalisations that follow.
It should be noted that the research did not reach wholly unambiguous conclusions as to the most effective ways of communicating with electors, but that is not to say that communications – and television in particular – cannot make a major impact. Most respondents believed, and the research team share their belief, that television advertising is the single most effective means of reaching people. This is based on the overwhelming weight of research evidence (as demonstrated consistently by BBC and ITC audience research reports and the British Election Study over many years) which shows that television is the most used and most trusted source of political information for people in the UK. A massive television-based advertising campaign, on a similar scale to those which have been used in the past in relation to issues such as drink driving and HIV/AIDS, would stand a very good chance of making a significant impact on levels of registration and turnout. Such campaigns cost millions of pounds to run, resources far outside the range of local authorities, even acting in unison, to even consider outlaying. However, in the event of such funds not being forthcoming, the remainder of the report focuses on what local authorities, operating in an environment of limited funding, can hope to achieve in terms of increasing voter participation.

The role of local authorities
There is another issue that the team confronted early in the research phase. While all electoral administrators accepted that it was part of their statutory responsibilities to seek to maximise registration there was no similar consensual view that the same applied to turnout. Many do accept this as part of their mission and some have even entered into public service agreements with improved turnout figures as one of the performance indicators. But others are more doubtful. A London electoral administrator typified this view when he told the research team: ‘It’s definitely not my responsibility to get the voters to the polling stations. My job is to remove as many barriers as possible and that means giving the voters as much knowledge as I can’. A West Midlands authority said they would like to help increase turnout but ‘we are constrained by existing Victorian legislation’. But it was perhaps the London administrator who stated that ‘I didn’t use to think that I had a duty to get people to the polls but now I’m not so sure’, who best reflected the current confusion.

Some experts in the field argue that the local government code of conduct does in fact prevent staff from doing anything that could be considered as assisting one particular party and, hence, encouraging people to vote in some circumstances could be seen as politically partial activity. There is thus clearly a need for strong central guidance on this subject and if it is the case that legislative restraints do in fact prevent authorities from engaging in efforts to raise turnout, then the research team believes that these restraints need to be removed.

The findings
Perhaps what was most striking about the 278 responses received was the revelation of the extent of the cynicism that is currently prevalent among electoral administrators as to whether there is anything further they can do to have an impact on local registration and turnout levels. However, it is in response to this mood that the research team would seek to emphasise its most important message – namely, that the findings show that it is possible to improve voter participation levels but that this can only be done by implementing a coherent and comprehensive communications strategy, which itself takes time and money. Such a campaign can have an impact, and even if that impact is limited in terms of raising registration or turnout by just a percentage point or two, that is sending the indicators in the right direction, or at the very least preventing them from moving further in the wrong direction.

What is also clear from the research is that the different stages of the electoral process require different forms of communication. The research team identified the following stages in the electoral process:

- the autumn canvass;
- rolling registration;
- promoting postal/proxy voting;
- promoting the poll.
Whereas the autumn canvass, and canvassing for postal votes, respond well to all forms of door-to-door intervention, seeking to inform people about the rolling registration process lends itself better to local advertising and media initiatives. This is for the obvious reason that, by definition, those for whom rolling registration is relevant are less likely to be recipients of door-to-door literature. The last category identified, that of informing people about polling arrangements, is largely dependent on the early distribution of poll cards, but it also benefits from local and national publicity that alerts people to the fact that an election is imminent.

The research clearly indicates that the implementation of a successful local communications strategy is very much in the hands of the local authorities themselves. For the overwhelming weight, not just of the qualitative and quantitative research carried out for this project, but also the research drawn upon from other sources, is that direct contact with electors is the most effective form of communication, both in terms of motivating electors to register and to go out and vote.

However, information from local authorities alone is never going to be sufficient to substantially increase electoral participation. Apart from politics and politicians influencing electors, three other factors can be identified as playing a significant role in motivating people to vote. One is the family, about which outsiders can do little, a second is the media while a third is the school system – and these latter two do lend themselves to some forms of intervention. The role of direct contact, local media and schools is examined in more detail below.

Case study
One North West authority, which has entered a public service agreement to raise turnout at local elections to 40% by 2004, reported that they had received around 10,000 responses to a personalised letter from the council’s Chief Executive encouraging people to apply for a postal vote. This year, capitalising on the local interest in football, they ran a campaign using the slogan ‘Get Your Cross In’. They sought to assess the effectiveness of this campaign by polling people who came to vote. When asked if they had been aware of any voter awareness campaign 78% of respondents said they had, this was 26% more than had responded to a similar poll the previous year, when the council had also run a turnout campaign but one that had been much lower profile. Of the 2002 respondents aware of the campaign, the communications activity that was best recalled was ‘leaflets through the door’, which 83% of respondents recalled.

Direct contact
In this context, direct contact refers to leaflets, letters and council publications that are delivered through the door and also to local authority canvassers making house-to-house calls on electors. Both electoral registration officers and the voters themselves report that these methods of communication have greater impact than either the information conveyed via the media or other forms of promotion such as posters, roadshows and so on. As one very active London council told the research team: ‘Getting stuff into people’s homes through the letterbox is what really makes the impact’. And there is a broad consensus that letters, personally addressed, especially in ‘official’ looking envelopes, tended to be the single most effective form of communication.
In terms of improving the efficacy of direct contact with electors a number of interesting proposals came up during the course of the research. One was that local authorities should, in co-operation with local political parties, seek to produce a booklet, distributed to all homes and made available in libraries, on the internet and elsewhere, in which all the candidates were given equal space to outline their political case. This approach was tested by Hyndburn at the May 2002 local elections and is discussed in more detail in the section of this report entitled The promotion of electoral pilot schemes.

Such a booklet would have a far longer ‘shelf life’ than normal party literature delivered through the door and would also provide a more durable in-home reminder of the forthcoming election. However, because attempts to produce something similar during the first elections to the Greater London Authority met with some resistance from the parties, as they have elsewhere, such an innovation would need to be introduced with care and after further piloting. Indeed, The Electoral Commission has recommended that more pilots be carried out aimed at increasing the information available to voters about candidates (The Electoral Commission, 2002).

One local authority in the North West trains library staff in the basics of electoral procedure and encourages them to ask library users if they are registered to vote. Another very simple idea came from a Welsh authority that posed the question, ‘Why call them poll cards ... why not just voting cards?’ Not a major innovation but one that would make the purpose of the card clearer and go a small way towards stripping the voting process of some of its mystique. Another of the respondents suggested inviting the Design Council to hold a public competition aimed at finding the best possible designs for electoral forms, cards and even ballot papers.

In September 2001 the Government put out a consultation paper entitled Improving Communication with Council Tax Payers, which sought views about the information that councils should send out with their council tax bills. The suggestion that emerged from the panel of experts convened as part of this research
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The project was that council tax bills would provide a very good opportunity for councils to urge residents to register and even to apply for postal or proxy votes. Indeed there is no reason why the relevant forms could not be enclosed with the bill. As one of the contributors to the panel put it: ‘This would close the loop between taxation, performance and representation’.

Local media

The media were generally identified by administrators as the second most important way of reaching electors, after direct contact. The media activity that seemed to be most effective involved establishing, and then exploiting, good relations with the local media. Several electoral administrators in larger urban areas told the research team that publicity in their local media was the single most effective way of reaching their electors. However, circumstances vary enormously. In some areas there is a lively and coherent local media scene encompassing radio, television and daily newspapers. In other areas the local media plays less of an important role in the life of the community. In some cases, relations between the local media and the authority are so bad as to make this an impossible channel of communication for the authority’s election team to exploit.

In general, BBC local radio stations were praised by administrators as good local partners – they were receptive to news and features about the electoral process and generally covered these issues in a responsible manner. No authority singled out local commercial radio stations for similar praise. However, even in the case of the BBC, local radio listenership is variable and skewed towards older, more middle class audiences, so gaining coverage on local radio is by no means a total solution. And although one local authority told the research team that they had video streamed the election count onto their website and had received 2,000 ‘hits’, the internet is not yet the answer to the problem of local media coverage.

Local newspapers should be the single most important means of media communication, but are frequently not. They should be because of their relative permanence compared to radio – in theory information about polling, parties and candidates can be available to readers for days, if not weeks, before polling day. Also, if properly cultivated, local newspapers can be persuaded to reprint application forms for voter registration and postal and proxy voting. However, very few do this. This is partly because, with the arrival of freesheets, the local newspaper market has becoming increasingly competitive, with a resulting decline in the quality and quantity of local political coverage. But it is also due to the general sense of alienation from formal political processes that has infected not just the national media but the local media as well. Given that paid-for local newspapers have a very high level of credibility among their, albeit declining, band of readers, this is a major problem.

This issue of local credibility brought the research team to the view that local newspapers ought to be playing a more constructive role in both raising electors’ awareness that registration and elections were taking place but also in informing voters about the mechanics of how to register, how to vote as an absentee and how to vote on the day. During the course of the project the research team spoke with Bob Satchwell, Executive Director of the Society of Editors, which represents over 400 local, regional and national newspapers editors, as well as editors in broadcasting and online media. His perspective was that of the local newspaper editor who saw his or her local authority not as enabling bodies seeking to assist the democratic process, but as organisations that were steeped in a culture of unnecessary secrecy who saw the local press as, at best, something to be tolerated and, at worst, something to be opposed.

Satchwell accepted the basic proposition that the research team had heard from its respondents – that local newspapers are far less interested in reporting local politics and far more interested in reporting ‘human interest’ stories, and that a sense of civic responsibility was now a much diminished quality in the culture of local newspapers, unless they could see a way of utilising it in ways that would boost their standing in the market place.
Nonetheless, he recognised the importance – both in terms of the democratic process and in terms of their own local image – of newspapers collaborating more closely with local authorities in order to promote voter registration and turnout. He made two concrete proposals. One was to urge local electoral administration officers to make direct personal contact with local newspaper editors with a view to seeking to enlist their support for registration or election purposes. However, he was also interested in working with The Electoral Commission and using his organisation to reach and inform editors about electoral matters.

Schools

Citizenship is part of the school curriculum in England and Northern Ireland, one of five ‘national priorities’ in Scotland and part of the Personal and Social Education Framework in Wales.

A great deal of hope, in terms of improving electoral participation, is being invested in the introduction of citizenship education into key stages 3 and 4 (covering ages 11-16) of the National Curriculum in England from September 2002. Although there is no formal curriculum for citizenship education in England, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) has suggested that inspectors should satisfy themselves that schools are delivering to their 11-16 year olds a syllabus that covers:

- fundamental human rights and responsibilities, the law, and how it affects young people;
- the diversity of identities in the UK, and the need for mutual respect and understanding;
- central and local government, public services, their financing, and the part individuals can play in relation to these;
- the key characteristics of parliamentary government;
- the electoral system and the importance of voting;
- how the economy functions;
- the work of community based, national and international voluntary groups;
- the importance of resolving conflict fairly;
- the significance of the media and internet in society;
- political, economic, social, environmental and sustainability implications of the world as a global community, and the role of the European Union, the Commonwealth and the United Nations.

Clearly, while only a small amount of time will focus on the specifics of democratic elections the overall raising of a wider democratic consciousness among school students is a goal that can only assist the process of raising young people’s rates of electoral participation. The research team spoke with Jan Newton, the Chief Advisor on Citizenship Education at the Department for Education and Skills, who is firmly of the belief that ‘voting is the tip of the citizenship iceberg’. In other words, while education about registration and voting may be limited, the whole thrust of citizenship education should ensure a heightened sense of the value and importance of democratic participation.

Mock elections are also a valuable route into schools for electoral administrators. Many authorities are already engaged in helping their local schools run such elections, but the authors’ research suggests that in the majority of cases this involvement stems from initiatives originally coming from the schools. The introduction of citizenship education as part of the curriculum offers local electoral administrators a major opportunity to engage young people in electoral issues, by offering to assist in the running of mock elections, by providing speakers, information and election materials. The problem for local authorities, in this context, is that pupils are more interested in the outcomes of political processes than the processes themselves. But some authorities are approaching this challenge with imagination.
Case study

Pupils in one London borough were recently asked to give their views as to how their local authority should spend £10,000 on a project for young people. Pupils were given budget details along with possible ways that the money could be disbursed. The result of the vote was that the money was spent on an anti-racism project but, perhaps more importantly, it also resulted in a heightened sense of the relationship between processes and outcomes. One of the pupils involved in the project was reported as saying: ‘If this is what voting is about then I’ll vote in the future’.

Thus great efforts are required in making the connections between registering, voting and convincing pupils that using democratic procedures to make a difference can work. But the encouraging aspect of the citizenship education initiative is the fact that there are a large number of organisations able to provide local authorities with advice and guidance in this area.¹

Research issues

It is worth stating that all the conclusions of this report are subject to this important rider: that while the evidence from local authorities and electors appears to be unambiguous, there is a ‘missing link’. Even though electors might state that a particular means of communication was the most important factor in influencing their decision to vote, neither the research team nor they can know that as a certainty. One of the fundamental problems of all political research is that, for the most part, people cannot really know their own motivations. It is one thing to say that such and such a factor was the most influential but with all political decision-making, motivation is multi-levelled and complex. There is also the complicating factor that voting is a ‘socially approved’ activity which means that electors will often give answers they think the interviewer wants to hear or that are socially approved. This explains why pollsters continually find that a far higher percentage of their respondents report that they voted than actually turned up at the polling station.

The most effective way of researching this subject, and of making any authoritative statements, is to establish research projects with in-built control groups that enable findings to be based on hard evidence, more than simply accepting what respondents are saying. For example, electoral experiments that involve a local authority targeting a communications initiative at a small sample of electoral areas should, as long as these areas are not significantly differentiated from areas outside the experiment, reveal substantive information about what does or does not work, in terms of communicating with electors.

Some work of this nature has been undertaken but only on a very limited basis. For example, one North West authority ran an experiment in which posters were placed outside 50% of polling stations one week before election day so that the effectiveness, in terms of increasing turnout, could be measured. The result of the experiment suggested that the posters had made no appreciable difference in turnout. Such a result sounds decisive but without knowing if they were comparing like with like,
whether the polling stations were in prominent locations and what might have been revealed had the experiment been run in a number of authorities, one should be wary about drawing too many conclusions from this experiment.

Similarly, an authority in the South West placed marked applications for postal vote forms in the offices of local travel agents and estate agents with a view to seeing if this was an effective way of increasing applications. It clearly was not, with no applications being received via this route. But just because such experiments do not reveal a positive result does not mean they have been a waste of time, effort and money, for establishing what does not work is just as important as establishing what does.

The research team believes that the key to really gaining an insight into understanding the electoral communication process lies in the possibility of mounting a number of information and communication experiments spread across more than one authority and, perhaps most importantly, involving the use of effective control groups. This would mean precluding the use of the local media or poster sites in such experiments and instead confining communication activity to door-to-door leafleting and/or canvassing activity where it is possible to control the flow of information from one area to the next.

However, the potential problem with such an experiment is that it would require local politicians, of all parties, agreeing not just to provide additional information to a certain group of electors but, more significantly, denying that information to another group. And that is a decision that, according to the research team’s respondents, most politicians, so far, are reluctant to take. Unless politicians are willing to take some risks, and support innovation and evaluation, then the chances of significantly improving registration and turnout through the efforts of the local authorities are going to be unnecessarily limited.

In addition, it should be noted that any generalisations offered here are made in the absence of any significant monitoring or tracking by local authorities of the impact of their electoral communication and information activities – this point is developed further towards the end of this report. Although the research team places a high value on the information received from respondents – many of whom have been engaged in this area of activity for many years, and bring to the work both enthusiasm and a deep knowledge of the subject area – the vast majority of their replies were based on experience and opinion rather than on what might be regarded as a sound statistical methodology.
**Key points**

- A local authority might adapt every conceivable form of ‘best practice’ in how it communicates and informs its electors but if the politicians are failing to motivate then these efforts are, at best, rendered marginal.

- Different stages of the electoral process require different forms of communication.

- All electoral administrators accept that it is part of their statutory responsibilities to seek to maximise registration but there is no similar consensual view that the same applies to turnout. There is a need for greater clarification and guidance, at a national level, on this issue.

- It is possible to improve voter participation levels when the local authority implements a coherent and comprehensive communications strategy which is adequately resourced.

- It is important that other council departments co-operate with electoral administrators in order to facilitate the compilation of accurate registers, e.g. information could be sent out with council tax bills.

- Direct contact with electors is the most effective form of communication.

- Local electoral administrators should make direct contact with local newspaper editors to enlist their support for the promotion of electoral issues.

- The introduction of citizenship education offers local electoral administrators a major opportunity to engage young people in electoral issues.
The promotion of electoral pilot schemes

As part of the project, the research team undertook an analysis of the 32 evaluations of the May 2000 local electoral pilot schemes. The full set of reports is published on the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) website. All 32 reports were studied, but only seven authorities sought to evaluate the efficacy of the communication activities associated with these pilots. Direct comparisons between the pilots are problematic because a huge range of different polling methods was used.

Virtually all the evaluations reported that it was very much easier to attract publicity for the pilots than for the normal run of electoral activity. This is hardly surprising, but striking nonetheless. It is worth quoting at length from the report submitted by Stratford-upon-Avon:

The interest shown by the media in this pilot was phenomenal and quite unprecedented in our experience. The public relations office issued six press releases on the electronic voting pilot and attracted considerable local, regional and national media interest. Briefings were given by the press officer to all local and regional media, plus BBC Westminster, The Guardian, The Times, the Daily Telegraph, PA and Sky News. Stories featuring the pilot were broadcast by BBC Coventry and Warwickshire radio, BBC Radio 4, BBC Midlands Today, BBC News 24, Central News, FM102 The Bear, ITN and SKY News. 32 separate press stories were recorded, including national coverage by The Guardian and LGA News. The summary of press coverage is by no means exhaustive, as there were undoubtedly other articles and broadcasts that the press office staff were either unaware of or unable to monitor. Many people contacted the District Council in response to the media coverage they had seen and this coverage gave reassurance and comfort to them. Many voters did not need detailed help because they had seen the system on television and at the road shows.

And the council claimed that the net result was that:

The 2000 District Council elections were the most widely promoted elections this authority has ever seen and the awareness of the electors was increased. This is shown by 96% of electors, who took part in the exit poll, being aware of the election due to the high profile publicity it attracted.

Stratford attracted a great deal of media publicity. Other authorities put greater emphasis on their own communication activities. Doncaster, for example, found that in response to the question ‘Were people in your house aware that voting in the Conisbrough ward would be by post?’, 94% said ‘yes’. Eighty-six percent said they were aware of material coming through the door about the pilot, 22% had seen publicity in the local press and 9% had heard about it on local radio. In answer to the question ‘Did the increased publicity encourage people in your household to vote?’ 55% said yes while 45% said no.

2 See www.elections.dtlr.gov.uk/pilot/index.htm
Doncaster is careful not to over-claim for its achievements:

These findings suggest that increase in turnout was the result of an increased awareness of the election through the publicity. However, previous experience in Doncaster is that promotional activities by themselves (whilst they increase awareness) do not increase turnout to any significant degree. Findings in the electoral survey show that people prefer the postal voting method over the standard process and accordingly it is believed that whilst the publicity may have assisted, the significant increase in turnout achieved by the Pilot was as a result of the postal voting scheme itself.

It is worth pointing out that such publicity efforts do not come cheap – the council spent over £5,000 publicising this pilot in just one ward, which included spending £2,600 on press advertising – an expensive way of reaching a small number of voters but, according to the authority, effective.

Manchester also devoted considerable efforts to publicising their pilot; these included: a ‘Shop and Vote’ leaflet distributed with poll cards; newspaper advertising and articles; posters (including at the supermarkets participating in the pilot); a banner across the front of the Town Hall; and an aerial message over the city. Voters at the early voting stations were asked what publicity they had seen and were invited to tick as many boxes as applied (see Figure 1).

As Figure 1 shows almost 90% of voters recalled seeing some publicity in the run-up to the pilot.

Milton Keynes’ publicity efforts included advertising in the council’s magazine and in the local newspapers. Twenty-four percent said that they had seen this newspaper publicity, 35% stated they had heard about the pilot as a result of the leaflet, 22% had found out via a political party while 18% had been made aware through ‘word of mouth’. However, Milton Keynes concluded that: ‘There is little evidence that would suggest that the increased publicity about the election contributed to any change in overall turnout’.

Plymouth put in an enormous effort into publicising their pilot, reporting that it ‘received more publicity, either direct or indirect, than any previous local elections’. Their efforts included:

- producing and distributing their own leaflets to every household in the pilot area;
- fixing large banners to the Civic Centre, the main shopping areas, on the major roads leading into the city and in the area surrounding the pilot;
- handing out leaflets to city centre shoppers in the days prior to early voting;
- placing display advertisements in the local evening paper;
- hiring a ‘sandwich-board man’ to walk around the city centre shopping areas;
- persuading the local media to give extensive editorial coverage to the pilot;
- franking all mail leaving the Civic Centre with publicity about the pilot.

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**Figure 1: Publicity seen by voters, Manchester pilot scheme, May 2000 (percentage)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publicity Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaflet delivered with poll card</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper publicity</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-store publicity</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio and/or television</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had seen no publicity</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Manchester City Council 2000
However, when they polled more than 1,000 voters who had taken part in the pilot they discovered that it was the media that had been the major source of information, while their own efforts hardly registered (see Figure 2).

Sunderland also put significant effort into publicity and, similarly, in terms of their own local initiatives, the results were mixed, with the council’s hand-delivered leaflets and posters in libraries making an impact but publicity in the council’s own newspaper and other smaller initiatives having minimal impact. Respondents to a questionnaire were asked to specify how they had found out about the pilot scheme. The results are detailed in Figure 3.

![Figure 2: How/where did you hear about the Early Voting Option? Plymouth pilot scheme, May 2000 (percentage)](chart)

**Base:** 1173 adults  
**Source:** City of Plymouth 2000

![Figure 3: Where did public find out about early voting? Sunderland pilot scheme, May 2000 (percentage)](chart)

**Base:** 734 adults  
**Source:** City of Sunderland 2000
Results from Redditch were slightly different. Because they were the first polling station to open for business in 2000 they received considerable local and national publicity. They asked around 400 electors taking part in the pilots if they thought the new arrangements had been adequately publicised and received a ‘yes’ response rate of 79%. They then asked how people had heard about the pilot. The replies are presented in Figure 4.

What is striking about these figures is the very low figure for local radio, although this might be explained by the fact that Redditch is covered by Radio WM based in Birmingham and hence probably does not have particularly high listenership in Redditch, whereas the local newspaper clearly does have a significant impact in the town. Similarly the Town Hall banner made a larger impact on the public than similar banners displayed elsewhere but, of course, that might well be related to the particular location of Redditch Town Hall.

So what conclusions can be drawn from this overview of the information effect of the 2000 pilot evaluations? First, that no direct comparisons are possible because the authorities used differing polling techniques, samples and questions. Consequently, any conclusions have to be treated with great care.

Second, that despite all the centralising forces in society different localities retain their own characteristics. Whereas, for example, in one town leaflets coming through the door from the council are seen as important and hence make an impact, in another the council’s own activities are swamped by a strong local media. In other words generalisations have to be treated with great caution.

Having said that, it does appear that where the local media take a strong interest in the electoral process this does seem to resonate with local people. Similarly, where there is the opportunity of making contact directly with the public in their homes (usually via leaflets through the door), this too can have a significant effect. On the other hand, most (but not all) publicity efforts in public spaces appear to have had minimal impact.

May 2002 pilots
The research team examined The Electoral Commission’s overall evaluation of the 2002 pilots and their summation of the information activities associated with those pilots. In total 30 local authorities tested a range of innovations directed at encouraging participation in the elections, increasing the diversity of voting methods, improving the efficiency of vote counting and increasing the information available to voters.\(^3\)

The Electoral Commission concluded that all the pilot authorities recognised the importance of the effective promotion of new ways of voting. Generally, more money was spent on publicity by the authorities conducting multi-channel pilots, where the message to be communicated was more complex. Most authorities had good coverage from local and regional press, and local radio was particularly receptive to news about the innovative voting methods.

Direct communication with electors was also a key tool. A number of councils piloting all postal ballots mounted a range of innovative events including three – Stevenage,
Making an impact: the promotion of electoral pilot schemes

Trafford and Chorley – that installed large thermometers on the front of the Town Hall, which were updated each day showing the percentage of ballots returned. Another, Middlesbrough, produced videos showing how to complete a ballot paper in a number of minority ethnic languages.

For those multi-channel pilot authorities, particularly where the pilots took place in only a few wards and a more focused campaign was required, direct communication was critical. In St Albans, electors in the pilot wards received through their letterbox first an explanatory leaflet together with their personal identification number and then a CD-ROM with a second voter identification number containing a step-by-step audio and video guide and details of a telephone helpline. In Newham, electronic voting equipment was demonstrated to the public on five days in April. A number of councils targeted the youth media and, as in Liverpool and Sheffield, set up dedicated youth websites.

Of the 30 authorities running pilot schemes, only one – Hyndburn – sought to provide voters with more information about the candidates standing in their area. The council paid for the cost of delivery for one electoral address for each political party and independent candidate in each ward to be sent to every voter on the electoral register. The purpose of the scheme was to test whether extending the availability of information about candidates to voters would increase participation in the elections. Turnout in Hyndburn was 35.8%, slightly higher than the 32% recorded at the 2000 local elections and the national average in 2002. Feedback received by the council, based upon a small-scale survey of 144 people in the days following the election, suggested that a significant majority (78%) felt that receiving leaflets made no difference to whether they voted or not. The council did not, however, seek to ascertain what people thought of the literature they received. The Commission has stated that it believes there is a need for more information-based pilots to examine the sorts of information that could assist voters.

Overall, The Electoral Commission concluded that the local authorities’ campaigns to publicise the pilot schemes were ‘professional and comprehensive’. When aggregated the 13 telephone surveys by NOP for the Commission in pilot authority areas showed 65% to be aware of the new arrangements for voting in their area. Fifty-eight percent recalled seeing some publicity about the new methods of voting, but fewer – 52% – said they felt either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ well informed about the new methods of voting. The most commonly seen promotional methods were a leaflet through the door, seen by 32%, a local newspaper advert (17%) and a TV advertisement or programme (16%). The importance of good communication and promotion of the pilots is shown by the finding that nearly four out of 10 (37%) of non voters who did not know about the new methods said they would have been encouraged to vote had they known.

Key points
- It is easier to attract publicity for electoral pilots than for elections run in the normal way.
- Different localities retain their individual characteristics meaning that the same promotional activities work well in some areas and not so well in others.
- Where the local media take a strong interest in the electoral process this does appear to resonate with local people.
- Where there is the opportunity of making contact directly with the public in their homes (usually via leaflets through the door) this can have a significant effect on levels of voter awareness.
- Most (but not all) publicity efforts in public spaces appear to have minimal impact on levels of awareness.
The views of electoral administrators

A questionnaire was sent to all UK local authorities, to assessors in Scotland and to the Chief Electoral Office in Northern Ireland. In total, 426 questionnaires were distributed. Respondents were encouraged to consult with their communications departments (where appropriate) when replying. How many actually did is not known but, judging from the responses to the open-ended questions, it would appear that very few did so.

The research team regards the 278 responses received, representing a 65% response rate, as satisfactory and is extremely grateful to all those electoral administrators and others who took the time to fill in such a relatively lengthy questionnaire. The response was achieved by an original posting, which was followed by at least four e-mail reminders. Of the 278 who replied to the survey some 258 completed the questionnaire. Those who chose not to complete the questionnaire were, in the main, from county councils, for whom the detailed subject matter was less relevant than it was for the district councils that hold responsibility for electoral registration. Nonetheless the respondents did represent a broad range of authorities in terms of types of councils, geographical spread and urban/rural breakdown. However, it should be noted that the sample, like virtually all surveys covering UK local authorities, under-represents the inner-city areas.

Analysis of the returns reveals that response rates ranged from 100% in Scotland to 81% in Wales, 65% from the English districts (largely rural), 53% from the Metropolitan and Unitary authorities and 42% from the London boroughs. So, although the overall response rate is good, it does need to be borne in mind that it is slightly skewed in favour of small town, suburban and rural authorities. However, based on the in-depth interviews undertaken with a wide range of local authorities, the research team believes that the sample fairly represents the views of local authorities about electoral affairs across the UK.

Given that the main purpose of the survey was to gain information about the effectiveness of communications and information activity in stimulating registration and voting (particularly postal voting) it is reasonable to assume that the non-respondents would, in general, be less active in this sphere than the respondents. This claim is made partly on the basis of common sense but also upon meetings with a range of electoral administrators (both via in-depth interviews and at various national gatherings). The research team does not believe that there is a whole stratum of electoral activity or opinion that the survey has failed to unearth.

4 The term ‘postal voting’ has increasingly come to signify both postal and proxy voting, as opposed to the official catch-all term ‘absent voting’, which, particularly since the advent of postal voting on demand, is increasingly misleading. So, in this report we use the term ‘Postal voting’ to refer to both postal and proxy voting, unless specified to the contrary.
The analysis that follows is based on both the statistical data that the survey produced but also, just as valuably, on the wide range of responses received to the survey’s open-ended questions (quotations in this section are drawn from this source). The analysis also draws on the views expressed by electoral administrators at an open meeting held during the Association of Electoral Administrators annual general meeting and seminar at Harrogate in February 2002.

Overview

Despite the undoubted efforts of those engaged in the processes of electoral administration, the overwhelming message from the survey is essentially negative. A comment from an outer London borough typified a very general attitude when they told the research team, ‘Whatever the extent of publicity, it is not felt that it has any significant impact on response rates’. Similar sentiments were expressed by respondents across the country. One authority’s view, for example, was that ‘there is no evidence that publicity made any difference to level of response to the canvass’, while another was even more brutal: ‘I think that virtually all publicity and advertising is a waste of time and money’. Another summed up the general mood when they said: ‘Apathy appears to be worldwide – sadly’.

However, it is in the spirit of the respondent from a Midlands unitary authority who stated that ‘Some success can be achieved but all the methods only offer marginal improvements’ that the research team approaches this analysis. The utility of the following analysis lies in informing authorities about those initiatives which do appear to have a positive impact, marginal or otherwise and, equally usefully, steering them away from those activities that do not appear to have made any sort of measurable impact on the electoral process.

The registration process

This section examines respondents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of various methods of information and communication in connection with the processes of registration. The word ‘processes’ is used because the stages of registration – making contact with ‘attainers’ (those approaching 18 years of age), gathering returns for the annual autumn canvass and conducting rolling registration – represent different but linked stages. Consequently, while the publicity efforts geared to these activities do differ there is a huge overlap as well. Thus a major campaign to raise awareness of the autumn canvass is inevitably going to spill over to those who are contemplating moving and therefore might need to participate in the rolling registration process. However, respondents were asked about both activities, and the research team has tried to draw out any major differences in perception in terms of the impact of publicity as it affects the separate registration activities.

Autumn canvass activity

The research team established the general context of publicity during the registration process by asking respondents how many reminders they sent out during the autumn canvass. Of the 225 respondents to this question 41% said they sent out just one reminder after having delivered the registration form. Forty-two percent said they sent out two, 15% sent out three while 2% sent out four. One highly tenacious authority sent out six reminders. In terms of timing, the authorities stated that most of their mailings go out in September and October with a smaller number going out in November, with one authority sending out reminders as late as January. And it is by no means universal to follow-up these reminders with visits by personal canvassers – 64% said they did but a substantial minority, 36%, said they did not.

A concern was expressed that with the draft register now being required to be published by 1 December rather than 15 February, the annual update process has become less thorough with fewer reminder calls or mailings, resulting in a poorer response level. One officer put it like this:

\[
\text{Compressed period} + \text{fewer reminders} = \text{lower response levels.}
\]

Some also felt that the recent change to the law, which would allow people to exercise some choice over who
can have access to their registration details, might mean that the household form, used in the annual update, will need to be scrapped in favour of an individual form, like that used for rolling registration. They feared that this would make the job of canvassers that much more difficult, as it was hard enough to try and talk to one member of the household, let alone each individual member.

The tactic of using warnings that not registering to vote would lead to a refusal of credit and a possible fine was recommended by some. One metropolitan authority said that their final reminder leaflet, which stressed these consequences very firmly, had a much more positive effect than personal canvassers.

An English unitary authority echoed the views of many when they said that they found the most positive reaction was from contacting people personally on their doorsteps, but that they were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit canvassers. The results were clear, they said: ‘Registration has gone down in the areas where we have found it difficult to recruit canvassers’.

**Posters**

The first communication question related to the use of posters. Respondents were asked whether or not they had ever supported the annual canvass by using the nationally produced posters. Of the 258 respondents the majority – 61% – said they had. However, as to their effectiveness, there was considerable doubt among the 157 that had used them, with only 12% saying they thought they had helped improve registration, 66% saying they did not know whether they improved registration and 22% saying they’d had no discernible impact.

In terms of the promotion of rolling registration, slightly fewer authorities – 114 in total (44%) – reported using national posters. Of these, 35% thought they had a favourable impact. A typical comment from those who were positive about the use of national posters was: ‘National advertisements do appear to have some impact on raising awareness’. But the majority view was typified by the respondent from a southern English county council who said: ‘It’s unlikely that posters have any effect on voter turnout’, or another respondent who observed that: ‘People don’t see posters, they are just part of the scenery’. Perhaps the single most pertinent observation came from the respondent who said: ‘I’m not happy that posters and other forms of publicity make any impact on the registration level ... It’s an expensive way of getting just a handful of extra people to register’.

A marginally smaller percentage of respondents – 43% – had used their own posters to promote the annual canvass, but with slightly more belief in their effect than that recorded for national posters. Twenty-three percent said they believed they had an effect, while 17% said they did not. Twenty-four percent of local authorities had used their own posters to promote rolling registration, of which a sizeable proportion – 39% – viewed them as a successful form of activity. The rest were unsure as to their effect.

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5 The Electoral Commission assumed statutory responsibility for publicity in relation to registration and other electoral matters – including leaflets and posters – on 1 July 2001. These materials were formerly produced by the Home Office.
The reported locations for posters were fairly predictable, with most being displayed in council premises such as notice boards, schools, libraries and other offices. Use was also made of doctors' surgeries, post offices, schools, temples and mosques (although no other places of worship were mentioned).

Direct mail and leaflets

There was probably more enthusiasm for the use of direct mail than for any other method of communication. For example, one London borough told the research team they believed that direct mail was the single most effective means of making contact with electors, while a borough council in the Midlands explained that: 'The first year the postal/proxy leaflets were sent to every property was in 1999 and the postal votes doubled. Every year since they have steadily increased'. And a south of England district council stated that: 'By writing directly to new occupiers we have already received a much greater return of rolling registration forms (in a non election year) than we did in the general election year when we did not write'. But a northern metropolitan borough pointed out that these operations did not come cheap: 'Direct mail shots to all households are comparatively costly for little tangible return', they commented.

'Make sure your voice is heard' poster – Ealing Council

'Make yourself heard' leaflet – Brighton & Hove Council
Direct mail to attainers was used by 19% of authorities but, of those offering an opinion, only 23% believed it played a positive role in the registration process, 20% thought it did not and the overwhelming majority – 57% – was unsure of its value. Only 7% said they used other forms of direct mail – for example to black and minority ethnic groups, disabled groups, schools and homeless hostels as well as enclosures with the annual canvass form – but here there was a high rate of satisfaction, albeit in small numbers, with 74% claiming that it had some utility.

Councils tended to make far more use of centrally produced leaflets (either emanating from the Home Office6 or The Electoral Commission) to promote the annual canvass than produce their own, but of the 24% that had, 31% thought that they had been effective. The Electoral Commission’s ‘Make Your Voice Heard’ leaflet was used by 50% of respondents in 2001, of whom 23% thought it had improved registration although the respondent from one southern district council commented: ‘The recent “Who Controls Who? Votes are Power” posters did not seem clear in the message they were trying to get across’.

As part of rolling registration, The Electoral Commission’s leaflet ‘Make Your Voice Heard’ was used by 53% of councils, with 32% saying they thought it had a positive effect. Twenty-one percent of authorities had produced their own leaflets and about half, 51%, regarded these to be an effective form of communication.

These positive figures might well be because publicity that addresses new issues or changes in current procedures is probably perceived to be more effective than simply those that remind people of existing arrangements.

Linking with council tax departments to target people moving into an authority’s area is being used increasingly. Two district councils told the research team about their success in getting new residents to register by actively sending out forms with council tax correspondence. One council in particular said that new registrations had risen from 18-20 a month to over 300 a month as a result and a district council stated that they had achieved a 60% increase in rolling registrations targeting new residents in a similar way. The research team was told that people increasingly expect councils to work in joined-up ways – hence, in the words of one council official: ‘They’ll say ‘you know I’ve moved because you’ve sent me a council tax bill, so why haven’t you changed my registration?’” However, electoral administrators do need to be mindful of data protection issues when considering new initiatives. The most common practice in this field, i.e. asking council tax departments to include registration forms with information to new residents, or in welcome packs, would seem to achieve accurate targeting while still conforming to the principles of data protection.

Council publications

Half the sample – 130 local authorities – used their own council newspapers and magazines to promote registration. Of these, only 29% thought it had a noticeable effect – a relatively low figure. With regard to rolling registration, 113 respondents – 44% of the sample – used their own newspapers, with 40% believing it to be effective. The priority given to this form of communication by some councils was exemplified by a comment from

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6 Although, as mentioned in footnote 5, The Electoral Commission assumed full responsibility for electoral issues in July 2001 many of the people the research team spoke to referred to Home Office arrangements and campaigns.
one southern district council: ‘We do not allow any of the quarterly council magazines (delivered to every household) to be published without an electoral based article appearing in it’, they reported. Some councils reported an increase in the number of telephone calls requesting rolling registration forms when the subject had been publicised in their council magazine.

**Web-based publicity**

As internet penetration increases – now put at around 50% of all adults – it is possible to detect a greater impact in the use of the internet for registration purposes. Local authorities made marginally more use of their websites to promote rolling registration than they did to support the autumn canvass. Forty-five percent of authorities stated that they used their own websites for rolling registration with 32% saying they considered this to be effective; this compares with 43% who said they used it for the annual canvass, of whom 23% thought this was effective. One city council was particularly enthusiastic, stating that:

> It is very difficult to gauge if any of the forms of advertising have a real impact, with the exception of the website. Easy access to download forms (for registration and absent voting) was definitely well received and helped people to register who might otherwise have been unable to get a form by the deadline.

But a district council was probably more typical, reporting: ‘We have forms on the council website for people to download. I cannot recall receiving a single form using this method’.

Many councils now make registration forms downloadable – the only drawback to this method is that the return of the form can be problematic. Most authorities will not accept forms returned by e-mail though one does accept forms if they have been signed and scanned but this is a complicated process that does not offer an immediate way forward. Some councils will accept registration forms that have been faxed back to them and some are exploring the possibility of accepting electronic signatures; but in general the web remains a good way of downloading forms, if not yet of returning them.

Council intranets are used by just 14% of local authorities and here there is a reasonable belief that this is an effective way of reaching the council’s own employees with information about registration – some 35% of these councils believed this to be an effective method of communication.

The website www.rollingregistration.co.uk was mentioned by only 14% of respondents of whom only 19% thought it effective.

The research team came across a small number of authorities that had linked with the www.ihavemoved.com website, which would seem to be worth looking into for the future as a way of automatically linking new residents with web-based electoral information. Finally, one outer London authority reported that they were developing links with local web-based community networks to distribute electoral information.

**Other council activities**

Roadshows and events in schools and colleges, which consume enormous amounts of time, energy and resources, were, on the whole, regarded with some scepticism. Fifteen percent of authorities had mounted this sort of event for the general public but only 15% of these felt they could say that such activities had a beneficial effect. Sixteen percent had mounted similar events in schools and colleges with 20% of these respondents saying they had been worthwhile. Eight percent of respondents had used banners across the town hall or other building to promote registration but only 5% of this group believed it had achieved a positive impact. However, even with such an overwhelming ‘thumbs down’ generalisations have to be treated with care. For example, despite the general unpopularity of roadshows two councils expressed enthusiasm. One, in northern England, told the research team that: ‘A roadshow for the general public seems to be quite effective as it raises awareness and generates interest and may result in members of public filling in forms on the spot’.
Local news coverage

Articles in the local press about registration were widely used but not with a great deal of conviction. Fifty-one percent of councils reported using the local press in this way, with only 24% of these regarding it as effective. In some areas there was a good deal of co-operation. In one Midlands city the local evening newspaper not only ran articles about registration but also, as part of their editorial coverage, reprinted registration forms. This council was not alone in receiving such local press coverage. One Welsh authority, for example, reported that: ‘producing a copy of the form ‘A’ in the local press seemed to have a positive effect on the number of replies’. And while the local press in a Midlands district council did not reproduce the registration form the council did see value in achieving good press contacts: ‘We know that the press releases we give to media organisations are read and acted upon by the public’, they said. But others were more sceptical; an outer London borough, for example, reported: ‘Whatever the extent of publicity, it is not felt that it has any significant impact on response rates’ while one East Anglian district council said: ‘Local publicity only reaches a very small proportion of the community’.

Local media advertising

Advertisements in the local press to promote the annual canvass were used by 36% of respondents with 29% of these giving this activity a positive verdict. Nineteen percent of respondents had used local press advertisements to promote rolling registration with 35% believing this to have had a positive impact. Radio is a relatively expensive medium for authorities to use in seeking to raise registration rates – in many cases groups of authorities have combined together to minimise costs. However, there was significant scepticism about the utility of this medium as a means of reaching potential electors. Twenty-seven percent of authorities had said they had tried using radio to promote the annual canvass. Of these, 18% thought this to be an effective means of communication, but 15% thought it was not. A Scottish assessor stated that ‘Radio appeared to be the least successful means of communication’.

Election roadshow – South Ayrshire Council
while a northern metropolitan council reported that, ‘Radio advertising and buying advertising space has been extremely costly without any appreciable effect on registration increase’. On the other hand, a south of England city, with two strong local radio stations, was enthusiastic: ‘Radio advertising seemed to have the greatest impact’ they said, before adding ‘but is hugely expensive for one council to take on’.

National publicity

Outside of the control of local authorities is national publicity, and in particular radio and television advertising and editorial coverage. Because the research covered the activities that local authorities themselves undertook in relation to promoting registration the research team did not specifically ask for views about the effectiveness of using the national media. Nonetheless, a number of unprompted responses were received which make it worth offering a few observations.

In general, respondents offered positive feedback as to the effectiveness of national advertising – ‘National television and newspaper campaign always seem to generate more interest’ a respondent from a south of England district council noted, while a Welsh authority said: ‘The most effective medium is TV, of course it is more expensive. It certainly generates most phones calls and response to the canvass’. The respondent from the south of England had been particularly impressed with The Home Office’s television advertising campaign, indeed, he or she wanted to go further suggesting that the soap operas should be prevailed upon to include material about the annual autumn canvass into their regular storylines. Even those authorities sceptical of the value of publicity did concede that the power of television advertising could not be denied. A south of England borough council, while expressing a generally gloomy view about the efficacy of media efforts to publicise registration, did concede that ‘the TV adverts sponsored by the Home Office did, however, appear to have some effect’.

Registration – conclusion

Overall it is possible to discern a trend in the responses which suggests that local authorities believe that media and communication tools can play a role in boosting the rolling registration process but they are more sceptical of its value in promoting the annual autumn canvass. The consensus view was that the autumn canvass was best promoted by effective door-to-door activity, either in the form of direct mail shots or visits by personal canvassers or preferably both.

In concluding this section it is important to bear in mind that the effectiveness, or otherwise, of particular activities is bound to vary enormously depending on local conditions, local traditions and local resources. One northern city and a Scottish authority, as has already been observed, were the only enthusiasts for running electoral roadshows. By way of another example, an outer London borough told the research team that, given the amount of time that people in the capital spend sitting in traffic, they found ‘the best adverts for us have been on the back of London transport buses. People ring the office and state they have just seen our advert on the back of the bus’. But this was not the case in other areas. A West Country authority, for example, always used to promote registration on the back of buses. Last year they decided to experiment by observing what the effect would be if they dropped bus advertising – they discovered that it had no discernible impact on the rate of registration.

Finally, when discussing registration, it is worth drawing attention to a worrying issue that local authorities reported both in this research and in the in-depth interviews – the growing occurrence of threats and even, on occasion, actual violence against canvassers. A northern district council, for example, reported that ‘the attitude of some of the households which have to be canvassed has increased in belligerency’, while an assessor in Scotland made similar observations. This relates to much broader issues about social exclusion and the fact that in some areas all doorstep inquiries are regarded with suspicion and even hostility. This is a relatively new factor which inner city authorities, in particular, are having to learn how to deal with.
Voter turnout

Analysis of the replies about encouraging voter turnout reveals the same pessimism as with the registration process, although using publicity in order to encourage people to apply for postal votes was viewed more enthusiastically. But if electoral administrators are not totally enthused about the efficacy of communicating with electors about voting, this in part reflects the fact that many contest the notion that this lies within their area of responsibility. A Midlands city authority was typical, arguing: ‘There is little the electoral administrator can do to encourage voters to vote, this is really down to the politicians’. Thus the number of initiatives taken in terms of communicating with the public about voting issues appears to be significantly less than those that have been mounted to encourage registration.

For example, of the 258 respondents who filled in the questionnaire, only 20% said they had ever made use of national posters encouraging people to vote – this compares with the 61% who had used national posters to encourage registration. And of the 52 who did use these posters, only 13% thought it had made any contribution to getting people to the polls. Interestingly more authorities – 28% – had used their own posters and a higher proportion – 25% – believed that they had been effective.

The biggest single activity undertaken by electoral officers in the context of encouraging people to vote was in getting articles or news stories picked up by the local press – around half of the respondents (51%) had done this, although only 18% assessed this as an effective intervention. A similar number (47%) had placed articles in council newspapers or magazines, with 20% viewing this as a positive initiative. Thirty-two percent of councils had placed adverts in their local newspapers, with 20% of these believing that this had been a useful activity. Forty percent had used the council website to encourage voter turnout, with 21% saying this had a positive effect. So, overall, the view was that the most effective promotional activity in terms of getting people to vote was producing their own posters, with other commonly used methods – articles and advertisements in council magazines, local papers and the use of council websites – all coming a close second.
Promoting postal votes

Given the recent changes in the rules affecting postal voting, the research team was particularly interested to find out if local authorities had used, and were enthusiastic about, information and communication activities in this area. In summary it is fair to read the results as indicating that the respondents thought that the process had benefited from positive information interventions. Thirty-five percent of respondents had used the national posters that advertised postal votes and just over half of these thought that this strategy had been successful. Forty percent of respondents had produced their own posters and an even larger proportion – 56% – believed that this had added to the uptake of postal votes. Fifty-seven percent had made use of The Electoral Commission’s postal vote leaflet and again a large proportion of these – 47% – thought this had improved applications. Twenty-eight percent had produced their own leaflets and here the proportion with a positive view climbs even higher, with 82% saying they believed these to have made a positive contribution.

Articles in the local press about postal voting had been initiated by 43% of authorities, with 55% believing they had made a difference. Thirty percent had advertised in the local press with 60% reporting a favourable response. Forty-six percent had made use of the councils’ own publications to encourage postal voting and 55% thought this had been beneficial. A large number – 48% – had used the council website and 53% reported that this had increased uptake. Only 11% of authorities had used the www.postalvotes.co.uk website but, of these, 53% spoke positively of having done so.

Of the 9% of councils that had tried other forms of direct mail, for example, sending electors postal voting forms along with poll cards, 92% believed this had been effective. And this tallies with the much larger group of the 49% authorities that had promoted the new postal vote arrangements alongside registration, of which no fewer than 81% thought this had had a positive effect.

A Welsh authority, for example, confirmed that: ‘The inclusion of postal voter requests with electoral registration forms showed a 100% increase in people interested in having a postal or proxy vote’.

Very few had attempted road shows and/or events to promote postal vote uptakes and those that had were less than enthusiastic about the results.

Nonetheless it is clear from the research that overall, in terms of promoting postal and proxy votes, local authorities do believe that publicity can made a significant positive impact; and this applies to virtually all forms of publicity but in particular to those that have been produced locally.

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7 The Representation of the People Act 2000, which came into effect in 2001, provided that postal votes should be available on demand. Applications may be for a particular election, a definite period or indefinitely.
Assessment of effectiveness of communication activities

Questionnaire respondents were asked to step back and give an overall assessment of the various methods of communication that they had utilised. They were first asked which methods they regarded as most successful. Figure 5 below shows the unprompted replies of those methods receiving more than one mention.

These figures suggest that, despite their misgivings, local authority electoral administrators are strongly of the view that it is their authorities’ own direct efforts that are the most significant in terms of reaching electors. The first four methods mentioned are all local authority initiatives. These are followed by radio and the press with 14 mentions, and then further examples of local authority activity. In all, 108 respondents identified council initiatives as being the most effective means of reaching electors while just 25 said that some form of media or national press activity was most effective. These figures represent a large vote of self-confidence by electoral administrators in their own abilities to communicate with their voting public.

The figures make interesting reading when set against the quantitative work undertaken by NOP on behalf of The Electoral Commission. Fifty-eight percent of the 3,224 adults in 13 of the 30 pilot areas recalled, during the last few weeks leading to the elections, seeing publicity or information about the new methods of voting, while 40% did not. Figure 6 provides a breakdown of the sources quoted by respondents who had seen such publicity or information.

In other words, these findings support the response from the electoral administrators, i.e. that direct mail has the most impact on potential voters. The preponderance of
Respondents to the research team’s questionnaire were also asked to identify what they considered to be the least successful ways of reaching electors. Responses to this question are presented in Figure 7 and exclude those methods that received only one mention.

These figures are almost, although not quite, a mirror-image of the earlier positive responses. There is extreme scepticism about the value of using posters, notices or even advertisements as effective means of reaching electors. The administrators are also sceptical about the mass media’s value, but of the two methods cited as most effective – direct mail and door-to-door contact – there is, in this list of failed methods, no mention.

**Figure 7: Overall, of all the methods you have tried which do you think are the least successful ways of reaching electors (number)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posters and notices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road shows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On buses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press releases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own publicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th birthday cards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Base: 258 electoral administrators**

*Source: CLEAR local authority questionnaire*

NOP’s findings, in indicating that leaflets through the door were the most recalled form of election activity, also throws light on one of the early findings from the evaluations of the 2002 local election pilots. One northern metropolitan borough council ran a pilot in which they offered the free delivery of an additional election leaflet to all the competing parties. In the event only the two main parties participated in the experiment and then not fully. Nonetheless, one in four of those polled, and who had voted, said that receiving the additional leaflet had contributed to their decision to vote.

Case study

Further support for the argument that councils can communicate electoral matters effectively via door-to-door deliveries comes from a Midlands borough council that also ran a pilot voting scheme in 2002 (which included voting by telephone and by internet). Early analysis of their evaluation indicates the power of local authorities to communicate. They polled electors arriving at polling stations about whether or not they knew that they could, have voted by telephone or the internet. Given that these electors had deliberately not chosen to take advantage of these new methods of voting, it is impressive that 96% of respondents reported being aware of the alternative means of voting. When respondents were asked for their sources of information about the experiments, 77% replied that it was the council’s own literature and promotions that were their primary sources of information. This was followed by the media, which was referred to by 18% of the borough’s respondents.
In terms of encouraging people to vote there was an overwhelming consensus that the possibility that non-registrants might find it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain credit, was by far and away the most effective message to be got across during registration campaigns. One Welsh authority, for example, told us that 95% of the queries that came in about registration related to the credit issue; concerns about the possibility of being fined £1,000 for non-registration coming in as the only other major issue of inquiry.

When it came to encouraging people to vote – either by post or otherwise – the following slogans are worth highlighting:

**Figure 8: Effective registration slogans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slogan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Register to vote, you will be X if you don’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t get mad – just get a little cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t care how you vote, we care that you can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use it don’t lose it or Use it, don’t lose it – Get cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you don’t register you can’t vote, if you don’t vote, it won’t register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving house? – Don’t leave your Vote behind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tick it? Yes you can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join the Generation X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No vote, no voice, no credit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 9: Effective voting slogans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slogan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have your say on polling day. Don’t get angry, get a little cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every vote cast is a voice heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have your say…………….on 6th May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your vote does count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you doing 2nd May? Make it a day to vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use your vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Your Cross in – Vote June 7th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responsibility for mobilisation

However, many electoral administrators made it clear that they did not believe that persuading people to vote fell within their area of activity. One south of England district council, for example, explained that they did not use slogans: ‘We attempt to ensure that all residents are registered and therefore entitled to vote. Turning out the voter is largely down to elected members and candidates’, they said. This view was echoed by a respondent from a Midlands borough who said: ‘I feel that turnout is the responsibility of politicians. Electoral Administrators can only provide the framework – it is politicians who influence turnout’.

New initiatives

The research team received a relatively small number of responses to the open-ended question, which asked respondents to identify new ideas currently being considered to promote electoral participation. The biggest single category (with 10 responses) was that of using the pilot voting schemes as opportunities for more general electoral promotion. However, eight authorities in England intended taking advantage of the introduction of citizenship education into the national curriculum in September 2002 to mount special citizenship workshops for young people.

Party initiatives

The questionnaire also asked respondents whether they had observed any effective new communications initiatives being undertaken by political parties in their areas. The major innovation observed was that of an increase in the parties’ attempts to increase the uptake of postal votes among their supporters. A northern borough, for example, reported that ‘local councillors targeted their own areas for postal voters which increased the postal vote figures dramatically. However, each party obviously only targeted the voters they thought would vote for their particular party’. Another stated that a local party’s targeting was so intense that even electors who had expressed no interest in receiving a postal vote were being sent application forms. And an interesting initiative was reported from a district council in the south who told the research team that ‘[one party] put a version of the postal vote form on their website for people to use and a number of people did use this facility’.

Expenditure on communication activities

In the main, local authorities did not spend large sums of money publicising electoral issues. The research revealed that in the last financial year (2000/01) the mean figure for annual expenditure on publicity was £3,000. However, the true figure is probably significantly below this since the mean has been artificially boosted by one or two very high spending councils – two spent between £35,000 and £40,000 in the year in question. The more useful figure is the mode – the figure occurring most frequently – and that is £1,000. Indeed even that cannot usefully be regarded as an ‘average’, because there were many non-responses to this question and, although only one respondent replied that they had no budget, it is probable that many others in the same position simply passed over this question. The money allocated for promotion was spent roughly evenly between promoting registration and promoting voting (whether at polling stations or by post).

Case study

An inner London borough undertook an ambitious initiative in the run-up to the 2002 local elections. In an attempt to reach young voters they commissioned a 30-second cinema advert specifically targeted at them, which sought to publicise their election pilot. But the results were disappointing for despite it being shown around 20 times in cinemas throughout the borough, turnout in the election fell (as it did across London) and none of the voters who filled in brief questionnaires at polling stations referred to the cinema adverts as a factor in motivating them to vote.
Monitoring and tracking

One of the problems facing researchers in this area is the lack of significant quantities of robust data upon which to base observations. The respondent from Slough offered the observation: ‘How do you know what works and what doesn’t? I think Lord Beaverbrook said, “I know that half of my advertising is wasted, but I don’t know which half”. That all sounds logical enough but it does not bear examination. Not that Lord Beaverbrook did or did not utter the aphorism but it is not the case that it is difficult to track the results of advertising. ITV regional companies, for example, are frequently used by major advertisers to test the effectiveness of a new advertising campaign. By confining the advertising to one particular region, and by not undertaking any additional promotional activity, it is possible to track sales volumes against density and frequency of television advertising.

Similarly it is possible to track the impact of information and communication activities on electoral registration, postal vote applications and even turnout. But to be effective such tracking requires the taking of some awkward political decisions. For just as the advertisers using a single ITV region have, as a control group, the rest of the country, so electoral administrators would require a control group consisting of the rest of the constituency or local authority in order to test the validity of their findings. In other words, experiments could be undertaken but they would require making additional efforts in one or two wards as compared to the rest of the locality. And these experiments could not involve using advertising or the local media, since there is no way of isolating the control groups from these activities. Thus the only effective means of communications that can be tested are those involving door-to-door activity – leaflets, council publications, canvassers and so on.

Some authorities, particularly in those areas that in 2000 and 2002 undertook election pilots have used opinion polling, in one form or another, in an attempt to uncover links between information and communications activity and electoral participation. While this form of research can reveal useful insights and trends it is never possible to use this information to make any definitive pronouncements. This is because respondents to opinion polls either do not remember, or deliberately lie about both their actual level of electoral participation and about the motivations behind this activity. And, even in circumstances where it is possible to correlate say media consumption with political trends, as noted earlier, it is notoriously difficult to draw any conclusions about causality.

Some of the respondents did come up with interesting proposals as to how the effectiveness of electoral information could be tracked. A southern district council, for example, suggested adding to the registration form questions such as ‘Where did you learn/hear about electoral registration?’ or ‘What prompted you to fill in this form?’ The problem with such a proposal is that it is well-established that the more questions a form contains the lower the overall response rate is likely to be. Thus trying to use the form to increase knowledge about response rates would probably have the effect of depressing them.

Having said that, it has to be recognised that very few authorities undertake any sort of evaluation of their own communication efforts. Respondents were asked if they had any statistical evidence to support their views about the effectiveness of their various methods of communication with the public. From the initial replies, 21 authorities were identified as indicating that they did undertake some form of systematic monitoring. All 21 were recontacted and asked if they could provide any data which might indicate the success or otherwise of their communication initiatives. Only two authorities responded and it emerged that, in both cases, their monitoring tracked the return of either voter registration forms or applications for postal votes chronologically and geographically but not in relation to particular publicity efforts.

Some authorities did provide details about various informal evaluation activities, such as staff noting that enquiries seemed to increase following particular initiatives. An example of this, which was not specific enough for the purposes of analysis, came from another southern district who reported: ‘We do not have scientific
data but can gauge the response to postal voting etc. by
the numbers requesting forms. We often ask telephone
callers what made them call regarding registration and it
is very unusual for them to say that they saw a notice.
We also know that when adverts or articles have
appeared in the local press our phones have been less
than red hot in the days following’.

Positive feedback

The new rules applying to postal votes have clearly
increased the rate of applications and made some sort of
effective tracking more feasible. A northern metropolitan
borough, for example, said that they had received over
10,000 postal vote applications as a result of sending out
a letter and form to every elector. Another local authority,
on this occasion a southern district, said that ‘we had
many calls from electors saying they’d just received the
poll card and saw on it “the invitation” to apply for a postal
vote’. A Scottish authority explained that school children
in their locality were given letters to take home, enclosing
a postal voting form, and that this enabled them to
monitor these forms as they came in; they reported that
this produced good (but not quantified) results. An East
Anglian district, on the other hand, mounted a special
campaign targeting 18 years olds and received not a
single response. A Scottish assessor told the researchers
that they received an increased number of calls when
articles about registration or postal voting appeared in the
local press or were broadcast on radio. This was echoed
by a northern metropolitan borough which said that they
had received a high volume of postal vote applications
forms as a result of a form being published in the local
newspaper. And a Midlands district reported that they
received 5,000 applications for postal votes as a result
of including the form in a double page spread about
electoral registration in their residents’ magazine –
the best response they had had to any initiative.

Negative feedback

Some councils reported negative feedback, however.
For example, a Welsh council stated that following the
placing of advertisements in local newspapers they
noticed no particular increase in feedback (they did not
specify whether this related to registration or postal
voting). But the prize for negative feedback has to go
to a Midlands district council; in an imaginative initiative
they placed postal vote application forms with local
estate agents and travel companies and they also
displayed posters in these locations in order to
courage those about to move or go on holiday to apply
for a postal vote. These forms were coded for monitoring
purposes. At the end of the process the council was able
to report that the total number of postal vote applications
returned as a result of this initiative was precisely zero.

Conclusions

So what are the conclusions that can be drawn from this
survey of the opinions and practices of more than two
thirds of UK local authorities? Perhaps the overall
conclusion is best summed up by the respondent from
a Midlands district who opined: ‘Some success can be
achieved but all the methods only offer marginal
improvements’. As a summation this cannot be denied
but nor should it be dismissed, for it is precisely at the
margins that change can be achieved.

However, some radical solutions were also proposed.
An East Anglian district wanted to see a change in the law
making it easier to penalise those who did not respond to
the autumn canvass. ‘The resources needed to prosecute
non-responders is prohibitive, and would place more
financial burden on councils who already spend more on
those who do not bother to send their forms back than
the majority of people who respond promptly’, they
complained. And a southern county council had an even
more radical proposal for improving turnout, perhaps
reflecting the ‘Don’t get mad, get even’ philosophy.
‘Doubling of council tax for non-voters would be very
effective’, they argued – true, no doubt, but somewhat
outside the remit of this research project.

The survey of local authorities revealed that a large
number of local authorities commit resources to the
production of a range of publicity materials. Posters
and leaflets are by far the most common, but many
authorities also produce press advertisements, use their
council newspapers or magazines and others produce,
or have produced, promotional items such as beer mats, bookmarks and carrier bags. Yet very few of those authorities that spend money on these items think they have any positive effect – either on raising registration levels, encouraging people to apply for postal votes or actually getting people to turn out to vote. For example, only 23% of authorities who said that they produced their own posters to support the annual registration process thought they improved levels of registration, compared to almost 60% who said they didn’t know whether they had an effect or not.

Thus the question remains why do they do it? For those that said they didn’t know if they had any effect, then at least they could be said to be covering all bases ‘just in case’. For those that thought they did have a positive effect, then the rationale is clear. But if they do not think they have any effect, yet still produce them, what reasoning is being deployed? A number of possible reasons have been suggested by electoral administrators – ‘it is expected’, ‘it is to keep Members happy’, ‘we have to be seen to try’ and so on. Others have said that they thought that promotional materials did have an effect, but only at the margins.

Key points

- Overall electoral administrators believe that direct mail is the most effective way of reaching potential voters and posters are among the least effective.
- Personal canvassers, nationally produced posters and leaflets, council magazines and local media are the most common methods of communicating with electors during the annual update of the register.
- Councils believe their communication has much more effect in the context of getting people to apply for postal votes than in getting people to vote.
- The number of initiatives taken in terms of communicating with the public about voting issues appears to be significantly less than those that have been mounted to encourage registration.
- Many electoral administrators question the idea that encouraging people to vote is their responsibility.
- It is important that other council departments co-operate with electoral administrators in order to facilitate the compilation of accurate registers.
An evaluation of publicity materials

One of the key aims of this research is to identify how to produce information that people will at least be more likely to read. In other words, why might some materials prove to be effective and some less so? Bearing in mind the communication objectives in the local promotion of electoral issues – to promote the registration process, to raise awareness and to persuade people to take action – good promotional materials should aim to achieve the following:

• use language that is appropriate for the audience;
• be produced in a format that is accessible to its audience;
• convey a clear message;
• be attractive or eye-catching;
• be clear who it is aimed at;
• encourage action on the part of the audience.

The research team looked at a number of samples sent by electoral administrators to see how they measured up against these objectives.

The materials examined were aimed either to support the annual canvass, rolling registration, application for postal or proxy voting or to encourage people to use their votes. The messages used to express these aims were of a common type – ‘Make your voice heard’, ‘Don’t lose your vote’, ‘No Vote, No Voice’, ‘Don’t lose your voice’ and so on. These stress the importance of action now to claim a fundamental right that it is assumed people will want to exercise given the chance. As previously indicated, many of the respondents pointed to the effectiveness of the stick, as opposed to the carrot, stating that in their experience telling people that not registering to vote will mean that getting credit becomes difficult is the most effective message. A smaller number mentioned that the threat of the £1,000 fine is the best motivator for reluctant registrants.

The fact that there is a broad consensus around a familiar theme suggests that in marketing terms branding is potentially strong; the message being a major part of that branding. Assessing how strong that branding is in reality throws up several issues:

• How is that message then used – that is to say, how is it displayed and in what visual context is it portrayed. Are there consistencies?
• There seems to be a family of messages rather than one message, which potentially weakens the brand.
• What is the relationship between this national brand and the local responsible agencies, i.e. the electoral administrators?

Some local authorities clearly prefer to use local branding, either by using a message of their own or by using a council logo and ‘home grown’ graphics or illustration. Given that the maintenance of the electoral register is a local responsibility then local contact numbers, council logos, council house style will be a priority for such authorities. But this does seem to lead to local officers feeling almost obliged to try and make their
The Commission also ran a campaign targeting young people in the run-up to the 2 May local elections – the ‘Votes are Power’ campaign – using images styled like political activists’ graffiti. Interestingly, there was no generalised ‘Use your vote’ or ‘Remember 2 May is election day’ campaign in 2002, although the Commission’s plans for 2003 do extend to wider audiences. Unlike many locally run campaigns an evaluation of the ‘Votes Are Power’ campaign was undertaken. The campaign consisted of posters in London Underground stations, national posters, radio and internet advertising and was delivered in two waves (February and April). The results show that after the April wave, 1 in 5 16-24 year-olds surveyed recognised the posters; among London Underground users this recognition was 31%, about one in three. The main message that young people took from the advertising was ‘It is important to vote’. And among those who remembered seeing the campaign a higher percentage of people said they would be likely to vote than those who did not recall it.

Nationally produced materials
Currently The Electoral Commission produces materials for local use, including leaflets with an electoral registration form attached and one with a postal vote form attached. Both forms are ready gummed and have a blank address box to write in the address of the local electoral registration office or for a local office to stamp in their address.

The Commission’s two leaflets for a general audience follow a consistent style and were designed when the Home Office still bore responsibility for electoral issues. They are bright and eye catching. They use the message ‘Make your voice heard’. The text has been approved for clarity by the Plain English Campaign and bears its Crystal Mark. There is general information, followed by notes on completing the form and answers to frequently asked questions. The leaflet is offered in other formats including audio cassette, British Sign Language video, in Braille and in a number of other languages. For further information, people are referred to the websites www.rollingregistration.co.uk and www.postalvotes.co.uk and to their local electoral registration office.
In broad terms the centrally produced leaflets would seem to meet all the research team’s criteria. Of course, they may not be to everyone’s liking and that may explain why not every council uses them, or supplements them with locally produced material. The research team found conflicting views during its interviews ranging from ‘I prefer to use local publicity – the national stuff is pretty non-descript, it has to appeal to everyone and doesn’t excite’ through ‘We use both national and local leaflets, though we find national posters awful’ to ‘We use national posters and leaflets – they have the Crystal Mark, we don’t want to reinvent the wheel’.

Making information accessible
Scope, the disability organisation, conducted some research following the local elections in May 2002 into how the electoral pilot schemes affected disabled people. Their main finding from a small sample of instructions sent to voters with postal ballots was that only a small minority informed electors that the information was available in other formats such as large print, Braille, audio tape or computer disk. The research team found a similar result in the sample of materials it looked at. This provision of information in alternative formats is a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). What is not made explicit in the DDA is a duty to advertise the fact that alternative formats are available, yet compliance with the spirit of the Act would seem to demand it. Scope, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and other disability charities would certainly recommend it.9

Creative ideas
How do the materials that are produced locally match up to the criteria? Well, results are mixed, perhaps unsurprisingly. There are many examples of creativity being applied to the task. A south of England city council merits a mention for a long series of inventive posters, leaflets and adverts to promote electoral registration with slogans like ‘Don’t get mad, just get a little cross’ and ‘Can you tick it? Yes, you can’. One Scottish council has produced very good leaflets aimed at young voters and disabled voters. A northern metropolitan borough council prior to the 2001 general election placed advertising boards around the local football ground bearing the slogan ‘Get your cross in – vote June 7th’. A southern borough council has produced striking posters aimed at first time voters with the slogan ‘Join the Generation X’. A small number of authorities sent bookmarks to the research team which they had produced as promotional items – one Midlands city council produced a particularly bright and colourful example. A southern city council took their message to the bar room with beer mats promoting electoral registration and postal voting arrangements. A northern city has produced a very comprehensive guide to elections and electoral registration for students. A local election leaflet from one southern city is notable for its use of information in a range of community languages and for printing the local contacts for the political parties for those wanting information about candidates and what they stand for.

8 The duty to provide information in accessible formats is contained in Section 21 of the DDA that came into force on October 1st 1999.

9 For more information on the Scope survey visit www.scope.org.uk
18th birthday cards
Greetings cards sent to ‘young attainers’ on their 18th birthday are now being employed by a number of authorities. Sometimes these are sent from the mayor of the authority, sometimes by the returning officer or chief executive. The Electoral Commission has developed its own to tie in with its ‘Votes are Power’ campaign, which is being sent to young attainers around London in partnership with the Association of London Government. These cards contain varying amounts of information about the electoral process and local contacts for the electoral registration office. Trying to get one design to appeal to all young people is impossible, just as with any other group of people. To be effective these cards would need to take their place alongside other cards from family and friends received by the young person and not go straight into the bin. So are these cards likely to pass what might be termed the ‘mantelpiece test’? To do that they would have to be bright and attractive, of good quality, look and feel like a birthday card and make the person feel special.
Case study

A novel approach to reaching young people on their 18th birthdays has been adopted by City of York Council. York teamed up with top daytime radio presenters Mark Radcliffe and the Boy Lard to produce a CD, which tells new voters all about the council and encourages them to get involved in local issues. The Wise Words CD is distributed free of charge to young people in York, when they reach the age of 18 and is also available to download on the York website http://www.york.gov.uk/wisewords/index.html.

Use your vote campaigns

A number of local authorities ran ‘Use Your Vote’ campaigns of one sort or another in the run up to this year’s local elections. One London borough elected a new style executive Mayor on the same day as holding elections for councillors in all of its newly constituted wards. As with other authorities, the boundary reviews that have changed many ward areas gave the council an opportunity to send an additional piece of communication to voters early this year. Typically this would include an introduction to explain to the voter that wards have changed across the area, that they may find that has altered the ward they are in followed by the name of the ward the elector is now in, and the polling station they will use come the next elections. The borough did this in January and also included a ‘Don’t forget to vote’ card for the mayoral and councillor elections using a design that was to be repeated during the actual election period. In the election period that design appeared on large poster sites by the side of major roads and in shopping centres.

Another London borough also ran a high profile campaign around the theme, ‘What takes two minutes and last four years’. Posters bearing this message, and the answer – ‘Your Vote on 2 May’ – appeared on sites around the borough two weeks before the elections. The council also produced a special eight-page edition of its magazine for residents dedicated to coverage of the elections, including a postal vote application form and a quiz.
Distribution
This section has been primarily concerned with the quality of promotional materials. Another important factor in how successful these materials are is distribution or placement. A survey carried out in August 2000 by Maidstone Borough Council is informative in this respect. This survey, which included questions on publicity, was sent to 2,000 households, selected at random, with 332 responses received. The results of a question relating to publicity materials noticed are presented in Figure 10:

What is striking about this survey is that posters have a hugely differential impact depending on where they are sited. Put them in post offices and four times as many people will notice them than posters inside buses. It also suggests that adverts on TV are much more powerful than adverts on radio or in other places. Of course, this is only one relatively small survey, but it is interesting nevertheless. At its simplest level, it is not just what you produce it is where it is placed that will determine its impact. Novel ways have been sought to get to people with messages about electoral issues. Registration leaflets have been put in estate agents to catch people as they move into an area. Doctors’ surgeries are also used. A number of authorities are now sending new residents welcome packs – either specially designed booklets or brochures or a collection of local and council information inside a folder or wallet. Electoral registration forms or electoral material are seen as forming an important part of such packs and are usually sent out using information from the council tax department. This sort of initiative presents a joined up service and usually gets a good response.

Research carried out at the University of Teesside into the effects of advertising on the decision to vote in Middlesbrough in May 1999 concluded that a small minority – some 2% – said that they had been influenced in their intention to vote by advertising. Though 15% of people said that they had been influenced by publicity material produced by Middlesbrough council – the vast majority (65.5%) by a leaflet drop through letterboxes, with TV (16%) and radio ads (7%) well behind. The study also found some evidence that younger voters, voters from minority ethnic communities, those voting in deprived wards and those who do not always vote are more likely to be influenced by advertising and publicity.

Figure 10: Publicity materials noticed (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publicity Materials</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posters in post offices</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverts on TV</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic notice board</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters on parish notice boards</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters at bus shelters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverts on radio</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters in libraries</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverts on council vans</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverts on back of till receipts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters in car parks</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters in buses</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 332 adults
Source: Maidstone Borough Council

10 Research conducted by Pamela Abbott and Roger Sapsford, The University of Teesside, May 1999.
Design of forms
The design of registration forms and any accompanying explanatory leaflets is also an area worth considering. A number of printing companies have tried to carve out a niche market for the printing of these forms – especially the ‘Form A’ used in the annual canvass. Consequently, the designs of many authorities’ forms are similar, perhaps with just the addition of their own council logo. Other authorities have taken a slightly more creative approach and commissioned their own design. One London borough is worth a mention for its consistent family of forms – ‘Form A’, accompanying leaflet, rolling registration and postal vote form. Each follows a clear design template and is well laid out, clear and easy to understand. Community language options are included, the date of the next local elections is clearly marked and a number of options are given for return of the forms. The postal vote application form has a particularly good question and answer section included on the accompanying leaflet.

Individual registration forms – such as those used for rolling registration – generally seem to have received more design attention, possible because these have been newly created forms rather than retreads of long established ones. The new requirement, enabling people to choose whether their details should be included in the edited register, may or may not lead to the adoption of individual forms, but will necessarily mean the adaptation of existing forms and new explanatory information.

The Electoral Commission has recently initiated a review of standard statutory and non-statutory forms used for election and electoral registration purposes. The review will examine the range and content of forms currently used in the electoral process; consider the need for forms to be prescribed in electoral legislation; identify examples of good practice and design; develop, and consult on, an improved set of forms; and prepare a strategy for their introduction.

Key points
• There is a lot of evidence of creative energy and effort going into locally produced materials.
• Most publicity is produced without a knowledge of how effective it is.
• While the quality of materials produced is inconsistent, the research team saw more examples of good quality than it did bad.
• Though there is a family of similar messages, with councils producing so much of their own material there is no single message.
• Views are mixed on whether national or local publicity is best.
• Councils should promote the availability of electoral communication in alternative formats to ensure it is accessible to all.
Quantitative and qualitative research

In seeking to understand how people receive political messages it is important to recognise two key points. First, that people’s interest in politics plays a major role in determining the extent to which they are conscious of attempts by political parties, local authorities or any other group to communicate with them. It is in this context that one has to appraise the responses, from both qualitative and quantitative research, about how much information, or publicity, respondents may or may not have seen. And second, that there is likely to be an element of respondents giving interviewers the answers they think they want to hear, or the answers that they believe to be the most socially acceptable.

Having said that, it would be sanguine to believe that there were no lessons for electoral administrators to draw from the soundings the research team took in its focus groups and the results of the polling done by NOP. For the overall flavour of the focus group discussions was one in which politics, and to some extent voting, were seen as activities that were not entirely ‘normal’. In this situation it is necessary for everyone involved in the political process to do as much as possible to make the ‘abnormal’ ‘normal’.

What came through from the focus group work is that people do want to be better informed, and specifically to be informed about the policies and candidates they are being asked to vote for. And while, overall, there is a degree of satisfaction among voters about their knowledge of the voting and registration systems, there is a lack of knowledge about parties, policies and politicians. In other words, people did not appear to blame the electoral system itself for their lack of political participation but they did blame the parties and politicians for failing to interest or excite them in its workings.

Opinion surveys

The Electoral Commission retained NOP to undertake quantitative polling among a national English sample in areas where there were local elections in May 2002 in addition to the 13 pilot areas survey discussed earlier in this report. In addition, the CLEAR research team conducted four focus groups timed to take place just before and just after voting in the May 2002 local elections. Two of the groups covered voters between the ages of 18 and 24 and two involved voters over the age of 24.

In their national survey, NOP asked respondents ‘how interested would you say you were in news about the local elections?’ Given the turnout of 32.8%, it is perhaps surprising that 54% said they were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ interested. And members of the focus groups in non-pilot areas also indicated a level of interest in local and national politics that exceeded their actual levels of electoral participation.
The research team was particularly interested to find out what respondents said were their main sources of information about the local elections. The poll shows that local newspapers still play an important role in the formation of local public opinion. Forty-two percent said they had read about the elections in their local newspapers; an almost equal amount – 40% – had seen coverage of the elections on television. Thirty-five percent had seen political advertisements on billboards, 19% had heard local radio coverage about the elections and 5% had accessed political information on the internet. However, 75% reported having had a leaflet or letter through their letterbox. It is clear that ‘traditional’ methods of political communication retain a pre-eminent position. These findings suggest that local authorities and local politicians are not in fact confronting a stubborn wall of indifference.

Focus group findings
In the focus group discussions the research team found that people were saying that far from suffering information overload they wanted more information – ‘I would happily read a book if they gave me one’, one group member said. But this desire, genuine or otherwise, to receive more political information, was combined with a strong sense of frustration, expressed especially forcibly by young people, at the fact that political information did not reach them – either in terms of their daily experiences or in terms of their ability to understand the content of the delivered political messages. For example, in one group all bar one of our young voters said that they tended not to see posters and leaflets when they visited a library or town hall as they were not specifically looking for them but suggested that siting posters near traffic lights, where motorists and bus passengers would not only easily see them but also have time to read them, might be an effective way of reaching electors.

When the research team asked how councils could communicate better the focus group members assumed that they could look on the council website for more information about elections if they were given the website address. However, had they done so they would have been sorely disappointed because, as far as the research team

Figure 11: Thinking of things like coverage in the media and information direct from the parties themselves, did you receive too much, too little or about the right amount of information about ... (percentage)
has been able to establish, no local authority has placed anything more than lists of candidates on their websites, and even this activity was undertaken only by a minority of councils. All participants were aware of council newspapers or magazines but none saw them as being used as a vehicle to stimulate interest in forthcoming elections.

Younger group members said that political communication materials needed to be more colourful and less boring; 'more like club flyers' was one comment. They thought that the beer mats were a good idea and that using McDonalds, the insides of buses and student halls were also good ways to reach young people. Text messaging was mentioned as another good way of getting to younger voters. Some clubs have started to advertise by text messaging: 'They can get annoying, but you do read them', one said. They did remember the 'No Vote, No Voice' Home Office campaign and they thought that TV and radio were much better media for reaching young people. Above all they believed that, as far as reaching young people was concerned, whatever materials were produced they needed to be placed where young people go – sports and leisure centres, clubs and so on.

Perhaps the strongest message that came out of the focus groups, which was also reflected in the quantitative data, was the notion that in terms of motivating people to vote, there was no substitute for personal contact. People felt that councillors and MPs should be the ones that were getting the voters out. Only one group member knew their local councillor and personal calls from candidates or party workers were a rarity. This, 'the personal touch', was felt to be the main thing that would be most effective in getting people out to vote. 'It would be nice to see who you were going to vote for face-to-face', said one group member.

Young people in the groups were particularly keen on personal contact, especially from someone closer to their own age. Talks to groups of young people in schools, colleges, youth groups and so on were regarded as helpful – both young people's groups commented that their discussions with the research team were the most sustained conversations they could recall about politics, and far more interesting than they had anticipated. They also suggested that getting celebrities to visit schools to talk about voting might be a good idea. They contrasted the local elections with their experience of student elections where candidates were much more active and visible.

The research team discovered that, in general, respondents did not have a clear view about the functions of local authorities. There was a general feeling that more should be done to make people aware of what their local councils did. They also felt that it was down to politicians to explain how an individual, by voting, would be able to make a real difference to people's lives. Only one of the group members could recall anyone knocking on their doors during the 2002 local election campaign. There was a general feeling that the decisive factors should be the charisma of the candidate, and his or her willingness to 'put themselves about'. The groups felt that more, regular information about what the council and councillors are doing would encourage them to take more interest in politics and ultimately vote more often. Everyone felt that they were better informed about general elections because of the national media coverage. In relation to European elections all said that they felt less well informed and therefore less inclined to vote.

However, the group discussions also revealed that some forms of communication from local authorities about electoral matters could be successful which very much reinforced the research team's notion of designing different means of communication to meet different requirements. On one level, many in the group said they recalled being sent information offering them a postal vote. It was remembered strongly that this information arrived in a brown 'official looking' envelope and it is probably a safe assumption that it was the fact of it being personally addressed that was the main reason why this communication was recalled. On an altogether different level it was found that when young voters were asked to compare a sample of birthday cards used by councils to reach new electors when they reached their 18th birthday,
the group were unenthusiastic about the more formal-looking cards but were very impressed with a mirror card from a shire county in the south of England with the text: ‘Now that you are 18 your appearance really counts – make sure that you turn up and vote at elections’. As one young group member observed: ‘I like that, it’s got a simple message and it’s funny’.

**Conclusion**

So the conclusion from both NOP polling and the focus groups is that people do want more political information and such information can be effectively delivered – NOP found that an impressive 53% of the respondents said that they had been aware of the changes made in relation to postal and proxy votes in 2001. Given that this change received minimal national media publicity it is indicative that it was the publicity efforts of local and central government that succeeded in getting across to a majority of the electorate a relatively complicated change in electoral law – a hopeful finding.

### Key points

- People want to be better informed about the policies and candidates they are being asked to vote for.
- People feel reasonably well informed about voting and registration systems but less well informed about parties, policies and politicians.
- Local authorities can play an important role in fulfilling people’s desire for more information about electoral issues.
- Personal contact is the most effective means of getting people to vote.
- Traditional methods of political communication, such as leaflets through the door, remain one of the most important methods of electoral promotion.
- Local newspapers still play an important role in the formation of local public opinion.
- Official looking mail in personally addressed envelopes has the best chance of being recalled.
Conclusions and recommendations

This final chapter draws together the main findings of the research and highlights best practice at the local level. It concludes by making some recommendations with respect to the assessment of future local publicity initiatives.

Every little helps
The first point that should be made is that this research has revealed no instant solutions. What is clear though is that local promotion can have small but significant effects at the margins. Raising awareness of how to register to vote, how to take up postal votes, how to participate in experiments in new ways of voting and so on, is an integral part of the electoral process. Doing it as well as possible has to be the aim. If authorities are going to communicate they have to know why they are and follow these simple rules: use plain language; make it clear who is being addressed; make sure it is accessible to the audience; make it attractive or eye-catching and encourage action on the part of the audience.

One size does not fit all
This report has identified much activity that is taking place at the local level to promote electoral issues. There is little consistency, however, in what is done, how it is done or why it is done. This is not necessarily a criticism. One thing that is apparent is that this subject does not lend itself to generalised prescriptive solutions. Local conditions will play a large part in determining what activities are most appropriate. For example, a West Country authority found that adverts on bus backs were seen to have no discernible effect on registration levels; by contrast a London borough believed that they were their single most effective promotional activity. This could be down to the fact that in London, buses are more frequent, move more slowly through the traffic and hence offer better advertising opportunities than in the West Country.

Facilitate and motivate
Most of the effort by local authorities is devoted to trying to persuade people to register to vote, particularly the annual update of the register. Much energy also goes into promoting postal voting. The least time and effort goes on persuading people to use their votes. This is explained in large part by the fact that councils have a duty to compile the electoral register and they do not have a similar duty to persuade people to vote. The research team’s view is that the prime job of the electoral administrator is indeed to make sure everyone who is entitled to is able to vote – that means making the
register as accurate as possible, giving good notice of elections and making the electoral process efficient and accessible. It is in this context that many electoral administrators have enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to experiment with new ways of voting. But electoral officers, and more widely, the local authorities they work for also have a vested interest in maintaining the democratic legitimacy of their own institutions. To put it simply, why go to the trouble of facilitating a vote if you have no interest in whether people actually vote or not? The research team believes that local authorities are a fundamental part of our system of democratic government and must play a part in promoting the value of that system.

Some councils do put significant effort into trying to persuade people to register for postal votes and on ‘Use your Vote’ type campaigns; that others do nothing highlights a difference of views about whether persuading people to vote is part of local authorities’ – and specifically, electoral administrators’ – roles. Clearly, promotional efforts will be more effective on levels of registration where the motivation of the elector is not such a crucial factor. Many electoral administrators will regard efforts to persuade people to vote as futile and a waste of money. Others are actively hostile to the idea that they should even try – ‘that’s the politicians job, not mine’ was a common response. Some local authority communication officers, and councillors, argue that any such campaign is in contravention of the code of conduct on publicity around elections because any campaign to get people to vote could be seen as a campaign to get people to vote in a particular way. It seems that this is an area on which there is a need for greater clarification and guidance at a national level.

Make it personal
From the limited evidence available and in summarising the views of those experts consulted a general picture emerges that direct contact with electors can and does work. When the research team asked local authorities to rank the most effective methods of communication the top four on the list were all direct contact methods – direct mail, council newspapers and magazines, personal canvassers and registration forms. This is supported by those councils that have conducted their own surveys about election communication and by the NOP poll which showed that leaflets through the door were the most recalled source of information. Communications through the letterbox can be made even more effective when they are personally addressed. Personal calls, such as those by canvassers, are the ultimate in direct contact. The research team was also told that the fact that fewer electors now get calls from candidates or their representatives, or even leaflets from them, has had a negative effect on turnout.

Among the least effective methods of communication identified in the research were roadshows and events. There was also a great deal of scepticism about the effectiveness of posters, particularly around registration, yet it is still one of the most common activities engaged in by councils.

Press home the point
Whichever methods the council chooses to promote electoral issues, the back-up of supportive coverage in the local media is important. One of the guiding principles of media effects research is that ‘the media cannot tell people what to think, but it can tell people what to think about’. Using the local media to sensitise the electorate to information about elections helps ensure that when the election leaflet drops through the door it gets more attention than it might otherwise. Local newspapers can also be used effectively as a way of getting application forms for postal votes into the electors’ hands. If electoral administrators are seeking better relations with the local media – and the research team would advise that they do – then they should make direct contact with their local editors and establish personal contact, making sure they
have the support of their own communications staff when they do so. We would also see a role for The Electoral Commission undertaking a national initiative with local newspaper editors, for example by encouraging them to print postal vote application forms on behalf of councils.

It’s good to talk
The interviews presented the researchers with some sharp differences in practice and style in how electoral administrators and council communications officers relate, or fail to relate, to each other. The research team was disappointed that more communications staff did not attend these interviews and, whatever the reasons for this, it would seem to suggest that the links could be stronger. Too often, the electoral administrator described the link as good because ‘they do what we ask them to’. This surely misses the point. The best relationship would be one in which a creative dialogue takes place in which the communications professional adds value to the experience of the electoral administrator. This does happen in many cases but by no means in all. Where communications officers did attend the interviews their input was extremely valuable and they clearly took the role of promoting electoral issues seriously. This contrasted acutely with the worst examples, such as the authority that stated: ‘they [the communications unit] don’t add anything to what we give them, there’s no creativity’.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, in partnership with the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency (lDeA) and the Audit Commission has embarked on a long-term project called ‘Connecting with Communities’ aimed at improving communications by local government. This is a channel through which some of the issues surrounding local promotion of electoral issues could be taken forward. Specifically, it could be a way to spread good practice in communication around electoral issues. More generally, councils which offer more regular, open and accessible information about services and decision-making will stand a better chance of increasing the motivation of electors to participate in elections to those bodies than those that do not.

Get joined-up
The research team was struck by the fact that some councils stated that they had made efforts to use information from other sources inside their own organisations with excellent results, while others saw this as problematic for legal, protocol or cultural reasons. For example, one Scottish authority explained how they had added 300 extra young attainers to the register by getting relevant age-related information from their education department. Linking with council tax departments to pick up new residents is something a range of councils do, a number are trying to do and others have been frustrated by not being able to do. But as one council said ‘People expect this sort of joined-up service. They expect that if the council knows they have moved and have changed their council tax records, they will automatically have updated them on the electoral register’. However, as mentioned earlier in this report, electoral administrators do need to be mindful of data protection issues when considering new initiatives of the information-sharing kind.

There are other ways in which joining up with different parts of the council and its partners can help. One example will be the degree to which authorities seek to play an active role in the delivery of citizenship education by offering to visit local schools, supporting mock elections and offering work placements. Another example would be the extent to which local authorities both include information about electoral registration in the induction of their new employees and also seek to persuade other large employers to do likewise.
Win the support of politicians
‘Certain parties have vested interests in voter apathy – it returns them year after year’. That is the stark observation of one council officer in the north of England. Certainly attitudes differ from one authority to the next. The research team has heard of some individual politicians who are very active and assiduous in chasing their constituents to register to vote, often with marked success. Others have put particular effort into getting people to register for postal votes. Yet in other councils, politicians have stymied officers’ efforts to promote electoral issues by, for example, banning advertising in local newspapers, banning all council publicity during election periods and blocking plans for electoral experiments. If improved turnout is a shared objective then electoral administrators and local politicians must work together as partners. Councils can help parties communicate with voters by providing good, timely information and there could also be a role here for The Electoral Commission and perhaps the IDeA and others to instigate a series of initiatives aimed at enthusing, motivating and energising councillors and local politicians to the causes of increasing turnout and improving communication with electors.

Put your money where your mouth is
It is clear from this research that there is a wide variation among authorities in the resources dedicated to promoting electoral issues. Responses received ranged from no dedicated budget at all for spending on promoting electoral issues to annual budgets of £30,000 or more – not surprisingly, perhaps, the largest budgets were in the authorities where extra funds have been allocated to meet Public Service Agreement targets on raising electoral turnout. Otherwise the differences did not follow a pattern consistent with size of authority. Most strikingly though was that many respondents were unable to give figures for spending on promotion. This suggests that the approach is ad hoc, unplanned and of low priority. There needs to be a general recognition that promoting electoral issues is an important activity and if it is to be done well it will require proper funding.

Build partnerships
Community networks, the voluntary sector and campaign groups have all been used to good effect by authorities. Targeting audiences and getting to know the best way of reaching them is best done by talking to people from those target communities. Operation Black Vote has gone so far as to suggest that there should be a statutory duty on local authorities to consult with expert organisations before elections and the annual updating of the register. Certainly better links with grassroots organisations can help get the message across with more effect – one council told the research team about local community websites that were showing a good deal of interest in electoral issues in their area. Perhaps electronic communities like these offer a way to replace the more traditional associations of political party activists and trade unions that are fast declining in activity and membership.
What matters is finding out what works

One of the major difficulties experienced in conducting this research arose from the lack of tracking and evaluation undertaken by councils in this area. In short, it is very difficult, on the basis of the evidence currently available, to say with any certainty what works and what doesn’t. The research team has conducted a detailed examination of the supply of promotional activity – what councils are doing and how they are doing it. It has used evidence from NOP and others to gauge the demand side of the equation – what people say they want and what they say they respond to. This helps one to make a judgement about whether councils are engaging in appropriate activity. But when it comes to assessing outcomes – whether what councils are doing is effective – it is difficult to move the debate on without more effective evaluation. It seems that councils feel hampered in doing this by political considerations – to try a particular activity in an area and compare the effect with one in which the activity was not done needs political support.

It may be that under the aegis of The Electoral Commission experiments of this kind could be sanctioned. For example, the research team would recommend an experiment in which an election booklet is distributed to all voters containing statements from each candidate. This would seem to meet the demand often expressed by non-voters that they did not know who the candidates were or what they stood for. It also provides the information in an accessible and durable form, more so than, for example, individual, loose leaflets. Further, this kind of booklet could also be made available to voters at the polling station, that is to say precisely when voters need the information. The Electoral Commission can play an important role in inculcating a more adventurous, can-do attitude when looking at local promotional activities.
References


We are an independent body that was set up by Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.