

## Making your mark

Design guidance for voter materials

The Electoral Commission's *Making your mark* design guidance aims to improve the usability and accessibility of voter materials, so that voters can 'make their mark' easily, and can be confident that their vote will be counted as they intended.

The guidance is intended for electoral administrators and government policy-makers.

### Background

We have noted various issues relating to ballot papers in our reports on elections held in recent years, including Northern Ireland in 2005, and Wales in 2007, and have made recommendations on how they could be improved. We have also made recommendations in other publications, including *Ballot paper design*<sup>1</sup> and *Equal access to democracy*.<sup>2</sup> A number of the recommendations from these reports have now been incorporated into legislation.

The issue of ballot paper design was highlighted following the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary and local elections, where a relatively high number of ballot papers were rejected. Ron Gould's report into those elections recommended a variety of measures relating to ballot papers, which were aimed at minimising the possibility of confusing or misleading voters. In response to that report, we said that we would develop a set of UK-wide standards covering the accessibility, design and usability of ballot papers and associated stationery. The *Making your mark* guidance delivers that commitment.

### Scope

The guidance covers the following materials:

- ballot papers
- guidance notices for voters in polling stations
- instructions to voters in polling booths
- postal voting statements and declarations of identity
- supplementary postal voting guidance

Many of the general principles in the guidance can also be applied to other electoral materials, for example to registration forms and poll cards. The design of these materials is covered in our existing guidance, including *Modernising electoral forms* (2005),<sup>3</sup> and *Managing electoral registration in Great Britain, Part I* (2008).<sup>4</sup>

*Making your mark* focuses on promoting good practice in design. It does not address issues related to the administration of elections, such as methods of ordering candidates and parties on ballot papers, or the merits of different voting systems. The good practice in the guidance applies irrespective of the voting system or ordering method in use.

1 *Ballot paper design*, The Electoral Commission (2003). Available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=16056](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=16056)

2 *Equal access to democracy*, The Electoral Commission (2003). Available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=16051](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=16051)

3 *Modernising electoral forms*, The Electoral Commission (2005). Available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=79881](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=79881)

4 *Managing electoral registration in Great Britain, Part I*, The Electoral Commission (2008). Available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=43961](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=43961)

Issues of physical access to polling stations, and the provision of information to voters in alternative formats, are not within the scope of this guidance. There are existing statutory requirements for Returning Officers in relation to accessibility of elections, and while this guidance should complement those requirements, it does not substitute or amend them.

## Approach

Our guidance focuses on putting voters' needs first, and we have followed that principle in our approach to producing it. We carried out qualitative research with electors across the UK in the form of focus groups and one-to-one usability interviews, to explore the design of existing voter materials.<sup>5</sup> We also reviewed existing materials with professionals from the electoral community, and from the fields of accessibility and usability. This research allowed us to better understand what makes voter materials easier or more difficult to use, as well as identifying good practice to share.<sup>6</sup>

The guidance promotes good practice in design, based on accepted industry good practice and our research findings. It does not specify the 'best' design for individual materials. Decisions about design are the responsibility of those who design prescribed forms contained in legislation, and of Returning Officers who produce those materials in practice.

## User-testing

The only way to properly establish whether a particular design is usable is to user-test it, and this should be done before it is adopted for use in a real-life scenario. We recommend that before any new designs for prescribed forms are proposed by governments in draft legislation, they are subject to a process of user-testing.

## The guidance

There is no easy solution to the challenge of designing voter materials. Ballot papers and other voter materials used at UK elections are very closely prescribed, and Returning Officers therefore have very limited scope to change the materials' appearance. Therefore, there are two versions of guidance.

### Guidance for government policy-makers

The guidance for government policy-makers and those who draft legislation reflects what is 'desirable' in terms of voter material design, and identifies changes that could be made to prescribed materials to improve their usability and accessibility. These are summarised on the next page.

### Guidance for electoral administrators

This guidance is for electoral administrators to use now, accepting existing legislative requirements and constraints.<sup>7</sup> It includes example materials to show how the guidance can be applied to existing voter

materials, and we hope that electoral administrators will begin using the guidance as soon as possible.

## The future

While this guidance is primarily focused on enabling voters to vote confidently and correctly, it should also help to:

- achieve consistency of design in voter materials, irrespective of when or where a person is voting
- give Returning Officers clear guidance and criteria to consider when designing materials and selecting and managing their suppliers
- encourage changes in electoral law and policy to ensure that voter materials are usable and accessible
- inform design decisions by governments when drafting new legislation and help us respond to consultations on proposed new designs.

We intend to use the guidance as a basis to press for improvements to the design of voter materials, so that over time, voters' needs will be put at the heart of the design process. We will encourage electoral administrators to use the guidance, through our performance standards framework for Returning Officers in Great Britain, and through our elections guidance materials.

## Feedback

We welcome feedback on the guidance and any suggestions on how it could be improved. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Christie Dennehy, Senior Policy Adviser, on [cdennehy@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:cdennehy@electoralcommission.org.uk)

5 The research respondents were all eligible to vote in at least one type of election in the UK, and included those who had never voted.

6 The research reports are available in the research section of our website at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/publications-and-research/policy-and-research](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/publications-and-research/policy-and-research)

7 At the time of publication.

## Key recommendations

Our guidance for governments recommends changes to existing prescribed voter materials that would require legislative change to enable them to take effect.

The key design changes we are recommending for consideration by governments are summarised here. Full details, including the rationale, are contained in the guidance itself.

Material	Recommendation
All	Use plain language
Ballot paper <sup>8</sup>	Include clear, specific voting instructions and a diagram (showing how and where to mark your vote on the ballot paper) at the top of the ballot paper
	Ballot papers should not be sectioned by a 'grid'. They should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have each party's/candidate's details on a separate row, separated by a horizontal line</li> <li>• have a distinct voting box at the right hand end of each row</li> </ul>
	Do not display candidate addresses in all-candidate contests
	Do not display the list (i.e. individual names) of a registered party's candidates in party list contests
	For candidates standing on behalf of a registered party, or in party contests, require the party name to be displayed on the ballot paper
	There should be an option for a registered party description to appear on the ballot paper in addition to, but after, the registered party name
	Independent candidates should be able to include information on the ballot paper that is equivalent to the information that registered parties or their candidates are permitted to include
Polling station notice	Include the election title on the polling station notice
	Allow the use of colour and illustrations
	Revise the content to include only the information the voter needs before they get to the polling booth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• where to get their ballot paper</li> <li>• what to do next</li> <li>• what to do if they need help</li> </ul>
Polling booth notice	Include the election title on the booth notice
	Revise the content to include the information the voter needs in the polling booth, and immediately afterwards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the voting system in use</li> <li>• how to mark their vote on the ballot paper</li> <li>• what to do next</li> <li>• what to do if they need help</li> </ul>
	Allow the use of colour and illustrations

<sup>8</sup> **Note:** any recommendation to not display particular information on ballot papers which is currently displayed, does not constitute a recommendation that voters should not have access to that information, only that it does not need to be on the ballot paper itself.

Material	Recommendation
Postal voting materials	Include the election title and the name of the document on the postal voting statement/declaration of identity
	Revise the content to include only the information the voter needs about the postal voting process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to complete their postal voting statement/declaration of identity</li> <li>• how to return their postal vote</li> <li>• the deadline for return</li> <li>• what to do if they need help</li> </ul>
	Re-order and rearrange the instructions so they occur in a logical order, following the postal voting process, and are positioned at the point the voter needs them
	Issue separate guidance to postal voters, including information on the voting system in use and how to mark the ballot paper

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