

May 2018 Postal and proxy voting pilot schemes

Evaluation report

July 2018

Summary of findings

At the May 2018 elections the Returning Officers (ROs) for Peterborough, Slough and Tower Hamlets ran pilot schemes focused on postal voting.

The ROs sent information to postal voters about how to protect their vote. They then contacted a sample of postal voters, who had been sent postal voting packs, to check that they had applied for them. In Peterborough and Tower Hamlets, they also contacted a sample of postal voters, whose postal ballot had been returned, to check that they had completed and returned their own vote. Peterborough also ran a pilot scheme to require proxy voters at polling stations to show identification before issuing them with a ballot paper.

Impact of the pilot schemes

The pilots were well delivered by the three ROs but we have not been able to draw firm conclusions on the impact of these pilot schemes. This was partly because in some cases there was no relevant data from before the pilots to compare against, and also because we were not able to tell what would have happened this year without the pilot schemes.

Impact of the leaflet for postal voters

There is no clear evidence about the impact of the leaflet for postal voters, although it is reasonable to conclude that well-designed and carefully worded information is likely to help encourage people to report evidence about electoral fraud.

Impact of the follow-up contact with postal voters

Postal voters welcomed the follow-up contact from the RO and the telephone activity was largely manageable with some additional staff. However, the household visit approach, as used in Peterborough, required more resources than the RO would normally be able to commit around a poll. There is no clear evidence about the impact on allegations of fraud and public confidence, although it may have provided reassurance to some voters.

The follow-up contact provided the ROs with additional information about potential cases of electoral fraud. While they could use this information to raise specific concerns with the police, the activity did not directly lead to any allegations being referred to the police at these elections.

Finally, the pilot allowed for the cancellation of postal votes where the elector said they did not want a postal vote or claimed that they had not completed a returned postal vote. The ROs did not need to make significant use of this power (one postal vote was cancelled for this reason in Peterborough) but it is logical that they should have this option available to them as part of any follow up activity with postal voters.

Impact of the identification requirement for proxy voters

The identification requirement for proxy voters was administratively manageable, and there is limited evidence of a negative impact on voters. Peterborough believe there may have been some effect in deterring fraudulent proxy activity as the number of proxies was notably lower than in recent polls. However, it is not possible to draw a clear conclusion from the information available.

Impact on allegations of fraud

We have looked at data from police forces about allegations of electoral fraud in these three areas. They received a very small number of allegations about postal voting at the May 2018 elections. We cannot draw any firm conclusions from this limited data, particularly because we cannot know what would have happened in these areas without the pilot scheme procedures.

Our conclusions

We have recently made recommendations about next steps for developing a voter identification scheme for polling stations in Great Britain. These can be found in our [report on the May 2018 voter identification pilot schemes](#). These recommendations apply to any requirement for proxies to show identification at future elections.

It is not clear that further pilots on postal voting would be helpful. The inclusion of a leaflet for postal voters provides useful additional information for voters but has resource implications for ROs. ROs can already choose to include leaflets in postal ballot packs within the current legal framework. Further pilot schemes are unlikely to provide useful additional evidence about the impact of including information in postal ballot packs, but any ROs who do include such information should carry out their own evaluation of any activity to learn lessons for future elections.

No legislative changes would be required to allow ROs to carry out follow up activity. However, ROs would not be able to cancel or reissue postal ballot packs within the current law if a voter said that their postal vote had been taken and completed by someone else. The UK's governments should undertake further work to consider whether ROs should have more flexibility to cancel or re-issue postal ballot packs in these circumstances.

Background

1.1 At the May 2018 elections three local authorities (Peterborough, Slough and Tower Hamlets) ran pilot schemes focused on postal voting. Peterborough Council also ran a pilot scheme to identify proxy voters at polling stations. Proxy voters are people who have special permission to cast someone else's vote for them, because that person can't go to a polling station themselves.

1.2 Each pilot scheme had broadly the same rules for how they worked. The Returning Officer (RO) for each area:

- Sent information to postal voters about how to protect their vote.
- Contacted a sample of postal voters, who had been sent postal voting packs, to check that they had applied for them.
- Contacted (in Peterborough and Tower Hamlets only) a sample of postal voters, whose postal ballot had been returned, to check that the named postal voter had completed and returned their own ballot paper.

1.3 Each pilot required a Pilot Order which legally allowed the changes to be tested at the May 2018 local elections. These orders also include details of amendments to existing processes. All the orders can be found on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk).

The Electoral Commission's role

1.4 The Electoral Commission is required to evaluate any pilots carried out under Section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000.

Statutory evaluation criteria

1.5 The Commission's evaluation must consider several criteria set out in the legislation. They are whether:

- the turnout of voters was higher than it would have been if the scheme had not applied
- voters found the procedures provided for their assistance by the scheme easy to use
- the procedures provided for by the scheme led to any increase in personation or other electoral offences or in any other malpractice in connection with elections
- those procedures led to any increase in expenditure, or to any savings, by the authority

Government's objectives for the pilots

1.6 The Government and Returning Officers (ROs) agreed objectives for these pilot schemes:

- Reduced allegations and perception of postal voting fraud.
- Voters feel confident to contact the RO, police or crime stoppers if they suspect fraudulent activity.
- Establishing that postal voters complete and return their own postal ballot papers.
- To raise high levels of awareness in relation to electoral fraud, ensuring that each elector casts their own vote without interference.

Our research and this report

1.7 This report sets out our assessment of the pilot schemes. It is based on:

- Data supplied by each local authority on the activities undertaken as part of the pilot.
- A survey of postal voters carried out on behalf of Cabinet Office.
- Interviews with electoral administrators.

Evaluation findings

Additional information for postal voters

1.8 Each pilot included a leaflet in postal ballot packs with additional information on postal voting and what to do if the elector was concerned about fraud. Feedback from the pilot areas suggests that this process was a manageable one to carry out. Peterborough did tell us that because of the inclusion of the leaflet, they had opted to produce their postal votes in-house this year, rather than outsourcing this to a printer. However, they also felt that it would be possible to repeat this activity in future years without significant challenges.

1.9 The inclusion of a leaflet in postal ballot packs can be carried out by ROs without the pilot legislation.

Impact of this activity

1.10 After the elections on 3 May, the Cabinet Office carried out a survey of postal voters in all three pilot areas and asked questions about the leaflet. Although the findings from the survey tells us what postal voters thought about the leaflet, we cannot draw any conclusions from the survey about the impact of the leaflet on levels of awareness or perceptions of electoral fraud.

1.11 This is partly because we have nothing to compare the survey results to. A comparison would enable us to look at views before and after the scheme and make an assessment about the impact of the pilot.

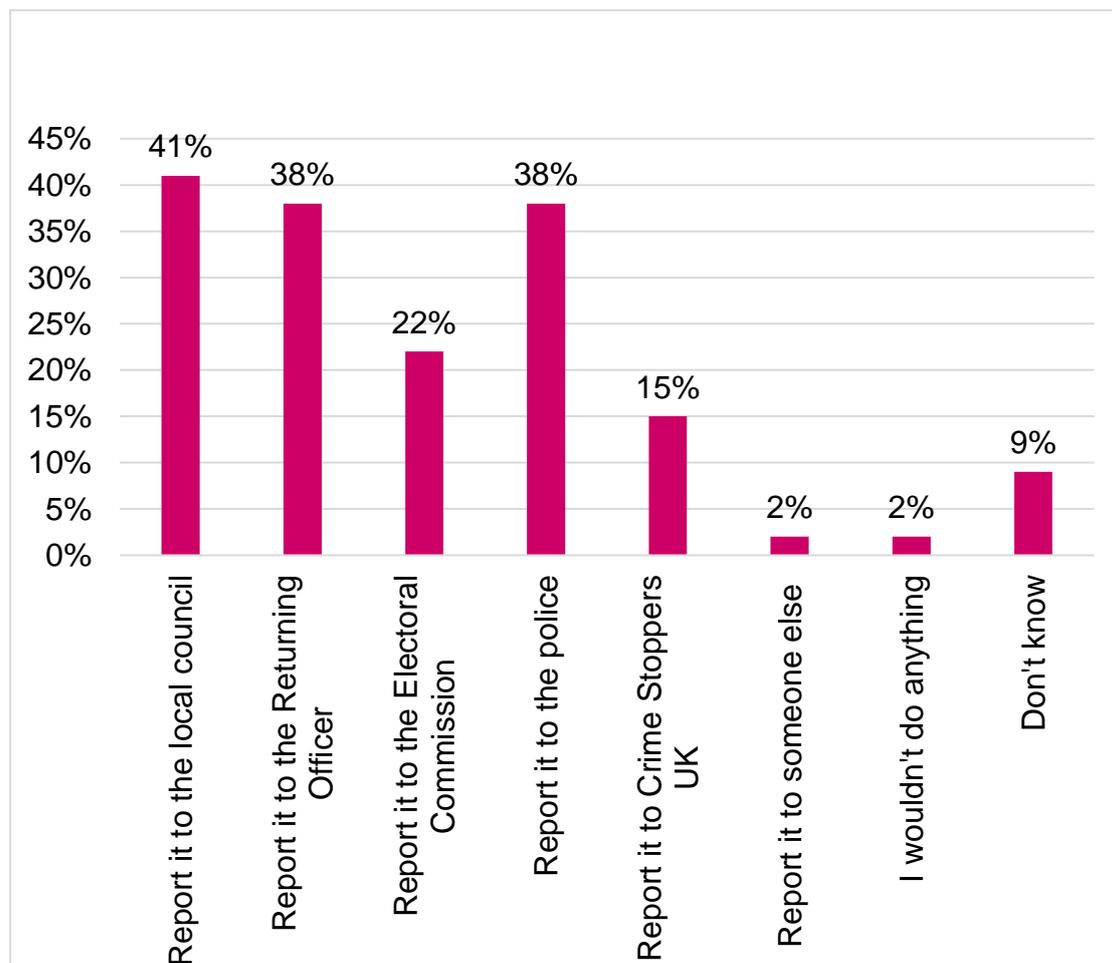
1.12 We cannot compare any of our own public opinion data with the pilot survey because our surveys tend to be conducted nationally or over whole

areas holding elections. We do not therefore have a baseline of attitudes in these particular pilot authorities. For example, in the Cabinet Office survey of postal voters nearly two thirds (65%) of respondents said that they thought postal voting was very or fairly safe from fraud or abuse. This is identical to the result of our survey of all postal voters across the areas in England with elections in May 2018. But we do not know if this is a usual result in these three local authorities or if it is higher or lower.

1.13 We can see from the Cabinet Office survey results that, overall, people in the pilot areas said they remembered seeing the leaflet and were happy with the language, layout, clarity and understanding.

1.14 The survey asked people what they would do if they thought electoral fraud had taken place. Drawing conclusions from this question is difficult because the question asked people to choose from a range of options. The chart below shows that people were most likely to choose reporting it to their local council, Returning Officer or the Police. However, as people were given a pre-determined list of possible actions to take this does not necessarily tell us what they knew or would do in practice.

Chart 1: If you thought that electoral fraud had taken place, what would you do?



Our conclusions

1.15 There is no clear evidence about the impact of the leaflet for postal voters, although it is reasonable to conclude that well-designed and carefully worded information is likely to help encourage people to report evidence about electoral fraud.

1.16 Under the rules as they currently apply, ROs can already decide to provide more information to postal voters, for example by including leaflets in postal ballot packs. This may not be necessary for all elections, but could provide useful reassurance to voters in areas where there have previously been concerns about allegations of electoral fraud.

1.17 ROs should assess, on a case-by-case basis, whether it would be useful to send further information to postal voters at future elections for which they are responsible, taking into account the local history of allegations and concerns about electoral fraud.

1.18 Further pilot schemes are unlikely to provide useful additional evidence about the impact of including information in postal ballot packs, but any ROs who do include such information should carry out their own evaluation of any activity to learn lessons for future elections.

Follow up activities with postal voters

1.19 The aim of this follow up was to establish that voters had received, completed and returned their own postal ballot and to reduce perceptions of fraud by reassuring voters that the Returning Officer is undertaking these checks. This follow up had two stages – the initial follow up after postal ballot packs were sent out (in all three areas) and the follow up with voters who had returned their postal vote (in Peterborough and Tower Hamlets).

Follow up once postal votes were issued

1.20 In Tower Hamlets and Slough follow up was carried out by phone and in Peterborough it was a household visit carried out when the postal votes were being hand delivered.

1.21 Table 1 shows the headline results of the exercise. The data shows that all of the postal voters contacted in Slough said they applied for a postal vote. The proportion who said they had not applied for a postal vote was similar between Tower Hamlets and Peterborough.

1.22 Tower Hamlets told us that they believed many of these voters misinterpreted the question they were being asked and were indicating that they had not recently applied for a postal vote for these local elections although they had applied for one in the past and therefore were still registered as a postal voter. There was also no indication that they did not want a postal vote.

1.23 In Peterborough, they believe the majority of the 41 that said they did not apply for a postal vote, were people who had forgotten that they had applied rather than suspicious examples. In many of these instances it was not the postal voter that answered the question on the doorstep but a family member on their behalf. In all these instances the postal vote was not delivered to the address but was returned to the town hall. The elector was then written to in order to explain what had happened and that they could come to the town hall to collect their postal vote if they had wanted to have one. Many subsequently collected their postal vote.

Table 1: Results of initial contact exercise after issue of postal votes

	Peterborough	Slough	Tower Hamlets
No. contacted who provided information	3,412	374	950
No. contacted who had received postal vote	3,409	363	755
No. contacted who had not received postal vote	3	11	44
No. who said they did not apply for a postal vote	41	0	7 ¹
Proportion who said they did not apply for a postal vote	1.3%	0%	0.9% ²

Follow up once postal votes were returned

1.24 As before, Tower Hamlets carried out this follow up by phone and Peterborough by household visits.

¹ An additional seven electors said they were unsure if they applied for a postal vote.

² This is calculated by taking the number who said they did not apply for a postal vote (7) over the number answering this question (786).

Table 2: Results of second contact exercise after return of postal votes

Pilot	No. contacted providing information	No. who said they did not complete their postal vote themselves	No. who said they did not return their postal vote themselves
Peterborough	575	0	0
Tower Hamlets	711	16	35

1.25 The table above shows that Peterborough found that all of the voters they spoke to had completed and returned their postal vote themselves. In Tower Hamlets, of the 711 postal voters spoken to, 16 said they did not complete the postal ballot themselves and 35 said they did not return it themselves.

1.26 The electoral services team at Tower Hamlets indicated, in their feedback to us, that there were no indications that these examples represented concerning instances. In most cases the voters said they had help from a family member (often a younger family member like a daughter) to complete their postal vote, most likely as a result of a language barrier. Those who said they did not return it themselves indicated that they gave their completed postal ballot pack to a family member to post or return on their behalf. There were no instances where an allegation was referred to the police further to the follow up activity.

Impact of these activities

Allegations of electoral fraud

1.27 We cannot say if there has been any impact on allegations of postal voting fraud because we cannot know what would have happened in these areas in the absence of these activities.

1.28 We do know, however, from data provided to us by the police forces covering the pilot areas, that the police received a very small number of allegations about postal voting at the May 2018 elections.

- In Peterborough, the police recorded three cases of alleged postal voting offences. None of these allegations were generated by the pilot activity. At the time of publishing this evaluation, court proceedings have been initiated in relation to one case, while the other two cases were found to involve no offence or insufficient evidence to identify a suspect.
- In Slough, the police recorded no cases of alleged postal voting offences.
- In Tower Hamlets, the police recorded five cases of alleged postal voting offences. None of the allegations were generated by the pilot activity. At the time of publishing this evaluation, the police had found insufficient

evidence to identify an offence or suspect in one case, and the other four cases are still under investigation.

Public attitudes and perceptions

1.29 We cannot draw clear conclusions about any impact on public perceptions of electoral fraud/postal voting fraud from these activities because there is no available measure of public attitudes among postal voters in these areas before the pilot. The data supplied by the Cabinet Office (from their postal survey) tells us about attitudes now but not how they might have changed.

1.30 However, it is important to note that both Tower Hamlets and Peterborough did indicate, in their feedback to us, that they received a very positive response from the electors contacted through the pilot. They said that there was, in the majority of cases, an appreciation from electors that the local authority was taking the time to carry out this work.

Do postal voters complete and return their postal votes themselves?

1.31 Clearly, these activities do help to establish whether or not some postal voters complete and return their own ballot papers but it is worth bearing in mind that the results are not necessarily representative of all postal voters in the three areas. This is mainly because while the samples selected for follow up were random, and those that responded to the calls or visits were self-selecting. While efforts were made to call and visit at different times of the day in order to capture different types of people, this was limited in comparison to what would be done to ensure representativeness in a survey.

Turnout

1.32 One of the statutory evaluation criteria is about the impact on turnout. The data on turnout among postal voters in these areas does not suggest there has been any impact from the pilot. As the table below shows, against the last comparable election turnout among postal voters has changed in Tower Hamlets. However, this shift is in the context of a significant change in overall turnout in Tower Hamlets between 2014 and 2018 (dropping from 48% to 32%) and there is no reason to link the change for postal voters to the pilot activities. 2018 data was not available for Peterborough at publication.

Table 3: Postal voter turnout in pilot areas (2018 v previous comparable)

Pilot	2018 PV turnout	Previous comparable PV turnout
Peterborough	Not available	72.1%
Slough	61.5%	61.5%
Tower Hamlets	66.2%	72.4%

Administration

1.33 The pilot areas have indicated to us that setting up and running this activity was manageable, although it was challenging to get enough (and the right) staff to carry out the work. For example, Peterborough needed 22 staff to carry out the follow up visits; Tower Hamlets needed fewer for their telephone calls (six in total) but they did need to be bi-lingual (English and Bangladeshi). Indeed one of the challenges for Tower Hamlets was that even having successfully recruited bi-lingual staff they still encountered language barriers in trying to speak to some electors.

1.34 Peterborough told us that it was challenging to be able to randomly select postal voters for the second stage of the follow up as this required input from their Electoral Management Software supplier. This was made more difficult by the late notice they were able to give to the supplier due to the late signing of the Pilot Order (in April 2018). They noted that it would be beneficial for any future pilots like this to have more preparation time.

1.35 In relation to costs, the activity in Peterborough was notably more costly due to the face to face approach adopted. They were clear that this was not a cost that they could justify bearing on an ongoing basis in the absence of the Government funding received for the pilot.

Our conclusions

1.36 The evidence from these pilot schemes suggests that postal voters welcomed the follow-up contact from the RO, and that the telephone activity was largely manageable with some additional staff. There is no clear evidence about the impact on allegations of fraud and public confidence, although it may have provided reassurance to some voters.

1.37 The follow-up contact also provided the ROs with additional information about potential cases of electoral fraud, which they were able to use to raise specific concerns with the police where appropriate. As with the benefits of sending information to postal voters about how to report electoral fraud, this additional check may not be necessary at all elections, but could provide useful information in areas where there have previously been concerns about allegations of electoral fraud.

1.38 Current electoral law does limit the options available to ROs in instances where they have identified concerns about postal ballot packs which have been issued to voters, however. There are limited circumstances in which they are able to cancel or re-issue new postal ballot packs – these do not include when a voter says that their postal ballot pack was taken and completed by someone else, for example. The UK's governments should undertake further work to consider whether ROs should have more flexibility to cancel or re-issue postal ballot packs in these circumstances.

1.39 Subject to the outcomes from this further work, ROs should assess, on a case-by-case basis, whether it would be useful to carry out additional checks

with postal voters at different stages during the election timetable, taking into account the local history of allegations and concerns about electoral fraud.

Identification requirement for proxy voters

1.40 In Peterborough, proxy voters needed to show photographic identification before being issued with a ballot paper for the elector that they were voting on behalf of.

1.41 In total 131 proxy voters attended a polling station and almost all of them showed either passports or photo driving licences. A small number showed an EEA UK residence card or a MOD card. Voters could also show a Northern Ireland Electoral Identity Card, a Biometric residence permit, a Disabled Bus Pass or a locally issued Electoral Identity Letter. No-one used these options. In total, one proxy voter presented incorrect identification and did not return with the correct identification.

Table 4: Identification types shown by proxy voters in Peterborough

Passport	Driving licence	EEA card	MOD card	No. initially not showing ID	No. not returning
60	67	3	1	1	1

Impact of these activities

1.42 These figures suggest that most proxy voters were able to meet the requirements. In total 183 proxies were appointed in Peterborough so this presents a turnout of over 70%. We cannot judge if this is similar to usual turnout because turnout data for proxies is not routinely captured.

1.43 However, Peterborough have told us that they believe the requirement to show identification did contribute to a reduction in the volume of proxies appointed at this election. In 2018, 183 proxies were appointed, down from 330 in 2016 and 479 in 2015 (when the UK general election was combined with the local polls). There is no evidence that this represented or led to a reduction in the fraudulent appointment or use of proxies, but Peterborough do think that this was potentially a positive impact of the pilot.

Our conclusions

1.44 We have made recommendations about next steps for developing a voter identification scheme for polling stations in Great Britain in our report on the five voter identification pilot schemes which took place at the May 2018

elections.³ Those recommendations also apply to any requirement for proxies to show identification at future elections.

1.45 Our main recommendation is that the UK Government should encourage a wider range of local councils to run pilot schemes in May 2019. These should include a mixture of rural areas and large urban areas, and areas with different demographic profiles. This would help make sure there is more detailed evidence about the impact of voter identification on different groups of people.

³ [Electoral Commission \(July 2018\) *May 2018 voter identification pilot schemes Findings and recommendations*](#)